



Collaboration Myths

A large obstacle to strengthening collaboration among target group, service organisation and funding body (and other stakeholders where relevant) are unrealistic assumptions about the significance and the design of collaborative work. With reference to the writings of Joan M. Roberts (2004), seven assumptions that often lead to the failure of stakeholder collaboration are presented here:

1. All those involved share the same motives, altruism in particular.
2. Conflict is undesirable in collaborations and must be avoided.
3. Power or power imbalances play no role in collaboration
4. Guiding and leading collaborations follows the same principles as guiding and leading in my organisation.
5. Organising and maintaining the collaboration requires only a small amount of coordinating effort.
6. The collaboration does not need its own structure.
7. The effort to maintain the collaboration consists simply of participating in joint meetings and information exchange.

Deconstruct the Myths!

Stakeholders' motives in health promotion and prevention are always diverse. In the case of project personnel, a frequent motive is to help others (altruism). In the case of the target group it is to receive assistance. In addition, however, other organisational and personal desires and aims of those involved are at least as important. To recognise and consider these motives is an important part of successful collaboration. Conflicts cannot be entirely avoided in collaboration. A marker of successful collaboration is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to deal with contentious topics in a way that satisfies all involved. Power is always part of the game in collaborations including a target group, service organisation and funding body. To recognise imbalances of power is a prerequisite for developing options for sharing it in the context of decision-making processes. Unrealistic assumptions about guidance and leadership do cause conflict between the funding body and the implementing service organisation. The structures of associations (NGOs) and public authorities, for example, are fundamentally different in respect to the organisational culture they enact (decision-making processes, reporting relationships, hierarchy, delegated authority, legal responsibility). There is also a variety of organisational cultures within both categories of organisations. These differences must be recognised and understood to enable successful, long-term collaboration. The need of collaborations to be coordinated is often underestimated. One commonly relies on the occasional exchange of information and does not ensure a structure that enables regular communication. In any case, it is important to observe the fact that there will be no successful collaboration without effort. Collaboration is not - as is frequently claimed - merely a question of the right "chemistry" or of chance, but rather the result of a concerted effort on behalf of all involved.

Authors: Wright/Block/Unger