



When to collaborate?



Collaboration is one form of group working relationship. It is most effective in particular circumstances and can be challenging to implement. It is not appropriate in every situation.

The challenge for individuals and organisations is determining when to use collaboration. It is **important** to assess risks and, sometimes, to choose a **simpler** approach.

The 'Farming Together Fact File 1' presented three types of group working relationships: co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration. All three approaches can be effective. However, each has different purposes and is *best* used in different situations.

Sometimes, it is sufficient to share information, expertise and referrals (co-operation). Other projects might need more efficient alignment of existing resources (co-ordination). When new or radically different resources, systems and inter-group processes and taskforces are needed, collaboration is required.

When to collaborate?

Decisions on collaboration* should be based on:

- the nature and **complexity** of the idea, issue or problem
- the **interdependency** between agencies and members
- the willingness of members and parent organisations to support **new thinking and behaviours**
- the level of collective **commitment** to change¹

What does your project need? Do the collaboration quick check below.

	<< Simple project: cooperation/coordination	Complex project: Increased need for collaboration >>>
Complexity	Few elements that can be clearly navigated	Multiple, interconnected elements difficult to define and untangle
Interdependency	One or two organisations have clear responsibility	Multiple organisations or sectors with confusing, overlapping responsibility in various jurisdictions
Support for new thinking	Objections to change of processes	Members and stakeholders are willing to change attitudes, processes and behaviours
Commitment to change	Power and resources remain with separate groups	Demonstrated willingness for radical change (sharing power/resources)

Collaboration decision factors

Level of complexity

Collaborations are formed to solve complex problems. Problems which comprise multiple, interconnected elements are hard to untangle and can defy precise definition. Such problems do not have clear solutions and cut across policy and service agencies. Consequently, they require a holistic and integrated approach.

Sense of interdependency

Collaboration is best used by organisations that recognise the need to work together. By jointly developing knowledge, skills and resources, collaborators can meet both individual and collective goals. However, organisations that share a common goal or problem don't always seek the same outcomes. Groups may have different agendas: financial security; increased profile; development of knowledge or capacity; new approaches; or expansion.

In collaboration, each participant is not just dependent but interdependent. *For example, three neighbouring beef breeders want to increase stocking rates. They consider rotational grazing and decide on a jointly hired agronomist to advise on pasture, feed budgets and rotations. A jointly-contracted fencer aims to reduce paddock size with movable electric fences. They also invest in GPS-linked plates to measure moisture. How might they share data and explore sharing freight costs and other supply chain logistics?*

The greater the interdependency, the more likely a collaborative approach is required.

Willingness to change

Collaboration is used to change existing systems or create new ones. For this to happen, members must not only share resources, but also power and authority. Participants must be willing to change their attitudes and develop new working roles and relationships.

Systemic change is risky. Group members must demonstrate 'buy-in' and legitimise change before it can occur. A commitment to sharing power and resources will help overcome resistance from organisations and stakeholders. Managers should carefully assess the capacity to change and adapt before establishing a collaboration.

Level of collective commitment

After reaching shared agreement on actions, collaborators must provide the resources necessary for ideas or solutions to be successful. Collective commitment to the new systems, processes, roles and relationships sustain the collaboration.²

1. Gray, B. (1989). Finding common ground for multi-party problems, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Keast, R, Brown, K, Mandell, MP and Woolcock, G. (2004). Network Structures: Working Differently. Public Administration Review 64(3):363-371.
2. Mandell, MP. (1994). Managing Interdependencies through program structures. American Review of Public Administration 24(91):99-121.

*Collaboration content originally developed by Dr Robyn Keast. Adapted for Farming Together by Dr Cathy Byrne.



'Farming Together' aims to:

- generate knowledge and skills about collaboration, co-operatives and collective strategies for farm businesses
- provide support to collaborative and co-operative approaches and demonstrate the economic benefits
- facilitate knowledge and resource sharing
- form regional networks

W: farmingtogether.com.au

E: info@farmingtogether.com.au

Ph: 1800 00 55 55

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