Managing Collaborative Activities

Implementation of systems-change projects and activities requires collaboration between multiple agencies and organizations. Although collaboration is usually seen as inherently good, it can be ineffective if not conducted within a framework of solid processes and structures.

STRATEGIES

Create Structures and Processes that Mimic a Hierarchy

There's no established hierarchy when working across organizations, so it's essential to create a replacement infrastructure that includes:

- A lead agency
- A manager from the lead agency who has overall leadership and coordination responsibilities such as:
  - Developing and updating a work plan
  - Delegating work
  - Monitoring progress and ensuring the work moves forward
  - Anticipating and preparing for potential problems
  - Making sure people follow through on their commitments
- Workgroups

The point of a hierarchical structure is not to dominate others or be controlling, but to ensure efficient processes and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. A good hierarchical structure supports participation at all levels.

Identify Required Knowledge, Skills, and Resources

Outlining the knowledge, skills, and resources required to conduct the activities in your implementation plan will help you determine:

- How your current collaborators can be most useful
- Who needs to be recruited

It is important to think of people and organizations involved in collaboration as implementers, rather than stakeholders. Stakeholder input and buy-in is crucial, but true collaboration involves in-depth participation.

Don't recruit people who have something to offer, but limited time to participate or people who have time, but none of the needed skills or resources.

Formally Define the Roles of Workgroups and Individuals

Clarity about roles:

- Provides a clear division of labor that limits duplication of effort

- Helps participants understand their responsibilities

- Holds people and organizations accountable for their commitments

Roles should be specified in writing and, when appropriate, outlined in MOUs.

Determine Decision-Making Protocols

To ensure the work moves forward, there should be very clear decision-making protocols, that include a shared understanding of what each individual's role is in a given decision (and where they are not involved).

Within the deaf-blind network there is often a desire to come to decisions via consensus. While this may work well in some situations, it can also lead to work getting stalled. Depending on the complexity of the systems change effort, your timeline, and the nature of the focus topic, you may want to consider some other options.

Online resources about decision-making:

- [Some Decision-Making Processes](#)
- [Too Many Cooks Spoil the Broth, or Maybe Not?](#)

Establish Clear Communication Mechanisms for Collaborators

Develop processes for communicating with everyone involved in implementation efforts (a separate plan should be established for communication with stakeholders) to keep them informed of what is going on within their own and other workgroups.

Include:

- *What* - the type of information that will be shared

- *When* - the frequency of communication

- *Who* – the individuals responsible for writing, organizing, and disseminating messages

The process should detail how committees will report to one another (e.g., sub-groups working on specific tasks may report to a broader oversight committee).

In our network, communication typically involves phone calls, email, online meetings (e.g., via Adobe Connect), and occasional face-to-face meetings. To be most efficient, however, communication strategies should also include the use of an online group format where members can upload and share materials and engage in threaded chats (e.g., a group on the NCDB site, Facebook).

Encourage Participants' Investment in the Work

- Discuss and share accomplishments (individual and group)
- Offer words of appreciation to group members
- Periodically stop and reflect on where the group has been and progress that has been made

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