

# Navigating the Collaboration Cycle

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Civic collaborations designed to achieve enduring, positive community change send partners down a daunting path known as the “collaboration cycle.” Partners in a collaboration – whether early in their journey or years into it – benefit greatly if they have a shared understanding of the cycle, its phases and its traps.

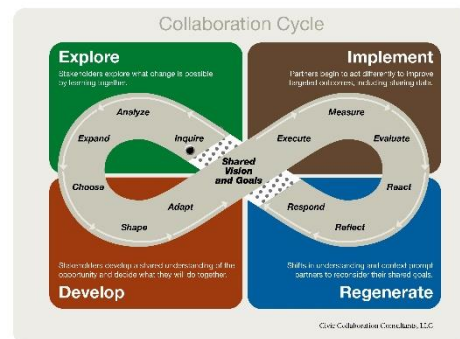
The cycle isn’t a full itinerary or a complete roadmap to the work of collaboration, but it does help partners prepare for what’s ahead and it helps them understand why navigating the collaboration cycle is much different than the more familiar journey of project management.

The term “collaboration” is used often to describe many different types of behaviors. I define “civic collaboration” as the process through which independent players within a civic system assume shared responsibility for achieving shared goals. For example, through civic collaboration partners may agree to work together to improve the educational outcomes within a county. The partners may include foundations that fund education initiatives, public officials that consider education a high priority, school leaders from public and private institutions, early-childhood advocates and companies that value the connection between educational outcomes and the quality of their workforce. To achieve their shared goals, each partner commits to:

- changing their own behaviors
- working together on initiatives that result in improved educational outcomes
- measuring their respective and collective progress.

Just as “collaboration” has many connotations, so does the term “civic system.” In this context, the word “system” means “a combination of things or parts forming a complex whole.” A “civic system” is a combination of organizations, institutions, programs and individuals that share the purpose of addressing a community priority – such as education, housing, food security or economic development. The outcomes of a civic system are shaped by the individual outcomes generated by the players within the system, as well as how those players interact with each other.

The collaboration cycle is often illustrated as a circle or an infinity loop because the partners in a collaboration often need to go through the cycle more than once before their shared goal is achieved. Or, if they achieve their initial goal, they may choose to stay together to achieve additional goals. Going through the full, four-phase cycle generally takes three to five years. Some collaborations fall apart before going through the full cycle. Other collaborations are sustained for decades through multiple journeys through the cycle.



## Phase 1: Explore

Collaborations often begin with a small group of people asking each other a question like this one:

“Why, despite all of our best efforts, are we unable to produce the outcomes we want for our community?” Sometimes that question is narrow in its focus – “Why aren’t our third-grade reading outcomes where we want them to be?” Sometimes they are very broad: “Why is childhood poverty so high?” Often these questions are familiar questions that have been asked before. Successful collaborations are fueled by new questions being asked about a familiar issue. For example, someone might ask: “What can we collectively learn from this school that has outstanding third grade reading outcomes?” Such a question will likely spawn a closer look at data that helps develop a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to third grade reading scores.

New questions help us think differently about the challenges and opportunities within our community. Old questions assign blame, protect turf and affirm our assumptions. While asking new questions and listening deeply to the answers they generate are essential practices throughout the collaboration cycle, they are particularly important in the explore phase. If a collaboration is fueled by old questions it will generate familiar results. Collaborations fueled by new questions have the chance to generate new results and enduring, positive change.

As the partners listen deeply to the answers generated by their new questions they gather the quantitative and qualitative data needed to more deeply understand the forces that are holding the status quo in place within the system, as well as the possibilities for transformation. Partners in healthy collaborations use that data to understand how their own behaviors – ranging from policy and funding decisions to the mental models they use to assess situations – hold the status quo in place. Partners begin to explore what they would each need to do differently to disrupt the status quo, and then they begin to consider what they might do together to achieve their shared goals.

The data helps the group explore what’s possible and it builds each partner’s sense of their shared responsibility to disrupt the status quo.

As is the case with any journey, decision-making is key to navigating the collaboration cycle. What questions will we ask? Who will we ask? What data will we use? How will we decide how to decide? Some of these decisions are made unilaterally. For example, each partner will need to decide how deeply they will explore their own role in holding the status quo in place? Other questions will need to be decided together, such as “What should be the scope of our work?” Will the education collaboration narrowly focus on improving reading scores of children in the third grade or will the partners address early childhood education because data shows that kindergarten readiness shapes those reading scores?

As the partners begin to make more choices about their work together, they will transition into the next phase.

## Phase 2: Develop

Fueled by a deep, shared understanding of the present state of the system, partners will be eager to act to improve the system’s outcomes. This urge to act is both invaluable and dangerous. Partners need to transition their work from learning to doing, but they also must decide the purpose and focus of their actions. Partners do not have the capacity to address all the issues, challenges and opportunities that

emerged during their exploration. The partners need to choose where they will focus their collective efforts, while maintaining their system perspective. Choosing the focus – often referred to as the strategic intent of the collaboration – is a crucial decision that will shape the rest of the collaboration cycle. The more defined the boundaries of what the partners are working on together – for example a focus on third-grade reading scores has more defined boundaries than a focus on improving elementary education outcomes – the more limited the choices are that the partners need to consider. Too narrow a focus and the work probably won't influence enough of the system and if the focus is too broad the partners may never agree on what to do together.

It is common for partners to identify an initial focus, with a recognition that they will pursue other opportunities once they've learned what it takes to make progress together.

The demands of the collaboration process on each individual partner and the whole group expand greatly during this phase. Strategies and specific initiatives are co-created by the partners. The partners often identify new partners – those that have financial resources, provide vital services or have invaluable insight and experience – that need to be engaged in the process. Strategy development and partner engagement demand technical expertise, as well as meetings, facilitation, communications and conflict resolution. Without sufficient resources the partners will struggle to clarify their strategy and build the shared commitment needed to implement that strategy.

### Phase 3: Implement

After the strategies and initiatives have been refined and adjusted based on partner input, implementation proceeds. Because many of the partners have continuously been implementing their own programs, the shift to implementation may not be visible to everyone in the system. For example, implementation of a collaborative effort to improve third grade reading outcomes might include a variety of organizations agreeing to collect and share their outcome data in a consistent manner. There may be no new programs serving third graders, but for the first time the community will have a better understanding of the collective results of disparate efforts. And the lessons learned from those results, might send the partners back to explore new questions and develop different ideas.

Implementation within a civic collaboration usually entails a combination of new initiatives instituted by individual partners, new collective initiatives and new ways to measure and share results.

### Phase 4: Regenerate

Regeneration occurs in our natural world – forests regenerate after a fire, starfish regenerate an arm etc. – and it is a natural occurrence within our complex civic systems, as well. Collaborations need to regenerate – be formed or created again -- because the context within our communities is constantly changing. For example, a collaboration focused on addressing a tight employment market in a community needs to regenerate in the wake of a global recession that results in high unemployment.

Partners implementing strategies and initiatives within a collaborative framework need to constantly ask how the context has shifted within the system and whether those shifts are causing outcomes to decline or are reducing the value of those outcomes.

Another driver of the need for regeneration is the recognition that the original boundaries used to narrow the focus of the collaboration are limiting the partners' ability to achieve their desired change.

For example, the partners may learn that they simply cannot do enough to improve third grade reading scores if they don't also address the quality of early childhood education in the community.

The need for regeneration drives the partners, and likely new partners, back into the exploration phase as the partners ask: "What do we need to do differently together in light of our improved understanding of and/or changes within the civic system?"

## Traps in the Cycle

Civic collaboration is a journey full of pot-holes, ditches and detours. Those are the easy parts. Liz Weaver of the Tamarack Institute has identified four common, mandatory traps that jeopardize the ability of partners to navigate through the collaboration cycle. These traps may grab hold of the partners within any phase of the cycle. Sometimes the traps will capture all the partners, sometimes only one or a few will experience a specific trap. One of the most important things to understand about these traps is that they aren't optional. Every collaboration will experience them in one way or another. The question is whether the partners will navigate through the traps or will the trap crush the partners' individual and/or collective will to continue on the journey.

### Scarcity Trap

Scarcity is perhaps the most frequent, mandatory trap that partners experience. It can appear at the earliest stage of the collaboration cycle when partners struggle to come up with the resources to conduct research to answer their new questions. And it will certainly appear when partners begin to wonder if their collective efforts are generating sufficient value in the regeneration phase.

Scarcity is a common trap because finite resources shape each of the organizations and programs within a community's civic systems. Working differently together requires more resources and a shift in how resources are allocated. It also requires new capacity to organize the collective work. Organizations and institutions focused on their own interests are understandably challenged to identify resources to support collective work. Partners within a collaboration can sometimes view dollars and staff allocated to the collective work as resources that would be better used to support their own operations. Partners navigate the scarcity trap by staying focused on their shared goals.

### Rigidity Trap

Transforming systems requires everyone within the system to change their behavior. Of course, not everyone within a system is eager to change and some are operating under constraints – financial, legal and cultural – that can keep them from making needed changes. In the exploration phase, this trap materializes when partners hang onto assumptions in spite of the data. In the development phase it can halt progress if partners insist that rules or past practice prohibit them from sharing data. And during implementation it can prevent organizations from adopting new practices that are producing positive outcomes for other partners. In its worst form, this trap can be summarized by the statement: "That's not how we do things." If too many partners stick to the way they did business in the past, the collaboration won't move past this trap. Partners focused on the desired outcomes find ways to cut through the constraints that power this trap.

### Parasitic Trap

Collaboration requires us to work with others and anyone who has ever done “group work” in elementary school or graduate school knows that some in the group don’t do as much of the work as others in the group. In civic collaborations, these “free loading” partners can be viewed as parasites, sucking credit from those doing the “heavy lifting” within the collaboration. Too many parasites and the collaboration will lose its momentum. Collaborations also require coordination capacity – staff support to convene meetings, facilitate strategy development, communicate across the system and resolve conflicts among the partners. This staff support acts as a “host” to the collaboration. Sometimes an individual partner can try to extract too much from the host, weakening the overall collaboration. An alternate version of this trap involves the “host” trying to exercise too much control or taking too much credit for the work of the partners. This can cause partners to reduce their willingness to be responsible for the collaboration’s success.

### **Chronic Disaster Trap**

Civic collaborations often address wicked, persistent problems that have defied repeated attempts to resolve. The forces that hold the inequitable status quo within a civic system in place are entrenched and difficult to shift. Sometimes it seems that all those forces are conspiring to limit the effectiveness of a collaborative effort. Just when outcomes are being generated, a shift in elected leadership or a new federal policy can disrupt the work or create a new hurdle.

Partners have seen past attempts at transformation fail and some are prepared for this effort to fail, too. Partners that believe nothing can change are particularly vulnerable to being stuck in this trap. Partners that refuse to tolerate the inequitable status quo of the system can encourage their colleagues to keep pushing, no matter what barriers and constraints block their progress through the collaboration cycle. Rarely does a collaboration hit upon the winning strategy the first time out of the gate. If failure is treated as a disaster, rather than an opportunity to learn and adapt, this trap can be fatal to a collaboration.

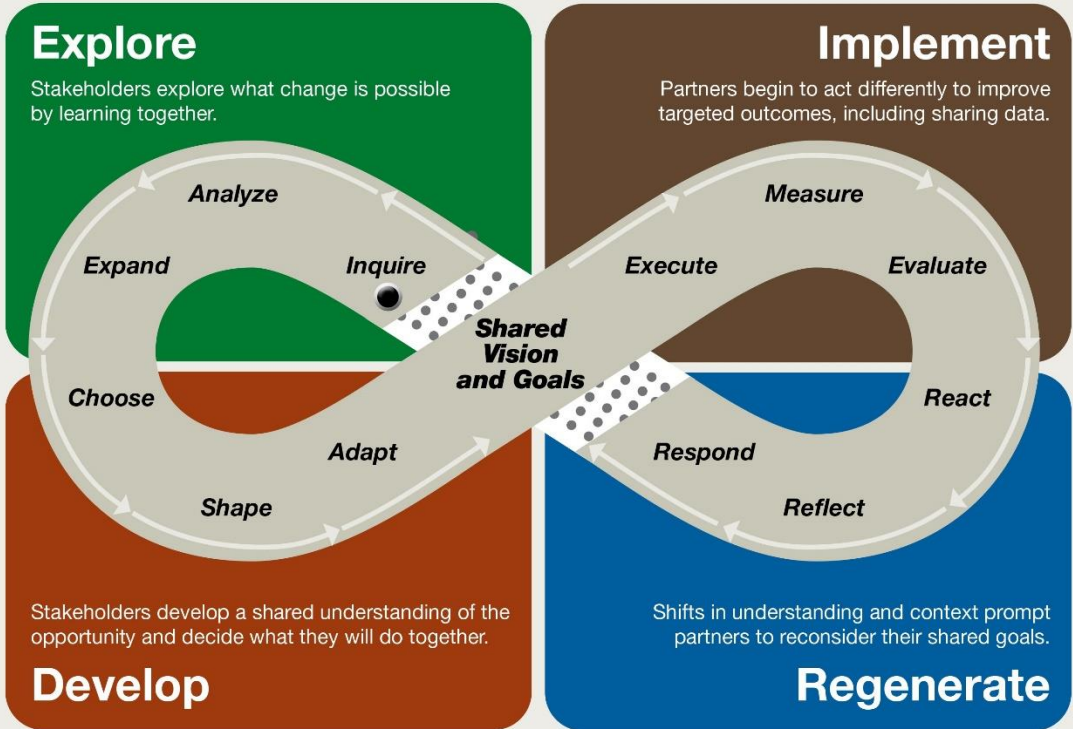
## **The Journey Through the Cycle**

The journey through the collaboration cycle is never linear or smooth. Partners often find themselves having to backtrack to move forward. If an individual leading an organization’s participation in the collaboration leaves the organization, their replacement may need to retrace the steps of their predecessor before they can effectively engage with the other partners. New organizations are often invited to join a collaboration as it enters a new phase, these new partners often need to make their own journey through the cycle to “catch up” with the decisions and perspectives of the partners.

One of the key roles of the coordination capacity that supports a collaboration is to help each individual partner navigate through the cycle. And to help all the partners navigate the cycle together.

Collaboration is a challenging journey. The path is made easier when the partners understand the cycle through which they are journeying.

# Collaboration Cycle



Civic Collaboration Consultants, LLC

Inspired by the work of Plexus Institute and Tamarack Institute

