10 Keys to Success in Collaborative Practices

To introduce and initiate collaborative practices in your state agency, you may want to use these "Keys to Success" as a checklist.

*Created by Kitchen Table Democracy (formerly the Policy Consensus Initiative)

1. **Find champions among leaders who can help achieve high level buy-in and support.**

   New government programs tend to thrive only when they have support from top-level leaders. The agency head and/or other high level leaders need to champion the use of collaborative practices. It is especially helpful when leaders are involved visibly. This may include attending training sessions, tracking and reporting progress, and rewarding individual and group accomplishments. These and other conspicuous efforts by top officials can be very effective in promoting a program.

2. **Employ a program manager or coordinator who can provide skillful strategic direction.**

   Introducing a new program and practice in an agency is a time consuming endeavor. Doing it effectively requires assigning someone the responsibility. Designating a staff person to serve as a Dispute Resolution Coordinator will be extremely beneficial. "DR Coordinators" perform a range of functions-from providing leadership and obtaining agency support to assessing needs, addressing barriers, and assisting with program development. To carry out their various functions, DR Coordinators must have some knowledge of, and experience with, dispute resolution and collaborative problem solving. Also important are characteristics such as leadership, communication skills, knowledge of the agency, and ready access to agency leaders.

3. **Provide continuous education and training to build capacity**

   While the concepts underlying collaboration and conflict resolution are not extremely complicated, they are new for many people. You will want to employ outreach, education, and training to obtain support among potential users, agency officials, and

leaders. Educational activities range from general efforts to inform
agency personnel and others about the existence of the program, to skill building.

4. **Use a collaborative approach, involving staff and users to develop your program**

   Collaboration involves identifying agency leaders, staff, and users at the earliest possible opportunity and involving them in conceptualizing a new program. State agencies that use these processes have learned that gaining input from internal and external stakeholders is critical when introducing a new program. By giving stakeholders opportunities to provide input and feedback, and to have a sense that their input makes a difference, you will help reduce resistance and enhance the probability of success.

5. **Follow the four basic steps to initiating a program:**

   Assessment: This is the initial step in developing a plan. You need to conduct an analysis of both the structure and mission of the agency as well as its current system for managing problems or disputes. You should also examine the barriers that must be overcome, and the opportunities, incentives, and potential sources of support.

   Planning and Program Design: Think big but start small! Determine the most pressing needs and which process or processes are appropriate for addressing those needs. The plan you develop may be comprehensive, with a number of phases to fully implement it, or it may focus on developing just one particular program. In either case, it should spell out the goals, objectives, and steps the agency will take in implementing the program or project.

   Demonstration: A pilot project allows your agency to begin on a small scale in order to see how well the program will work. The agency can learn lessons from the pilot, correct any problems that arise, and then implement the program on a larger, more permanent scale.

   Evaluation: This helps your agency determine whether the program is meeting its goals and functioning effectively. Evaluation data are useful in gaining the necessary feedback for making decisions about program direction, and in obtaining resources for continuing or expanding successful programs.

6. **Employ a systems approach, adopting procedures to prevent as well as resolve disputes**

A systems approach involves employing a variety of methods and procedures to change the way people handle their disputes. It requires you to look at ways to prevent disputes, and ways to assist people in resolving conflicts before they become full-blown disputes. Once the dispute has occurred, it provides a spectrum of methods to help resolve the dispute.

The components of a system for handling problems or disputes should be arranged in a low-cost to high-cost sequence. If parties are unable to reach a joint decision through negotiations, then agency heads, hearing officers, arbitration panels, or courts may become the designated decision-makers. Appeals from that decision may be made to a higher review body. The design of a system should permit skipping steps when a judgment is needed quickly. It may also be desirable to provide a way to return to earlier steps, in the event that parties discover negotiation may be a better alternative.

Another important component of a systems approach is education and training. This helps build staff skills, enabling them to deal with issues differently and adopt and use new procedures and practices for handling conflicts and disputes.

7. **Create incentives and remove disincentives to the use of collaborative practices**

The existing incentives and disincentives for using collaboration in an agency will affect the ultimate success or failure of any program. You will need to develop strategies to take advantage of existing incentives, and to overcome disincentives. Disincentives are likely to include resistance to change, lack of resources, and concerns about loss of control or power.

A number of federal and state agencies have created incentives by changing hiring and promotion practices; adding job performance rating categories for use of negotiation, collaboration and dispute resolution; and establishing awards programs. Incentives may also include complying with statutes or executive orders, saving time and resources, developing long-term solutions, and improving working relationships. Identifying and employing appropriate new incentives is crucial.

8. **Develop policies and guidelines in support of the program**

   Depending upon the nature of the program, you may find it useful to formulate policies or program guidelines setting forth the agency's purpose for instituting collaborative practices. These guidelines may:

   o Declare high level agency support and gain attention within an agency and with the public it serves

   o Identify sources of delay or inefficiency in existing procedures

   o Establish implementation goals, incentives and timetables

   o Begin the process of educating agency personnel about these processes and their utility

   o Begin to change agency "culture" to encourage informal efforts to address problems and prevent and resolve conflicts.

   You may also want to establish agency policies to ensure that principles of fairness, impartiality, and quality are followed. But it is important that these policies and guidelines not be overly prescriptive about the collaborative methods themselves. The hallmark of the program should be flexibility, so that the processes serve the agency's unique mission, address the issues, and serve the parties.

9. **Ensure adequate resources to support the program**

   One of your key tasks is identifying the resources that will enable the agency to use collaborative practices successfully. Essential resources include money for personnel and services. Depending on the nature of your program, resources may be available from within your agency or from other agencies, from federal programs or grants, or from public-private partnerships with other stakeholders who will benefit from the program. Leaders and DR Coordinators should not hesitate to get help implementing a program, from key personnel within their own agencies, from counterparts at other agencies, or from other states with similar programs.

10. **Reward and celebrate accomplishments**
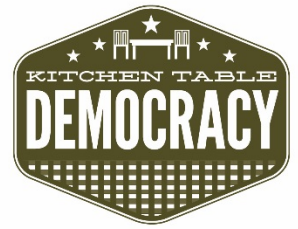
Studies of successful projects universally rely on a strategy of "Do something - Celebrate - Do something - Celebrate again!" When an implementation effort is designed with immediate doable steps that are publicized or celebrated, it creates positive momentum that helps keep people engaged.

Recognition and reward for personal accomplishments are also important motivators. When agency leaders play a role in recognizing the accomplishments of those working to implement these programs, it can signal to other employees that the activities have value.

For example, the Office of Dispute Resolution in Massachusetts makes two awards annually to state employees. One is the John Dunlop award for promoting use of ADR in a state agency. The other is the MODR award for resolving a public policy dispute.

The Conflict Resolution Consortium in Florida presents an annual leadership award-in memory of a highly regarded public servant-to both public and private sector leaders who have championed consensus building and problem solving on public issues.