



Becoming Collaborative

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Highlights

- Collaborative governance—that is, working jointly across the traditional boundaries of governmental agencies, and between the public and private sectors—has proven to be an effective strategy for implementing policy initiatives over the past two decades in an increasingly interdependent environment.
- The increased demand for collaborative governance stems from a changing policy environment which has become more dynamic and demanding. A wide range of tools, techniques, and legal authorities have evolved in recent years in response to the increased demand.
- As the use of networked collaborative governance models goes to scale, we will likely see a shift to a greater use of “platform-based networks”—a business model inspired by the digital world.

BECOMING COLLABORATIVE

By John M. Kamensky

In October 2002, an outbreak of a highly contagious disease among chickens was detected in Compton, California. If allowed to spread, it would devastate the \$40 billion poultry industry in the U.S. The response involved dozens of public and private sector organizations over the course of a year and the outbreak was successfully quelled, but this emergency and the governmental response to it barely reached public attention.

Government operations such as this oftentimes run in the background out of public view, hiding how government works in ways that increasingly depends on multiple players for success in areas in which no single agency has the span of resources or legal authority to act.

Containing the outbreak required a highly coordinated effort among federal, state, and local actors. Dr. Annette Whitford, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was designated as the joint area commander of a task force formed to stem the outbreak. Her task force was modeled on a collaborative emergency response governance approach developed in the 1970s by the Forest Service to combat forest fires. Based on pre-defined protocols, she orchestrated the containment effort across 10 major state and federal agencies, in 19 counties, involving more than 7,000 workers over an 11-month period. The work involved diagnosing the disease, euthanizing and disposing more than 4.5 million birds, monitoring to ensure the disease was eradicated in commercial and private locations, and conducting appraisals to reimburse owners for birds destroyed.¹

Organizing quickly, mobilizing people, exercising authority, and paying for the entire operation required significant collaboration among public and private actors. This approach to infrequent emergencies is just the tip of the iceberg of cross-agency collaboration occurring across the government.

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, public management scholar Donald Kettl declared that government was failing to meet public expectations because “many of the most important problems we face simply do not match the institutions we have created to govern them.”² He observed that many challenges—such as responding to disasters, organizing the delivery of services to disabled individuals, and orchestrating a response to climate change—have no single

organization in charge. As a result, the traditional bureaucratic institutions defined by hierarchical agencies and programs that were so successful in the mid-twentieth century are not adequate for challenges that span across organizational boundaries.

The traditional hierarchical model of governing is increasingly being supplemented with a collaborative network model. Some stable and focused governmental functions remain under the hierarchical model, while other more fluid and dynamic functions are adopting a more network-based, collaborative approach. This networked collaborative model is still evolving and growing in importance—within agencies, between agencies, between levels of government, and between the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

What is “Collaborative Governance?”

The concept of “collaborative governance”—that is, working jointly across the traditional boundaries of governmental agencies, and between the public and private sectors—has proven an effective strategy for implementing policy initiatives over the past two decades in an increasingly interdependent environment. The descriptive terms for these phenomena vary: networks, collaborations, partnerships, horizontal government, boundary spanning, joined up government, and more.

This evolution has resulted from the need for new business models to address societal challenges where the traditional hierarchical organizational model no longer works. The evolution is also driven by the availability of new technologies that lower cross-functional collaboration barriers which existed in the past.

Academics say this collaborative networking phenomenon is one of the defining characteristics of “New Public Governance” where “multiple different actors contribute to the delivery of public services and the policymaking system” and the line between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors has become increasingly blurred.³

These new operating models have evolved largely through trial and error, beginning with the private sector and diffusing to cross-sectoral partnerships.⁴ Public and private sector leaders have found the traditional hierarchical bureaucratic model increasingly inadequate for addressing increasingly complex challenges. They also found the market-based models of privatizing functions or creating contractual arrangements did not help. They tried different approaches to working horizontally across traditional hierarchical structures and stakeholders—typically by organizing around a common goal, customer, or geographic area.

What drives the use of collaborative governance? Rosemary O’Leary describes how government has steadily increased its use of collaborative approaches in lieu of the traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic approach. She says there are several explanations for this shift:

- First, “most public challenges are larger than one organization, requiring new approaches to addressing public issues” such as housing, pollution, transportation, and healthcare.
- Second, collaboration helps to improve the effectiveness and performance of programs “by encouraging new ways of providing services.”
- Third, technology advances in recent years have helped “organizations and their employees to share information in a way that is integrative and interoperable.”
- And finally, “citizens are seeking additional avenues for engaging in governance, resulting in new and different forms of collaborative problem solving and decision making.”⁵

Early in his administration, President Obama’s Open Government initiative placed a premium on the use of collaborative approaches. This led to the institutionalization of several specific initiatives, such as the creation of cross-agency priority goals described later in this chapter.⁶

The development and use of collaborative networks and partnerships happened faster than academics could keep up. There was a scramble to understand and classify them in the 1990s and early 2000s. The IBM Center sponsored a number of reports that undertook such efforts, addressing definitional issues such as:

- What do we mean by networks, partnerships, collaboration, and platforms?
- What can networks be used to accomplish?
- What are the different kinds of networks?
- How do collaborative networks differ from traditional hierarchical systems?
- What are the preconditions for success?
- What competencies and skills are needed to manage collaborative networks?

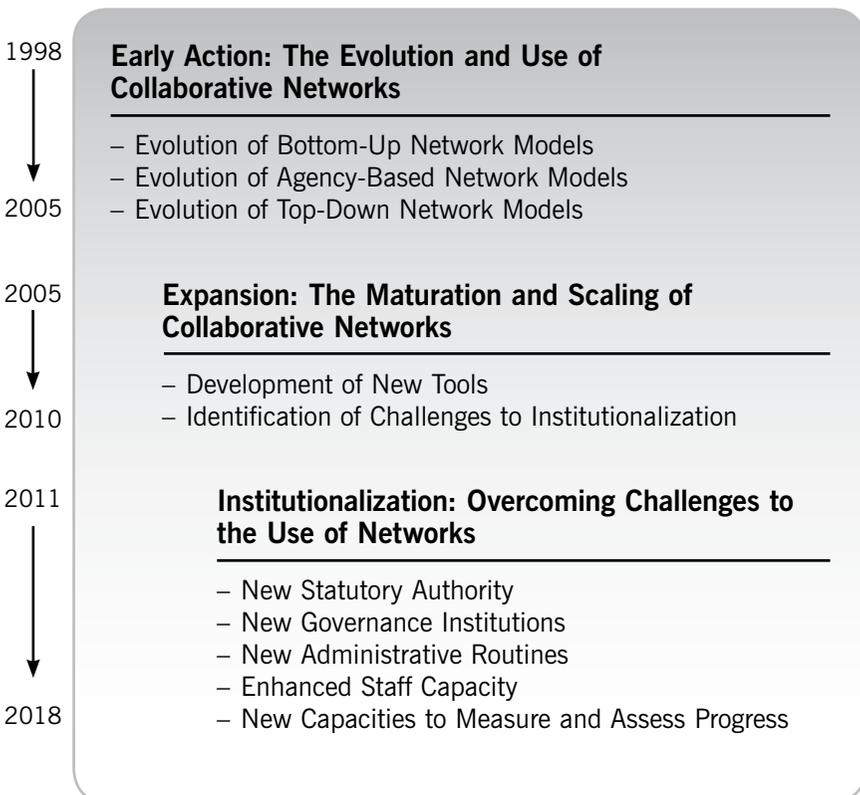
Responses to these types of questions were summarized in two publications: a 2004 book, *Collaboration Using Networks and Partnerships*, edited by John Kamensky and Tom Burlin,⁷ and a 2014 literature review, *Inter-Organizational Networks: A Review of the Literature to Inform Practice*, by Janice Popp, Brint Milward, Gail MacKean, Ann Casebeer, and Ron Lindstrom.⁸ These works provide useful conceptual frameworks to understand the evolution of collaborative networks and answers to questions like those above. However, the more inspiring stories have been case studies of practitioners in the “real world” over the past 20 years.

Organization of Chapter

As seen in the chart titled, “Evolution of Collaborative Networks: 1998–2018,” the evolution can be divided into three phases:

- **Early action:** Informal networks of people, programs, and organizations—and the use of partnerships (a more formalized approach)—grew organically, largely from the bottom-up, as pragmatic responses to specific situations. These included community-led efforts to improve the water quality of rivers, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s efforts to prevent future damage to communities facing natural disasters (versus only responding to a community after a disaster has occurred).
- **Expansion:** Policy makers began to proactively use network-based, collaborative governance models to address broader issues, such as improving food safety, addressing changes brought about by climate change, cross-agency law enforcement efforts, and creating veteran-centric approaches to myriad resources available to veterans.

Evolution of Collaborative Networks: 1998—2018



- **Institutionalization:** Statutory authority, strategic plans, and capacity-building efforts helped legitimize and provide the foundation for policy makers to use collaborative networks in a wide array of policy arenas. This has been reflected in statutory provisions creating cross-agency priority goals, Office of Management and Budget directives, and presidential directives to use collaborative approaches and to develop a cadre of career executives with experience working across organizational boundaries. Some congressionally appropriated funding has also specifically targeted these efforts.

In addition to the development of this new institutional capacity, there is a shift underway to create and use “platforms” to organize and deliver internal services. Platforms are electronic business models that have become a foundation for virtually frictionless transactions and interactions between “many-to-many”—like eBay, Facebook, Airbnb and Uber. Digital platforms may presage the future of how collaborative governance evolves. The lessons offered stem from the experiences of the many pioneers in the field of collaboration.

This shift to the use of platforms is reflected in the expansion of shared services for functions such as personnel and finance at the federal level. It is also seen in the delivery of citizen-facing services, such as the use of integrated networks of social services organized around the needs of families and individuals in cities like Los Angeles and San Diego and in countries like Canada, Australia, and Belgium.

The remainder of this chapter provides more detail about these three phases. The chapter concludes with lessons learned and observations on what’s on the horizon—the evolution of digital “platforms” as the backbone for collaborative networks.

EARLY ACTION: THE EVOLUTION AND USE OF COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS

While state and local networks have tended to emerge bottom-up, networks at the federal level seemed to be largely an outgrowth of top-down initiatives to improve cross-agency or federal-state “coordination” efforts—in areas such as grants management, avoiding duplicative capital investments in hospital equipment in a common geographic area, or working across agency boundaries that shared a common geographic boundary. The dynamics within networks differ from those that are bottom-up versus top-down, and informal versus formal. Networks also start at the agency level, with agency leadership serving as “networking entrepreneurs.” Observers judge the bottom-up and the mid-level manager approaches as more likely to be successful, generally due to better buy-in by those doing the actual work.

Evolution of Bottom-Up Network Models

The use of collaborative networks that cross organizational boundaries has a long history. Many of the early networks evolved in response to specific needs at the state and local levels, dealing with practical problems—such as sharing fire-fighting equipment and staff in emergencies via mutual aid agreements, joint economic development initiatives, or addressing natural resource issues in a common watershed.

In a 2003 report, *Leveraging Networks: A Guide for Public Managers Working Across Organizations*, Robert Agranoff described a dozen such locally-driven networks in the Midwest, observing: “Social capital, or the built-up reservoir of good will that flows from different organizations working together for mutual productive gain, no doubt is the ‘glue’ that holds people together or the ‘motivator’ that moves the process along.”⁹

Mark Imperial, in a 2004 report, *Collaboration and Performance Management in Network Settings: Lessons from Three Watershed Governance Efforts*, provides a vivid case study of a bottom-up, local-level collaborative network.¹⁰ He describes the collaborative efforts of three watershed governance efforts with activities dating back several decades in places as diverse as Lake Tahoe, NV; Tillamook Bay, OR; and Tampa Bay, FL. He observed that each watershed governance effort developed its own unique performance management system, to hold each of its participating members jointly accountable for the group’s actions. He concluded that “collaboration is a strategy for getting things done” by improving both service delivery as well as environmental conditions. Common collaborative activities included “habitat restoration,...streamlining permitting processes, improving enforcement, and coordination land acquisition to improve service delivery.”¹¹

Evolution of Agency-Activated Network Models

Some networks evolved based on entrepreneurial efforts of leaders at the agency level within larger organizations. Following are two examples of federal-level collaborative initiatives that reached beyond their own agency boundaries. They include the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Safe Construction Networks launched in the late 1990s, and a Department of Health and Human Services initiative to improve community-level health care.

- **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA):** A notable example of how one federal agency activated a collaborative network is a 2002 case study by William Waugh, Jr., *Leveraging Networks to Meet National Goals: FEMA and the Safe Construction Networks*, which describes the development of Safe Construction Networks by FEMA in the 1990s.¹² After a series of disastrous hurricanes, wildfires, and earthquakes, FEMA undertook in 1995 a National Mitigation Strategy to reduce property losses and protect lives. Pursuant to this strategy, FEMA created in

1997 an initiative called “Project Impact.” A key focus of this initiative was to encourage safe construction. This included, for example, land-use regulations in flood plains that promoted elevated construction and flood-proofing buildings. It also required the collaboration of not only local jurisdictions, but also state coastal zone management programs, private insurance companies, building code standard-setting organizations, construction companies, and non-profits promoting disaster-resistant model home designs.

Initial distrust among the voluntary participants are because “Project Impact community participants [perceived] that FEMA officials were trying to foist certain kinds of projects on them rather than accept local priorities and proposals.” FEMA quickly learned that working within a network “does require a less aggressive, more collaborative style of leadership.” Ultimately, this pioneering network did not survive the transition from the Clinton to the Bush administration, but it offered clear lessons to other federal agencies on the importance of “strong interpersonal skills... and considerable political acumen in order to interact effectively.”¹³

- **Department of Health and Human Services’ Bureau of Primary Health Care (BPHC):** Another pioneering example of the use of an agency-activated collaborative approach to tackle an ambitious goal is the BPHC’s “100% Access/0 Health Disparities” campaign from 1998–2002. John Scanlon, in his 2003 report, *Extraordinary Results on National Goals: Networks and Partnerships in the Bureau of Primary Health Care’s 100%/0 Campaign*, describes how the BPHC, provided \$1 billion in grants to community health centers and staffing support via the National Health Services Corps.¹⁴ A leadership cadre within the BPHC collectively decided to set a national goal of providing 3,000 communities across the country with access to health care by all residents, focused on eliminating health-status disparities among the vulnerable and uninsured. Scanlon found that the strategy was to “launch a self-organizing, self-sustaining movement” with multiple levels of leadership at the national, state, and local levels sharing a common vision and measurable goals.

The initial goal was to enroll 500 communities in the first three years of the initiative by gaining commitments from local doctors and other health care providers within these communities. As the initiative enrolled communities, it identified selected local benchmark models. BPHC then began to partner with existing national networks of physicians, hospitals, pharmacists, unions, local elected leaders, and faith communities. BPHC established performance partnerships with groups such as the United Way of America and the American Academy of Pediatrics to work with communities to restructure existing community assets and reinvestments to ensure access to care. By 2002, the campaign transitioned its leadership from BPHC to a non-profit, the Community Health Leadership Network, that continued the initiative as a “national movement.”¹⁵ By the late 2000s, the national network had disintegrated, but scattered local movements continue.

What triggered agencies like FEMA and BPHC to undertake efforts like this on their own initiative at an agency level within the federal government? In both cases, leaders of these initiatives said their efforts responded to the adoption of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, which requires agencies to develop plans and measures of performance. This Act signaled a shift in managerial attention from processes, programs, and activities to achieving mission-focused results. This new focus highlighted the need to collaborate more actively with stakeholders beyond their programs and agencies.

Evolution of Top-Down Network Models

The FEMA and BPHC examples were agency-activated and occurred within the context of larger organizations. Efforts to formalize the use of collaborative governance at the national cross-agency (and cross-sector) level first appeared in the mid-1990s and were dubbed “national strategies.” These included the statutorily-mandated 1997 *National Military Strategy of the United States of America* and the *International Crime Control Strategy* in 1998.

These strategies, not signed by the President, largely dealt with issues within the bounds of a specific agency. For example, the national military strategy signed by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff focused on the armed forces—force structure, acquisition, doctrine, etc. Other agencies had developed cross-cutting national strategies. The Office of National Drug Control Policy’s national strategy and the attorney general’s interagency counterterrorism and technology crime plan pre-existed the Bush Administration’s use of national strategies.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush understood the criticality of developing a national—not just a federal—approach to fighting terrorism. He expanded the use of a relatively new policy vehicle—which the White House called a “national strategy” document—as a way of creating an overarching strategic plan around a specific need or outcome, signed by the President. One of the first signed by the President was the 90-page *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, issued in July 2002. It addressed the threat of terrorism in the U.S. and focused on the domestic efforts of the federal, state, local and private sectors.¹⁶

President Bush’s Administration issued about a dozen other national strategies that addressed a pressing national—not just federal—issue, such as homeland security, cybersecurity, and pandemic preparation.¹⁷ These strategies were typically orchestrated by the White House. The approach ebbed in the transition between the Bush and Obama Administrations, even though it was still being promoted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) as late as 2017.¹⁸

GAO found that national strategies differed from other federal government planning documents in their national scope, and oftentimes had international

components. The federal government did not control many of the sectors, entities, or resources involved in implementing these strategies. GAO also found a rough hierarchy among the various terror-related strategies with cross-references among them. For example, the *National Security* strategy provided an overarching strategy while the *Homeland Security* strategy provided more specific approaches to combating terrorism domestically.

Several of these early federal top-down collaborative networks were discontinued, largely because of changes in leadership between presidential administrations.

In the 1990s and early 2000s all levels of government experimented with different forms of inter-organizational collaborative networks. Some were emergent and bottom-up, some mandated and top-down. Some were

The Special Case of The Incident Command System

The Incident Command System (ICS) is an organizational model developed at the local level in California in the 1970s by firefighters struggling to overcome an organizational paradox that most crises create. Crises require a mix of skills and capacities beyond a single organizational hierarchy, or a single political jurisdiction, and therefore need a network of responders. Forest fires do not respect boundaries between counties or cities. At the same time, crises require coordination, rapid decision-making and decisive, coordinated action — characteristics associated with hierarchies.

In a pair of studies of the ICS approach, *Leveraging Collaborative Networks in Infrequent Emergency Situations* (2005) and *From Forest Fires to Hurricane Katrina: Case Studies of Incident Command Systems* (2007), Donald Moynihan concludes that the ICS approach solves this paradox by leveraging the strengths of both networks and hierarchies.¹⁹ This approach has since been applied successfully in a range of other crises, such as responding to contagious poultry diseases, the pandemic scare of 2004, and natural disasters. This organizational model involves a latent network among a wide range of participants that occasionally gather to share information and train together, but it does not come into action absent a specific triggering event. When that occurs, pre-defined roles and responsibilities and the latent network quickly becomes a hierarchical organization. After the event, it returns to being a latent network.

Dr. Moynihan's case studies found that ICS works best when the network size and the scale of the disaster are geographically limited, the responders are experienced with the ICS approach, and the responders have a strong positive working relationship with one another. While these limitations may bound the effectiveness of this approach in a wider range of situations, it was seen as compelling enough that, in 2004, the Department of Homeland Security extended the approach as national policy used in response to all national emergencies, called the National Incident Management System.

event-specific (e.g., local responses to a flood), some geographic-specific (e.g., watershed improvements), and some population-specific (e.g., reducing health disparities). But this approach gained traction in public management and moved beyond the experimentation phase, expanded into other policy domains, and scaled to larger and more complex public challenges.

EXPANSION: THE MATURATION AND SCALING OF COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS

In the 2000s, the use of collaborative networks expanded. This approach was used at all levels of government and in increasingly complex policy environments involving multi-sector partners. As collaborative networks matured, they often changed their composition of participants, strategic focus, and how they worked together. The growing pains of various networks helped identify common challenges that networks face as they strive for longer-term sustainability. Addressing these barriers systematically helped pave the path toward institutionalization of collaborative governance as a useful approach for public managers.

Expanded Use of Complex Collaborative Networks

The early 2000s saw the use of collaborative networks expand in complexity by involving multi-sector actors in different policy domains. The following four examples of such networks, demonstrate the breadth of issues in the network model:

- **Minnesota Traffic Congestion Program:** The U.S. Department of Transportation sponsored in 2007 a pilot program—Urban Partnerships—to reduce urban traffic congestion. One of the pilots focused on a cross-sector collaborative effort in the Twin Cities metropolitan area of Minnesota, the subject of a 2009 report, *Designing and Managing Cross-Sector Collaboration: A Case Study in Reducing Traffic Congestion*, by John Bryson, Barbara Crosby, Melissa Stone, and Emily Saunoi-Sandgren.²⁰ The Twin Cities traffic congestion management initiative led to the development of relationships among state and local government agencies and between the public and private sectors. This, in turn, led to changes in existing organizational structures, processes, and norms of interaction. The report examined the use of a system for charging road users during peak traffic times in order to reduce traffic congestion. But, because of the diverse mix of stakeholders involved, the report looked at other potential congestion-reduction strategies such as increasing public transit and telecommuting. Interestingly, as the project matured over time, the mix of stakeholders changed and the dynamics of the group of participants also

changed. Critical factors in the success of the initiative involved having a project manager who could connect diverse stakeholders, as well as having respected, neutral organizations and conveners who could work with stakeholders.

- **Homeless Networks:** When President Obama took office in 2009, his Open Government initiative advocated the use of collaboration and set a new tone at the federal level. This supportive attitude contributed to the expanded use and scaling of collaborative networks at the federal level. For example, continuum of care homeless networks had been promoted via a 2009 federal law. They are comprised of multiple community-based or self-organized networks representing the public, private, and nonprofit sectors that work together to address homelessness within their communities. A number of these networks pre-existed the federal program, but they were able to expand as a result of the program. In 2014, about \$1.8 billion in funding was provided to nearly 400 networks involved in planning, providing, and tracking the effectiveness of a range of services to eliminate homelessness. A 2016 report, *Effective Leadership in Network Collaboration: Lessons Learned from Continuum of Care Homeless Programs*, by Hee Soun Jang, Jesus Valero, and Kyujin Jung, found that the most successful of these networks had leaders who exhibited inclusive leadership styles, were agile and adaptive, and used performance information effectively in making decisions.²¹
- **Multi-National Networks:** Collaborative ventures sometimes result in multi-national and bi-national boundary efforts. A 2011 report, *Environmental Collaboration: Lessons Learned About Cross-Boundary Collaborations*, by Kathryn Bryk Friedman and Kathryn Foster, examined U.S.-Canadian-Mexican environmental efforts that resulted in collaboration around cleaner air and water.²² While most collaborative efforts begin informally, multi-national and bi-national international efforts are seen as needing a formal written agreement to provide needed legitimacy to act jointly: “While they find that many of the elements necessary for effective collaborative ventures are critical—such as a clear purpose, dedicated staff, and the willingness to be flexible—they conclude that a bilateral collaborative venture is often more effective when it has formal legal structures in place that enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of various stakeholders. Informal collaborations are often useful precursors to more formal efforts. These informal efforts are often not seen as having the necessary legitimacy and resources in order to be as effective as their more formal counterparts.”²³ For example, formalized bi-national technical groups were created between the U.S. and Canada with a commitment to “maintain and restore the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem.”²⁴
- **Food Safety:** Not all efforts to create collaborative approaches succeed. For example, food safety responsibilities have historically been fragmented and decentralized among 16 federal agencies responsible

for implementing 30 different laws and myriad state, local, and private sector entities. This policy area may be ripe for greater collaboration but, absent a willingness by key stakeholders, little progress has been made. Even presidential directions to increase cross-agency collaboration had largely failed to better integrate the food safety ecosystem. This resulted in GAO adding food safety to its list of high-risk programs. Nevertheless, efforts began in 2010 to integrate public and private sectors as partners in food safety to define an ecosystem approach, according to a report, *Food Safety—Emerging Public-Private Approaches: A Perspective for Local, State, and Federal Government Leaders*, by Noel Greis and Monica Nogueira.²⁵ However, absent congressional support and a consensus for action by key stakeholders, little progress has been made according to a 2017 report by GAO—in part because the U.S. food safety system never envisioned the regulation or coordination of global production and supply chains.²⁶ In June 2018, the Trump Administration's government reorganization plan included a proposal to create a single food safety agency.²⁷

Development of New Tools to Support Collaborative Initiatives

As collaborative networks evolved in different policy domains, supporting technologies and network models evolved in parallel to support their growth. Technologies that support collaborative networks include:

- **Social Media Tools:** The evolution of a range of electronic tools, especially over the past decade, has dramatically lowered the “friction” of operating in collaborative networks. These tools include shared networks, shared data, video chat, and mobile devices. Together, they have helped lower the communication and coordination challenges endemic with the operation of interpersonal and highly dispersed collaborative networks. As noted in Chapter Five, the pervasive use of social media in individuals' private lives has led to the rapid adoption of these tools in the work place. A study by Greg Treverton, *New Tools for Collaboration: The Experience of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, describes how tools created for social media have been adapted for use in the Intelligence Community to foster greater collaboration in operational analyses and analytic processes. As examples, he writes: “An Intellipedia wiki is continuously updated with a timeline and links to various teams, portals and documents. *eChirp*, a variant of Twitter, is used to broadcast quick updates. GlobalScene is crowdsourcing, spontaneously relating, discovering and discussing across the hidden realms of the U.S. Intelligence Community.”²⁸ He observes that these collaborative tools contribute to greater productivity, but still have “a long way to go” in terms of broader adoption across the community, in part because organizational cultures do not provide incentives for collaboration.

Similarly, in a 2016 report, *The Social Intranet: Insights on Managing and Sharing Knowledge Internally*, Ines Mergel examines the use of “social

intranets” in several agencies (also discussed in Chapter Five).²⁹ Social intranets are “in-house social networks that use technologies—such as automated newsfeeds, wikis, chats, or blogs—to create engagement opportunities among employees.” Mergel found that social intranets can create broader communities within agencies. One manager she interviewed said “The real key was to increase the ability for people to find each other...And to have expertise emerge that wasn’t explicit in the job description of that person.”³⁰ For example, the State Department’s Corridor initiative, launched in 2010, allowed a globally dispersed staff to quickly share information about events that might not be communicated as readily through the more traditional formal diplomatic cables. The platform “supports the creation of online communities to publish information and connect with employees across the department,” she notes.³¹

- **Communities of Practice as a Tool:** Another tool for collaborative networks is “communities of practice,” designed around common areas of interest rather than an event. In a 2003 report, *Communities of Practice: A New Tool for Government Managers*, William Snyder and Xavier Briggs wrote “Communities of practice provide a social context for building and sharing ideas and experiences together, and for getting help from colleagues to put them into practice.”³² In an example from the late 1990s, they describe how the Boost4Kids community of practice was formed as a pilot initiative to demonstrate the value of collaborative networks. This community focused on improving results for kids, such as school readiness, health insurance, and better nutrition. Network participants included not only a range of federal agencies, but also a number of foundations and nonprofits. Thirteen localities pioneered the community, and each brought state, local, and nonprofit partners to the table, as well. Each locality also developed a “performance partnership” with a federal agency champion to help measure results and cut red tape. Nascent electronic tools included GIS maps, electronic “universal” program applications for families within the localities, and access to best practices on ways to enhance school readiness. The network model was originally a hub-and-spoke design that brokered assistance from various federal agencies, but eventually evolved to a peer-to-peer network based on community-wide conference calls that linked all participants together. Though participants found value in the network, it disbanded in the early 2000s after federal sponsorship waned.
- **Stewardship Contracting as a Tool:** Cassandra Moseley wrote a 2010 report, *Strategies for Supporting Frontline Collaboration: Lessons from Stewardship Contracting*, on the use of stewardship contracting as a tool to support frontline collaboration, specifically in ecosystem management of forest lands and watersheds.³³ Stewardship contracting involves a set of legal authorities granted to the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to contract and partner with outside entities “to perform restoration work and create local community benefit,” accord-

ing to Moseley. The traditional contracting approach was “an adversarial system that rewarded inexpensive rather than high quality work.”³⁴ The new approach allowed timber harvesting in ways that reduced fire hazards, and the revenues from that timber could be reinvested within the local community to pay for other restoration activities developed by the community in conjunction with the Forest Service and BLM. This approach allowed experimentation with new strategies and resulted in bringing “additional financial and technical resources to the collaborative from non-federal entities.”

These and other examples of collaborative networks show that, as governance strategies, they were beneficial and made a difference in their respective policy arenas—and that the various supporting tools have lowered barriers to using the network approach. However, in most cases, these networks could not sustain themselves over the long run because of the difficulties with working in a collaborative environment—especially in the context of the traditional and self-sustaining hierarchical model. In the 2010s, efforts were undertaken to address some of the common challenges to creating and sustaining collaboration-based initiatives.

Identifying Challenges to Institutionalization

The wide range of experimentation in multiple policy arenas in the 1990s and early 2000s surfaced institutional, cultural, political, and other challenges to the use of collaborative approaches. These challenges were explored by Janet Popp and her colleagues in a literature review of studies on collaborative networks in their 2014 report discussed earlier. These challenges can be grouped into three categories:

- Institutional, organizational, and governance challenges
- Cultural and staff challenges
- Political, accountability, and measurement challenges

Institutional, Organizational, and Governance Challenges

With government traditionally organized along bureaucratic lines of authority, sharing authority and responsibility across program or organizational boundaries is counter-intuitive. In addition, statutory constraints reinforce agency and program boundaries, thereby discouraging sharing and working collaboratively—and reinforcing organizational autonomy. Furthermore, there are often clashes in culture and “institutional logics.” For example, the food safety approach used in the 1990s by the Food and Drug Administration was scientific and pathogen-based, while the Department of Agriculture’s traditional approach to meat inspection was based on the use of visual “poke-and-sniff” to detect diseased carcasses.

In addition, bottom-up collaborative efforts are often seen as undermining the authority of a hierarchical system. In addition, the bottom-up efforts can

be viewed as lacking the legitimacy to act. Furthermore, bottom-up efforts are administratively difficult for staff to work across boundaries and administrative systems. For example, how are employees' performance to be appraised if they work on-site at another agency? What about paying travel and training expenses? How is accountability defined? Finally, using a collaborative approach is time-consuming and requires patient consensus building to develop a shared commitment to common purposes, goals and approaches.

Cultural and Staff Challenges

Members of a collaborative initiative often lack experience working across organizational boundaries, and leadership within a network requires different styles than in a hierarchical organization. Typically, individual incentives and rewards are recognized in hierarchical, not horizontal, systems. Managers successful in hierarchical systems know how to compete for resources for their own stovepipe. In addition, they are recognized and rewarded within their own professional circles, not across disciplines or organizational cultures. Those involved in a collaborative network can find themselves isolated from their hierarchical peers and feel their career opportunities may be jeopardized by working in a collaborative environment. Yet, some entrepreneurial managers are so committed to a mission that they take these risks. For example, the leadership cadre within the BPHC, described earlier, undertook such an initiative. However, these types of networks are often driven by individual personalities and lack resilience if they lose key network participants—as was the case with the BPHC.

Political, Accountability, and Measurement Challenges

The traditional agency- and program-based hierarchical structure can dictate the distribution of how power, influence, dollars, and accountability is held. Competition is a natural trait in the political sphere; however, it can present a stumbling block in collaborative ventures. Accountability can raise problems in a collaborative network because it is often not clear to whom a network is accountable, especially in an emergent network that forms informally at first and then grows. Also, the diffusion of accountability can lead to “free riders” whose organizations benefit but do not contribute to the work of the network. For example, the early stages of the 2013 cross-agency priority goal for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math—to collaborate around improving educational instruction approaches across about 200 different programs in 13 different agencies—found participants meeting in many subcommittees but with little accountability to accomplish anything. In later years, greater visibility to top-level government leaders and clearer measures of long-term outcomes led to strengthened accountability for action.³⁵

These and other challenges combine to make it difficult to sustain the use of a network approach over time, but there have been lessons learned about

reducing “coordination fatigue” and costs—mainly by developing an appropriate governance structure, meaningful measures of progress, and a network culture that reinforces good behavior.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION: OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO THE USE OF NETWORKS

Collaborative networks tend to be institutionally fragile, as seen in some examples presented earlier that were initially successful but disbanded over time. They depend heavily on the development of interpersonal trust between stakeholders, higher-level executive champions to provide a sense of legitimacy, and the availability of network leaders who are skilled in managing across boundaries and can serve as neutral brokers and facilitators rather than as more traditional top-down “strong leaders.” Networking is hard work and time-consuming because of the coordination and transaction costs imposed on the network’s leaders and participants. In fact, Bryson and his colleagues observe that “collaboration is not an easy answer to hard problems but a hard answer to hard problems.”³⁶

Still, collaborative networks can effectively address key public issues in a wide range of policy domains. As a result, efforts have been taken to reduce challenges and improve the chances for the sustainability of networked approaches. In recent years, progress has been made in three areas: (1) enhancing organizational capacity to act via the use of networks, (2) enhancing staff capacity to work in networks, and (3) developing a capacity to measure and assess the progress of networked initiatives. Probably the most prominent marker for the move to institutionalize the use of collaborative networks was the passage of the GPRA Modernization Act in 2010, which advanced progress in each of these three areas.

Enhancing Organizational Capabilities to Act

As noted earlier, there are many institutional, organizational, and governance challenges to creating and sustaining the use of collaborative networks to solve public problems. However, in the past decade, a number of new statutory and administrative capabilities have appeared.

New Statutory Authority

When the effectiveness of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) was revisited in 2010 by Congress and the Administration, it expanded to include provisions that encouraged cross-agency collaboration around common priorities. The GPRA Modernization Act provided statutory

authority to create a small handful of Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) Goals, designate goal leaders, and publicly report on their progress. In a 2017 study, *Cross-Agency Collaboration: A Case Study of Cross-Agency Priority Goals*, John Kamensky concluded that demonstrable progress occurred across the board: “The actions taken within each of the CAP Goals have resulted in increased performance and results in several areas that, in a number of cases, had previously demonstrated little to no progress. For example, past efforts to coordinate permitting and review processes between agencies lagged until this initiative was designated as a CAP Goal.”³⁷

The Trump Administration continued this effort by releasing its own set of cross-agency priority goals in March 2018. This was seen as a sign of continuity of commitment to using the process of cross-agency goals to manage multi-agency collaborative efforts. For example, one of the new priority goals involves improved coordination of infrastructure permitting and review processes. This Infrastructure Permitting and Review CAP Goal supports a major Administration priority – increasing investments in public infrastructure – by creating a central coordination point for 35 statutory review and permitting processes across 18 federal agencies.

In addition to the overarching statutory authority for CAP Goals, there are other statutory authorizations for collaborative approaches. For example, the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requires the federal Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services to collaborate on an ongoing basis around implementation. The law’s requirements involving interagency collaboration include “issuing regulations, developing a common performance system, and overseeing state planning.” Interestingly, GAO assessed the progress in implementing this program, using as assessment criteria seven leading practices that can enhance and sustain federal collaborative efforts.³⁸ Having such assessment criteria is also an encouraging step toward institutionalization.

New Governance Institutions

In addition to statutory authorities provided by the new law, parallel developments contributed to greater institutionalization and sustainability of the use of collaborative networks that involved advances in technology, processes, people, and structures.

For example, a number of organizational structures have evolved over the past decade to support various collaborative initiatives. Over the past two decades, Congress has mandated the establishment of cross-agency councils for the leaders of financial management, technology, personnel, and acquisition. The General Services Administration (GSA) staffs these various councils, in addition to the President’s Management Council comprised of the chief operating officers (generally the deputy secretaries) of the major departments and agencies. Together, these councils serve as a “network of networks” of the federal government. Other supportive elements include:

- A federal governmentwide online electronic sharing platform, the MAX Community, engages more than 150,000 federal employees at the operational level so they can work with colleagues in other agencies more readily than through traditional channels.
- GSA's Technology Transformation Service continues efforts to provide facilitation, training, and coordination, and serves as a catalyst for cross-agency collaborative efforts. It shares best practices and helps nascent organic networks navigate legal and other barriers to communities of practice.
- The U.S. Digital Service provides cutting-edge technology support to agencies, often by partnering with agency staffs to jointly develop solutions for high-profile technology challenges.
- Collaborative capacities have evolved and innovated at the agency level, such as the Department of Health and Human Services' innovation office, the IDEA Lab.

New Administrative Routines

The implementation of the GPRA Modernization Act led to a series of new administrative processes being put into place that provided both legitimacy for the use of collaborative networks and a degree of institutional stability. The law mandated the creation of Cross-Agency Priority Goals, led by a designated goal leader. While piloting this new approach before fully implementing it, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) found greater strength in designating at least two co-goal leaders—one with policy authority, often out of OMB or the White House, and one with agency-level authority, often a deputy secretary. OMB also found that having a small support staff and a small fund to support individual goals was critical to ensuring day-to-day attention to the development and operation of the network of agencies involved in implementing a goal. And, having small amounts of seed funding helped get individual goals off to a quicker start than if goal leaders had to wait for funding to flow from participating agencies via different accounts.

The other important routine was the requirement that cross-agency goal leaders conduct quarterly progress reviews and post their progress and next steps on the [performance.gov](https://www.performance.gov) website. This ensured an ongoing rhythm and focal point for goal teams to continue meeting, and to engage senior government officials in helping address barriers the teams could not solve themselves.

Enhanced Staff Capacity

A second set of developments over the past decade involved building greater capacity for leaders, managers, and participants to operate in networks.

Developing Network Leadership Skills

GAO has forcefully articulated the importance of investing in the development of effective collaborative leadership. GAO noted in a 2010 report on national security threats that “no single federal agency had the ability to address these threats alone” and that there are barriers to agencies collaborating to address threats. GAO observed: “One barrier stems from gaps in the knowledge and skills national security professionals need to work across agency lines” and that interagency training and other professional development may “help bridge such gaps by enhancing mutual trust and understanding among personnel from different organizations.”³⁹

Two reports examined the competencies needed by senior executives for network leadership. Interestingly, a 2012 survey of federal career executives, *Collaboration Across Boundaries: Insights and Tips from Senior Federal Executives*, by Rosemary O’Leary and Catherine Gerard, found that executives themselves felt the most important attributes for their success were interpersonal and group process skills—not policy or technical expertise.⁴⁰ A 2013 report, *Developing Senior Executive Capabilities to Address National Priorities*, by Bruce Barkley, recommends creating “a small, high-level cadre of cross-agency executives,” drawn from the existing ranks of career senior executives, to take on large cross-agency priority initiatives. He also offered a set of competencies as key attributes that such executives should have for success in this newly defined role.⁴¹

In 2014, President Obama committed to a White House leadership development program for a select group of promising career managers that reflected some of the recommendations offered by Barkley. That year-long program launched in 2015 and continues today to provide developmental experiences for a select group working on governmentwide, cross-agency initiatives.

Developing Network Participant Skills

In addition to overall leadership skills, there is a need for a greater understanding of roles and behaviors among lower-level managers and members of networks. Brinton Milward and Keith Provan wrote *A Manager’s Guide to Choosing and Using Collaborative Networks* in 2006. They found that managers of a collaborative effort have to rely on trust and reciprocity rather than hierarchical chains of command. They observed that “There are five different tasks that lead to effective network management” and that these include roles where they have dual responsibilities and roles for management of a network but also management *in* a network. These include management of:

- accountability, such as determining who is responsible for which outcomes
- legitimacy, such as attracting positive publicity and new members
- conflict, such as development of mechanisms for conflict and dispute resolution

- design (or governance structure), including when a structure should be changed based on participant needs
- commitment, which includes ensuring support of network goals goes beyond a single person in the organization

Having such a framework for understanding roles and responsibilities provides an essential step in developing the right skills and attributes for network leaders.⁴²

New Capacities to Measure and Assess Progress

In addition to developing different models for organizing networks, a number of assessment tools have evolved to address accountability and measurement challenges associated with the use of networks. One of the more prominent is the use of a technique called “social network analysis.” Evelien Otte and Ronald Rousseau wrote in 2002 that social network analysis is an analytic approach for investigating social structures within organizations, such as who is linked in terms of informal working relationships. Visual maps show the social structures and networks of people or things and the strength of their ties with each other. This form of analysis helps sociologists as well as network managers to identify “nodes” within networks of key individuals.⁴³

In addition to the statutory and administrative capabilities to support collaborative networks described above, a number of parallel developments are essential to the longer-term sustainability of networks. These involve developing capacities to both assess the effectiveness of networks and assure their accountability to the public and taxpayers. Traditional evaluation and audit tools are insufficient because of their complexity. Why is this? Barbara Romzek and Jeannette Blackmar, in a 2012 article, write: “Social service networks operate within a tangled web of bilateral and multilateral ties that encompass multiple vertical and horizontal accountability structures reflecting both formal and informal accountability relationships at the organizational and individual levels.” They go on to say: “Accountability arrangements in networks present special concerns because of the potential for accountability to get ‘lost in the cracks of horizontal and hybrid governance’.”⁴⁴

In a specific network case, Christopher Koliba, Asim Zia, and Russell Mills examined the emergency management network response to Hurricane Katrina and concluded that an accountability model for such a network would need to address three sets of relationships:

- democratic (elected representatives, citizens, and the legal system)
- market (owners and consumers)
- administrative (bureaucratic, professional, and collaborative)⁴⁵

This level of complexity in an evaluation has, to date, been beyond what most evaluators and auditors have considered. So, how does one measure

performance in networks? Romzek proposes an informal approach: that participants in networks hold each other jointly accountable. This may work in certain circumstances, but in a strongly hierarchical political system such as in the U.S., that answer does not suffice. Chris Silva writes that participants and stakeholders in a network have varying perspectives on and values about what constitutes network effectiveness. These perspectives range from individual participants in a network, the organizations to which they belong and their stakeholders, and external stakeholders—political leaders and the community at large. He says that evaluating the effectiveness of a network needs to take all these perspectives into account, in addition to the specific outcomes intended—such as reducing human trafficking or water pollution.⁴⁶

In undertaking such an evaluation, Koliba, in a 2011 article, suggests the use of three different methodological approaches:⁴⁷

- **Comparative case study analysis** would be “a systematic way to identify and describe performance management systems within complex, inter-jurisdictional networks.” It also discusses the role of federal agencies in building the capacity for such systems (for example, using traffic congestion management efforts in Minnesota, as discussed earlier, as a model).
- **Social network analysis** would be used to “analyze the relationship between the kinds of network configurations” (for example, using emergency management response plans in different regions of the country as a case study).
- **Complex adaptive systems approach** would be used to evaluate network performance (for example, using the deliberative processes developed to improve healthcare delivery networks as a case study).⁴⁸

Developing these approaches and using them will provide assurances to policy makers that sustaining collaborative governance approaches, in parallel to the traditional hierarchical forms of governing, is an appropriate investment of their political capital.

LESSONS LEARNED

Based on observations over the past twenty years, most effective collaborative networks are not mandated by law in a top-down fashion, but emerge from the community affected largely bottom-up. Participants have to work collaboratively, sharing power and authority. Nevertheless, there is a role for legislative involvement. Legislation can create conditions and grant legitimacy for organizations to work in a collaborative manner, as seen in the GPRA Modernization Act’s provisions for the creation of Cross-Agency Priority Goals.

In addition to the challenges of forming, managing, and sustaining networks discussed above, several overarching lessons gleaned from two decades of observing a wide range of different collaborative networks include:

- **First, networks can be an effective tool.** When applied in the appropriate situation, with the right conditions in place, collaborative networks can be a powerful tool for solving challenges. These conditions include factors such as common goals, a willingness to share authority, and the ability to be held jointly accountable. As a result, public managers need to exhibit judgement as to when to deploy the use of networks. This was a success factor in developing the watershed collaborative networks discussed earlier.
- **Second, there is no one-size-fits-all approach or design.** Observing models of different networks in different environments is key for learning about how networks work. Networks need to be developed and applied to fit their specific context, and leaders need to build the institutional and organizational processes that can sustain cross-agency actions over time. Fortunately, as noted earlier, the 2013 report *Implementing Cross-Agency Collaboration: A Guide for Federal Managers* by Jane Fountain indicates that guiding principles have been developed, based on the experiences of pioneers in the field, that serve as useful starting points for those beginning or joining a collaborative network.⁴⁹
- **Third, involving the right kind of people is key.** Probably the most important lesson is the role of individuals in a collaborative effort. Individuals have to be willing to bring the right mindset to the table, assume good intent by fellow network members, make activities transparent to the group, and be flexible about the evolution of the network.⁵⁰ The 2012 survey of federal senior executives by O’Leary and Gerard found that executives perceived these attributes as critical success factors in their jobs.⁵¹
- **Fourth, sustainability of networks is problematic.** A consistent observation over time has been that collaborative networks often die, largely because of changes in key players, the lack of legitimacy or authority, or when partners stop contributing resources—either money or people—when priorities change. In some cases, a network is a project with a clear beginning, middle, and end. But increasingly, collaborative networks involve longer-term efforts, such as networks among veteran services or foster children service providers. Further research can determine ways to ensure sustainability for such networks. The new statutory framework may help, at least for selected, top-down networks.

“Dual operating systems” will always exist in government—both hierarchical and networked. Public managers will benefit from the mix because the complexity of governing in today’s world demands both.

LOOKING FORWARD

All of government will not suddenly transition to collaborative networks. And this model is not appropriate for everything that government does. As in the private sector, there will continue to be “dual operating systems,” with traditional hierarchies and collaborative networks operating side by side.⁵²

But, as the prevalence of collaborative governance increases, the use of “collaborative platforms” will grow as part of the broader family of collaborative network models. The platform concept is not new and has been widely adopted in the private sector. Businesses such as Uber, AirBnB, and Facebook all have a platform-based business model. Currently, platform models in the public sector are more prevalent at the state and local levels, and in other countries, than in the U.S. federal government. They seem more sustainable than some other forms of networks.

What is meant by “platform?” Chris Ansell and Allison Gash wrote in 2018: “...collaborative platforms are defined as organizations or programs with dedicated competencies and resources for facilitating the creation, adaptation and success of multiple or ongoing collaborative projects or networks.”⁵³ They also noted that collaborative platforms “specialize in facilitating, enabling, and to some degree regulating ‘many-to-many’ collaborative relationships.” More effective platforms do not mandate participation, but rather catalyze and facilitate voluntary efforts.

Ansell and Gash found that a platform's two key characteristics are to provide “a framework upon which and through which other activities may be organized,” and relative stability over time that is easily reconfigured to respond to changes in demand and the broader environment. The use of platforms may mitigate in ensuring the sustainability of networks by capturing information on progress, knowledge, and work products. The use of a platform may also allow networks to scale and more quickly pivot in response to external shocks, such as funding cuts or the loss of a critical stakeholder.

In a 2008 report, *Integrating Service Delivery Across Levels of Government: Case Studies of Canada and Other Countries*, Jeffrey Roy and John Langford describe how other countries have adopted digital platforms to improve the delivery of services to citizens. They wrote that public services are “traditionally delivered by a plethora of government agencies via programs that are not connected to each other.” They found a global movement to be more citizen-centric in the design and delivery of services using a network approach that relies on the use of digital platforms. This is being done in countries such as Canada, Belgium, Denmark, and Australia.⁵⁴

At the U.S. federal level, this approach is not yet widely used in citizen interactions. However, the federal government has committed to the use of “enterprise platforms” for internal services, which is more about integrating services onto a common platform than using a voluntary collaborative networking approach. Examples include the move to shared services for human

resources and payroll,⁵⁵ the creation of the Defense Health Agency that is a new platform for providing healthcare services such as pharmaceutical support across military services,⁵⁶ and the Department of Homeland Security's development of a multiagency operations center.⁵⁷

As state and local citizen services platforms multiply and gain experience in delivering integrated services in the coming years, this model will likely be adopted more widely at the federal level as well.

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