

A REVIEW OF COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS¹

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Networks, Collaborations, Coalitions and Partnerships

“While there is a growing consensus that partnerships may represent a new form of social governance based on trust and collaboration in comparison to the more traditional bureaucracies and networks associated with markets and hierarchies respectively, closer examination has suggested that strange organisational formations are emerging under the umbrella of partnership, with contradictory demands and tendencies embedded within them. Indeed, as some commentators observe, the contradictory features of partnerships may well be their most interesting feature - practically, politically and analytically.”²

Networks, Collaborations, Coalitions, Partnerships and the Literature

There is a substantial literature exploring successful working relationships between government agencies and community based organisations. However, on closer reading much of it is descriptive rather than reflective. It also has serious and substantial methodological problems.

As stated in a recent paper prepared by the New Zealand Foundation for Research Science and Technology (FoRST) funded project - Strengthening Communities through Local Partnerships Programme Local Partnerships and Governance Research :

*At the most general level, it is widely acknowledged that the international literature on partnerships is characterised by ‘methodological anarchy and definitional chaos’.*³

Thus identifying critical features and factors that have been tested rather than asserted is rather difficult. Some of the best material on what helps and hinders successful working relationships between organisations comes from the “network” literature. Hence the term “network” in this document includes activities and structures linked to cooperation, collaboration, coalitions and partnerships.

Core issues for Networks, Collaborations, Coalitions and Partnerships

Narrowing down the scope to “researched” findings indicates the following key features and factors of successful working relationships between government agencies and community based organisations :

- Different kinds of networks are best for different kinds of tasks, and need different kinds of strategies. In particular, the strategies for establishing and supporting networks that primarily share information are very different from those that undertake joint projects and work⁴.

- There are considerable differences in developing and supporting working relationships that are focussed on :-

Information sharing
Cooperation
Coordination
Collaboration
Partnership⁵

- All forms of networks usually take longer than expected to establish themselves; sponsoring agencies frequently back out of supporting the development networks too soon⁶.
- Local networks do what networks do, and there is very little a central agency can do about that without destroying the vibrancy of that network.⁷ In fact, networks tend to do better when the goals are set by its members rather than external bodies.⁸ Whilst the needs and support of “central” or “external” agencies are often important in the establishment of “local” networks, these can significantly inhibit local networks if applied too inflexibly⁹.
- A critical part of building a network is positive expectation of the coalition.¹⁰
- The tasks necessary at an early stage of coalition building are different from those later in the development. Indeed “late” stage tasks applied too early can delay coalition building, “early” stage tasks and processes applied later can inhibit the coalition.¹¹
- Networks tasks must reflect their constituency. Therefore local networks are most effective dealing with local issues, local agendas and local priorities. Local networks cannot be expected to deal with national issues, agendas or priorities, unless they have local relevance.
- One of the big challenges in establishing networks is to move them beyond information sharing¹². A critical part of building more ambitious networks is the articulation of a clear mission or guiding purpose¹³
- Network participants need the active support of the organisations they represent, especially when the network starts taking decisions about projects and resources.¹⁴ Indeed they rarely operate effectively when its participants do not have the active support of their own agencies.¹⁵
- Networks are not institutions, they cannot be expected to do what institutions do¹⁶
- The role of network coordinators is complex and demanding. The skills required depend on the kind of network that is envisaged. The more ambitious the network aims, the more demanding the skills.¹⁷
- Diverse networks are likely to be more creative than homogeneous networks¹⁸

- Networks tend to have core and peripheral members, who participate in different levels of task.¹⁹ In fact, recent developments in network theory suggests that this is not a weakness but a valuable feature, and attempts to include everyone into the “core” is unlikely to be worthwhile²⁰.

Integrating These Core Issues

Scanning the literature, three key factors help determine how well a network operates:

- The “fit” of a network – the correct alignment of purpose, structure, processes and resources
- The way in which the network is managed
- The context of a network

Factor One - The “fit” of a network

One of the most significant lessons from the literature is the need to align the purpose, structure, processes and resources. Failure to understand these implications is a major cause of network’s failing to live up to expectations.

Pooling the work of several authors, the following framework emerges.^{212223 24} The authors essentially argue that a particular arrangement is more likely to be stable and successful if there is a horizontal balance of characteristics. So that a network that is attempting to solve complex problems will need much higher levels of support and leadership, than an occasional information sharing network. Although this seems self evident, the literature frequently comments that government agencies appear often to establish or promote networks that have structures and resources appropriate to “networking” or “cooperation”, but with expectations more akin to “coordination” or “collaboration”.

Level	Purpose	Structure	Process	Resources
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide dialogue and common understanding • Mutual exchange to support each others’ efforts • Clearing house for information • Create clearinghouse for information • Create base of support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-hierarchical Loose/flexible link • Roles are loosely defined • Community action is primary link among members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-key leadership • Minimal decision making • Little conflict • Informal communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variable time • Minimal skill • Minimal support • Minimal finance
Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match needs and provide coordination • Limit duplication of services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central team acts as communication hub • Semi-formal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders who facilitate • Perhaps some conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variable time • Medium skill • Medium support • Variable finance

Level	Purpose	Structure	Process	Resources
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that tasks are done • Limited joint problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> links • Links are advisory • Group seeks to influence decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal communication within the central team 	
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share resources to address common issues • Link resources to achieve joint goals • Merge resource base to create something new • More complex problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central team consists of decision makers Roles are defined • Links are formalised • Group participates in decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous leadership focused on issue • Central and subgroup decision making • Frequent and clear communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium to high time • Some skills at high level • High support • Variable finance
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared vision and goals • Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities • Complex problem solving • Share resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus is used in shared decision making • Roles, time, and evaluation are formalised • Links are formal and written into agreements • Group is a decision making structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High leadership, trust level, and productivity • Ideas and decisions equally shared • Highly developed communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High time • Complex skills at high level • High levels of support • Variable finance

Purpose

As a network gets more complex most of the literature stresses that the purpose of the network needs to become clearer. However, many of the evaluations of networks highlight how unclear network purposes are for those involved. For instance, one meta-evaluation concluded “there is a surprising amount of real confusion among participants about what the network they are involved with is for, or what the point of being in a network actually amounts to.”²⁵

Resources

The literature consistently argues that resources must be adequate to the task, and is a particular issue for social service networks, where there are considerable limitations of time, money or previous experience.²⁶ Time is a resource, and many sources stress that networks take time to develop, especially when the networking role is commonly placed on top of all the other task people are expected to conduct. In the public sector the alignment of inter-agency priorities is particularly time consuming.²⁷ “Not enough time” and “too heavy a workload” were frequently mentioned when respondents were asked to list barriers to inter-agency collaboration in the evaluation of the Strengthening Families initiative²⁸. Furthermore, as Keast et al argue²⁹, the time consumed is very frustrating to those in government who perceive an emphasis on relationships at the expense of outcomes.

Evaluation questions that flow from these issues

- For each project how aligned are the purpose, structures, process and resources? What are the consequences of this?
- To what extent do they reflect a “networking”, “cooperative”, “collaborative” or “partnership” agenda; and how does that match the perceptions of stakeholders involved in the projects
- How clear are the various stakeholders about the purposes of particular networks and partnerships?
- Do the various purposes ascribed by various stakeholders require the same degree of alignment?
- To what extent is a particular project about networking, coordination, collaboration or partnership? Is there clarity and agreement about this?
- If they are not in alignment, which features are out of alignment and what have been the consequences of this?
- What kind of resources (ie time, money, skills, information, people) have been available, and to what extent have they been matched to the overall ambition of the task?
- Was the structure of the project able and suitable for the tasks they had to underpin?
- Were a project’s processes appropriate for the available resources and structures or the purpose?
- Who is and is not involved in the project? Is there sufficient diversity for the task? What have been the consequences of this?

Factor Two - The management of networks

The need for quite particular and specialised skills for participating in and managing networks is consistently stressed in the literature. People need to be appointed to “coordinate” networks on the basis of their skills to do so, or access to appropriate training, rather than their general availability in an organisation. As the network gets more ambitious, so the skill requirements increase.

Myrna Mandell³⁰ argues that those coordinating networks need to have the time, skills and other resources to manage three key areas:

- Influencing members to participate
- Securing commitment from members
- Creating a favourable environment for productive work.

Influencing members to participate

This has two dimensions.

The first has to do with the need to secure the support of participants who can sustain and build legitimacy for the network. This has been reflected in the idea of securing *champions* (participants who provide energy for the work to be done in the new arrangement) and *sponsors* (participants who have the ability to legitimise the network through persuasion and influence).

The second dimension refers to influencing rules, procedures, values and norms. This has to do with altering perceptions of participants and includes exploring similarities and differences in perceptions leading to goal congruence; framing or the ability to change perceptions by influencing prevailing values and norms; developing a shared purpose or program rationale and developing a vision whereby attention can be focused on synergistic purposes.

There is also the question of who needs to participate and to what extent. As several reviewers observe, networks tend to have “core” members and “peripheral” members. Until relatively recently, network theory promoted the idea that maximising “core” membership and reducing “peripheral” membership was important to network sustainability and effectiveness. However, more recent research suggests the opposite – that the most effective networks have relatively few “core” members. It is important to ensure that these “core” members have extensive connections of their own into *different* networks³¹.

Securing commitment from members

This is about the ability to command obligations from the participants to take joint action and the ability to develop cooperation and collaboration among a diverse group that might not ordinarily cooperate with each other. It involves mobilisation behaviour to marshal resources, build coalitions and forge agreements, and developing a view of the whole to promote a set of common objectives.

Creating a favourable environment for productive interaction

This is about minimising the costs to participants. It includes blending many different cultures, needs and goals to facilitate interaction among participants; securing a working consensus on behalf of the whole (perhaps via a collective set of objectives, goals or visions), but allowing participants to contribute based on their own reasons; and fostering effective communication among participants. It involves building management skills in which the role of a network coordinator is changed from someone who is “in charge” to a multi-lateral broker role, or facilitator.

Formal and informal rules can serve to help managers (including those not directly responsible for the network) in their ability to create a favourable environment or they can become barriers. In simpler networks the rules can be restrictive and still allow for the purposes to be achieved. In more complex networks, managers will need to focus their efforts on legitimising the purpose of the network, securing a commitment to it and establish a working consensus. In these circumstances, the rules should be as flexible as possible to allow the members to be able to work out needed adjustments and to be able to manoeuvre as much as possible to deal with the complexities that will be encountered.

Equally important is the role of informal rules/guidelines. Regardless of whether there are formal rules, an astute manager will be able to use informal relationships to influence the prevailing values and norms and build obligation from participants to take joint action. If the goals allow for the use of the simpler types of networks, then the need to rely on these strategies will be limited to the ability to get buy-in from members who insist on maintaining their independence. For more complex networks and purposes, the manager will also need to focus on securing support and

legitimacy for the goals by developing buy-in of sponsors and also building coalitions and agreements even before the network is formed.

The question of “trust” occurs frequently in the literature. It is usually seen either as a prerequisite of successful networks (see below), or as a product of successful networks. It is also commonly assumed that time, communications and working relationships build up trust. However, Newell and Swan point out that in situations where people have different world views, increased communication may actually serve to increase differences and erodes trust.³²

Evaluation questions that flow from these issues

- What assumptions were made about the necessary skill for managing and participating in these project’s networking activities ? By whom ? With what consequences ?
- To what extent were those assumptions correct or incorrect and what have been the consequences of this.
- Who have been the “champions” of a particular project’s networking goals ? How have they performed that role and with what consequences ?
- Who have been the “sponsors” of a particular project’s networking goals and how have they exercised their sponsorship role.
- Who has been able to “shape” the partnership and create the appropriate perception ? How have they done this, and with what impact ? How have the prevailing norms and values of the network developed and who has been critical in this ?
- Who are the “core” members of a project’s networks ? How have they been selected and/or recruited ? On what basis ? How have the “peripheral” members benefited or linked into the core ? How have networks of networks been actively exploited ?
- In what way have the desires by participants to collaborate been exploited and shaped ? Has this been built on previous collaborations or networks, or has it had to be developed from scratch ? What mechanisms have been used to do this ? And with what impact ?
- How have the individual and collective interests been negotiated and traded off ? Who has spearheaded this, and in what way ?
- Has the “flexibility” of a project’s networks matched its ambition ? To what extent should the process be principle driven rather than process driven ? Has the process given the principles some practical activities ? Have people followed any guidelines as if they were rules, or followed guidelines because they felt this was the best approach ?
- To what extent have centrally or locally developed performance indicators helped or hindered the development of the network ? Have they been accurate or valid indicators of “performance” ?
- What have been the “formal” and “informal” rules of the network or partnership been ? How have they worked in practice ? Who has helped shape them and how ?
- How important has “trust” been in the development of the partnership ? To what extent has it built on existing levels of trust, and to what extent has it needed to create sufficient levels of trust to undertake the task.
- How successfully has the network management role been carried out ?
- How well have any “external” sponsors balanced the need to drive the collaboration with the risk of over-riding its autonomy ?

Factor Three - The Context of a Network

Mandel³³ also argues that the context of a network can also help and hinder. She identifies a range of contextual factors, and identifies the management implications for each of these factors.

History of relationships

If there is a poor history of relations among members and the goal is to deal with complex problems, managers will need to focus more strongly on blending the different cultures, needs and goals than if members have a history of good relations. This can often be made easier if managers can build strong support and legitimacy for the network so that a well-respected sponsor can serve to convince members of the worth of maintaining it. In less complex types of network (eg cooperation) managers can probably rely more on personal persuasion, often on a problem-by-problem basis.

Relative power of members and non-members

Because of the intense feelings and conflicts that can arise as a result of power issues, management techniques must be adapted to allow members to secure a working consensus rather than imposing traditional controls or coordinating mechanisms.

In simpler types of networks, the power dimensions which allow members to maintain their individual orientation and insist on maintaining the status quo, will mean that management techniques will need to be adapted in order to focus on two elements: securing commitment from members to take joint action and the ability to create a favourable environment for productive interaction. Since only limited purposes are expected to be accomplished in simpler networks, managers will not need to focus as much on securing commitment, but they would do well to insure there is strong support and legitimacy for the innovation at the outset.

In the more complex types of networks, the emphasis will need to be on the ability to secure commitment to overriding goals as well as on the need to blend the many different cultures, needs and goals that will be present in these arrangements. Developing a shared purpose can serve as a foundation for all actions.

The question of "power" raises issues of who exactly controls or is in charge of the network. Several reviews stress how "external" organisations are important in the establishment of networks, but can also stifle them. This is particularly the case with government agencies, where the original impetus for the establishment of networks comes not from network members, but from central policy makers. For central policy makers this poses a dilemma. As Keast et al say "In effect, there is a desire to continue to tightly control what occurs in the network structure. True collaboration and integration delineates, the key role for policy makers is to lay the foundation for the members to be able to operate with the authority they will need, and then to step back and "get out of the way". This does not mean that policy makers should not be involved in the assessment of the network structure, but it does mean that they have to pull back and allow the members to have the kind of flexibility they will need to come up with innovative systems change and to feel comfortable taking the risks

they will have to take.”³⁴ This is particularly true of assessing network “performance”. Networks established by policy makers, or by central agencies often have performance measures that conform to their world view. However, as Keast et al stress the performance of network arrangements cannot be judged, evaluated or measured along traditional bureaucratic lines such as outcome or outputs, since they are essentially evolutionary, developmental and contribute to the establishment of trust and relationships that may take quite unintended courses.

Impact of political/cultural context

The openness or restrictiveness of the political/cultural context can make a difference as to whether complex coalitions or network structures will ever get off the ground. In very restrictive contexts, action may be limited to relatively simple networks and thus relatively simple goals.

In the case where more complex problem-solving is the goal, however, it will be up to the manager to influence those in the political arena to change their position. This will mean the manager will have to first build support and legitimacy for the network from sponsors and then rely on an ability to influence rules, procedures, values and norms.

Type of issue

This factor becomes, for managers, a double edged sword, as the simpler types of issues may be easier to get people to the table, but they will do so because they feel the stakes are low enough to insure their individual goals will prevail. In this case, there may be fewer difficulties in terms of getting agreement, but the end result may be maintaining the status quo rather than any systems change. If managers are interested in achieving more complex purposes (eg establishment of collaborative ventures), this will mean that members must perceive their mutual interdependence, which, in turn, will require an emphasis on maintaining a shared commitment to goals. This will be impacted by the perceptions of the issue by the members, and managers may need to focus on influencing and altering perceptions to develop a shared purpose.

Culture of members

In a network the development of a “rationale” allows members with diverse backgrounds and affiliations to come together as a new whole. This does not mean, however, that members give up their identity as representatives of individual organisations or groups or even give up their way of thinking and behaving based on their affiliations prior to becoming members. Consequently management techniques must be adapted that allow members to build commitment to the other members for their own reasons and in their own ways, not by imposing traditional controls or coordinating mechanisms (eg performance measures or practices imposed by one organisation on all members of the network).

It is not entirely true that the cultural and political context is less important in simpler forms of network. If managers want to maintain the relative independence of the members *and* still be able to solve mutual problems, then managers will need to work even harder on finding sponsors who are able to get a minimum of

agreement to take joint action. In simpler networks that are predominantly focussing on information sharing, this can be a major undertaking.

Indeed in the more complex types of networks, members tend to be more astute about the need to develop a program rationale than in the more simple types of networks. They know they must continually work on maintaining a view of the whole and blending different cultures, needs and goals. This is still a difficult process, but nonetheless, often there is a better foundation for these management strategies in the more complex types than in the simpler types.

Other contextual factors

In their review of studies of health promotions coalitions, Butterfoss and her colleagues concluded that it was important to understand the stages of coalition development, since different factors may be important in enhancing coalition functioning³⁵. Knowing what these are may help coalitions move from one stage of development to another. According to Butterfoss, contextual factors dominate the initial stages of a coalition. These factors include those above, plus :

- Positive attitudes towards the idea of a coalition
- Resource scarcity
- Failure of existing efforts to address the problem
- Legislative or extra-organisational mandates
- An effective, motivated catalyst organisation
- Previous history of collaboration or competition between coalition members
- Capacity to maintain linkages - essentially the technical ability of members to stay in touch and create a sense of direction.

Evaluation questions that flow from these issues

- What has been the history of collaboration, networking and partnerships in the project areas ? To what extent has this been critical in establishing the particular form of partnership in this area ? How has the impact of poor past experiences been managed, how have good past experiences been exploited ? What are the implications of this for other projects in other areas ?
- How have the relative power differentials between stakeholders been managed ? What have been the consequences of this ? In particular, how has this affected the ambitiousness of the project ?
- To what extent have the "ground rules" of a project's funding set by its policy framework, influenced the development of a projects ability to network ? In what way ?
- How have centrally defined performance measures helped or hindered the development of a projects ability to partner, in particular to respond to the particular needs at a local level ?
- How influential has the political context been; nationally, regionally, locally ? What boundaries has it set around the project's networking and partnership activities ? How restrictive has it been ? Has it enabled the project to develop freely or restricted its ability to develop ?
- To what extent do stakeholders comprehend and are able to work on the interdependence of each other ?

- How has “diversity” been handled ? Diversity in terms of knowledge, experience, organisational size, organisational and personal cultures and traditions, sectoral standards ?
- To what extent have stakeholders and participants understood, acknowledged and made allowances for the complexity of their task. How have key individuals handled these situations and with what results ?
- To what extent do people feel positive about the purpose of the project and the role of networking ?
- How have people responded to the reality of resource scarcity – has it influenced the wish to collaborate more, or worked against it ?
- Are there organisations that have really committed itself to the project ? How has sponsors handled and promoted this ? How have sponsors handled situations where key stakeholder organisations are not enthusiastic ?
- What existing networking mechanisms are there in the project areas, and how successfully have these been used ?
- To what extent to those involved in the any partnership activities have adequate autonomy of support from their own organisations to legitimise decisions taken ?

Summary

The literature strongly suggests that pulling people together and hoping for the best is not a good way to establish a sustainable network. Establishment of networks – of all kinds – require a delicate balance of features, and careful matching of management styles, skills and contextual responses. As Mandell³⁶ states clearly – “to insist on one type of arrangement over another without considering the characteristics of the arrangement as well as the context in which they will operate is foolish, at best.” She suggests that “where conditions are very restrictive, managers might do well to develop a [network] in stages, starting with simple issues that will allow members to buy into the new arrangement and form positive relationships with each other first, and then they can move to more complex [networks] based on these established relationships” as the resources, skills managerial skills and context allows.

A final word of caution comes from the New Zealand Ministry of Health’s review of the network literature³⁷. “Intersectoral collaboration is a tool, not an end in itself. It is resource intensive and should be the approach of choice only when it is the most effective approach or when no other solution has been successful.”³⁸

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- 1 My thanks to the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission, the New Zealand Department of Child Youth and Family, and to the Collaborative Institute for Research and Learning in Evaluation (CIRCLE), for their support in developing this note. This is still a note in progress.
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