



Are we ready to collaborate?

Collaborations can bring cross-sector and inter-organisation benefits but they can also create complexity for member organisations. New challenges need to be weighed against business-as-usual. Forming a collaboration does not necessarily solve all the problems.

Shifting the way your organisation functions is not easy. In effective collaborations, groups yield some autonomy, share power and resources, and work for the collective good. The viability and credibility of your group rests on understanding what to look for in a collaboration, assessing your organisation's tolerance for risk and participation and determining your level of commitment and capacity.

Before committing to collaborate ...

☞ Ask your members

Do we need this collaboration?

Consider whether collaboration is the *best* approach for your identified challenges. Might the likely benefits be achieved without joining a larger group? Setting up and operating a collaboration, for collective goals and purposes, must also contribute to your individual goals. Will this help you now or for the future?

Are we willing to change?

If your organisation is resistant to (or unlikely to create) change, early examination is needed before committing. Is the resistance able to be overcome? Real change involves work and policy adjustments, institutional relationship review and funding. Change takes time and money. Reflect with your leaders on whether change can be achieved *and* sustained. What is the feasibility of committing your structures, management, stakeholders and resources to long-term collaborative action?

Do we have capability and capacity?

Collaborating requires investment of labour and effort, as well as funds and materials. Can your organisation contribute enough? These resources could be used within your own group. Further, the returns from collaborative investment could take time. Committing for the long-term is a considerable step, so professional advice on investment returns is often worthwhile during the planning stages.



"We all thought we were ready. We tried to create a new structure to share power ... but being held accountable as a new entity for compliance procedures, we had to communicate across old boundaries and think in an entirely new way. Scrutiny from others' external stakeholders was difficult – it made us more robust as a group ... eventually!"

– Regional wine label team member

Do we have the skills to collaborate?

Different skills should be sought within your team and from outside if necessary.

- Assess communications, relationship building, facilitating, negotiating and project management skills, along with cross-group engagement experience. All cross-organisation and cross-sector workers will need these.
- Assess collaborative skills in each organisation, including previous collaborative efforts and experience on new initiatives.

Do we have the time and energy?

- New relationships and collaborative activities take time; current relationships need sustaining.
- Time is a crucial resource. Parent organisation needs are weighed alongside the collaborations'. Is time spent by individuals and the organisation worth the investment?
- A high-level of intellectual energy can be required from collaborating representatives – this can reduce their focus on day-to-day activities. Are you able to be flexible? Will you commit appropriate human resources?

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Australian Government
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and Water Resources



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Considerations prior to collaborating

Can we delegate decision making?

Representatives of collaborating organisations need enough authority to make decisions. Parent organisation support is critical, so the level of power conferred to the representative must be clearly understood. Organisations need to accept that representatives are accountable to the collaboration as well as the parent organisation.

☞ This dual responsibility can create tension.



Competing priorities and expectations ought to be clearly stated. Organisations' representatives need explicit support from parent organisations to work outside an organisation's boundaries. The authority of the collaborating representative should be commensurate with the issue – the higher the stakes, the greater the authority. Further, the representative's authority in the parent organisation is likely to indicate the organisation's level of commitment to the collaboration's goals. What messages are you creating by your choice of representatives?

Are we ready for scrutiny?

Time spent at the collaborating table often leads to critical examination of each party's values, interests talents and drawbacks. Groups must be prepared for frank exchange, to foster better collective outcomes. Representatives should not be tasked with merely portraying the parent organisation as favourable, to score points, or 'fence-sitting', to gain the benefits of collective knowledge without contributing. Such actions would undermine both the collaboration and the parent organisations' reputation.

Collaboration Checklist Is your group ready to collaborate?

- Is it necessary?
- Will we be better-off over time?
- Are we open and able to change?
- Can we sustain the commitment?
- Have we the time and capacity to work collaboratively?
- Do we have skills to contribute?
- Are we aware of the investment needed?
- Can we delegate decision making to appropriate representatives?
- Are we ready for external scrutiny?
- Are we doing this for the collective goals and the right reasons?
- Are we ready to take accountability for our contribution and for our collective agreements?

Are we ready to be accountable?

The collaborating expectation is that participants genuinely strive for the collective goals. Organisations need to consider whether they have the structures and processes in place to support and sustain a collaboration. In addition, parent organisations must be able to defend their participation in the group effort when things get tough. Beyond a willingness for internal change, collaborators may need to show evidence of their efforts to other collaborators, and argue the case for decisions made in the collaboration projects. Parent organisation priorities and commitments must be balanced alongside those of the collaboration, but governance issues such as accounting records, evidence based reasons for decisions and legal compliance issues must be committed to by each participating organisation.

*Original collaboration content developed by Dr Robyn Keast. Adapted for Farming Together by Dr Cathy Byrne.

"Our collaborating farmers are developing a new brand for a holistic management process and we are working with an international organisation to launch in Australia. We developed a common email list, to make sure everyone had access to updates. We also organised regular online and face-to-face workshops and discussions, to get us all on the same page, but also to raise the level of understanding of the accountability requirements for all participants. Taking responsibility was helped by identifying members who had had some experience and others who were willing to learn, to share the load.

– Tony Hill, Holisitic Management

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