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## Journey to Successful Collaborations

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## Journey to Successful Collaborations

### Abstract

Due to ongoing budgetary restraints, reduced staffing, and other challenges to continued program growth, Extension personnel must understand how to bring together the resources needed for successful programming and sustainability. The most effective way to accomplish this is through collaboration. Unfortunately, ". . . little is written describing how to approach the developmental process [italics added] of collaboration" (Gardner, 2005). This article provides readers with an easy to understand, step-by-step guide for navigating the road to successful collaborations.

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## Introduction

The ability to cobble together the resources needed for successful Extension programming is vital due to ongoing budgetary restraints, reduced staffing, and other challenges to continued growth. The most effective way to accomplish this is through collaboration. Collaboration describes the efforts of people and/or organizations to achieve a common goal that could not be reached efficiently through individual efforts (Borden & Perkins, 1998; Boswell & Cannon, 2005; Gardner, 2005; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Osher, 2002).

Extension professionals must understand the process of building collaborations in order to bring together the resources, expertise, and new perspectives that will enable them to effectively address complex problems, improve program outcomes and achieve program sustainability (Freeth, 2001; Gardner, 2005). In addition, grant-making agencies increasingly require multi-organizational collaborations as a condition of funding (Borden & Perkins, 1999; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001). Unfortunately, ". . . little is written describing how to approach the developmental *process* [italics added] of collaboration [as opposed to] . . . describing what it should look like as an outcome" (Gardner, 2005, Abstract).

## The Collaboration Process

What happens *during* the journey toward effective collaboration is critical for success; however, the path is seldom straight and often rocky. The steps outlined below will provide Extension personnel with an easy to comprehend, yet valuable map for navigating the collaboration process. While each step on the road is important, the first two are *crucial*.

**Step 1. Clearly define the problem: *need for journey*.** When the need for a program has been identified, but available resources (funds, time, expertise, equipment, etc.) are not sufficient to meet needs, it is time to consider the merits of collaboration. Multiple individuals and organizations are in a far better position to contribute resources needed to improve program outcomes (Ansari, Phillips, & Hammick, 2001; Freeth, 2001).

**Step 2. Identify core partners to develop the program: *travel companions*** (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001). Collaborations are stronger and more effective if the major players are included in program development activities. Collaborations can be formed with almost any combinations of individuals, agencies, or organizations. The trick is to identify those individuals and organizations compatible with program goals that also have the resources required to support programming efforts (Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Nicola, 2005). These entities should also stand to benefit from the collaboration. The importance of including a diversity of members cannot be overemphasized. Invite members from as many diverse segments of the community as compatible with your mission. Don't forget to include policymakers, the media, business leaders, and your clientele (Alexander et al., 2003; Gardner, 2005; Nicola, 2005).

**Step 3. Develop a common vision of the project to increase feelings of shared ownership: *the ideal journey*** (Alexander et al., 2003; Boswell & Cannon, 2005; Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005; Gardner, 2005; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Nicola, 2005).

**Step 4. Ensure that everyone has a voice and is treated respectfully: *travel etiquette*** (Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005; Gardner, 2005; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Osher, 2002; Rebori, 2000).

**Step 5. Clearly define program and collaboration goals: *destination*** (De Gibaja, 2001; Gardner, 2005; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Nicola, 2005).

**Step 6. Define process and plan of work: *chart route and define travel modes*** (De Gibaja, 2001; Freeth, 2001; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Osher, 2002).

**Step 7. Establish and nurture trusting working relationships between collaborators: *ensure travellers' confidence*** (De Gibaja, 2001; Gardner, 2005; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Nicola, 2005).

**Step 8. Provide benefits to members and align reward structure with collaborative goals: *frequent travel points*** (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Nicola, 2005; Osher, 2002).

**Step 9. Evaluate program and collaboration to provide evidence of outcomes and impact: *check course*** (Ansari, Phillips, & Hammick, 2001; Nicola, 2005). Collaborations are *not* self-sustaining, so periodically use a tool such as Borden's and Perkins' (1999) *Collaboration Progress Checklist* to ascertain whether course corrections are needed.

**Step 10. Use evaluation results to modify, expand, and/or drop the collaboration in order to maximize success and/or sustainability as required by program mission: *alter course as needed***. If the project mission has been fulfilled, it is time to drop the collaboration (Freeth, 2001).

## Conclusion

Extension professionals must build successful collaborations to achieve program goals and program sustainability. Use the guide (Table 1) to chart a course towards successful collaboration, and you *will* reach your ultimate destination!

**Table 1.**  
Guide for Successful Collaborations

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	1. Clearly define problem or situation, and ascertain that forming a collaboration is the best solution.
	2. Invite members from as many diverse segments of the community as compatible with your mission.
	3. Develop a common vision of project to ensure feelings of shared ownership.
	4. Ensure that everyone has a voice and is treated respectfully. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strive for open communications.</li> <li>• Use membership-driven agendas during meetings.</li> </ul>
	5. Clearly define program and collaboration goals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create collaborative guidelines with enough flexibility to keep all partners engaged.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan for program and collaboration evaluations.</li> </ul>
	<p>6. Define process and plan of work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine skills, preferences and pertinent individual expertise.</li> <li>• Delegate responsibilities &amp; leadership roles based on characteristics &amp; skills</li> <li>• Define strategies to eliminate/minimize discrepancies in effort and benefits.</li> </ul>
	<p>7. Establish and nurture trusting working relationships between collaborators.</p>
	<p>8. Provide benefits to members and align reward structure (if any) with collaborative goals.</p>
	<p>9. Evaluate program and collaboration to provide evidence of outcomes &amp; impact.</p>
	<p>10. Modify, expand and/or drop collaboration to maximize success and/or sustainability as required by program mission.</p>

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