

Twenty Ingredients for a Successful Collaboration

Research clarifies what's needed when planning a strategic alliance.

By Mark B. Redfield, Jr.

What makes a collaboration among nonprofits fruitful? The answer isn't a mystery. Twenty factors have been identified as integral to an effective strategic alliance.¹

The 20 Questions

You can put the 20 factors into good use for your organization. If you're contemplating a strategic alliance, ask yourself these questions first:

Does your organization have a history of cooperation in your community?

Is your organization seen as a leader in the community?

Is the social climate favorable for forming strategic alliances?

Is there trust and respect between your organization and your alliance partner?

Is a good cross-section of people involved in the collaboration?

Do all members of the collaboration feel that the alliance is in their self-interest?

Do members of the collaboration have the ability to compromise?

Do collaboration members share a stake in the process of collaboration and in the outcome?

Do collaboration members at all levels share in the decision-making?

Are collaboration members flexible?

Have both partnering organizations developed clear roles and policy guidelines?

Are both organizations adaptable?

Do members of both organizations communicate with each other

frequently and openly?

Have both organizations established formal and informal communication links?

Do both organizations have concrete, attainable goals and objectives for the collaboration?

Do the two organizations share a common vision for the collaboration?

Will the collaboration serve a unique purpose?

Is there sufficient funding for the collaboration?

Is there a skilled convenor to organize the collaboration?

Do the alliance organizers have the capacity for strategic thinking?

The first 19 questions are based on factors proposed by Paul W. Mattessich and Barbara Monsey in a

Wilder Foundation study. A twentieth factor was found by David Aronstein and Michael Connolly, who wrote a working paper in which they reviewed the 19 factors from the Wilder research study, agreed that these factors were crucial to collaboration success, but reported that a capacity for strategic thinking was another critical success factor that should be added to the model.²

Survey Results

I performed my own study, in which I asked executive directors known for their partnering success which factors they thought most important.³ A majority of respondents agreed strongly that 19 of the 20 factors were essential to their collaborations.

For example, take factor 1. It appeared in the survey as: "There is a history of collaboration or cooperation in the community which helps us understand the roles and expectations required in a collaboration and enables us to trust the

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The only variable that a majority didn't identify as a success factor was factor 9.



**Figure 1: The Six Categories
& the 20 Factors**

- I. Environment
 - 1. History of collaboration or cooperation in the community
 - 2. Collaborative group seen as a leader in the community
 - 3. Political/social climate favorable
- II. Membership Characteristics
 - 4. Mutual respect, understanding, & trust
 - 5. Appropriate cross-section of members
 - 6. Members see collaboration as in their self-interest
 - 7. Ability to compromise
- III. Process/Structure
 - 8. Members share a stake in both process & outcome
 - 9. Multiple layers of decision-making
 - 10. Flexibility
 - 11. Development of clear roles & policy guidelines
 - 12. Adaptability
- IV. Communication
 - 13. Open & frequent communications
 - 14. Established informal & formal communication links
- V. Purpose
 - 15. Concrete, attainable goals & objectives
 - 16. Shared vision
 - 17. Unique purpose
- VI. Resources
 - 18. Sufficient funding for the collaboration
 - 19. Skilled convener
 - 20. Capacity for strategic thinking



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process.” According to their responses, 71.5% agreed with this factor.

The only variable that a majority didn’t identify as a success factor was factor 9, which appeared on the survey as: “Every level—upper management, middle management, and lower-level management (operations)—within each organization in our collaborative group is encouraged to participate in decision-making.” Only 42.9% of respondents agreed with this statement—the lowest of any response and the only one with less than a 60% agreement.

The Six Categories

For survey purposes, the 20 factors were grouped into six categories (see Figure 1). We can summarize them as follows:

Category I: Environment consists of the geographic and social context within which a strategic alliance exists. While alliance members may influence the environment, they don’t have control over it. In a favorable environment, political leaders, opinion makers, the public, and the people who control resources will support (or at least not oppose) the collaboration’s mission. The collaborating organizations will be seen as leaders who have a history of collaboration in the community.

Category II: Membership includes the skills, attitudes, and opinions of the individuals in the collaborative group as well as the cultures of the organizations involved. According to our model, members should have mutual respect, understanding, and trust. They should view the collaboration as being in their self-interest, they must be able to compromise, and there should be a good cross-section of members.

Category III: Process/Structure refers to the management, decision-making, and operational systems of the alliance effort. Alliance members should be flexible in the way they organize themselves and adaptable when it comes to organizational change. They should share a stake in both the process and outcome of the collaboration and should develop clear roles and policy guidelines. People in all layers of the organization should participate in decision-making.

Category IV: Communication alludes to the channels used by partners to send and receive information, keep one another informed, and convey opinions to influence the group’s actions. Our model proposes that communication should be open and frequent and that there should be both formal and informal communication links.

Category V: Purpose refers to the reasons for developing the collaboration, the result the alliance seeks, and the tasks necessary to accomplish it. Every collaboration is driven by a need, crisis, or opportunity. To be

Survey respondents pinpointed two factors as especially relevant to a successful collaboration.

A collaboration needn't have all 20 factors in place.

successful, a collaboration needs concrete, attainable goals and objectives; a shared vision; and a unique purpose.

Category VI: Resources includes the financial and human input necessary to develop an alliance. Three of the 20 factors relate to resources: sufficient funds, a skilled convener to lead the group, and the capacity for strategic thinking.

Where Should You Begin?

This research clearly shows the importance of the 20 factors identified in previous studies. Survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed with 19 of the 20 factors. They pinpointed two factors as especially relevant to a successful collaboration: a leader with organizing and interpersonal skills (factor 19) and the capacity for strategic thinking (factor 20).

Even though it didn't receive a majority response, we can't ignore factor 9 with 42.9% agreement. For one thing, survey respondents affirmed the other factors in the same category (the process/structure category). And when asked about their responses to factor 9, respondents explained that, while they tended to focus on decision-making at the upper-management level, that didn't mean lower-level decision-making wasn't important. As one executive director put it, "I know we should encourage more decision-making at lower levels, but we're not really there yet."

As that comment suggests, a collaboration needn't have all 20 factors in place for it to be successful. As long as members agree on the importance of the factors and are diligently working toward attaining them, they have a foundation on which to move forward.

If you're looking for a way to begin, there's no better place than with factor 20, strategic thinking. Thinking strategically leads to a common purpose and a shared vision. And that's the first step to getting people to work together. ■

Footnotes

¹The terms "collaboration," "strategic alliance," and "partnership" are used interchangeably in this article.

²For more on the Wilder Foundation study, see www.wilderresearch.org. For more on the Aronstein and Connolly working paper, "Access to Life Saving Medicine: A Collaboration between a Not-for-Profit HIV Clinical Research Agency, a State Public Health Department, and For-Profit Pharmaceutical Companies," see www.independentsector.org/programs/leadership/3sector_overview.html.

³This research consisted of sending surveys to 34 nonprofit organizations and following up with on-site interviews.



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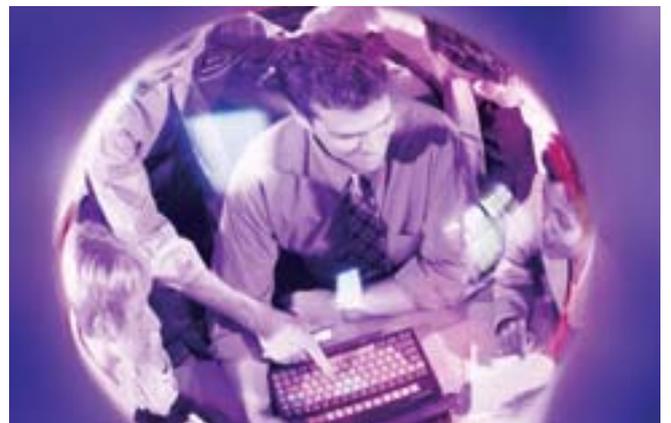
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