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Collaboration Assessment Guide and Tool

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Collaboration Assessment Guide and Tool
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Collaboration Assessment Guide and Tool

Introduction

This guide was developed to help multi-sectoral community collaborations associated with United Ways – Centraides to assess their “well-being”. Such collaborations address complex issues that require a comprehensive approach. Member organizations and participants develop a common vision, and share leadership and resources to work towards outcomes focused on long-term, systemic changes in the community.

The tool is designed to assess the effectiveness of the collaboration’s internal structures and processes. It can assist participants in the collaboration to share their perceptions about the effectiveness of current and past processes, and the appropriateness of mechanisms and structures used by the collaboration to accomplish its work. It may be used to facilitate a group discussion or may be adapted for use as a survey or to interview key informants.

The tool is intended to help you to develop, sustain and renew your collaborative initiative. However, it is not designed to help you assess the effectiveness of specific strategies that your collaboration may implement, such as public education or public policy advocacy, etc. While this tool refers to collaborations that work to improve outcomes for children and families, it can be easily adapted to a different focus.

The tool was developed based on:

- a review of tools developed by other organizations;
- a review of literature on success factors in collaborations, and improving the sustainability of community collaborations;
- the UW-C Movement’s *Standards of Excellence*; and
- the experiences of children’s initiatives associated with United Ways – Centraides in Canada.

For further details, see the Reference section.

Using the Tool

The tool contains 78 indicators in the form of statements, grouped into 13 categories. In undertaking an assessment, your collaboration should focus on specific categories within the tool, or selected statements within one or more categories. Your focus may be influenced by the developmental stage of your collaboration, or particular challenges that you would like to explore. The categories are:

- 1) Purpose of the Collaboration
- 2) Membership Characteristics
- 3) Getting to Know the Community
- 4) Planning for Impact
- 5) Implementation
- 6) Building Relationships
- 7) Decision-making
- 8) Organizational Structure and Governance
- 9) Leadership
- 10) Communication and Branding
- 11) Resources
- 12) Sustainability
- 13) Learning and Evaluation

If you would like to choose a few key statements from each category, see Appendix A.

Group Discussion

If the tool is used to stimulate a group discussion, consider whether it would be helpful to have an external facilitator. While this is not required, it may be beneficial if you anticipate significant differences of opinion within the group.

If the number of participants is greater than eight, you may want to divide the group to increase opportunities for participation.

To facilitate a discussion:

- Select the categories and statements in the tool that you would like to focus on, given the amount of time available and the priorities of the group.
- Ask participants to review the selected statements, privately note their responses, and jot down evidence and examples that would support their responses.
- Invite participants to share their responses and their reasons; it is not important that the group reach a consensus.
- If a participant questions why a statement could be considered relevant or significant to the success of the collaboration, invite other participants to share their views; be prepared to comment based on your own experience or note the explanations provided in Appendix B.
- For each category, summarize points of agreement and differences of opinion. Based on the discussions, help the group to summarize the strengths of the collaboration and areas that could be improved.
- For each category, invite suggestions on how the collaboration could continue to build on strengths and address challenges.

Survey

Select the categories and statements in the tool that you would like to focus on based on the developmental stage of the collaboration and issues that are most pertinent. Keep in mind that responding to a survey should take approximately 20 minutes.

You will need to add a few initial questions to gather useful background information, such as:

- how long the respondent has participated in the collaboration;
- the degree of involvement by the participant and his/her organization; and
- the sub-group that the respondent participates in (i.e. working group, council, etc.)

You may want to add a few questions that solicit respondents' views on the effectiveness of some of the collaboration's key strategies. You may also want to ask an open-ended question for each category, to gather additional perceptions to help you interpret the responses, for example: *Please comment on your responses and suggest ways the collaboration could improve in this area.*

Key Informant Interviews

Review the tool to identify topics that are most appropriate to explore in an interview; categories 5 to 10 may be most useful. Based on the statements you select, draft 6 – 10 questions, depending on the planned length of the interview. If you would like to choose a few key statements from each category, see Appendix A for suggestions.

Using the Findings

In reviewing the findings of your assessment, consider the following questions for each category:

- Is there a general consensus in the responses, and shared agreement about what's going well and areas that could be improved?
- If not, is it clear why there are differences of opinion? Should these differences be explored further (perhaps through key informant interviews)?
- Have respondents identified how the collaboration could continue to build on strengths and address challenges?

If not, further discussion should be planned. Suggestions for addressing areas of concern will be specific to the issues identified, however problems will need to be monitored and may require an action plan.

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Collaboration Assessment Tool

1) Purpose of the Collaboration	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) The collaboration was established to address important, complex issues in our community that require a comprehensive approach.						
b) The collaboration serves a unique purpose that is not duplicated elsewhere in the community.						
c) We seek to build on community strengths and assets.						
d) The collaboration seeks to influence and change community systems that impact [children and families].						
2) Membership Characteristics						
a) The collaboration includes people and organizations from diverse sectors.						
b) People and organizations that are critical to the success of the collaboration initiative are actively engaged.						
c) People who would be most impacted by the work of the collaboration, including community residents, are actively involved.						
d) As the initiative develops, we continue to engage new partners, if required.						

3) Getting to Know the Community	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) The collaboration has taken the time to learn about key community organizations, networks and coalitions that address issues associated with [children and families].						
b) Members have discussed their perceptions of current conditions, services and resources that support [children's development] and changes that would lead to improved outcomes.						
c) The collaboration has invited [parents and] community residents to share their perceptions about current conditions, services and resources that support [children's development] and changes that would lead to improved outcomes.						
d) The collaboration has collected and assessed data about the [well-being of children and families] and information about community needs and resources.						
e) The collaboration has a good understanding of the community – its people, cultures, and values.						

4) Planning for Impact	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) The collaboration has developed a shared vision and principles to guide its work.						
b) The collaboration's vision and strategic plan are grounded in the findings of its assessment of community needs and assets.						
c) The collaboration has articulated a theory of change and identified long-term outcomes [for children and families] and measurable, attainable goals.						
d) The collaboration has identified early to mid-term objectives that will set the stage for the attainment of longer term goals.						
e) The collaboration has selected strategies that are likely to contribute significantly to improving outcomes [for children and families].						
f) The collaboration has selected strategies that are in keeping with its capacities and resources.						

5) Implementation	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) Members understand and agree with our goals, and have a clear understanding of what the collaboration is trying to accomplish.						
b) The collaboration finds ways to engage [parents, consumers and neighborhood residents] in implementing strategies.						
c) The implementation plan includes short-term objectives, designed to provide opportunities for early successes.						
d) The collaboration has taken on the right amount of work at the right pace.						
e) We take time for reflection and course correction, making changes to our action plan as needed.						
f) Members have a sufficient level of commitment; responsibilities are shared and tasks are completed.						
g) People and organizations that participate in the collaboration benefit from being involved and have a stake in the collaboration's success.						
h) When setting its own priorities, my organization takes into account the work of the collaboration.						
i) Involvement in the collaboration is changing the way my organization undertakes its own work.						

6) Building Relationships	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) We have taken time to build trust among participating organizations and individuals.						
b) There is a high level of mutual respect and understanding among people and organizations involved in the collaboration; members enjoy working together.						
c) We strive to build a sense of shared ownership among participating organizations and individuals.						
d) Open dialogue occurs and disparate views are valued.						
e) Conflicts are acknowledged, resolved constructively and are used as a source of innovation.						
f) Issues about power are addressed openly and transparently.						
g) Power differences are managed in ways that facilitate the active involvement of all members.						
h) We acknowledge and affirm the contributions of individuals and organizations.						
i) We recognize and celebrate our accomplishments.						

7) Decision-making	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) All those involved in the collaboration have a clear sense of their roles and responsibilities.						
b) Members actively participate in making major decisions.						
c) Our meeting processes are effective.						
d) There is a clear process for making decisions and implementing actions.						
e) People demonstrate flexibility and the ability to compromise when decisions are being made.						
f) We foster creative thinking, innovation and risk-taking.						

8) Organizational Structure and Governance	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) The collaboration's organizational structure facilitates effective governance and management.						
b) All groups (e.g. task groups, committees, etc.) within the organizational structure have clear terms of reference.						
c) There are clear reporting and accountability mechanisms.						
d) We have developed a charter, operating agreement or memorandum of understanding that outlines the collaboration's vision, purpose, principles, plans, policies and agreements about leadership, decision-making and finances.						
e) Participants in each group within the collaboration have the appropriate level of knowledge, skills and decision-making authority (i.e. the "right" people are at each table).						
f) Members understand and support the structures and processes used to set strategic priorities and make major decisions.						
g) Our organizational structures, including governance, have been modified over time to reflect the development of our collaboration.						

9) Leadership	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) Leadership is shared, and there are opportunities for members to develop their leadership skills.						
b) Leaders have the required skills and knowledge, and can communicate a compelling vision that engages others in the collaboration's work.						
c) The collaboration has successfully engaged community leaders in a number of sectors to act as champions in support of improved outcomes [for children and families].						

10) Communication and Branding	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) People in this collaboration communicate clearly and openly with one another.						
b) Communication happens both at formal meetings and in informal ways.						
c) There is an established process for communication between meetings.						
d) The collaboration has implemented strategies for keeping member organizations and other community stakeholders informed of its vision, plans, actions and successes.						
e) Information on progress and changes in outcomes is communicated regularly to all members of the collaboration and to the public.						
f) The collaboration has addressed issues related to branding (e.g. the name of the initiative, logo, key messages, co-branding with participating organizations, etc.)						
g) Brand elements are used with permission and consistently applied.						
h) The collaboration's activities and processes are congruent with its brand characteristics.						

11) Resources	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) We have identified the skills and resources that each individual or organization brings to the collaboration.						
b) Participating individuals and organizations contribute resources to the initiative such as time, expertise, leadership, contacts, funds, and in-kind supports.						
c) The collaboration has access to financial and in-kind resources from a number of sources.						
d) The collaboration has adequate resources to do what it wants to accomplish, including sufficient funds, staff, materials, technical expertise and facilities.						
e) We are able to access and leverage additional resources as a result of working collaboratively.						
f) The collaboration has a clear protocol with members with regards to its resource development and fund allocation (if any).						
g) The collaboration is knowledgeable about funding sources available to improve outcomes for [children, families and neighborhoods] in the community.						

12) Sustainability	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) We recognize that changing community conditions requires long term commitment of resources and actively consider how to sustain our collaborative work.						
b) The collaboration engages the involvement and support of a broad range of stakeholders, and community leaders who use their influence to generate support for the initiative.						
c) The collaboration provides comprehensive orientation to new members and volunteers, and skill development, as required, to facilitate their participation.						
d) The collaboration plans for transitions in its leadership.						
e) The collaboration has a plan for sustaining resources.						
f) We continue to gather pertinent information about the community, and funding, policy and other developments that may impact on our initiative.						

13) Learning and Evaluation	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable	Don't Know
a) The collaboration has sought out information from similar initiatives in other communities and continues to gather and share information about effective practices.						
b) The collaboration has developed a plan to evaluate its work.						
c) The collaboration periodically measures community outcomes related to its work to monitor progress towards achievement of goals.						
d) We take time periodically to reflect on what we are learning about collaborative work, including the effectiveness of our collaborative structures and processes.						

APPENDIX A

20 Key Statements

1) Purpose of the Collaboration

- I. The collaboration was established to address important, complex issues in our community that require a comprehensive approach.
- II. The collaboration serves a unique purpose that is not duplicated elsewhere in the community.

2) Membership Characteristics

- I. People and organizations that are critical to the success of the collaboration initiative are actively engaged.

3) Getting to Know the Community

- I. The collaboration has taken the time to learn about key community organizations and community characteristics, needs and assets.

4) Planning for Impact

- I. The collaboration has developed a shared vision, principles, and a strategic plan that is grounded in an assessment of community needs and assets.
- II. The collaboration has selected strategies that are likely to contribute significantly to improving identified outcomes, and that are in keeping with its capacities and resources.

5) Implementation

- I. Members understand and agree with our goals, and have a clear understanding of what the collaboration is trying to accomplish.
- II. Members have a sufficient level of commitment; responsibilities are shared and tasks are completed.
- III. People and organizations that participate in the collaboration benefit from being involved and have a stake in the collaboration's success.

6) Building Relationships

- I. We have taken time to build trust and a sense of shared ownership among participating organizations and individuals.
- II. Issues about power are addressed openly and transparently.
- III. We acknowledge and affirm the contributions of individuals and organizations.

7) Decision-making

- I. People demonstrate flexibility and the ability to compromise when decisions are being made.

8) Organizational Structure and Governance

- I. Participants in each group within the collaboration have the appropriate level of knowledge, skills and decision-making authority (i.e. the “right” people are at each table).
- II. There are clear reporting and accountability mechanisms.

9) Leadership

- I. Leaders have the required skills and knowledge, and can communicate a compelling vision that engages others in the collaboration’s work.

10) Communication

- I. People in this collaboration communicate clearly and openly with one another.

11) Resources

- I. Participating individuals and organizations contribute resources to the collaboration such as time, expertise, leadership, contacts, funds, and in-kind supports.

12) Sustainability

- I. We recognize that changing community conditions requires long term commitment of resources and we actively consider how to sustain our collaborative work.

13) Learning and Evaluation

- I. The collaboration has developed a plan to evaluate its work.

APPENDIX B

Comments on the Categories: Relevance of the Indicators

1) Purpose of the Collaboration

Collaborations require significant investments of time, energy and other resources. This level of commitment is unlikely to occur unless members view a collaborative initiative as the most effective approach, and feel that the collaboration is not duplicating other efforts in the community.

A collaboration is more likely to contribute to significant changes in community conditions if its efforts build on the community's strengths and assets, and some of its strategies focus on creating changes to community systems.

2) Membership Characteristics

Who is involved – individuals and organizations – will vary with the nature of the collaboration. Identifying potential partners, and outreach and engagement are important steps in establishing the collaboration and may be required periodically as the collaboration evolves. Keep in mind that effective approaches to engaging prospective partners will vary; business people, government officials, funders, donors, community residents, politicians and service providers may all be potential members or participants in a community collaboration.

3) Getting to Know the Community

Members of a collaboration likely have different perspectives about the community and access to different sources of information. Before developing an action plan, it is important to take time to review pertinent data and consult with those who have an interest in the collaboration's work to develop a common understanding of the community. This will help to ensure that the collaboration is not duplicating the efforts of other organizations and is aware of individuals and organizations that should be invited to participate in the collaboration. A thorough understanding of the community is also required to guide the collaboration's strategic planning process.

4) Planning for Impact

A shared vision, goals and principles are the collaboration's working tools. They should be used as a sounding board against which all decisions are evaluated. The outcomes, goals and objectives that are developed will provide the basis for developing an action plan and evaluation framework for the collaboration's work.

Changing community conditions is often complex, long term work. It is important to take the time to think through what will contribute to change, the steps involved and the resources required. "Doable" strategies should be chosen that will contribute to improving community conditions.

5) Implementation

Implementation is likely the most challenging part of collaborative work. It's important to take on the right amount of work at the right pace, building in opportunities for "early successes" or "small victories" that give the group energy and strengthen commitment to the effort.

Leaders need to take action to sustain momentum and ensure continuing commitment. Opportunities for reflection can help members identify progress, and any necessary changes to action plans.

Participation by people in almost all activities naturally tends to ebb and flow. However, if partners do not fulfill commitments then collaborations simply will not work. Partners need to define their responsibilities clearly in the collaboration's operating plans.

It's also important to track whether the collaboration is making a difference in how member organizations do their own work. By asking members to identify precisely what they have done to take the lessons from the collaboration back into their own organizations, the collaboration can facilitate change within its partner organizations as well as through their joint work.

6) Building Relationships

Research on success factors in collaborations has highlighted the importance of mutual trust, shared ownership and the ability to deal with differences in power inherent in bringing together diverse individuals and organizations. Collaborations are strengthened when members take the time to build personal working relationships with one another and to learn about the priorities and constraints of participating organizations. Building trust among participants takes time, and fostering a healthy climate for collaboration requires skilled leadership.

7) Decision-making

To work together effectively, individuals and organizations need a clear sense of their respective roles and responsibilities, and agreement on how decisions will be made and implemented. The ability to be flexible and to compromise is another success factor in collaborations. Given that collaborations seek innovative approaches to complex issues, creative thinking and the willingness to take risks are valuable assets.

8) Organizational Structure and Governance

Developing the organizational structure, including clear terms of reference for each group, is an investment of time that minimizes problems and increases effectiveness and accountability. Keep in mind, however, that a collaboration's organizational structure and governance typically evolves over time.

9) Leadership

Effective leaders are crucial to the success of collaborative initiatives. These leaders have: 1) the respect of people and organizations with diverse views and interests, 2) the

skills to build consensus on difficult issues, and 3) the ability to engage other community stakeholders.

Sharing leadership and supporting leadership development helps to build ownership in the collaboration and improves its sustainability.

10) Communication and Branding

Open and frequent communication, both formal and informal, is a key factor influencing the success of collaborations.

Collaborations may need to consider issues relating to branding and co-branding. When making decisions about branding, take into account the importance of promoting shared ownership and responsibility for the collaboration.

11) Resources

Community organizations often have a history of competing for resources. Collaboration requires that participating organizations contribute resources and work together to leverage additional resources.

12) Sustainability

Ensuring sustainability is not just a matter of focusing on resource development. The involvement and commitment of stakeholders and community champions, and planning for changes in the collaboration's leadership and members also contributes to long term sustainability. The collaboration also should consider the impact of changes in the community, and funding, policy and other developments so that it is prepared to adapt to changing conditions in the external environment.

13) Learning and Evaluation

Learning and evaluation should be ongoing aspects of collaborative work. Collaborations are strengthened when members seek out information about effective practices based on the experiences of other initiatives, and take time to reflect on what they are learning from their own collaborative work.

Measuring the impact of the collaboration's work and communicating these results to the public and to stakeholders strengthens the collaboration's credibility, contributing to long term sustainability.