

The Collaboration Cloverleaf: Four Stages of Development¹

Col-lab-o-ra-tion: A voluntary process through which a broad array of interests, some of which may be in conflict, enter into civil dialogue to collectively consider possible recommendations and actions that improve the management of natural resources to benefit both the environment and surrounding communities. Collaboration is different from a partnership in that collaboration involves a diverse array of stakeholders; a partnership is likely to engage a few parties that are interested in working together on a specific project.

FOUR STAGES

Research has shown that successfully addressing the factors below results in a more effective collaborative effort. There may also be some factors that your collaborative must address that aren't listed here. We call this a cloverleaf as you will meet all of the challenges repeatedly and not necessarily in order. (When "you" is used, we're talking about the collaborative group as a whole). As the group moves around the cloverleaf, its members will increase in skill level, so the next time the group faces the same challenge, it will be better prepared. This tool is meant to give you an idea of "what's next" and what might be missing.



¹ Adapted by Barbara Wyckoff and Karen DiBari from Michael Winer and Karen Ray, Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2003

Stage ONE - FORMATION: Bring People Together and Envision Results

Collaborations begin individual-to-individual. Collaborations may grow from a good idea shared over the telephone, mutual frustration with failing systems, stalemate, and in some cases, legal settlements. Whichever way they start, people get to know each other as individuals, attend meetings, and begin to find agreement. Together, people envision the desired results and keep the collaboration focused on your group objectives.

1. Bring people together (have respected initiator(s), choose potential members, invite participation, take time)

- Most collaborations begin with a quiet initiation. Often a small—yet diverse—group will come together to talk about the potential for finding agreement, outline a plan for the process, and identify other stakeholders who are needed to enable success. This **team of initiators** of a collaborative process must be able to build trust and present the vision and anticipated results clearly enough to attract others, yet broadly enough to include the skills and opinions of a range of participants.
- **Choose potential members** to include diverse view points and ways of working, both supportive and challenging, and those that have the capacity and familiarity with the issues to help the collaborative come together and accomplish the work. Include “end users” of the work, as well as people “out of the mainstream”. Carefully consider the contributions of each person and the perspective they bring, as well as their impact on the collaborative effort if they’re not included at the table.
- **Invite participation** using, as appropriate to your situation, public invitations such as newspapers and announcements, direct contact and private meetings. Be sure to summarize any pre-meetings at the “kick-off” meeting with all of the stakeholders so there is transparency and full disclosure.
- **Take time** to develop relationships and work through initial obstacles! This is the “make it or break it stage.”

2. Enhance trust (choose a convener, hold effective meetings, involve everyone in the meetings, disclose self-interests)

- **Choose a convener/facilitator** who can be neutral, supportive and flexible, assume authority as negotiated with the group, delegate responsibility for specific steps, build conditions by which individual members can influence the whole group, remain somewhat distant from the content, facilitate conflict constructively, and focus on the process.

- **Effective meetings** are those where the purpose and outcomes are clear, participants provide valuable information, decisions are made, action is taken, and relationships are built. Review what has been accomplished (or not) and what happened (or not).
- **Involve everyone** by recognizing that people will participate different ways and structuring the meeting to build on these differences. Recognize individual contributions and follow-up with those who didn't attend. **Invest in relationship-building early on.** The time spent getting to really know group members as individuals will pay off later.
- Remind participants to bring their **interests** to the discussion, not their organizational or personal **positions**.

3. *Confirm your vision (understand vision statements, write a vision statement around the “zone of agreement”, capture the focus)*

- **Vision statements** tell you where you are going, generate excitement for the group, and focus on possibilities, not problems. Vision statements include: a broad description of what you will accomplish (for whom, where, and by when), the scope of the effort (how big, how many, how much), and a clear statement about how this vision/purpose is unique among the members of the collaborative and can only be accomplished through the joint efforts of the group (i.e., the rationale for forming the collaborative). It is important to focus on the areas where everyone can agree, rather than on the differences.
- **To write a vision statement**, brainstorm important phrases and words, agree on the most important points, refine the statement, and then ask a subgroup to draft the statement, bringing it back to the full group to modify and ratify. Remember to stay focused on what motivates you all around the “zone of agreement”, rather than on specific positions or solutions. If there are specific issues that cause conflict but that are important to the group, set them aside for consideration later on in the process.
- **Capture the focus** or succinct statement that excites the group and easily conveys to others the work of the collaborative.

4. *Specify desired results (define desired results, think strategically)*

- To **define desired results** ask, “How will we know we have achieved our vision?” Desired results must be concrete, attainable, and measurable. Identify both short- and long-term results.
- **Think strategically**, building on the group's strengths and unique assets, and taking advantage of opportunities to achieve the vision. What will this group do that others are not able to achieve? Identify and build on the group's comparative advantage, while leveraging alliances and resources outside of the collaborative. Clarify who the stakeholders are and show how the group's results will help them, thereby increasing support for your efforts.

Stage TWO - FOUNDATION: Empower Yourself for Action

As collaboratives move beyond the forming stage, individuals have to be empowered to take on the work. This occurs primarily at two levels: 1) individuals need to have the authority from their home organizations to act easily and effectively together; and 2) the collaborative needs clarity and structure within itself.

1. Confirm support and authority from the home organization (document and share progress, obtain authority with the home organization, communicate, secure necessary documentation)

- **Document progress;** inform the public and home base organizations of progress, noting that at this stage the group's product is the process. Be sure to affirm that planning is equally important as doing, and recognize that the collaborative, at first, will not save money or time. Use this progress report to engage the support of the home organization and public.
- All members of the collaborative need to **know what authorities from the home organization** and/or constituency they have (or don't) and communicate this to the rest of the group. Authority is the power and right to make decisions, take actions, and commit resources. If a collaborative member does not have this authority, she/he needs to be clear with the collaborative regarding who does have this authority and the process for securing it when needed.
- As part of the process of formalizing relationships with the Forest Service, it will be important to **secure any necessary documentation**. This documentation and letters of commitment clarify authority and help the collaborative pool the powers and resources needed to achieve its objectives.

2. Structure/use conflict resolution (expect conflict, clarify the issues, create a conflict resolution process and resolve the unresolvable)

- By not allowing conflict, groups limit their ability to change. Collaborative groups should **expect conflict**, promote and manage it throughout the life of the collaboration, and recognize that some conflict may never be resolved.
- In order to resolve disagreements, groups must **clarify the issues**. Otherwise, some people will be quiet, and others will stop coming to meetings. It is essential to ask, "What is going on here?" An important step is to explore "assumptions" that people are taking to be fact, when in fact they are not.

- Create a **conflict resolution process** that includes everyone and doesn't burn bridges. Limit those who talk a lot, and invite the participation of those who are more hesitant to speak. Avoid personalizing the conflict and the concepts of "right" and "wrong". Most importantly, keep the group's "eye on the prize" of the work at hand, as this will help people step back, revisit what is really important, put the conflict in perspective, and reconnect with their values. **Resolve the unresolvable** by exploring alternatives to even the most difficult conflict situation. As before, if necessary, set divisive issues aside.

3. *Organize the effort (form a structure, determine roles, create and approve joint agreements, make needed changes in the home organization, decide about staffing, secure resources)*

- Most partnerships work best when the partners **form a structure** that helps members manage the work. Collaborations usually adopt one of two structures: a table or a wheel. In the table structure, everyone comes together to make the necessary decisions. In the wheel structure, small groups take more independent action, with an individual or group at the hub that coordinates information and activities. It is also important to determine whether the organization will be hierarchical (one person in charge of the various groups), individual-based (each person responsible for a certain aspect of the work) or group centered (the whole group is responsible and no one individual clearly assigned). Whatever decisions are made, they must be flexible and adaptive.
- The group needs to **determine clear roles** to fit its structure and to implement its vision. At this point, the focus is on roles to fit your structure, including: calling meetings, group logistics, documenting and distributing records of the meetings, leading meetings, ensuring everyone is kept engaged, and surfacing and resolving conflicts, among others. Assign roles according to the interests and strengths of the collaborative's members, because ultimately, people gravitate to their interest or they drop out.
- Interagency **joint agreements** clarify power, authority, responsibility, and resources. All members must seek approval from their home organization for potential agreements. Clarity in the agreement increases the likelihood that the home organizations will commit to their part. What authority will each organization exercise? What responsibilities will each organization fulfill?
- Home organizations **may need to make organizational changes**. Each one must ask, "What policies, procedures and operations must we change and/or institute to support the work of the collaborative?" Collaborative members must follow up with their own organization.
- Stability of the collaboration is essential. Basic operational needs such as **logistical support** (planning when and where meetings will be held, organizing field trips, recording and circulating meeting notes) are often handled by one or more members of the

group. Sometimes a facilitator will also take on that role, or groups may be fortunate enough to have staff support, either paid by the collaboration itself or provided by member organizations.

- To **secure resources**, it is first necessary to decide what is needed, what will be the source, and who will control the resources. It is important that anything having to do with resources is transparent and ratified by the whole group.

4. Support the members (establish a decision-making protocol, create a communications plan, reward members & others)

- A **decision-making protocol** outlines the decisions to be made about the collaborative process and the work being undertaken. For each decision, the protocol outlines how the decision will be made, for example: unilateral, consultative, consensual, democratic, or delegated. Finally the protocol outlines who is involved in making each decision.
- To build effective **communications**, consider and plan how group members and committees (if you have them) will communicate with each other, between member organizations, and with the broader community. This will require an advocate or small group to promote conversation among all and ensure nothing is overlooked.
- **Give rewards** for work done and results achieved. Also recognize the contribution of the home organizations. You must stop and ask what has been accomplished, give praise, and thank everyone.
- Create opportunities for joint fact-finding and learning, field trips, and opportunities to ask questions and deeply explore issues.

Stage THREE – FRUITION: Ensure Success and Results

In this stage, groups begin to reap the benefits of all of the experiences gained in the first two stages. The collaborative's work toward social, ecological, and economic objectives can now be more easily accomplished because group members have learned each other's strengths, how to organize effectively, and how best to use the group's collective resources. Now it is time to do the work!

1. Manage the work (review the vision and lay out an action plan, create accountability standards, build collaborative work habits)

- Before embarking on the work, it is critical to **review the vision and lay out an action plan**. This means: getting specific on the actions you will take; clarifying responsibilities; developing a budget; and communicating with all of the appropriate parties. Often, groups start small and have success before moving into more complex projects.
- Accountability is proof of action. The group needs to **create accountability standards** (how will you know if everyone is living up to their side of the deal?) and gain sign-off from all of the engaged parties.
- Output and action through collaboration (versus planning) require **new work habit**, skills, and maybe even a different organizational structure. The group will need to state what these are and how they will hold everyone accountable to these practices.

2. Evaluate the results (value evaluation, create an evaluation plan, continually monitor to improve the work)

- The first step is to **value evaluation**. The group needs to discuss what evaluation can teach the collaborative; what potential effects it will have on the joint efforts; and what people engaged in similar efforts can learn from your success and failures. It is important to view evaluation as reflection, decide what's important to measure and why, and decide on a do-able plan. Remember that failure is a valuable learning opportunity.
- The group then **creates evaluation plans**, including identifying indicators, measures, methods of data collection and analysis, and responsible parties. Many groups have put an "annual learning meeting" in place during which they assess their evaluation results against their stated outcomes and results. Evaluation can include taking an internal look at the collaborative process as well as measuring the group's impact in terms of achieving its objectives.

- **Monitoring happens on an on-going basis**, including questions such as: is the effort effective and adequate? What lessons have we learned and how will we apply these to our work?

3. *Renew the effort (promote adaptability and flexibility, retire appropriate members, add new members, celebrate)*

- **Adaptability** is the capacity to adjust to major changes in the community we serve. **Flexibility** is the collaboration's capacity to remain open to varied ways of doing things and organizing itself. Ongoing reflection will help the group change either/both the process of collaboration or/and the objectives and work program.
- **Plan on how the group will replace members.** It's common for collaboratives to deal with key members moving away, changing positions, or just getting burned out. It's helpful to have a process in place for recruiting and transitioning new members into the group. Once new people join, the group may need to revisit the structure and joint agreements and make necessary changes.
- As the group starts implementing action plans, the **group structure may need to adapt**. Decisions may need to be made more quickly, progress may require oversight and individual responsibility, and the group may have to deal with many "moving parts" at one time.
- Everyone in the collaboration and all of the supporters need to feel involved, useful, and valued. Publicly recognize member contributions and **celebrate** group success.

Stage FOUR: FUTURE: Endow Continuity, Formalize, or Gracefully Come to the End

Your group accomplishes continuity when the collaborative increases relationships and responsibilities. Continuity means continuation of the *collaborative effort*, not necessarily *the collaborative group*, which may be replaced by an institution or some other community entity. The group may want the community to accept what it has started and to nurture it as part of larger community efforts. In some cases, this may be a time when the specific work of the group is finished and the collaborative disbands. It is best if this decision is thought through carefully and taken proactively, rather than just letting interest die off and the effort dissolve through inaction. In other cases, the collaborative may formalize into its own nonprofit in order to better achieve the group's work, or change structure to make it more sustainable for members. A challenge for collaboratives in rural communities is dealing with burn-out of members who put tremendous time and energy into the group over multiple years.

While many groups will exist beyond 24 months, this is a good interval for checking in on whether the group needs to continue to exist and what direction group members want to take it. In this section, we lay out some options for groups to consider, and groups may choose a combination of the ones listed here. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list.

STRATEGY

Create visibility (convey an image, promote the results)

- A collaborative needs community-wide resources to endow the continuity of effort. To gain major support, the collaborative must be seen as a leader. The message must be simple, **convey an image**, and grab the hearts of people. Questions to address include: what do we need to tell the public about the collaboration in order to **attract future leaders and build engagement**; how do you need to adjust your decision-making to make it more open and accessible; how can you increase our base of support to work more widely in the community; who are representatives of additional interests; and what programs and policies do you need to change?
- A collaborative must also **promote its results**, clearly motivating the audiences to take action and stating specific next steps you want your constituents to take. In addition to the message, the group will need to choose the best techniques for getting the information out to different constituencies, including community, funders, home organizations, decision-makers, etc.

Expand the “zone of agreement”

- After trust has been built among members and the group has a track record of success, the **issues that were untouchable in the past may be more manageable**. Some groups choose to expand the size of the land area they’re working on (moving from a small project to a large one, from individual projects to landscape-scale restoration plans, or from the wildland-urban interface to watershed issues, for example).

Focus back in on the origins of the collaborative to solidify the group's foundation

- Sometimes after a collaborative group has a track record of success, it receives many requests for assistance from other groups, is asked to weigh in on issues not central to the group’s core mission, or branches into areas that seemed ripe for agreement but end up distracting the group. At this point, the group may decide to “hunker down” and **revisit the original purpose and base of trust** in order to sustain the collaborative.

STRUCTURE

Formalize into a non-profit and establish a board of directors or spin off pieces of the work

- Often, a collaborative group forms around public land stewardship and restoration because there is no one organization that focuses on the nexus of agreement among diverse stakeholders. When there is no obvious existing organization in the community that could assume part or all of the collaborative's work, the group may decide to formalize into a nonprofit.

Find a fiscal sponsor to help the group raise or manage money

- Not every group wants to put the time and energy into incorporating as a non-profit organization, managing a board, and the legal requirements that go along with it. Many groups work with a fiscal sponsor, an organization that receives and manages funds for another one (usually for an administrative fee).

End the collaborative group (understand the need for, create and hold a formal ending)

- Regardless whether the effort is turned over to the community or it just ceases to exist, sometimes the group – as its members knew it – comes to an end. A **formal ending** is critical as it recognizes that people and relationships have changed, and clears the way for a new beginning. The end of the collaboration may include: reflection and recollection, messages to the community, individual and organizational recognition, and a statement of what will come next.

Spin off parts of the collaborative's work to another organization

- Another option is for the collaborative to pass a piece of their work on to another group that is well-equipped to implement it.

"Transformation is a shared journey." ~ Anonymous