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Kathryn S. Whitaker

Richard A. King

James A. Lowham

See next page for additional authors

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Requirements for Collaboration With Schools: Public and Private Leaders Speak Out

Authors

Kathryn S. Whitaker, Richard A. King, James A. Lowham, Mary Norby-Loud, and Paul Sueltenfuss

If organizations are truly to collaborate, rather than merely cooperate, there will necessarily be a sacrifice of autonomy as they share visions, resources, decisions, and accountability.

Requirements for Collaboration With Schools: Public and Private Leaders Speak Out

by Kathryn S. Whitaker, Richard A. King
James A. Lowham, Marie Norby-Loud and
Paul Sueltenfuss

The complex problems facing children and families in this country provide an impetus to reexamine service delivery systems. One promising answer to the resolution of these issues is interagency collaboration. This strategy brings together previously fragmented organizations to better assist children and families through coordinated efforts. In addition, interagency collaboration promises to provide more comprehensive service delivery.

Multiple organizations have coordinated and cooperated in various endeavors over the years; yet recent conceptions of collaboration differ from these more passive approaches. Cooperation, for example, may include networking and information sharing (Melaville & Blank, 1991), but agencies do not make substantial changes in basic services provided, nor in the rules and regulations governing their agencies (Hord, 1986). Similarly, coordination "implies joint activity, but does not require participants to share a common goal" (National School Boards Association, 1991).

Hord's (1986) framework examines the differences between cooperation and collaboration in terms of (a) beginning processes, (b) communications, (c) resources and ownership, (d) requirements, (e) leadership and control, and (f) rewards. Whereas a cooperative begins with an agreement for one organization to assist another, the initiation of a collaborative rests on organizations joining forces to outline shared goals and action plans. Communication in a cooperative is characterized as a conveyance of information from one organization to another, unlike the more fluid communication channels among individuals at different levels in collaboratives. An

Whitaker is Associate Professor, King is Professor, and Lowham, Norby-Loud, and Sueltenfuss are Doctoral Students in the Division, University of Northern Colorado.

"us/them" process mode typifies the individual proprietorship of cooperative institutions, whereas a "we" process of system ownership and mutual funding of activities distinguishes collaboratives. A cooperative endeavor requires one organization to obtain permission from another to analyze problem areas; a collaborative demands that both groups devote time and energy in taking action and requires each to contribute expertise. Unilateral leadership and central control characterize organizations in a cooperative, whereas dispersed leadership, delegation of responsibility, and mutual control typify collaboratives. Finally, one organization reaps greater direct benefits from a cooperative activity, unlike the sharing of resources and services that distinguishes collaboratives.

In this paper, we describe a study that followed Hord's (1986) framework in understanding the views of public and private sector leaders concerning conditions which are necessary for successful collaboration between educational organizations and non-school agencies, including businesses, social service and non-profit agencies, and community colleges. The focus was intentionally shifted from schools to their potential collaborators—a population that is not always asked about its own views on collaboration despite the movement toward school-linked partnerships. Partnerships are important in the context of this study because, as Houston (1979) noted, collaborative relationships are more likely to grow from successful previous experiences. The extent of partnership activities was documented in a National Center for Education Statistics (1989) survey. In 1987-88, 40% of the nation's public schools had some kind of formal partnership with an external institution.

The recent trend toward the formation of collaboratives beyond partnerships (Kirst & McLaughlin, 1990) urged the collection of data from these types of institutions to ascertain perceptions of what makes for effective collaborative arrangements. Specifically, the research question which guided the study was as follows: "Are shared vision, shared lines of communication, shared resources, shared leadership, shared responsibility for decision-making, shared accountability for outcomes, and yielding autonomy necessary conditions for collaboration among two or more organizations?"

Methodology

A group of doctoral students at the University of Northern Colorado collaborated in designing this exploratory study of necessary conditions for effective collaboration (Lowham, et al., 1992). They interviewed forty-two leaders from selected businesses, social service and non-profit agencies, and community colleges which had first-hand experiences with school-linked partnerships or collaboratives.

Interview questions were developed following the six areas outlined by Hord (1986), and included questions about vision, communication, leadership, accountability, decision making, resource sharing, and autonomy. The semi-structured interview guide included seven two-part questions. First, respondents were asked to rank on a Likert scale the extent to which certain conditions were necessary for collaboration. Second, respondents were asked open-ended questions about advice they would offer concerning each condition. After addressing the conditions, they were asked to offer any additional advice about collaboration with schools and to identify other individuals who might also be interviewed relative to the initiation of collaboratives.

Quantitative data gathered through the first stage were aggregated without reference to the organization of the interviewees. Mean scores were compiled for each of the seven categories. Next, responses to the open-ended questions concerning advice were categorized according to the seven themes. Quantitative methods were used to support the findings from the interviews.

In the following section, we discuss the findings of these conversations with the potential collaborators in relation to advice noted in the emerging literature on collaboration.

Findings

Responses to the interview questions revealed the collective beliefs of these leaders about the necessity of selected conditions to build successful collaboratives with schools. Table 1 presents the number of respondents who indicated each value on the scale and the mean responses. It is clear that shared lines of communication, shared accountability, shared vision, and shared responsibilities for decision making are viewed by these individuals as being essential ingredients. Less important in the general view of respondents are sharing human, financial, and material resources; sharing leadership; and yielding autonomy.

Table 1. Necessity of selected conditions for successful collaboration

Condition	n	Frequency of Responses*					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
Share vision	41	3			11	27	4.44
Share communication	39			1	7	31	4.77
Share human resources	40	1	5	6	11	17	3.95
Share financial resources	38	5	4	7	5	17	3.66
Share material resources	42	3	3	12	11	13	3.67
Share leadership	39	6	2	6	12	13	3.62
Share decision making	37			2	17	18	4.43
Share accountability	38			5	9	24	4.50
Yield autonomy	37	5	5	10	8	9	3.30

*1 = low, 5 = high.

Shared Vision

One of the primary elements of a successful collaborative is the development of a shared vision (OERI, 1991). This common understanding of purposes and goals is a critical foundation for changes in the current structure of service delivery. Organizations that plan to collaborate need to decide on the broad vision that expresses a need for fundamental changes in the system and a desirable state (National Alliance of Business, 1989).

The importance of clarifying vision in beginning a collaborative relationship is evident in the advice provided by respondents. As shown in Table 1, the mean score for this condition is 4.44, on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). Several respondents noted that each organization, as a first step, must examine the rationale and motive for collaborating with another organization. One leader representing a non-profit agency stated that if a vision is not shared, alternative motives may be present. Kagan (1990) noted that the partnership process must be based on a unified view of outcomes participants wish to achieve.

Another emerging theme related to shared vision was the perception that some agreement on goals holds the project together. As one business person put it, "you don't have to share the same path, but you do have to share the same goal." A non-profit leader differed somewhat, noting that the vision itself does not have to be the same for all partners; however, in

this person's view, there must be a high level of agreement of purpose to foster effective working relations. Similarly, a community college leader responded that "paths may converge to a point, but the ultimate overall goal doesn't need to be the same."

Agreement on the vision is essential to the buy-in among participants, stated one non-profit leader. A social service agency representative agreed on the importance of buy-in of the vision by stating, "for the collaborative to be successful, shared vision must be high, although sometimes the vision comes along later." Another social service representative emphasized that having a shared vision "prevents communication problems and a lot of emotional garbage later in the process." Gardner (1992) echoed this important consideration by stating that line workers' involvement is important in the early stages.

When asked about the importance of shared vision, three respondents stated the importance of defining a mission for the collaborative. More specifically, respondents recognized the important role of the school in defining the mission of the collaborative. One leader from a non-profit organization predicted better results if the mission is "mandated by the principal" and if teachers are directly involved in discussions about the collaborative's purpose and goals. A community college leader contradicted this statement saying, "The shared vision needs to be created by the collaborating organizations."

Shared vision is clearly an important condition for collaboration. Although respondents differed in perceptions of the extent to which goals and desired outcomes must be the same for collaborators, they agreed that a common vision is important for securing organizations' buy-in and for fostering effective working relations.

Shared Leadership

Whether collaborative arrangements survive or die "depend on the urgency of the problems and the willingness of somebody to take the leadership" (Minneapolis: Youth Coordinating Board, 1990). Few would disagree that collaboration among organizations requires strong leadership, whether by an individual or several people. Leaders are able to envision goals, affirm values, achieve unity among groups, and serve as symbols (Gardner, 1986).

The literature supports shared leadership in collaboratives. Jehl and Kirst (1992) emphasize shared power, responsibility, and ownership; Hord (1986) supports shared, mutual control and dispersed leadership. Melaville and Blank (1991) also caution against a single leader in collaborative efforts. They state that "continued reliance on a single voice will ultimately stanch the flow of new ideas, underutilize the pool of available talent, and undermine the growth of interdependence central to successful joint efforts" (p. 25).

In this study, shared leadership was not viewed as being as crucial to the establishment of collaboratives as were other conditions (see Table 1). Responses to the question on the importance of shared leadership were mixed, and interview findings clarified the apparent divergent views. Respondents seemed to be divided on the issue of whether leadership is found in a single individual or is an equally shared responsibility among collaborators.

Several respondents suggested that one leader should take responsibility and be accountable for the success of the collaborative. A non-profit organization leader stated that the initiation of the collaborative rests with top management, although joint participation and empowerment must occur. Another responded that "it is easier to run the collaborative if everyone knows who is in charge. Someone needs to feed things through." A business leader observed that problems can surface when one person is not in charge: "Shared leadership takes longer and it is possible that two or more leaders can blame one another if the collaborative is not successful."

In contrast to these respondents who suggested that single leadership was preferable, others emphasized the positive impact of shared leadership. Stated a leader from a non-profit organization, "For the collaborative to be successful, leadership needs to be shared; if one person controls, there is a breakdown. Everyone's skills need to be tapped." One individual stressed that areas of leadership need to be decided in advance, such as having co-chairs from different organizations and rotating the responsibility for chairing the meetings.

These organizational leaders' views differ from the prevailing support for shared leadership as has been expressed by Hord (1986), Melaville and Blank (1991), and Jehl and Kirst (1992). They do not question the importance of leadership in collaborative endeavors; rather, they disagree about the degree to which leadership can be effectively shared.

Shared Lines of Communication

The predominant mode of service delivery by fragmented agencies lacks effective communication systems. Professionals and other agency personnel rarely talk to each other and oftentimes do not see each other as allies. In fact, outright rivalry occurs as organizations compete for scarce resources (Melaville & Blank, 1990). The result of poor communication among agencies is children and families "falling through the cracks" and not receiving the services needed (Kirst & McLaughlin, 1990).

As depicted in Table 1, sharing lines of communication is one of the most important conditions. It is also one of the most difficult to sustain in a collaborative effort. Respondents stated that collaboration will not occur without effective communication. "This is the key" to successful collaboration, stated a non-profit organizational leader. "It makes a difference between success and failure," responded another.

Open lines of communication among organizational leaders at high levels are especially important at the beginning stages of establishing the collaborative. Later, open communication also becomes critical among all agency and school personnel, according to one respondent. Participation of and communication with school administrators is particularly crucial because having school support is most important, stressed one non-profit leader.

Several organizational leaders articulated that communication must be on-going, occurring on a day-to-day basis. Hord (1986) stresses that communication roles need to be established and channels created for interaction across the organizations. In addition, many levels of communication need to be established, as clear information is the keystone of success in the effort. Many respondents in this study emphasized the importance of communication occurring through many layers and not resting with, for example, only top and mid-management. As one community college leader observed, "The more information each organization has, the better the collaborative becomes." Another community college leader stressed the importance of communicating with all, even guests and visitors. The community needs to be educated about the value and purpose of the collaborative.

Many problems faced in collaborative arrangements appear to be primarily due to a failure in communications. Melaville & Blank (1990) emphasize that participants need to establish communication processes that provide permission to disagree and one where conflict is viewed as a constructive way to move forward. One business leader in this study said, "The more times information is passed around, the more distorted it becomes, making the need for certain mechanisms to be in place to foster communication." A social service agency leader expressed discomfort with the communication channels between his agency and the school district, noting that the hierarchical structure of the school district caused problems.

Both business leaders and community college leaders offered the strategy of using newsletters to keep all involved abreast of developments. Others stressed regular meetings, at least once a month, with representatives from all collaborating organizations participating and sharing information.

Establishing and nurturing effective communication channels are critical in collaboration. Open and continuous exchange of information builds trust among participants, enhances support in the community, and enables better service delivery.

Shared Resources

The literature advances the view that sharing resources is requisite for successful collaboration; this condition is a key difference between collaboration and cooperation. Melaville and Blank (1990) underscore that collaboratives "need to share staff time and expertise, in-kind services, and especially funds. The commitment of resources is the acid test of any joint effort's determination to make a difference" (p. 32). According to Hord (1986), sharing resources enhances system ownership and creates a "we" process mode.

Although a few non-profit leaders indicated that resources should be shared to "as great an extent as possible," this condition was not viewed to be as important as other components described in the study (see Table 1). This finding may indicate that these organizations were not engaged in collaboration to the degree depicted by Hord (1986), but were engaged in more cooperative efforts. Responses may also have reflected the reality that sharing resources is very difficult; one respondent said, "Ideally it would be great, but it is not realistic."

Several barriers to resource sharing exist. Intriligator (1992) notes, "Garnering resources for interagency efforts is one of the challenges confronting the service community. Agency budgets are strained, and new initiatives typically require additional staff as well as retraining of existing staff" (p. 15). The non-school personnel in this study referred to budget constraints and grant funding limitations that pose limits to sharing financial resources. A community college leader maintained that frequently organizations only have control over their own funding and are limited in the degree to which they can share with other organizations. Non-profit agency personnel cautioned that sometimes the motive for collaboration comes from grant funding exclusively and that this can cause problems. Rather than shared resources per se, these organizational leaders observed that agreement on who provides what resources and how they are used is an important condition.

A representative of United Way indicated that while the agency is in collaborative arrangements with other organizations, resource sharing is not equitable. The agency desires greater resource sharing among all organizations involved. The collaborative arrangement is easier, she maintained, if financial commitment comes from other agencies as well. A business leader agreed: "The more each party is willing to share, the better the chance they have in reaching goals." Another suggested that sometimes businesses can offer more in terms of resources, but schools should contribute to the extent that they can.

While many respondents spoke of financial resources, questions were also asked about sharing human and material resources. One representative of a non-profit organization suggested that contributions be based on the ability of each participating organization to support the initiative, while a business leader indicated that "human and financial resources piggy back on each other; one without the other creates constraints." Others commented that "partners must contribute whatever they can or there is no marriage." In contrast, a representative from a non-profit organization called for access to all resources of all participants.

Although mixed responses surfaced in regard to shared resources, the literature suggests that pooling resources is

important. Intriligator (1992) states, "collaborative interagency relationships are supported with pooled resources which are largely within the control of the interagency unit. In effect, agencies make contributions to the collaborative unit in exchange for ongoing participation in its activities" (p. 17).

Sharing resources may be an essential condition to collaboration, but it is less critical than other factors in the view of these selected leaders. However, it appears that questions about who contributes how much of financial, human and material resources must be addressed to assure successful efforts.

Shared Decision Making

Sharing decisions distinguishes collaborative efforts from cooperative and coordinated ones (Hord, 1986; Intriligator, 1992). Respondents in this study agreed that sharing decision making is crucial to collaboration (see Table 1). A business leader stated, "For the collaborative to be effective, decisions should be shared. Sharing decisions contributes to buy-in and commitment. It is also important to lay out what you have to offer and what you are willing to do." Another business person observed that lack of shared decision making can lead to the destruction of the collaborative.

Although respondents agreed that decision making should be shared, at least one respondent noted that the balance would not necessarily be equal because individuals vary in their expertise. The balance also depends on the type of decision to be made. One individual, representing a non-profit organization, suggested that the major decisions are fiscal in nature. For example, what kinds of resources are organizations going to contribute?

Several respondents observed that policy and governance decisions needed to be shared, but the day-to-day decisions did not. For the decisions that need to be shared, scheduling regular meetings is one way to accomplish this. Hord (1986) also mentions the necessity of having regular meetings, among both large and small groups of collaborators, to sustain efforts.

A community college leader emphasized the importance of regularly scheduled meetings to "increase the trust level because of building closer relationships." Several respondents stressed the importance of establishing trust among collaborating organizations. One participant cautioned that if "trust, mutual appreciation, and respect did not exist up front, the collaborative would likely be doomed for failure." Another non-profit leader echoed the importance of trust by stating that the "level of power among collaborating organizations must be equal or trust will not be present." Intriligator (1992) cautions that inappropriate use of power represents a lack of trust between parties and it is necessary to develop mechanisms such as consensus decision making to avoid power plays.

The importance of shared decisions is evident in responses; nevertheless, it is also clear that the nature of decisions to be made define the degree to which participants express a need to be involved in deliberations. The more that a decision relates to the governance of the collaborative, the more important it is that participants have a voice.

Shared Accountability

To make a difference in expanding and improving services to children and families, interagency initiatives must begin with a clear statement of expected results. The collaborative, and individual agencies within it, should be "held responsible for measuring, monitoring and meeting objectives within a reasonable period of time" (Melaville & Blank, 1991). Another benefit beyond that of improved service delivery is a realistic assessment of that which can be accomplished: "Accountability is a sure-fire way to counter the temptation to over promise, an easy trap for an up-and-coming initiative trying to drum up interest and support" (Higgins, 1988, cited in Melaville & Blank, 1991, p. 34).

In this study, the importance of shared accountability is evident by participant responses. Sixty-three percent of the respondents gave shared accountability a high ranking of "five." Their comments revealed a concern with early agreement on who will be responsible for what results. Business leaders were especially concerned that accountability issues be spelled out early in the process. They urged participants to raise questions such as, "What do you want to do and by when?" and "How will we know when we accomplish this?" A business leader suggested that presently the accountability issue is fuzzy and that an evaluation form is needed to protect both sides. Another, stating that collaboratives fail because "... the burden falls back on business," argued that if people are not empowered, they fail to see the need to be accountable.

Representatives from non-profit agencies also emphasized the need to decide accountability issues up front. Two non-profit leaders noted that accountability issues become more of a factor as money issues surface. Others observed that it is people, not agencies, who are accountable: "If individuals say they will do something, they need to do it." A social service agency leader stressed that she would like to be more involved in outcomes as opposed to just the initiation: "I ignite the interest and the schools do the follow up."

One non-profit leader distinguished between full responsibility and task responsibility stating, "It is not necessary for everyone to have full responsibility, but task responsibility. You need to be clear about who is responsible for what." In contrast, another referred to shared accountability: "If you are working as a team, you can't blame one person if something doesn't succeed."

Most community college representatives reiterated the importance of shared accountability; one leader stressed "All need to be accountable for their part; we are only as strong as our weakest link." Another community college representative, however, did not rate this component as high as others indicating, "In certain situations, only one of the particular agencies will be held accountable should something go wrong."

The importance of accountability is overshadowed by disagreements about whether that responsibility for results needs to be shared. Some respondents favored shared accountability by the entire team of participants, whereas others stressed the realization that one agency is ultimately responsible for outcomes.

Interdependence

The issue of autonomy versus interdependence is apparent as many collaboratives struggle to find the right balance. As Melaville and Blank (1991) note, "the natural tendency of participants to maintain their distinctive organizational characteristics gives rise to the 'turf issues,' which, in greater or lesser degree, many joint efforts experience" (p. 29).

Differences exist in collaborative arrangements that attempt to transcend organizational boundaries and those which do not. Intriligator (1992) points to this difference, stating that "collaborative interagency efforts represent a higher degree of interdependence than coordinated and cooperative arrangements" (p. 23). The broader and more complex the interagency arrangement, the greater the need for interdependence.

One of the interview questions in this study asked individuals, "To what extent do collaborating organizations need to yield autonomy?" Findings showed that yielding autonomy was not viewed as a high priority (see Table 1), although the randomness of responses suggested that the question was not completely understood by some individuals. Several respondents, however, provided valuable insights to the issue of autonomy versus interdependence, often referring to issues of turf and territoriality. One community college leader stated:

This is a real problem for some because of their territorial nature. They fear loss of power, authority, and decision making. Like dogs marking their territory, you need to go

back and revisit this because it's what we're all about. Everyone has different agendas. We need to go back and continually refocus on the goal of education.

Although agreeing that yielding autonomy is important in collaboratives, one non-profit leader suggested that in practice, it is difficult to give up autonomy. Another non-profit leader stressed that it was unrealistic to expect organizations to yield autonomy, stating that "a collaborative requires flexibility, not yielding autonomy or we become one big bureaucracy." A third individual thought that there should be a blending with most of the autonomy retained.

A non-profit leader stated, "Autonomy was given up at the table, but resurfaced when the individuals returned to their respective agencies." This idea might best be described by a quote of one respondent, "Organizations become autonomous within the project, but not anonymous." There is a clear hesitation to forego individual identities.

Business leaders provided mixed responses, but most favored retaining autonomy. One business leader underscored that "You need to have your own identity, but be prepared to become part of the others' personalities—a blending." Another said that it is okay to keep autonomy as long as one group doesn't override the other. A third business leader suggested that the degree to which organizations are willing to yield autonomy rested with the extent of goal commitment; that is, the more committed the organization to the vision or goal, the more it is willing to yield autonomy. Finally, a business leader cautioned that some may see yielding autonomy as an intrusion, especially in the case of teachers who, given their history of relative autonomy in the classroom, might view this as an encroachment on their professional decision making.

Finding a balance between interdependence and autonomy is difficult. Organizations may not want to give up individual identity as an agency, yet many are willing to yield to the degree necessary to achieve jointly desired outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

If organizations are truly to collaborate, rather than merely cooperate, there will necessarily be a sacrifice of autonomy as they share visions, resources, decisions, and accountability. This study of public and private sector leaders' views of conditions for successful collaboration with schools confirms this supposition, but raises questions about the nature of leadership and the degree to which participants are willing to share resources, accept accountability, or yield identities in the name of collaboration.

The questions asked of leaders in business, non-profit and social service agencies, and community colleges were derived from Hord's (1986) framework for distinguishing collaboration from cooperation. It was clear from responses that shared vision, communication, decision making, and accountability are key conditions for effective collaboration with schools (see Table 1). Potential collaborators must explore purposes, goals, motivations, and desired outcomes as agreement is reached on a common vision for joining forces; otherwise, commitments may wane and fragmented services may once again prevail. Open lines of communication at all levels of the organizations and frequent discussions among personnel are essential, not only to share information about clients but also to resolve conflicts and build trust. Similarly, shared decision making processes particularly regarding governance and policy issues contribute to commitments to collaborate. Although recognizing the importance of shared accountability for the results of joint efforts, there seemed to be greater reluctance to commit organizations equally to the burden entailed in this responsibility.

Sharing leadership, yielding autonomy, and sharing human, financial, and material resources were reported to be less important ingredients (see Table 1). Interview findings clar-

ified the thinking of nonschool personnel, suggesting that potential collaborators consider whether leadership is to be shared or singular and the degree to which they are expected to share resources or sacrifice their independence. Rather than denying the importance of leadership per se, respondents differed in whether leadership can be "shared" in all dimensions of collaboration. A recommendation that might be made is that organizations initiating a collaborative consider the nature of leadership up front to avoid later disagreements about who is in charge and who is likely to be identified with successes and failures. To some degree the disparate views of respondents reflect comfort with the prevailing paradigm of leadership in bureaucracies; we speculate that the importance of shared leadership will be recognized as organizations become more familiar with collaboration and more comfortable with sharing leadership, decision making, and accountability.

Sharing human and financial resources was also viewed as less important in creating successful collaboratives. It appeared that it is essential to agree on who provides what resources and how they are to be used. However, the hesitation to yield control over resources reflected constraints of budgets and policies. It may also have been a statement that these leaders had thus far been engaged in partnership efforts rather than collaborative ones envisioned by Hord (1986), Kirst and McLaughlin (1990), Intriligator (1992), and others. If full collaboration is critical to the betterment of service delivery, and if sharing such resources is essential to this goal, then organizations must be willing to share, personnel must be trained, and policies must be written to facilitate this action.

This study also shed light on the degree to which organizations might be willing to yield their identities in the name of collaboration. Although individuals consent to come to the table to discuss more effective ways of providing services through joint efforts, they stop short of sacrificing organizational autonomy. If collaboration means anonymity in the name of interdependence, it appears that partnership or cooperation may be the preferred modes.

In summary, it appears from this study that potential collaborators with schools must reach agreement on the degree to which they desire to share leadership and resources, as well as to sacrifice their autonomy, early in deliberations. It may be far easier to share a vision of better service delivery and to open lines of communication than it is to fully commit organizations' resources or to fully share accountability for results of interagency collaboration.

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