

A Collaboration Framework for Use in Extension



It's common practice for Extension professionals to partner with other professionals and agencies to improve the lives of Mississippians. Working relationships with various educational and service organizations are necessary because a single entity cannot address the state's most pressing needs. Addressing needs such as increasing access to a healthy food supply, decreasing the unemployment rate, preventing obesity, and improving water quality and quantity—to name a few—requires collaboration between Extension and other educational and service organizations.

Collaboration

Collaboration is “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can explore constructively their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray, 1989, p. 5). Collaborations can “enable different people and organizations to support each other by leveraging, combining, and capitalizing on their complementing strengths and capabilities” (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001, p. 180).

Benefits of collaboration include these:

- provides more innovative solutions to complex issues
- reduces duplication of efforts
- brings together multiple human and financial resources
- creates higher quality programs (Marek, Brock, & Savla, 2015, p. 67)

Because of the benefits of collaboration, funding agencies have increasingly required collaboration as a condition of support. Similarly, universities and Extension administration at those universities favor collaborative approaches that meet the needs of clients (Bruns & Franz, 2015).

A Framework for Collaboration

The National Network for Collaboration created a framework to illustrate how organizations work together to bring about change (Bergstrom et al., 1995). The five-level framework is presented in **Figure 1**. The first level of a working relationship is *networking*, and the final level is *collaboration*. Please note that the word *collaboration* is in the title of the framework and is also a distinct level in the framework.

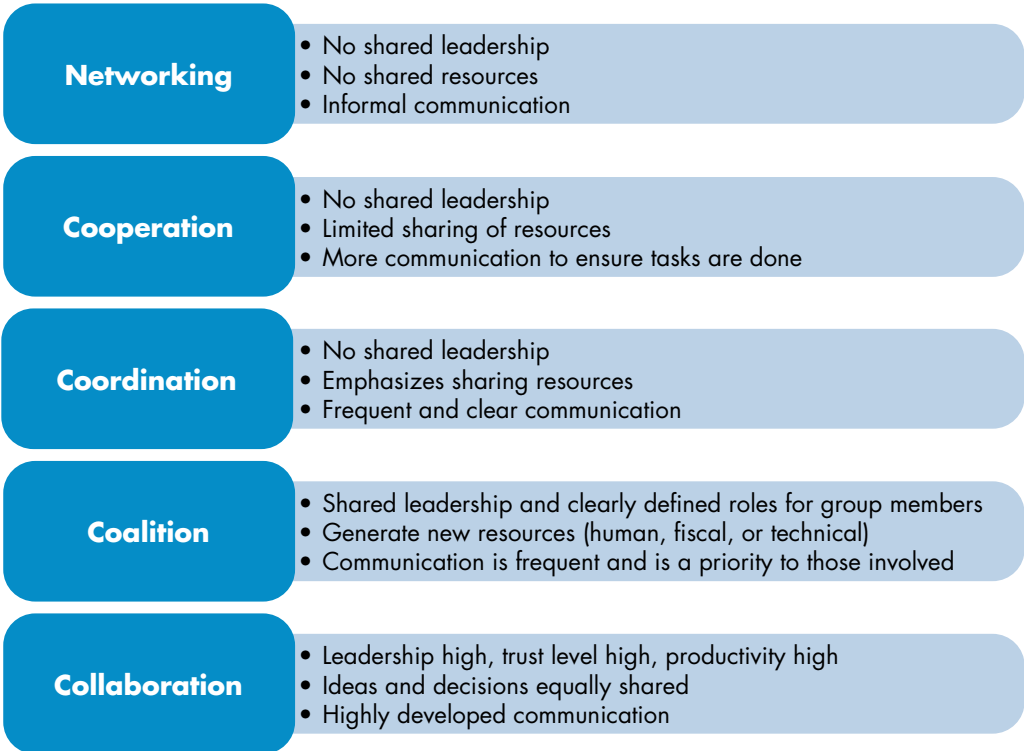


Figure 1. National Network for Collaboration Framework – Key Characteristics. Adapted from Bergstrom et al., 1995.

This framework could be helpful to Extension administrators, agents, and specialists when thinking about working relationships with various partners. It identifies factors that can promote or hinder working relationships. For example, the frequent communication

that is part of the coalition level reinforces that all partners are committed to working toward shared goals.

Table 1 gives additional information on using the framework, along with an example from MSU Extension.

Table 1. National Network for Collaboration Framework: Levels, description of relationships, and an example from Family and Consumer Sciences-related programming in MSU Extension.

Level	Description of Relationships	Example
Networking	Partners exchange ideas and share information.	An Extension professional and another agency's employees share information about programs they provide to families.
Cooperation	Partners help with referrals, provide space, distribute marketing and client education materials, and host events open to clients and community members.	An Extension professional puts program brochures in the lobby of another agency; Extension professionals provide a food demonstration at a local grocery store; a housing authority refers residents to an MSU Extension program.
Coordination	Partners have a common focus that addresses an issue or creates something new.	An Extension professional works with the local public school to increase opportunities for unstructured physical activity time/free play; an Extension professional helps an early childhood development center draft a food policy to promote healthier eating within the center.
Coalition	Partners have a longer-term commitment to joint action.	An Extension professional works with the local schools to initiate and maintain environmental changes in school lunchrooms that promote healthy food options.
Collaboration	Partners contribute to joint activities and have designated personnel who advise and make decisions about effective strategies and interventions; an interdependent system that works to address issues and opportunities.	Another state agency organizes a 90-member group to develop, implement, and evaluate health improvements in Mississippi; MSU Extension actively partners with that state agency to identify strategies that can help improve the health of state residents.

It might seem like a more intense relationship is better, but this is not always necessary for accomplishing the task at hand. Extension professionals should consider the range and functions of the various levels as they determine the most beneficial level of involvement. Different contexts might call for a specific type of working relationship. For example, a working relationship with a community agency or organization may be most effective at the level of *cooperation* if the primary purpose is to recruit participants for Extension programs. On the other hand, a working relationship with an Extension professional in another county may be most effective at the level of *collaboration* if those professionals are partnering to implement a program across multiple counties. Also, the ideal level might evolve over time as Extension professionals' needs change and/or the needs or demands of other organizations change.

Conclusions

The National Network for Collaboration Framework provides a place to start an organizational conversation about how different levels of partnership are needed at different times. Further exploration is needed to better understand barriers experienced with current working relationships, possible strategies for enhancing existing relationships, and approaches for forming new relationships.

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