



## Technical Assistance Partnership

Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program  
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### Collaboration Best Practices: TA Tool

#### Process Must Be Fair, Inclusive and Open = Credibility

- People are smart. They not only listen to what we say, they observe our behaviors, and it will become obvious to the collaborating group if the collaboration is not fair.
- Inclusivity means not only inviting people to participate, but also ensuring a situation in which they are comfortable participating. This can mean changing the time, location, and structure of the meeting to make sure that all partners can and will participate. This may include child care, transportation, stipends, orientation, and training.
- “Input does not equal involvement”. Some believe if they get input from people but do not actually engage them in decision making and strategy development, they will feel a part of the SOC, not so. Some may not include certain groups or individuals in the actual decision-making process or strategy development because it is difficult to include them. To be truly inclusive, we must actively involve partners in brainstorming, strategy development, decision making and evaluation.

#### Everyone Must Be Well Informed!

- Often in meetings, some people have all the information, some people have some of the information, and some have no information. To be effective as a collaborating group, it is essential that everyone have the same information. This can be a difficult task. It is important to have clearly scheduled meeting times and places, reminders, notes to all from past meetings and current participant rosters. Some partners may require an extra phone call/update/orientation/training. Whatever it takes, we need to get all of the collaborating partners to the same level of knowledge of the information, allowing for full and authentic participation by all.

#### Safeguard Your Process

- Once you’ve determined a decision-making and meeting process and who will be involved and how people are invited, you will only want to make changes as a group process. It is every partner’s responsibility to safeguard the groups established process and keep that process consistent until which time the group determines they want to change the process. This adherence to the group decision making increases credibility of the group work.
- Decisions for the group cannot be made outside the group’s agreed decision-making structure. In other words, people do not want to come to a meeting and find out that the decisions they previously made as a group have been undone or changed by someone or some group during a hallway conversation or exclusive phone call. Once a decision-making

process has been determined by the group, it should not be changed unless the whole group changes it, establishes it as a change, and it is fully documented and communicated to all.

### **Create a Widely Held Vision**

- In a top-down, for-profit corporation or organization, leaders can create their own vision, and employees must adopt that vision. In a collaborative effort, the vision must be created by all. Although that sounds difficult to do, the challenge is in determining methods on how to do the task, not whether or not to do it in a collaborative fashion.
- Who should be involved in creating the vision? Everyone who is needed to reach the vision: maybe 60 people, 80 people, or even 120 people.
- With so many people that need to be included in some way, the creation of the vision can be difficult to facilitate, but there are ways to manage it. With large groups, you can gather and consolidate the information, and send it back out to people for their input. Keeping the information in draft as long as possible allows everyone an opportunity to review it, and participate in the creation of the vision. Although the process may be slow and cumbersome, it is necessary if you want everyone to participate in achieving the vision.

### **Use Strong Neutral Facilitation**

- It is very difficult to be a partner in a partnership and also facilitate; as a partner you want to have your input and be able to come down on one side or the other of an issue. It is not good for the group to have an individual play both roles as facilitator and partner.
- For the large partnership meetings, some communities use a strong, neutral facilitator in the beginning until the group has come up with a strong, ingrained process. This facilitator should not only have strong skills as a facilitator, but also understand systems of care principles, governance, and practices.

### **For Greater Gains in the Future, Be Prepared to Give Up Something**

- Successful partnerships require partners to seek more than their own individual gain and strive for the greater good of the whole. Although everyone in the partnership should ultimately gain, we must also be willing to change ourselves. Part of collaboration is adjusting our perspective and how we do our work.
- We can all agree change is good, and may think that “if they would just change things would be better”, but we must also change ourselves by doing things differently, and even possibly giving something up.
- When the partnership begins, everyone comes with their own individual picket fences, and the goal is to create a single picket fence around the entire partnership. During this process of moving the fences, sometimes we are giving a little more, and sometimes we are gaining a little more, but in the end everyone gains.

### **Suspend Your Agenda**

- When we come together to work, every person, and every group has their own goals and aspirations and it's hard to put those aside. However, we all need to suspend our individual or agency agenda for the greater good of the group. If a partner's goals are not ultimately being met by the collaboration's results, maybe they are not in the right place for now. During the actual work of the collaboration, we need to suspend our individual agendas, and focus on the

greater good of building a community system of care that will better serve our children, youth, and families.

### **Overcome Mistrust and Skepticism**

- Anytime we're working with others, there is a natural tendency to be skeptical of change or something new. As groups get together to share and work, there is automatically mistrust and skepticism. Each individual must make a conscious effort to put aside the mistrust and skepticism to see how the collaboration efforts can bear fruit. Sometimes as a group we need to spend time discussing this concept, and addressing it as a group so that we can work to overcome the natural mistrust and skepticism early on.

### **Use "Open/Warm" Communication with Partners**

- This work requires us to be open, which means issues cannot be kept under the table. People need to express what's important to them and share their feelings on issues. Often, "open" means direct, and stern and loud, but we've learned that if someone is overly assertive or aggressive, walls are built and doors are closed because of this open/cold method of delivery.
- We recommend the group learns to communicate in a warm way: instead of saying, "you're wrong, let me tell you how it should be" (an open/cold presentation), it's better to say, "let me share my perspective, I have a different take because of my experience" (open/warm presentation). Open/warm keeps the walls down, and people hear the open direct information when it's delivered in a warm way.
- Although meetings may become heated when discussing difficult topics, it is best if we realize we are all on the same team working to accomplish the same thing. The enemy is outside our ranks, often rooted in ignorance, lack of information, or misguided intentions. We must try to come together as group, not fight amongst ourselves but uniting to fight the bigger foe outside of our team.

### **Strike a Balance Between Process and Action**

- Process-oriented people may recommend we discuss things more fully, have another meeting, and ensure everybody is involved in the discussion.
- Action-oriented people think about decisions before the meeting and come to the meeting with their answer. They like to move quickly to a decision.
- Collaborations involve a wide range of people styles from very process oriented to very action oriented, which leads to frustration on both sides. Process-oriented people get frustrated with action-oriented people because they feel like they're rushing to decisions and not getting enough input; action-oriented people get frustrated with process-oriented people because they feel there is little forward momentum.
- We frequently refer to a speed chart in meetings. Even if we find a middle ground, it's still frustrating to both ends of the spectrum. We need to acknowledge this in our meetings, find a balance to take care of the needs of both types of people, and be aware that this frustration exists. Some people prefer to move through change at 95 MPH, while others prefer to move at 5 MPH. As a group, we move at a compromise of 45 MPH which frustrates both ends of the continuum. At times, we move at 95 MPH and at times 5 MPH, further frustrating some partners.

### **Understand “The Time It Takes”**

- Collaboration is messy. You may have to cover material multiple times and in multiple places because there might be new partners or people who couldn't attend a previous meeting. Working in groups takes more time and more effort; scheduling meetings between broad groups of people is difficult, making group decisions in a timely manner is hard. One of the biggest complaints against collaboration is that it takes too long, and people think “I could go into my office and make a decision or call up four people and make a decision quickly.”
- True collaboration requires (a great deal of) time. Often it's not just about making the decision, it's about getting the involvement, buy in, and creativity of the group. People have different perspectives and ideas on situations, and the decision-making process builds the support of the partners and yields better outcomes in the long run.

### **Draft Strong “New Type” Leaders**

- “New Type” leaders don't need to always be in the forefront or limelight. They're always present when good things are happening, just not always in the front of the room.
- “New Type” leaders help make things happen. They get people involved and act as facilitators. They're always looking for leadership skills in others and they're very collaborative in nature; when credit is to be given, they give it to all participants, no matter how small their role. They know each person is essential to the success of the effort.

### **Spread Decision Making Throughout the System and Have a Broad Governance Structure**

- Governance and decision making in systems of care is less about oversight of the effort as it is about getting partners to be involved in the decision making. People who are part of the collaboration for the long haul are those who feel like they have built the system because they have been involved in some part of decision making.
- Not everyone needs to be involved in every decision, but creating several governance components and workgroups with the idea of making sure there is a place for everyone to participate in decision making. When partners are engaged in decision making and building the system, they will fight to protect the collaborative effort and sustain it over time. When people start to act on an individual basis, we see partnership drop off. People may show up, but if they don't get engaged in substantive work, they won't stay very long. It is essential to authentic collaboration to involve all partners in some level of brainstorming ideas, strategy development, decision making, and evaluation.