

Building While Flying

Capacity, Structures & Processes to Sustain Civic Collaboratives

Forces ranging from a persistent pandemic to new federal grant programs have increased demand for collective efforts to address community priorities. However, increased demand doesn't necessarily make building and sustaining an effective civic collaborative any easier.

The dual challenge of uniting diverse partners ranging from neighborhood residents to policymakers and funders to address wicked, persistent problems related to such priorities as housing, education and safety has been aptly described as building an airplane while flying it.

Add into the mix the need to keep updating the plane while continuing to fly it over multiple years and the challenge is extreme enough that community members are well advised to seriously consider whether they are up for the challenge.

If community leaders believe that working together is indeed the best way to address a priority, the next question they need to consider is: "How will we organize ourselves to make decisions together?"

This is a complex and challenging question, in part because we are much more familiar with how organizations decide than with how diverse groups collectively decide. There are three essential elements to developing and sustaining the ability of diverse members to make decisions together:

- a trusted **process**
- **structures** for collective decision-making
- **capacity** to facilitate the process and support the structures.

Capacity

While the level and type of capacity will evolve, early on there should be a person(s) who is trusted by the players to facilitate and coordinate their collective work. This person could be employed by one of the partners at the table or hired by the partners collectively. Regardless, the person works on behalf of the partners at the table. This is a service role. This person is not the pilot of the plane. Rather they are a combination mechanic, air traffic controller and flight attendant. This initial facilitation capacity is needed to help the players develop the processes and structures needed to make basic decisions. As those processes and structures take shape, the roles the partners want performed will likely expand to include project management, evaluation, advocacy and more. Collaboratives need support capacity to be sustained.

The facilitator makes it easier for the players to make decisions together. Will they make decisions by consensus, majority rule or some other way? And who will decide how to decide? Who will be invited to the table and what types of structures are needed to engage different elements of the community in the collective effort?

Structures

Founders of organizations create decision-making structures that best serve the interests of the organization. However, the structures used to help diverse members of a collaborative make decisions cannot be designed by a few. They need to be designed collectively, and change based on the shifting needs of the collective.

Three types of structures can help sustain collaboratives:

- Governance structures, where strategic and financial decisions are made.
- Action structures, where strategies are turned into actions.
- Advisory structures, where diverse interests can inform and shape the decisions of those serving in the action and governance structures.

Effective structures of civic collaboratives reflect the diversity of the community, strengthen relationships within the community and foster shared power.

Process

The facilitator of the collaboration helps the players at the table ask compelling questions together and to listen deeply to the answers that are generated. As [Adam Kahane shares in his essential book, *Facilitating Breakthrough*](#), the initial question of the process is, “How do we see our situation?” This question, in its multitude of forms, will help the players understand the priority they want to address together. Developing shared understanding is essential because of the inherent complexity of many of our civic priorities. Complexity assures that root causes are as uncertain as the appropriate solutions. Shared understanding allows the players to answer the facilitator’s second question, “How do we define success?” The answers that emerge to this question can be translated into shared goals, as well as the individual and collective actions the partners in the collaborative will take to achieve those goals.

The process to ask and answer these and other essential questions needs to build trust among the members. Trustworthy processes are transparent, informed by evidence and inclusive.

The capacity, structures and process will evolve as new members become engaged and the members apply the lessons they’ve learned along their journey together. Civic collaboratives are in a constant state of learning and adapting. Which means, the participants will always be building the airplane while flying it.