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What We Mean by Working Together

by Harriett Moyer*

Talk of networks, alliances, partnerships, coalitions, and collaboration are common when people meet to get something done in their community. Often the terms are used interchangeably or conjure up vague ideas of people working together. Few people have a sense of exactness about the terms. Clarification of such terms is useful in that it helps set common expectations and understanding in a group trying to accomplish a task in their community. The following is based on the work of Teresa Hogue at the Oregon Center for Community Leadership.¹

Networking - - Major purposes of networking are to dialogue and reach common understanding, serve as a clearinghouse for information, and help create a base of support. A network is non-hierarchical in structure with loose flexible links. Roles in a network are loosely defined and community action is the primary link among members. Process in a network is characterized by low-key leadership, minimal decision-making, little conflict, and informal communication.

Alliance - - Purposes of forming an alliance include matching needs and providing coordination on a project, limiting duplication of services, and ensuring that tasks are done. The basic structure of an alliance is a central body of people acting as a communication hub. Links among the people are semi-formal and advisory; roles are somewhat defined. The group leverages activity. Process in an alliance is characterized by facilitative leaders, complex decision-making, some conflict, and formal communications within the central group.

Partnership - - Sharing resources to address common issues and merging resource bases to create something new are the main purposes of a partnership. In terms of structure, the central body of people consists of decision-makers. Roles are defined and links formalized. The group develops new resources and a joint budget. Process is carried out by autonomous leadership but the focus is on the issue. Group decision-making is done in the

central and subgroups. Communication is frequent and clear.

Coalition - - Central purposes of a coalition are to share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems. Commitment to the coalition should be for a minimum of three years. Structurally, all members are involved in the decision-making. Roles and time are defined; links are formalized with a written agreement. A coalition also develops new resources and a joint budget. Process is done through shared leadership. Decision-making is formal with all members and communication is common and prioritized.

Collaboration - - Purpose of a collaboration is to accomplish a shared vision and impact benchmarks. It is geared to build an interdependent system to address issues and opportunities. Structural characteristics include: use of consensus in shared decision-making; formalized roles, time and evaluation; formal links written into work assignments. Process involves high levels of leadership, high trust level, and high productivity. Ideas and decisions are equally shared and there is highly developed communication.

The above defines five levels of relationships ranging from the relatively simple network to the very complex collaboration. Keeping the differences in mind among the various levels will help provide focus and clarity among groups and individuals when undertaking a new community project.

¹"Community Based Collaboration - Wellness Multiplied 1994, " Teresa Hogue, Oregon Center for Community Leadership in "Collaboration Framework", The National Network for Collaboration, 203 Ag Admin Bldg., 2120 Fyffe Rd., Columbus, Ohio, 1995, p. 3.

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