

# Overcoming Barriers to Court and Community Collaborations

Madelynn Herman and Don Reinhart

Whether you're involved in a problem-solving court collaboration, a project to increase access to justice or on a local committee or task force, collaborations can be a challenge with many barriers to overcome. While we can't change each and every obstacle overnight, we can maneuver through the barriers placed in our path. The following information provides a sampling of barriers and a few tips on how to overcome them.

**Lack of resources (internal or external).** Resources can include both time and money. Not all collaborative projects require additional resources to accomplish goals and objectives. Always explore what your collaborating partners can bring to the table. If you are funded for a collaborative project; make sure that you have the capacity to implement the project both in human resources and technology.

**Judicial ethics concerns.** Judicial ethical concerns for participating in collaborative efforts are real and can cause reluctance to participate. Most states have language in their judicial rules of ethics that permit judges to participate in extra-judicial activities. Including representatives from both prosecution and defense helps to resolve due process and procedural fairness concerns of a problem-solving court initiative. Agreement on additional team protocols may also be necessary to have a court representative at the table.

**Fear of compromising the mission of your organization.** Know and understand your organization's mission and objectives versus those of the external team players as well. Consider carefully how you will articulate your agency's mission and how it fits into the goals and objectives of the collaborative project. Success is defined differently depending on the mission of an organization. The focus of the collaborative effort should be on system-wide outcomes and improvements.

**Lack of role clarity (internal or external).** Once you volunteer or are appointed to participate or lead a collaborative project, make sure that you understand the magnitude of your project and that you are supported by your superiors before accepting the responsibility. At the start of your collaborative efforts, have a frank discussion about both individual and agency roles and responsibilities, including any ethical limitations of your individual role in the collaborative effort. Make sure you understand what is involved and what expectations others will have of you. Consider articulating roles and responsibilities in a MOU or MOA.

**Power differences between partners.** Understanding the hierarchy of community, state, and federal agencies versus your own organization is important, but also understand that in an outside partnering project; each agency, including yours is considered equal in the decision-making process.

**Different levels of commitment between partners.** Each partner involved in your collaborative project will come to the table with various levels of commitment. As a collaborative team member or leader, respecting these variances will eventually result in a very dedicated member. The use of MOU's can help clarify and sustain commitments over the duration of the collaborative effort.

**Cultural barriers to collaborations.** Barriers such as the use of legal jargon that is not understood by all must be considered and addressed. Including a diverse membership to your collaborative team is important and will bring different perspectives to problem-solving.

**Lack of leadership support for collaborative effort(s).** Make sure that your peers and immediate supervisor are always brought up-to-speed as to developing national and local trends that affect the collaborative project you have undertaken. Have frank discussions about the purpose of the collaboration, why it is important, its benefits, what the collaboration expects to achieve, and how the collaborative efforts fit the organizations' mission. Collaboration can only begin when leaders understand the need to work together.

**Lack of trust between team members or stakeholders.** Always be aware that by undertaking a collaborative project, the first order of business should be to develop a sense of rapport with each and every member of the team. This personal effort over time should help to establish an aura of trust and reliability among the team members. To build trust, have frequent and open communication, contribute equally to goals and objectives, work through conflict, have decision making protocols, give credit where credit is due, do what you say you are going to do, and create a culture of accountability.

**Lack of information sharing and/or poor or strained communication between potential partners.** One of the most difficult challenges in overcoming barriers to collaboration is to convince individuals on the external team as well as those within your organization to share information. The 'Silo' mentality is one that refuses to share information for the better good of the organization or project. As leader, you must devise ways to 'bring' individuals to believe in the team concept. Information sharing can be increased by creating a non-threatening environment to share ideas and creating opportunities to network.

**Confidentiality and security issues.** Always remember "what goes on in Vegas, stays in Vegas". Although this term is humorous, it makes good sense to abide by its inference. Always know that the team's activity has a specific purpose for its existence; respect its privacy issues, and confidentiality of sensitive information.

**The structure and culture of the organization.** From an internal perspective, to enforce the concept of collaborative teams or partnering within your organization; impress your HR director to consider using the following terminology in all job descriptions: a) Collaborates with peers as to team projects both internal and external; and b) Participates in information sharing activities such as workgroups or committees, inter-agency task forces or collaborative efforts, communities of practice, or cross-functional teams.

**Unsure of who to partner or collaborate with, or the benefits of the potential collaborative effort.** Get to know your 'in-house' neighbors. Reach out to understand their particular role/responsibility in the organization or community so that you might be able to collaborate with them in the near or far term. Know who the key players or stakeholders are so you are ready when opportunities to collaborate are presented.

Collaborations and partnerships can be a challenge with many barriers to overcome. Even though there is no single approach to a successful collaboration; collaborative efforts can go a long way to achieve goals that result in the establishment or enhancement of programs or services and the development of new problem-solving approaches.

January 2015