

## Beginning Your Collaboration: Tips for a Safe and Satisfying Journey

Think of a workgroup as a collection of people taking a journey together. As it plans its trip, members need to figure out where they're going, how they will get there, and what route to take.

- A workgroup's destination is its **vision**, dictating where the group wants to go.
- A workgroup's vehicle is its **structure and procedures**. Its structure is the body; its procedures the engine. Members travelling in a broken-down vehicle (e.g., full of holes in the floor) are likely to "fall out," or leave the group. And if the engine begins to fail, the journey is likely to slow down or come to a screeching halt.
- Lastly, the path or route a group takes is its **goals and activities**—how members will work together to get where they need to go.

Building on this analogy, here are some tips for ensuring a smooth and safe collaborative ride!

- **Create a shared vision.** One of the first orders of business for collaborative workgroups is to discuss and create a shared vision. If members have different ideas about the ultimate purpose of the workgroup, the team will not be motivated to work toward common goals. A shared vision unifies the workgroup and makes it easier to figure out what needs to happen to make the vision a reality.
- **Develop a well-defined structure.** Whether the group's structure is akin to a Mini Cooper or a charter bus, it's important that everyone has somewhere to *sit* (i.e., a role), and that you *make room* for new members. Elements of a well-defined structure, such as clearly defined roles and responsibilities, meetings that begin and end on time, and regular progress updates will reduce potential frustration, keep members involved, and increase member satisfaction.
- **Establish clear goals and related action steps.** If you leave for a journey without a plan (whether GPS app or paper map), you are likely to get lost, waste energy (i.e., gas), and drive many extra, unnecessary miles. Groups that don't have clearly-defined action steps connected to concrete goals can easily get "lost" in action. Busy team members whose activities are not tied to goals may be "spinning their wheels" and not actually moving the team's prevention agenda forward.

- **Promote open communication during meetings.** Create guidelines for participation or “ground rules” that support open, honest, and respectful exchanges. These serve as the “seat belts” that keep members safe, promote trust, and prevent tension and conflict among members.
- **Use clear and transparent decision-making processes.** Just as oil prevents an engine from seizing, clear and transparent decision-making processes will help to ensure your team doesn’t get mired in indecision. How the team approaches decision making is one of the first decisions it should make together!
- **Be responsive to member needs.** Like maintaining your car, so, too, must you attend to the needs of your members. Make sure that members find value in their participation—failing to do so is like driving all day and not stopping for food. One way to “feed” members is by providing trainings and in-services to build needed capacities. Another is to ensure that members can contribute in meaningful ways. Lastly, check in regularly with members to gauge their satisfaction with the group and find out if you need to do any tune-ups.
- **Build the leadership capacity of members.** This not only helps to keep members challenged and engaged, but will also contribute to the group’s sustainability. Having workgroup members who are involved in leadership roles is like having a spare tire—it ensures that your workgroup is not dependent on the involvement of a single individual to move forward.
- **Assess progress regularly.** Revisiting project goals, and associated roles and responsibilities, will help the team stay on track and avoid long detours. Keep in mind, however, that the shortest path to getting somewhere isn’t always the smoothest, or most scenic. Remember that the journey should also be fun and fulfilling. So acknowledge member contributions and celebrate your progress along the way!