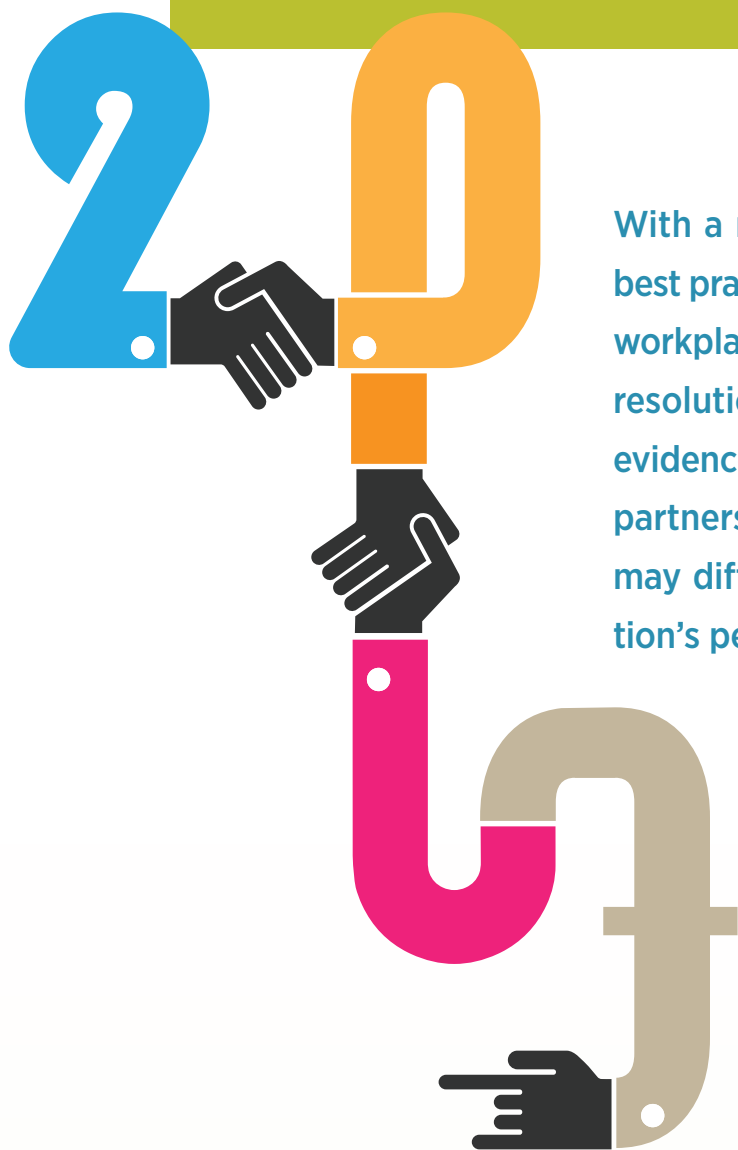


PARTNERING &

By Wendy Rafkin and Andrew Gray



With a new year upon us it is the perfect time to renew best practices for success in creating synergy for important workplace goals. One practical and achievable New Year's resolution toward this goal is to follow a consistent and evidence-based approach to developing collaborations or partnerships. While their basic strategies and structures may differ, both are good ways to optimize your institution's performance and field presence.

Partnerships: One definition of a partnership is an interaction in which partners have a shared and mutual goal, contribute essentially equivalent skills and resources toward that goal, and have shared ownership of the effort. Partnerships are most commonly between two or three parties interested in distributing the effort and resource burden collectively. Everyone benefits from the shared knowledge and expertise gained through a successful partnership. There are many ways to structure a good partnership, but each has basic responsibilities maintaining a productive and progressive effort. Keys to a good partnership include: 1) regular face-to-face meetings so that each of the parties has equal opportunity to provide its perspectives and preferences; 2) when an issue does arise, remember that each party has the same goal in mind — to help quickly and constructively resolve a solution; and 3) shared responsibility in setbacks as well as in successes. Regardless of whether short- or long-term, partnerships do more than just seek goals and products—they reflect on your institution in the larger landscape of the field.

Collaborations: In comparison, collaborations are often comprised of different groups of stakeholders, each having a specialized skillset or insight, and each standing to gain a different benefit from the interaction. Collaborations are most commonly undertaken by multiple parties, each of which contributes a distinct resource and expertise. As with partnerships, there are many ways to structure a good collaboration. Qualities of a good collaboration include: 1) mutual recognition of the special expertise each party brings to the table; 2) the ability to connect the progress dots as they

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arise from each of the distinct facets of the effort; and 3) seizing value-added opportunities to go beyond the initial goals when mutually agreed, and as unforeseen synergies emerge. Similar to partnerships, collaborations can go a long way toward project success and institutional prowess.

Here are some milestones that all partnerships and collaborations should pursue to afford the best chance to harvest meaningful results over the course of the program or project. The first stage is the **assessment** of whether a partnership or collaboration is the best structure to achieve the goal. It is key to identify potential partner(s) or collaborators as early as possible in the assessment period for mutually beneficial relations and address objectives of each organization. Consider time, logistics, and resources, as well as any need for special expertise in this assessment phase. Next, develop the basic **framework** to help organize specific factors in moving together toward the goal. Then, put your concept to the test by **modeling**. This kind of reality-check simulation helps stakeholders think through the project or program together, and aids in identifying and avoiding pitfalls that are not foreseen by any single party. Perhaps most importantly, develop a decision-making and communication process to anticipate issues and help guide efficient resolutions. This can be done with regular meetings for review, conference calls, or online communication. Better to be prepared than to be surprised.

Any successful and effective interaction involves mutual decision-making and teamwork to identify or invent best approaches to address issues or concerns. Likewise, it is important to define any unique or special relationships that may be needed to promote efficient progress. Of course a strategic plan, vision, and timeline are integral components of any program or project. Once you have identified the nature of the relationship, it will be easier to approach groups that share an interest in your mission and project outcomes. In the same way, explicitly considering institutional priorities is a must. For example, define the benefits that will be gained by each interest in the interaction. Importantly, progress toward a goal must be specific and measurable. Establish metrics or benchmarks of progress, and monitor milestones frequently. Beyond any tangible fruits of the effort, never underestimate the potential for positive aspects of a successful program and the ways in which others may become excited to develop a working relationship with your organization. Partnerships and collaborations should not only reflect the goals of the respective parties, but should also highlight the importance of the goal.

Value-added benefits of collaborations and partnership are also important to consider, and include: **Networking** – increasing dialogue and common understanding amongst workers within a given party and between parties. **Communication** – be it informal or formal, regular and clear information sharing is key to successful communication. **Coordination** – naturally different people have different strengths, so identify and apply them in kind to maximize advances and minimize duplication of effort. **Cooperation** – share in efficiencies of resources to address common goals. Synergy occurs when parties merge ideas, expertise and resources as connected to

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common goals. **Leadership** – recognize the value of each individual and the greater collective effort, and address issues quickly and effectively.

While partnerships and collaborations have key differences, they share important features. Here are a few tips for success whether your aim is a partnership or collaboration:

1. Identify and agree on clear, unambiguous expectations up front—the fewer surprises the better.
2. Foster and maintain a positive outlook. Stay focused on collective priorities and team goals.
3. Assess outcomes and issues objectively to promote shared responsibility and progress to goals.
4. Structure regular communications to promote inclusivity and equitable opportunities for input.
5. Leadership should reinforce values shared by all partners and recognize collective successes.

Working together through collaborations and partnerships is not always simple or easy, and some may not yield their intended results in the end. However, when developed and managed through an inclusive and cooperative process, effective collaborations and partnerships can yield both great programmatic and institutional success, help mitigate issues or pitfalls, and raise morale for all. It may take time to develop optimal relationships, but it will be worth the effort. ■



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