How Are We Doing? Evaluating Your Collaboration

In the evaluation step of SAMHSA's Strategic Prevention Framework, prevention practitioners collect information to determine the effectiveness of their intervention(s) and then use these data to improve their future prevention efforts. Some evidence suggests that a collaboration's functioning is related to its ability to implement prevention interventions.[1,2] Therefore, evaluating the processes partners use to work together—such as how decisions are made and communicated—can help partners understand and improve the quality of their collaborations.

This tool presents some considerations for evaluating collaboration, common functions to evaluate, and examples of instruments that measure these functions.

When Does Evaluation Make Sense?

Evaluation can be a time-consuming and potentially costly process, so before diving in head first, consider the following: *What is the desired outcome of my collaboration, and will an evaluation help me reach that outcome?* Collaboration in the context of preventing substance use and misuse can take many different forms. In networking, two partners exchange information for mutual benefit; in full collaboration, responsibilities and decision-making are equally shared and institutionalized. While no single type of collaboration is "better" than another, different types of collaborations may be better suited for evaluation.

Collaborations that form for a one-time event—for example, to organize and deliver a conference—may not benefit from a systematic evaluation since it is unlikely that the collaboration will continue over time. By contrast, a collaborative group like a community prevention coalition, which comprises multiple partners, may benefit greatly from determining which elements of the collaboration's functioning need improvement. Before embarking on an evaluative process, discuss the potential value of the results—including possible negative results—on your collaboration's future.

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[1] Riggs, N. R., Nakawatase, M., & Pentz, M. A. (2008). Promoting community coalition functioning: Effects of Project STEP. *Prevention Science: The Official Journal of the Society for Prevention Research, 9(*2), 63-72. doi:10.1007/s11121-008-0088-7

[2] Brown, L. D., Feinberg, M. E., & Kan, M. L. (2012). Predicting engagement in a transition to parenthood program for couples. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 35*(1), 1-8.

What Elements of Collaboration Should You Evaluate?

Historically, evaluations of collaboration functioning have focused on elements most closely related to outcomes. Researchers and prevention practitioners alike have found that these elements can be grouped into constructs that should be considered when evaluating coalition functioning.[3,4] A few of these constructs include:

- **Leadership:** This construct often measures the degree to which the collaboration's leader seeks the input of all members of the collaboration, has the management skills to drive collaboration initiatives on a day-to-day basis, and has the interpersonal skills to keep members engaged and enthusiastic.

- **Partner Relationships:** In this construct, evaluations typically explore the group's cohesion, ability to work effectively together, and the existence of trust between members. Evidence of collaborations experiencing conflict or a lack of trust will be captured under this construct.

- **Competence:** This construct often measures the collaborative group's efficiency, decision-making processes, development and adherence to governance structures, and ability to set and meet goals.

- **Sustainability:** In collaborations where sustaining the group's activities over time is part of its purpose, this construct often evaluates the expertise of collaboration members in sustainability planning, attitudes toward continuing the group's work, and capacity to obtain funding beyond the current year.

- **Communication:** This construct often measures the quality and frequency of communication between collaboration leaders and members, and the processes established to communicate the group's activities to the public.

How Should Evaluation Data be Gathered?

Many collaborative groups will solicit the expertise of an outside evaluator to develop a measurement instrument, gather data, and provide consultation on the results. It's possible, however, to develop an appropriate instrument internally, drawing on existing tools. Below are a few examples of surveys that have been developed to evaluate collaboration functionality.

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[3] Brown, L. D., Feinberg, M. E., & Greenberg, M. T. (2010). Determinants of community coalition ability to support evidence-based programs. *Prevention Science: The Official Journal of the Society for Prevention Research, 11*(3), 287-297.

[4] Brown, L. D., Feinberg, M. E., & Greenberg, M. T. (2012). Measuring coalition functioning: Refining constructs through factor analysis. *Health Education & Behavior, 39*(4), 486-497.

- Collaboration Evaluation Worksheets: This chapter from the book *Evaluating Community Collaborations: An Overview*,[5] includes a compilation of various assessment tools (beginning on page 26) for evaluating collaborations.

- Collaboration Progress Checklist: Developed by the National Network for Collaboration, this tool measures group effectiveness across 13 constructs.

- Diagnosing the Health of Your Coalition: Developed by the Northeast Center for Healthy Communities, this tool is designed to help community coalitions—just one example of substance misuse collaborative groups—collect data on their functionality.

Additional Resources

- Granner, M. L., & Sharpe, P. A. (2004). An Inventory of Measurement Tools for Evaluating Community Coalition Characteristics and Functioning. *Health Education Research*, 19(5), 514-532.

- Perkins, D. F., Feinberg, M. E., Greenberg, M. T., Johnson, L. E., Chilenski, S. M., Mincemoyer, C. C., & Spoth, R. L. (2011). Team Factors that Predict to Sustainability Indicators for Community-Based Prevention Teams. *Evaluation And Program Planning*, 34(3), 283-291.

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[5] Backer, T. (2003). Evaluating community collaborations: An overview. In T. Backer (Ed.), *Evaluating Community Collaborations* (pp. 1-18). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.