

The Three Essentials of Successful Collaborations

Published in March 11, 2024, edition of [Crain's Cleveland Business](#)

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As someone who makes a living supporting community-based collaborations, my first piece of advice on how to collaborate is always the same: Don't.

If you can achieve your goal on your own, please do so, as you will save much time, talent and treasure. Collaboration is a means, not a goal. What if you need others to get where you want to go? Well, a partnership – where roles and responsibilities are defined in advance – requires less of those scarce resources than does collaboration.

But what if the goal is to address an adaptive community challenge (not a technical problem), such as assuring our lakefront is accessible to and creates value for all residents or the talent development system works for residents and employers? No single entity or partnership can address such complex priorities. Collaboration is required. What then?

First, agree on what the term means. Assuming people understand what collaboration is and how it's done is one way to guarantee failure.

Successful collaborations are made up by people with a shared purpose who share power and responsibility to achieve it. Those are the three essential "shares" of collaboration:

- Purpose
- Power
- Responsibility.

We shouldn't confuse a common complaint with a shared purpose. For example, the "talent shortage" has been the top complaint in communities for more than a decade. But rarely do I see employers changing their employment practices to address it, let alone sharing power and responsibility. A shared purpose must be powerful enough to unite diverse parties with distinct priorities over the long haul. Such a purpose is much less common than frequent whining.

When it comes to power, the dominant trait in our culture is to aggregate, not share. Yet, successful collaboratives create structures and practices that help primary actors (individuals directly affected by the issue) and supporting actors (funders, policymakers and service providers working on the issue) learn, decide and act together. Too often efforts labeled as “collaborations” are merely attempts by a few powerful people to tell others what they should do together. That’s called “**collaboration**.” It’s a made-up word, which I learned from Eric Gordon, that doesn’t need explanation because we’ve all experienced this unhealthy power dynamic. One inspiring example of shared power in Cuyahoga County is A Place 4 Me, a collective effort to end youth and young adult homelessness. A Place 4 Me is designed so youth and young adults, funders, government officials and nonprofit leaders make decisions together, as peers. The process is messy, difficult and worth it.

Many years ago, I learned a valuable lesson from a business executive participating in a successful manufacturing collaborative in the Mahoning Valley. She said the effort gained traction because members stuck with it long enough to stop pointing fingers at others and start looking in the mirror. As each member reflected on their own responsibility for the intolerable status quo, the work ahead became clearer. And they’ve shared responsibility for that work for more than 20 years.

Persistence is a common trait of successful collaboratives. In an age where instant gratification isn’t nearly fast enough, persistence is as rare as true collaboration.

In short, civic collaboration is rarely possible and when possible, nearly impossible to achieve. But, as a mentor is fond of reminding me, just because it’s impossible doesn’t mean it’s not somebody’s job. If we want our community to thrive, we will set aside our egos, logos and line items. We will forge a powerful, shared purpose. We will share power and responsibility. And together we will achieve enduring, positive community change.

