

Achieving Results with Collaboratives

Strategies for Helping Collaborative Leaders Hold Themselves and Each Other Accountable for Action

Key Findings

A formal, written process for documenting leaders' commitments increases the accountability rate by 17% percent for individual commitments and 25% percent for group commitments.

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Increasing the number of same-sector partners by 5% can improve accountability by 16 %.

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Increasing attendance rates significantly increases the quality of members' actions and partnerships.

Leaders often feel stuck because of the seemingly intractable nature of social problems such as educational achievement, health disparities, and community safety. Understanding that large-scale social change requires multi-sector coordination, many collaborative efforts have been launched to tackle these problems. Yet, there has been little measurable, broad, and sustainable success.

An emerging framework, the Theory of Aligned Contributions¹, posits that large-scale social change is most likely to occur if a core group of multi-sector leaders responds to a call to action that is urgent, focuses on a measurable result, and establishes public accountability. Within an environment that supports a structured process, leaders build trust and take risks. They make commitments to action that are aligned with each other's work and are at a scope and scale sufficient to make measurable progress.

How leaders within voluntary collaboratives hold each other accountable for making and keeping action commitments that are impactful and aligned with the collaboratives goals is the subject of this brief. In this brief, accountability is defined as being not only accountable to

collaborative leaders, but also accountable for specific tasks. Attending meetings, reporting progress on committed actions, and completing committed actions all contribute accountability.

Achieving Results with Collaboratives: Strategies for Helping Collaborative Leaders Hold Themselves and Each Other Accountable for Action provides insights into how collaboratives can develop accountability—a key strategy for achieving results. It can help practitioners prioritize strategies for creating a collaborative or enhance the performance of an existing collaborative.

This is one in a series of research briefs that will assist service providers; government, nonprofit, and business leaders; and grant makers in developing effective collaboratives.

The Methodology and Studies

The researchers sought to inform collaborative work by:

- Comparing the performance and roles of leaders from the nonprofit, business, and government sectors;
- Examining the extent to which partnerships exist within and across sectors, as well as how the partnerships affect work quality; and
- Examining the impact of the sector composition in collaborative meetings on outcomes and partnership patterns.

By conducting quantitative analyses and literature reviews, researchers could accurately measure and understand events in multi-sector, voluntary collaboratives. The quantitative methods included regression analyses, hierarchical linear modeling, analyses of variance, and social network analyses. The data came from the Leadership in Action Program (LAP), which develops cross-sector and voluntary collaboratives to improve the lives of children and families. Created by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the mission of LAP is to foster community-level networks focused on one specific community issue. The data set included four LAPs, 911 action commitments, and 160 leaders. Researchers also conducted an interdisciplinary literature review, using nonprofit management, public policy, and psychology resources.

The following papers provide additional information on the results and methods that are summarized in this brief as well as the Leadership in Action Program.

- Littlefield, Jennifer and O'Brien, Julia. "Playing Well with Others: Nonprofit Participation in Cross-Sector Collaboratives." Paper presented at the annual conference for the Association for Research on Nonprofit and Voluntary Action, Washington, DC, November 17-20, 2010.
- Littlefield, Jennifer and O'Brien, Julia. "Policymaking through Collaborative Networks: Issues of Accountability and Performance." Paper presented at the annual conference for the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Boston, Massachusetts, November 4-6, 2010.
- Hersey, Leigh; Littlefield, Jennifer; and O'Brien, Julia. "Participant or Spectator? Nonprofit Engagement in Multi-Sector Collaboratives." Paper presented at the annual conference for the American Society for Public Administration, Baltimore, Maryland, March 11-15, 2011.

Highlights from Research Findings

Building an Accountable Collaborative

Multi-sector collaboratives form because many social problems are too complex for just one sector to solve. Collaborative groups can leverage resources by improving economic efficiencies, service quality and quantityⁱⁱ, and decision quality because of including different perspectivesⁱⁱⁱ. Also, diverse groups tend to produce better ideas and be more creative and innovative^{iv}.

Collaboratives usually have some structural stability^v, yet they can have trouble holding members accountable to the collaborative and its goals. Without accountability, collaboratives may lack the organization needed to be efficient^{vi}.

Achieving accountability is the linchpin for collaboratives that seek to overcome common challenges and achieve better outcomes. Developing accountability to each other and to stakeholders, as well as for results, are critical elements to improving performance^{vii}. In a collaborative that values accountability, members report on progress, complete tasks, and attend meetings. They also monitor and measure progress, and mobilize and motivate after progress occurs^{viii}.

Early findings from these studies demonstrate that there are certain conditions that consistently increase accountability in collaborative groups:

- Formal commitments to action
- Same-sector partnerships
- High attendance
- Performance measures
- A “champion” or “accountability partner”

Community and program leaders can also look to existing models of accountability for guidance. Accountability is an operating principle of the Leadership in Action Program, which is founded on an emerging change framework call the Theory of Aligned Contributions:

- Participants follow a “call to action” from a group of high-level, cross sector leaders.
- They engage in experiential learning to strengthen their capacity for effective and collaborative work.
- To ensure that they make and keep commitments that are aligned with the groups’ work, progress reports on commitments are discussed and distributed at meetings.
- The leaders also use data to track progress on strategies.

Findings and Recommendations

The accountability framework used by the Leadership in Action Program has a substantial impact on its accountability, productivity, and success. Findings from the research are below, as well as recommendations to help leaders apply these findings to their collaborative efforts.

Use a Formal Process to Document Action Commitments

Finding: A formal, written process for documenting leaders' commitments can increase accountability by 17% percent for individual commitments and 25% percent for group commitments^x.

A formal, written process for making commitments is a critical strategy that collaborative leaders can implement to facilitate accountability for performance and teamwork. Leaders are 25% percent more accountable when they use written group commitments and 17% percent more accountable when they use written individual commitments, instead of verbal commitments.^x

The process improves completion, an indicator of accountability. Leaders are four percent more likely to complete commitments when they make written individual commitments and five percent more likely to complete them when they make written group commitments, instead of verbal commitments^{xi}.

Collaboratives can develop a formal, written action process by:

- **Making commitments easily accessible to the collaborative.** Information recall becomes difficult during group tasks^{xii}. Distributing a list of commitments made during a meeting reminds leaders of tasks, clarifies tasks, ensures that they are aware of their peers' actions, and creates accountability to the collaborative for leaders' commitments.
- **Making written commitments with partners.** This also provides a tangible tool to help leaders develop productive partnerships.
- **Using a form to capture commitments.** The writing process helps leaders ensure that their commitments are impactful and aligned with the collaborative's shared goals. It also helps leaders reflect on the resources and relationships that they can use to move strategies forward.
- **Reporting on commitments made in prior meetings.** Asking leaders to report on their progress contributes to a culture of accountability. It also helps leaders effectively reevaluate old strategies.

Examples from the Field: Commitments in the Leadership in Action Program

Leaders made commitments that were both verbal and written. Making commitments that are tangible and recorded support alignment and impacts accountability. Written commitments were recorded on forms and represented individual or group commitments. The forms included a section for partnerships, which helped leaders to find common and complementary resources. A documenter recorded the commitments in the meeting notes that were distributed to all meeting participants. At the next meeting, leaders shared their progress in the opening discussion and by updating their forms. The documenter captured these progress reports and included them in the meeting notes.

Name:			Date:	
What will you do between now and the next meeting?	How will this contribute to a measurable result?	With whom?	By when?	What progress did you make? <i>Complete at next meeting.</i>

Take Action with Same-Sector Partners

Finding: Increasing same-sector partnerships in a multi-sector collaborative by 5% can improve accountability by 16 percent^{xiii}.

Partnering to make commitments helps leaders in collaboratives be interdependent and cooperative, rather than isolated and unconnected. Same-sector partnerships are a stronger predictor of accountability than cross-sector partnerships, suggesting that similar cultures, processes, and values lead to a shared sense of duty. By increasing same-sector partnerships in a multi-sector collaborative by 5%, leaders can improve accountability by 16%^{xiv}. Increasing them by 10% leads to a 32% increase in accountability^{xv}.

Yet, frustrated with challenges that commonly plague collaboratives, which include different ways of working and standards of performance^{xvi}, leaders often resort to working alone. Collaboratives can develop partnerships by:

- **Helping leaders feel close and connected to each other.** Encouraging trust and open, honest dialogue without glossing over differences is important for relationship building and can lead to greater feelings of accountability^{xvii}.
- **Creating a facilitative, neutral climate.** This can build collaborative relationships^{xviii} by supporting the ongoing process of negotiation, commitment, and execution^{xix}.
- **Structuring group work strategically.** This, in turn, increases their productivity. For example, research shows that including leaders from the government sector in partnerships increases accountability in group work^{xx}, as does including leaders from one's own sector^{xxi}.

Example from the Field: Building Partnerships in the Leadership in Action Program

The LAP leaders reported that building productive relationships was the most important work that they did. In these relationships, LAP leaders were accountable to each other, acted collaboratively, and made the shared goal more of a priority than their individual needs.

The LAP addressed accountability by fostering productive partnership in a variety of ways, including the use of neutral facilitation and individual coaching to explain collaborative leadership skills while leaders conducted real work, rather than using a didactic approach. By building skills this way, leaders built lasting and productive relationships that focused on achieving a shared goal. These skills included facilitating consensus decisions and plans; addressing and resolving conflicts; and holding superiors, peers, and support staff accountable for implementing effective strategies.

Issue a “Call to Action” to Engage Leaders

Findings: Engaging a “champion” or accountability partner, increasing attendance, and using performance measures may also increase accountability.

Common topics from the research that may lead to increased accountability include:

- **Engaging a “champion” or “accountability partner.”** Most collaboratives are concerned with being accountable *for* a result, yet being accountable *to* something is also important^{xxii}. By charging the leaders with attaining a result, the partner can legitimize the collaborative and hold it accountable for the work. The partner can also offer energy and resources to retain momentum^{xxiii}.
- **Using performance measures.** Providing performance information to the leaders, creating processes for interpreting performance measures, and strategically using the information to improve its operations can enhance the work of collaboratives^{xxiv}.
- **Improving attendance.** Having a critical mass of leaders at the table to contribute expertise and resources is critical to a collaborative’s success. Attending more sessions increases the:
 - Quality of commitments. Commitments made by leaders with better attendance have the potential for greater impact and are more closely linked to the collaborative’s shared goals^{xxv}.
 - Number of commitments made by leaders^{xxvi}.
 - Number of partnerships that leaders develop^{xxvii}.

Examples from the Field: Accountability Frameworks in the Leadership in Action Program

The **accountability partner** was a group of high-level government, business, and nonprofit leaders who issued a “call to action,” which invited leaders to be accountable for their performance by making measurable improvements in the community-level result in less than two years.

Each LAP develops **performance measures**^{xxviii}. The leaders explore questions and use a tool to map their performance measures, which helps establish whether populations are better-off:

1. Who are our customers?
2. How can we measure if they are better off?
3. How can we measure if we are delivering services well?
4. How are we doing on the most important of these measures?
5. Who are the partners that have a role to play in doing better?
6. What works to do better, including no-cost and low-cost ideas?
7. What do we propose to do?

How much did we do? Example: Number of students served	How well did we do it? Example: Percent of students who were tutored
Is anyone better off? Example: Number of students who are proficient	Is anyone better off? Example: Percent of students who are proficient

Recommendations

Accountability is a hurdle that all collaboratives must overcome to reach their goals. This research led to guidelines for building an accountability framework that collaborative leaders from all sectors can use to influence effective, equitable, and sustainable cross-sector contributions to community improvement.

In developing their accountability framework, leaders should recognize that one success or accountability around one action would not produce population-level changes. Accountability happens over time and involves interdependent factors.

Our findings demonstrate that certain approaches to collaboration can improve accountability. Most importantly, collaborative leaders should emphasize partnerships, formal commitments to action, and other strategies:

- Because collaboratives are most successful when leaders' actions are interdependent and cooperative rather than isolated and unrelated, leaders should emphasize the development of partnerships.
- Providing a formal tool for committing to actions for individuals or and groups create reminders of commitments that both they and their partners made to contribute to the shared goals of the collaborative.
- Our findings also suggest that strategically using a "champion" or "accountability partner," performance measures, and attendance can enhance accountability in a collaborative.

Overall, our findings offer evidence that collaborative members can be accountable and that collaboratives can perform successfully. Our recommendations provide actionable steps that practitioners can implement over time to develop their own accountability framework.

The brief is a product of the Results Based Leadership Collaborative (RBLC), which grew out of a partnership between the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) and the University of Maryland School of Public Policy (MSPP). The RBLC has expanded its work to provide leadership expertise to other groups, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, that share an interest in developing strategies to effectively meet the needs of communities, children, and families.

References

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- ^{xxvii} Policymaking through Collaborative Networks: Issues of Accountability and Performance (APPAM 2010, p24)
- ^{xxviii} Performance measure framework is adaptive from Friedman 2005