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The International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) Student and Early Career Network (ISECN): A Case Illustrating Three Strategies for Maximizing Synergy in Professional Collaboration

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Commentary

The International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) Student and Early Career Network (ISECN): a case illustrating three strategies for maximizing synergy in professional collaboration

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Abstract: The International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) Student and Early Career Network (ISECN) was constructed upon a foundation of research, using the Bergen Model of Collaborative Functioning (BMCF) as a blueprint to inform its leadership, communication, structure, and culture. The BMCF consists of inputs (partners, mission, and financial resources), throughputs (operational processes), and outputs (synergy and antagony). In this commentary, we use the BMCF to describe the ISECN work, highlighting opportunities, successes, and challenges. We also put forward three strategies derived from the BMCF that have been purposefully employed by ISECN to maximize its production of synergy from the voluntary contributions of its members. (Global Health Promotion, 2012; 19(3): 50–53)

Keywords: collaboration and partnership, workforce development, IUHPE

Introduction

In 2008, *Global Health Promotion* published a commentary updating the International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) community to the work of the IUHPE Student and Early Career Network (ISECN) after its first year of full operation (1). Fast forward to 2011 – five years have passed since ISECN began recruiting members – describing all the work accomplished would be impossible here, however some current highlights include:

- presenting and preparing a peer-reviewed study on developing a professional Code of Ethics;
- managing the online presence of the IUHPE's 20th World Conference on Health Promotion;
- serving as editor and stream managers for *Views of Health Promotion Online* (publishing several reports);
- producing a monthly newsletter with a global perspective;
- helping IUHPE headquarters expand the IUHPE membership base;
- creating a new, frequently updated website (isecn.org); and
- serving on IUHPE regional committees and on the IUHPE Board of Trustees.

As a network within the IUHPE, it is pertinent that members outside of ISECN stay informed of our activities; however, with this commentary, we seek to do more than simply update readers. We will illustrate how research has informed ISECN leadership since its inception and will examine

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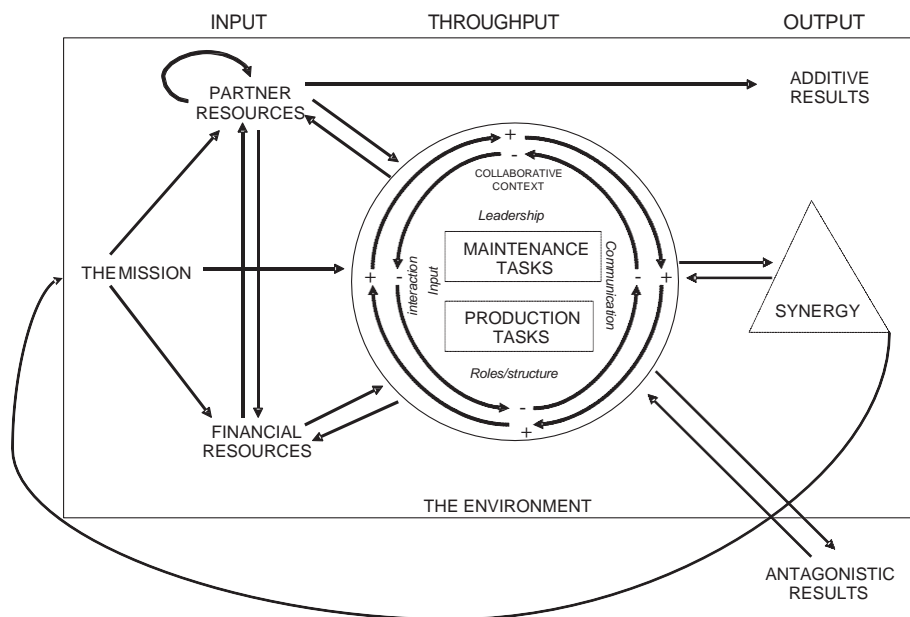
Figure 1. Bergen Model of Collaborative Functioning

ISECN as a case demonstrating concrete strategies for maximizing synergy in such collaborations.

Background

In 2006, the first author completed a Master's thesis on collaborative functioning (2) using the IUHPE's Global Programme for Health Promotion Effectiveness (GPHPE) as a case to explore the strengths and challenges of collaboration among health promotion professionals. Out of this work a conceptual model of collaboration was derived: the Bergen Model of Collaborative Functioning (BMCF).

Motivated by the dedication and voluntarism of the GPHPE participants and by discussions with the then-president of the IUHPE, Maurice Mittelmark, the first author decided to build a network for students and early professionals within the IUHPE. As the network took shape, this conceptual model, the BMCF, was constantly applied.

Bergen Model of Collaborative Functioning

The BMCF (3) (Figure 1) is an extension of the Wandersman *et al.* (4) model and has been used in several empirical studies on collaborations (5–8).

It takes a systems view of collaborative functioning: inputs of partners, finances, and mission enter the collaborative context. Once inside, these inputs interact in positive and negative ways influencing and being influenced by the leadership, communication, and formalized roles/procedures of the collaboration. In this context, partners work on production tasks relating to the mission and maintenance tasks that keep the collaboration going. This work results in outputs: synergy (more than what would have happened without the collaboration) or antagony (resources wasted through the collaboration process). These outputs feed back into the collaboration positively and negatively, affecting how the partnership operates and its abilities to recruit new partners and financial resources. Almost always, both synergy and antagony are present.

ISECN and the BMCF

ISECN's mission is 'to identify, support and serve the needs of this IUHPE membership category by mobilizing student and early career professionals within the larger network'.

As with all collaborations, ISECN pursues this mission by combining the organized efforts of its resources. ISECN has no budget; this lack of financial resources makes its work dependent on the voluntary contributions of time and effort from members (partner resources).

Three strategies ISECN has used to motivate and engage its volunteers are presented and discussed below:

- regular communication and interaction;
- benefits for participation; and
- specific tasks/roles and leadership understanding of voluntary work.

Regular communication and interaction

Communication is the means through which collaboration is accomplished. Within ISECN, we communicate to identify needs and priority areas so we can clarify our plans for accomplishing projects. We also communicate to connect and build professional links and friendships, among people who rarely meet face-to-face.

ISECN utilizes technological modes of communication that include an email listserv, Facebook, and our website. We also use Skype to discuss our projects, plans, and needs during our working group, leadership team, and quarterly teleconference calls. ISECN strives for the delicate balance between under-communicating and over-communicating (2). We use our listserv for the most relevant communication to all members. Emails concerning mundane details of specific projects are sent only to members of the relevant group. We use quarterly Skype calls to do most of our planning and updating. These calls are entirely voluntary so anyone can participate but nobody 'has to'. Minutes of these meetings are then distributed to the entire membership. The website, our newest tool, offers the opportunity to connect and share information among ourselves while also serving as a platform for showcasing our work and members. The main feature of all our communication is that it is consistently available but minimally intrusive.

Benefits for participation

Work must be rewarded. Because ISECN cannot provide monetary rewards, it is essential to find alternative, yet meaningful, compensation. An important factor of ISECN's success as a collaboration has been to develop mechanisms to meet our members' needs for growth and advancement through ISECN work. Our main currency for rewarding work has endless possibilities in practice – we provide opportunities.

Some examples are:

- building skills, resumes, and professional reputation through working on health promotion projects or holding leadership positions at regional and global levels;
- building publication lists through leading health promotion working groups or moderating and summarizing *Views of Health Promotion Online* (VHPO) streams; or
- earning college/university credit through contributions to our newsletter.

Since ISECN's mission is 'to identify, support and serve the needs' of our members, the rewards we offer that benefit individual members, while simultaneously furthering the network's mission, can be considered synergy. Throughout our work we have witnessed members' continual excitement by the recognition or opportunities they receive for participating in ISECN which then motivates them to continue contributing. This is a demonstration of synergy's ability to positively impact collaborative functioning and recruit and renew partner resources.

Specific tasks/roles and leadership understanding of voluntary work

Members' interests drive ISECN project selection. Working groups are formed on the initiative of the person who will lead the group and then other members are invited to participate. Working group members decide together what will be done and volunteer to complete specific tasks. In this manner, each person takes on a clear role within the group.

When people accept a role, they feel a certain responsibility and accountability to deliver on that obligation; however, this dynamic is complicated in a strictly voluntary collaboration (2). The leadership must first recognize that each partner is a volunteer and that, at times, other responsibilities must take precedence.

To address this, ISECN has cultivated an environment that encourages 'doing what you can'. Members are encouraged to step away from responsibilities in times of stress or competing demands. People step away for various periods and are warmly welcomed back when their schedules allow. The leadership team not only communicates this understanding but also acts as role models – stepping away for reasons such as family illness, maternity leave, relocating, and during the intense writing phase of the PhD. This flexibility empowers members to take projects on knowing they can work them around their other priorities.

Antagony

Given limitations of space, we will allow the list of ISECN's accomplishments above to serve as evidence of synergy. However, this commentary would not be complete without a discussion of antagony.

In the case of ISECN, a collaboration without financial resources, antagony means the time and effort of the partners (inputs) have been lost along the way or opportunities to affect our mission have not been acted upon. ISECN has experienced both.

On one occasion, we began a project and enlisted the work of an eager member without realizing that the project was not in line with the overall vision of ISECN as a network within the IUHPE (off-mission). Unfortunately, when we learned we could not use the member's work, that member left ISECN. A second member distrusted the collaborative context of ISECN; this person repeatedly questioned the leadership team's actions and created substantial extra work (maintenance). Ultimately that member also decided to leave the group. Although we cannot know for sure, it can be argued that our policy of leniency with the workload of voluntary members and the periodic absence of leadership has slowed our progress and growth or caused us to miss opportunities to fulfill our mission.

Conclusion

Leadership within a collaboration is about maintaining balance. To use BMCF terminology, the inputs of mission, partner, and financial resources require a delicate balance. In the case of ISECN, the

mission must be particularly compelling and personally beneficial to compensate for the lack of financial contribution. Communication also demands balance – you want to communicate just enough to ensure awareness and engagement, without communicating too often or too much. Lastly, there must be a balance between assigning responsibility without being too demanding on voluntary partners. These lessons gleaned from the impressive collaboration of the GPHPE have informed most ISECN decisions and, while we have still made mistakes, these insights have enabled us to proactively address many potential problems.

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