Structured Conversations for
Building Effective Collaboration

With decreasing resources and increased need in human services, we are doing more of our work in groups made up of members from diverse organizations. We know that we get better results when we collaborate in order to pool our collective resources for mutual benefit. While inter-disciplinary groups bring together a variety of ideas, experiences, bases of knowledge and resources, those same differences can also lead to miscommunication and conflict that can serverely compromise the effectiveness of the group and the success of their efforts. Intentionally and collectively building a collaborative structure from the start can set a group up to take advantage of diversity, anticipate conflict as an opportunity for growth, and engage in true innovation.

Effective collaboration requires the intentional balancing of both "Task" and "Maintenance". Too often groups form and immediately begin working on their *task*. Very little thought or energy is allocated to creating structures and processes that will support the ability of the group to work together to successfully reach their goals and/or complete their tasks. *Maintenance* conversations focus on **how** the group is going to accomplish the work as a prelude to focusing on **what** the group will accomplish.

The following conversations represent a process for groups to use as they form. Any group that is building or addressing it's collaborative structure should engage in the first **four** conversations. The last **three** are suggested for groups where there are circumstances that render those conversations important. The structured conversations to build collaboration include:

1. Articulating shared purpose
2. Defining roles, responsibilities, and relationships
3. Determining shared expectations
4. Deciding upon structures for internal interactions
5. Creating a shared language
6. Defining values that guide the work
7. Creating external connections

Each of these conversations could be held as they relate to the work and also as they relate to the group. Both are important. Be clear about which one the group is discussing.

Conversations every group should have

Clarity of Purpose

When collaborating there is a belief that we can achieve better results by working together on an issue than by working on the same issue independently. The first task of any group is to clarify the basic purpose for choosing to work interdependently.

The pursuit of mutual purpose is best achieved when groups are organized to engage in shared learning. Shared learning is a fundamental function of any group and should serve as the foundation upon which clarification and pursuit of a group's purposes is derived.

Considerations when articulating shared purpose:
- What function does this group serve?
- Why is that function important?

Clarification of Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships

Many groups struggle when they are not clear about the roles and responsibilities of the members. Recognizing the importance of relationships, highly effective groups focus on:

- Connection before content – what do we know about each other's skills, interests, background, challenges and or constraints?;

- Regular Interaction – how do we remain connected with each other through the ebb and flow of the work?;

- Building Trust and Safety – do we have an environment in which we are able to talk about how we are functioning both independently and collectively?; and

- Balancing Task and Maintenance as it relates to how the members of the group identify their strengths and contributions to the collective whole – is everyone able to offer what they have of value to the group regardless of title or formal role?.

Shared Expectations

When well-meaning people find themselves challenged and perhaps avoiding difficult and contentious issues, there is often a simple and powerful explanation; they haven't created the shared expectations or the group norms and processes for working together. When they attempt to work out their differences, they often do so in ways that are incomplete or unproductive, leaving them frustrated, alienated from one another, and

resentful. They are, then, more likely to avoid confrontation the next time a contentious issue arises.

Effective groups take the time to articulate and clarify their "shared expectations" and implement strategies for evaluating their performance against these shared parameters. They hold themselves accountable to these commitments in order to build and maintain trust and safety.

Questions to consider when developing shared expectations:
- How will our group make decisions?
- What will happen if things don't progress like we think they will?
- What can we expect when tension or conflict emerges?

Internal Interactions

In effective groups, participation is high, investment in the outcome is high and information flow is dynamic and appropriate. In less effective groups, participation is low or conflicted, energy to implement is low, and information flow is blocked. Specifically, characteristics of effective groups include:

- Information flows freely and appropriately between members

- Collaborative communication is used to identify individual and shared interests

- Members communicate to support shared learning and mutual purpose

- Energy and commitment to the outcome remain high

Thoughtfully developing realistic structures and mechanisms to promote the exchange of information both in and between meetings is critical initial work for an interdisciplinary group. It takes time to create opportunities for dialogue. The investment of this time up front will support the creating of a dynamic, complex and sustainable collaborative group.

Addition conversations to consider having

Shared Language

For groups that are comprised of multiple disciplines or are made up of newcomers and more seasoned members, developing a shared language is important and often overlooked. Language, both in the choice of words and their definitions, has a tremendous impact on the ability of a group of people to work together. When bringing together a diverse group to engage in shared learning and achieve a mutual purpose, many of the members will likely have their own language to describe outcomes, interventions and activities and the overall goals of the work and the group. Bringing partners together to work collaboratively requires the adoption and use of shared terms with shared meanings.

Components of the conversation about language:
- What are the terms that we will use when describing the work of this group?
- What is the definition adopted by the group?

Shared Values

Many of the systems and services in heath and human services are guided by values. There are professional values, values held in fields such as public health or medicine, and values that are part of accepted frameworks like systems of care in mental health. Values can become such an accepted part of a system or organization that they can lose their definition. Everyone can list them, but individuals do not often feel the need to define them when creating a collaborative group. As the work is implemented, the values are not then applied with any level of consistency. When the values are not applied consistently by individuals of a group, questions of alignment to the values can arise causing tension, conflict and a break down in the group.

Questions to consider:
- What are the values that we share in this work?
- What does it look like if we are operating in alignment with those values?

External Interactions

As groups take on their own identity and seek loyalty from individual members, it is important to seek information and feedback from external sources. Groups with effective external interactions exhibit the following:

- Appropriate communication and exchange of information between the

group and the external system or context in which the group operates;

- Boundaries and expectations between the group and external system(s) that are clearly defined so that the integrity of the group is respected; and

- An ability to consider external pressures, feedback and new information.

It is also important for the group to determine what kind of unified message should be made public.

Conclusion

Creating an effective, collaborative group takes time, thought and continuing care. Groups who engage in these structured conversations build a solid foundation for shared learning which allows them to harness the benefits of the diversity of their members. As members rely upon norms and process for the work of the group, they build relationships of trust with each other and trust in the group. As the work evolves, these conversations also provide a structure to which groups can return to maintain the effectiveness of their group as they focus on completing their tasks.