Collaboration Disruptors

Dealing with reluctant, challenging members of a collective effort

Collaboration – working with others to achieve a shared purpose – is easier when we get to pick who is at the table. However, when working on a complex community issue we don't get to choose. For example, if the purpose of the collaboration is to improve the talent supply in a community, it's difficult to imagine success happening without committed participation by key employers, educational institutions and leaders of training programs. Yet, not every corporate CEO, community college president or workforce training non-profit president is willing and able to share power and responsibility in ways that make a collaboration successful.

For the convener of the collaborative, referred to as the backbone in the collective impact framework for civic collaboration, this reality means that they must work with some members who are just as likely to disrupt progress as promote it. There are at least five types of "disruptors" of collaboration.

Billy the Bully believes that collaboration done their way is best and they will do whatever they can to get their way. Power is their gauge of success, not outcomes.

"Sometimes I think the collaborative process would work better without you."

Reluctant Ray/Rey is enthusiastic about the purpose of the collaborative and understands the value of working with others to achieve that purpose. But their core competency appears to be finding reasons why their organization cannot share power or responsibility to move the collaborative forward. At every turn, constraints limit their ability to support the collaborative.

Nervous Nick/Nicky represents a powerful institution with great influence over the collaborative's outcomes. But they're reluctant to use their power and/or influence to shift that institution's behavior. They are nervous that if they push too hard within their own organization for change, they will put their own position at risk.

Negative Ned/Nadine has been a leader in the community for decades. They've worked in multiple sectors and have been a part of multiple efforts to address the shared purpose of the collaborative. At best those efforts have had short-lived success. They are certain what doesn't work and will remind everyone as often as possible that we've tried that before.

Protector Phil/Phyllis comes to all the meetings and says all the right things. But is motivated only by a need to protect themselves and/or their organization. While not necessarily opposed to the shared purpose, their focus is on protecting turf and minimizing risk for themselves and/or their organization.

Because the backbone is responsible for maximizing member connections and contributions to the collaborative, the backbone leader (or leaders) doesn't get to ignore or dismiss these disruptors. Regardless of the disruptor's motivations, priorities or constraints, the backbone leader should take three steps to identify how best to shift their behavior:

- **Observe:** Pay close attention to what the disruptor both says and does. Often their words and actions are in conflict and the disruptor may not even realize it. Observe how other members of the collaborative respond when the disruptor speaks. Assess which members are showing signs of agreement and which ones are becoming frustrated, or worse, with the disruptor.
- **Ask:** Based on your observations, ask other members of the collaborative to share their perspectives on the disruptor's behavior. Do they see them as being disruptive or do they see them as pushing the collaborative to make better decisions? It's easy for a backbone leader who has decided on a path forward to misinterpret a member's constructive behaviors as disruptive simply because the member is willing to challenge the backbone leader's preferred path. This is one reason why backbone leaders need to develop deep, trust-based relationships with at least a handful of members of the collaborative. Backbone leaders need to remember their mission is to serve the members, and sometimes that means helping members be disruptive.
- **Engage:** After observing and asking, engage with the disruptor in a dialogue to better understand their priorities, motivations and constraints. The purpose of engaging is not to confront or challenge the disruptor, but to identify opportunities for you, them or other members of the collaborative to pivot in ways that increase connection and contribution and limit disruption. It may be helpful for another member of the collaborative that the disruptor trusts join the dialogue. Be careful not to "gang up," on the disruptor. For the engagement to be successful, the disruptor must feel they're in a trusted, safe space.

Often, the disruptors aren't disrupting on purpose. Working within a collaborative is different from working within an organization. Behaviors and practices that bring leaders success in an organization can be disruptive in a collaborative setting. Backbone leaders should use their inquiry skill – ask compelling questions and listen deeply to the answers that emerge – to help the disruptor recognize the negative consequences of their behavior and, if possible, adapt. Some common questions that can be helpful to engage disruptors include:

- What would you need to see from other members to have confidence that this collaborative is worth more of your time/commitment?
- What would you need to see from me or the rest of the backbone to have confidence that this collaborative is worth more of your time/commitment?
- What constraints limit you/your organization from fully engaging with this collaborative?
- What could I or other members of the collaborative do to mitigate those constraints or make it easier for you or your organization to fully engage?
- What should the collaborative set as a goal/priority/focus that would encourage you to engage more fully in its work?

- The time isn't always right to be a part of a collaborative effort like this, do you think you or your organization should consider stepping back?
- Is there another member of your organization that you think should be part of this collaborative? What would it take to engage that person?

Through observation, engagement and inquiry options for shifting behavior will emerge.

However, if the disruptor's behavior doesn't improve and is resulting in significant harm to the collaborative, the backbone leader has an obligation to the other members of the collaborative to explore other options, including having the collaborative's leadership body consider voting to remove the disruptor. Removing a member is rarely necessary. But it is always messy, which is why it is important to have agreements in place that make it clear what is expected of members of a collaborative. Removing a disruptor can be painful, but valuable as it demonstrates that the collaborative's top priority is its shared purpose, not the interests of any single person or organization, regardless of their power and influence.