Collaboration guidelines for non-profits


Session chair

Panelists
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Develop a strategy for a successful collaboration, starting with the way you’re going to get target partners on board.

Within your organization, in some cases you’ll need the support of senior management at the outset. In other cases, it may not make sense to approach them until later in the process, such as after a detailed plan or a prototype has been created.

Sometimes it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Trust is the foundation on which any successful collaboration is built. Develop trust with individuals, and from there, with each organization. Get to know the people you’re going to work with. This might mean, for example, getting together over coffee.

Spend the necessary time to develop relationships with your key contacts and with the teams they depend on.

Although you may believe that a particular organization would be an ideal partner for a collaborative effort, they may not feel the same way. It's important to have an enthusiastic partner. If it's too hard or “not clicking”—emails are going unreturned—don't force it. Just let it go. (“They're just not that in to you.”)

Recognize the difference between consultation and collaboration. In the former, you’re asking for input; in the later, the other party has or perceives that their opinion is equal in weight to yours.
Identify all the stakeholders and understand the goals and objectives of each. Sustaining a collaborative effort requires that all parties see benefits to continuing the efforts.

Agreements that spell out goals, roles, and responsibilities, including who is responsible for payment, may be critical, depending on the parties involved and the size and nature of the effort.

Meet at your facility and at theirs, or on “neutral” turf. This will reinforce the belief that each party is a valued partner in the effort.

Follow meetings with an e-mail message that puts key points in writing. Having a written record reduces the potential for misunderstanding and increases accountability.

By starting small, it may be easier to reach a milestone, thereby demonstrating the success of the collaborative effort. Members of the group can take this back to their organizations as proof of the value of participating and continuing to devote resources to it.

This early success may attract others interested in joining or at least supporting the effort.

A project manager or consultant may be able to pull together the details of a large project and keep the many different parties on-track better than what a member from any one organization could do.

Regularly evaluate how things are going. Be open and aware. Be willing to learn from one's partners and to make changes.

Make adjustments as you go. Build on successes and failures to tweak the program even as it is going on.

Candidly assess the results, identify what worked and what didn’t, and share that insight with others so that you and your organization can learn from the effort.

Different parties may have different sensitivities to the way their organization is presented (e.g., in press-related materials, presentations, or documents).

Remember the "big picture.” Unexpected things occur, and the best laid plans can go awry. Should that happen and you’re faced with having to explain why things have gone sideways to your manager, just remember, “Collaborations can be fun. You meet and work with new people and explore new perspectives and ways of working!”