

Implementing Cross-Agency Collaboration: A Guide for Federal Managers

By Jane Fountain

Federal agencies and academics have long discussed the importance of cross-agency collaboration. But recent changes in law and advances in technology have led to a new environment that makes cross-agency management far more achievable. The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 requires the development of government-wide priority goals and greater coordination among agencies. This article provides useful insights into how the government can proceed in creating effective cross-agency collaborations that can improve outcomes significantly.

The passage of the Modernization Act recognizes contemporary political realities. First, complex policy problems, such as export promotion, disaster preparedness, and food safety, cannot be addressed by a single agency. Second, economic constraints make it increasingly problematic to continue spending on redundant and overlapping programs, services, and systems. Third, collaboration across agencies allows the federal government to streamline, simplify, and improve policy making and implementation. Collaboration has the potential to:

- Save money
- Simplify government for citizens and business
- Make public managers more productive

The basic message of the guide is this: Interagency collaboration is sustainable if, and only if, managers operate strategically within their institutional environments and develop two types of cross-agency collaboration:

Collaboration through people: Relationship skills must be developed for effective managers and teams. Team-building skills are those used by managers willing and able to work across jurisdictional boundaries to develop effective professional relationships and cohesive working groups. Skills needed by effective managers include active listening, fairness, and respect—qualities that produce trust in a cross-agency collaborative initiative. In cross-boundary teams, managers build informal relationships outside regular

hierarchical channels. Teams function well when productive communities based on trust and professional experience form around a problem, project, or practice.

Collaboration through processes: In addition to effective managers and effective teams, cross-agency collaborative initiatives need effective organizational processes which include a focus on strategy, operations, systems, and their management. Effective organizational processes demand an organizational skill set that emphasizes rigor and clarity in setting goals, designing systems, building in milestones, attracting resources, and framing an organization that lies across agency boundaries.

Public managers effective at cross-agency collaboration need to use both their relationship skills and organizational structures strategically, working within their institutional constraints. The lessons reported here bring together a wide range of practical research and more than two decades of studying cross-boundary relationships and working with government managers in the U.S. and other countries. This guide provides a comprehensive approach to cross-agency collaboration. It is not enough for a manager to develop interpersonal skills of persuasion or negotiation. Nor is it enough for a manager to focus exclusively on organizational processes such as performance and measurement.

Managers who concentrate exclusively on passing new laws and budgets will miss other key dimensions of cross-agency collaboration. Management advice and research on collaborative governance, networked governance, joined-up governance, and more abound. Some advice emphasizes individual leadership skills in developing collaboration. Other studies emphasize building networks for innovation. Still others focus on social media and technologies that should somehow make self-organization possible. And others stress performance management with an emphasis on clear goals, measures, and accountability. Cross-agency collaboration demands all of these skills and more.

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Collaboration through People— Relationship Skills for Effective Managers

Key attributes, skills, and practices can be used by managers to promote successful collaboration across agencies. The critical message is this: effective managers working across agencies must use interpersonal and team-level skills, while simultaneously working with others to develop rigorous management processes and systems robust enough to be sustained across formal bureaucratic boundaries.

Strong interpersonal skills are important, but they are not sufficient in themselves. Rigorous performance management and other processes are critical, but they fail when relationship skills are neglected. Building trust does not mean that rigorous systems are not needed. But rigorous systems underperform when managers don't trust one another's authority, expertise, and reliability. So we first discuss the skill set of the collaborative manager, the key dimensions of effective teams, and the underlying elements of collaboration across boundaries: trust, norms, and networks.

The Collaborative Manager

Collaboration depends critically on the interpersonal skills of individual managers. Successful cross-agency collaborations always involve policy entrepreneurs with skill at facilitation and brokering among individuals and agencies with different perspectives and interests. Some researchers suggest that the selection of public managers with such skills is critical to the success of networked organizational projects. Other studies recommend that organizations foster the formation of “collaborative pairs” by linking key individual brokers across agencies. In building interagency capacity, individual incompatibilities among managers translate to structural weakness as processes are distorted.

The skills and processes that make agencies successful are similar to those that make cross-agency collaborations successful. The key difference is the need to design and

manage across rather than within jurisdictional boundaries and operate without the formal authority present in hierarchical relationships. Managers who are effective across boundaries use the big picture, framing, persuasion, negotiation, and other dimensions of influence to set direction, gain commitments, build trust, and motivate and coordinate others outside their direct chain of command.

Characteristics of an Effective Collaborative Manager

- Good interpersonal skills
- Builds strong professional relationships
- Builds trust
- Fairness
- Flexibility
- Impartiality
- Sees the big picture
- Creates shared meaning
- Sets direction
- Propensity to envision new ways of operating
- Framing problems for joint problem-solving
- Empowerment
- Brokering
- Persuasion
- Negotiation
- Active listening
- Motivation
- Facilitation
- Sharing
- Open communications
- Empathy
- Conflict resolution
- Networking
- Creativity
- Innovation

Source: Jane Fountain

The director of a successful, large cross-agency initiative describes his management style as the conductor model. Far from the stereotype of the charismatic leader, this executive has a background in electrical engineering and transportation logistics with a preference for giving the limelight to others. Like musicians in a symphony, his staff and partners must all be reading from the same sheet of music, while their artistic expression is encouraged.

Collaboration through Processes— Enhancing Cross-Agency Capability

The design of cross-agency collaboration should flow from a clear, compelling statement of mission and goals; and a strategy that engages key stakeholders. There are seven organizational processes that foster cross-agency collaboration.

Process 1: Setting Significant Goals

Clear, important goals energize and focus public managers. Managers are more likely to identify with and commit to a collaboration that has clear and significant goals. In fact, many cross-agency initiatives have stalled or failed because managers could not (or would not) reach fundamental agreement on goals even though a policy issue of importance—for example, interoperability among first responders or authentication processes in the federal government—formed the original impetus for the cross-agency group. The goal or mission of the cross-agency collaboration must be important enough to justify the effort required to develop and manage cross-agency processes.

Process 2: Specifying Roles and Responsibilities

Organizations exist to accomplish tasks that individuals alone cannot accomplish. To do so, organizations use division of labor to exploit gains from specialization of functions and tasks. Interagency arrangements, by extension, exist to accomplish tasks that single agencies alone cannot accomplish. They, too, use division of labor and functional specialization. This means dividing agencies by roles and responsibilities and assigning tasks associated with those roles. Role clarity and formalization make clear to those in the interagency arrangement what needs to get done and who will do it.

Among the key structures public managers must build are those for governance, task performance, and communication. Successful cross-agency collaboration is built through effective development and management of a variety of governance and coordinating groups, typically including a steering committee—an advisory group composed of technical or specialized staff such as legal or financial experts,

Key Organizational Processes for Enhancing Cross-Agency Capability

- Setting significant goals
- Specifying roles and responsibilities
- Formalizing agreements
- Developing shared operations
- Obtaining adequate resources
- Creating effective communication channels
- Adapting through shared learning

external stakeholder groups, and cross-departmental work teams.

Process 3: Formalizing Agreements

Cross-agency partners should articulate and formalize roles, tasks, and responsibilities, including decision-making authority. In some cases, they should develop formalized agreements that specify the objectives, roles, and reporting relationships at the outset of the project. Interagency networks in government often use more formal instruments than those in business, not because there is less trust among the individuals, but because the culture and, in fact, institutionalized requirements for oversight and accountability are more formalized.

Observations drawn from business alliances show that formalization in successful network partnerships tends to decrease over time, but this is not the case for government alliances—yet another example of the need to translate private business best practices carefully to mesh with the institutional environment of government. Emphasis on goals and objectives, milestones, and deliverables is required so that partners understand their role, deliverables, and the timeline and pace of the initiative.

Process 4: Developing Shared Operations

Strong project and operations management is critical to keep the moving parts of multiple agency groups aligned. Managers of successful interagency projects report that their work groups are well organized and meet frequently. Whether they use a stat meeting model based on CompStat and CitiStat, or other models, the challenges are similar:

- What are the problems we have to solve?
- What is our plan?

- How do we build a plan of action that will accommodate all relevant agencies and programs?
- What do our customers need from us?
- What are the milestones and deadlines?
- How will shared resources and budgets work?

Public managers must often find the minimal common areas on which to begin to build shared operations. This shared space, even if small at the outset, provides a basis for further development.

Process 5: Obtaining Adequate Resources

Adequate budget and staff are critical to interagency collaboration. During the initial stages of a collaboration, staff and budget constraints may present considerable challenges to agencies and managers as they try to regularize resource flows and develop equitable shared arrangements. For example, when Congress passed the E-Government Act of 2002, they authorized substantial funding for e-government initiatives to build cross-agency capacity, but much of the funding was never appropriated, and managers of cross-agency projects required considerable resourcefulness and perseverance to find and share funding across agency budgets.

Managers with experience working across agencies stress the importance of developing a shared budget with norms of equity to ensure sustainability. Ensure sufficient resources to carry out goals. If budgetary resources are constrained, develop an equitable formula for a shared budget or an equitable fee-for-service structure that reflects actual use.

Process 6: Creating Effective Communication Channels

Effective communication channels are critical for prospective interagency partners. Communication is not simply a means to build group coherence and identity; it is a vital tool of coordination, particularly when network actors are building new capacity and lack established operating

routines and coordination. In addition, establishing a culture of open communication helps to ensure that promising ideas, emergent problems, and varying perspectives receive open, frank discussion in an environment where differences are respected and conflicting views can be reconciled to produce workable solutions.

Process 7: Adapting through Shared Learning

Interagency collaboration implies that partners across agencies can engage in shared learning. Initial alliance conditions and interorganizational design either “facilitate or hamper the partners’ learning about the environment of their alliance, how to work together to accomplish the alliance task, their respective skills, and each other’s goals.” During the Bush administration, public managers involved in the Grants Center of Excellence (COE) developed a consultative partnership strategy meant to leverage differences across partner agencies in terms of grants management practices into innovations for the entire partnership network. ■

TO LEARN MORE

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- In .pdf (Acrobat) format at the Center website, www.businessofgovernment.org
- By e-mailing the Center at businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com
- By calling the Center at (202) 551-9342