

5 Skills for Staff of Community Collaboratives

Those responsible for supporting a community collaborative have a demanding, vital role. Performing the multitude of functions and activities required to engage a diverse set of partners so that they can make decisions together and achieve shared goals requires an unusual skill set.

Two procedural skills and three leadership skills are especially important for supporting a healthy, effective collaborative.

Procedural Skills

Facilitation: Meetings are inherent to the collaboration process. Meetings with a clear purpose that result in agreements of who will do what by when accelerate momentum. Redundant meetings that feel like a remake of the movie “Groundhog Day” send collaboratives into a downward spiral.

Tools and techniques developed by world class facilitators such as [Sam Kaner](#) and [Adam Kahane](#) are critical to facilitating four types of meetings that are common within cross-sector collaboratives:

- One-to-one sessions with existing or potential partners
- Small group meetings focused on developing or assessing collective actions
- Meetings of governance bodies or other groups responsible for making decisions on behalf of the larger collaborative
- Stakeholder meetings designed to gain input and direction from diverse audiences

Collaborative Health Assessment: Collaborations move at the speed of trust. The paramount importance of trust requires collaborative coordinators to be constantly assessing the quality of the interactions among the players. Facilitators of collaborations need to develop a variety of tools and tactics to track the level of participation, commitment and trust demonstrated by each partner. This ongoing assessment is used to identify upcoming traps and opportunities, as well as to identify opportunities to build more engagement and trust.

Leadership Skills

Understanding Context: Context is defined as the “interrelated conditions in which something exists” and in a cross-sector collaborative the “interrelated conditions” are numerous and complex. They include the relationships among partners and stakeholders, conditions within the civic system that hold the status quo in place and external forces that shape outcomes (such as global economic forces). Partners within a collaborative are often focused on the context within their own organization. In contrast, the collaborative leader needs to understand the context of each partner and discern how these diverse forces will influence how the partners can work together and what they will be able to work on together. Collaborative leaders can use a variety of tools and tactics to sharpen this skill, including assessing the priorities, motivations and constraints of existing and potential partners; identifying and leveraging the [polarities](#) that create both tension and opportunity within a collaborative; and mapping the forces and interests that influence the collaborative’s outcomes. The context within

communities is complex, so understanding context also requires us to have a deep understanding of complexity and systems. [Donnella H. Meadows' Thinking in Systems](#) and David Peter Stroh's [Systems Thinking for Social Change](#) provide valuable insight on how complexity influences collaboratives.

Inquiry: The skill of asking new, compelling questions, and listening deeply to the answers they generate is essential to catalyzing change within complex civic systems. While organizational leaders are expected to have the answers, collaborative leaders need to be able to ask, and help others ask, questions that foster creative thinking, engage diverse stakeholders and foster new possibilities. Inquiry is risky business, as compelling questions often challenge the mindsets of powerful protectors of the status quo. To minimize the risk and maximize the value of asking new, compelling questions, leaders need to practice this skill. Warren Berger's [A More Beautiful Question](#), and Edgar H. Shein's [Humble Inquiry](#) provide sage advice on how to strengthen this skill.

Building Trust: A key responsibility of coordinators of collaboratives is to communicate in ways that build trust and create environments where partners can build trust with each other. Building trust demands an understanding of the elements of trust and how others view and value those elements. This leadership skill is intertwined closely with the breakthrough facilitation skill. Tools and techniques, including those developed by the [Trusted Advisor](#), [Stephen M.R. Covey](#) and [Bruce Hendrick](#), can help leaders enhance their trust building skills.

Developing & Practicing These Skills

Chris Thompson, president of Civic Collaboration Consultants has developed a rigorous curriculum drawn from the insights of leading experts and his experience working with dozens of collaboratives. Chris provides group and one-to-one coaching services to help collaborative leaders strengthen these five skills. Formats for the training and coaching include:

One-to-One Coaching helps individuals tasked with supporting a collaborative directly apply these five skills in their day-to-day tasks and provides them with an opportunity to identify specific steps to enhance the effectiveness of the collaborative. In addition, individuals are provided tools and techniques to teach these skills to others.

Team Coaching brings together the full support staff of a collaborative to develop a shared language for their work, identify and implement specific tools and tactics for catalyzing and facilitating their collaborative and practice the five essential skills.

Cohort Training brings together support staff and key partners from multiple collaboratives within a single community to develop a shared language for their community to describe and teach what it takes to sustain effective collaboratives. Members of the cohort share their experiences and learn from each other, as well as the curriculum shared by CCC. In addition to developing their collaboration skills, members of the cohort explore how they can support each other and share resources to enhance their respective collaboratives.