How to Tell if a Collaborative Meeting is a Waste of Time: The Four Clues

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Not all collaboratives are worth the time they take - and they really do take a lot of time!

But how can we tell the good ones from the ones that are just a BOGSAT - A Bunch of Guys Sitting Around a Table? Based upon experience with dozens of collaboratives over the past decade, there are four good ways to detect a collaborative that is wasting people's time:

1. **A weak collaborative spends most of its time reporting on what agencies do, rather than what is happening to clients and the community.**
   A results orientation does not exist in all collaboratives. Many collaboratives are driven by an activities orientation - the belief that what agencies do matters, rather than whether clients and the community derive positive benefits from those actions. A good collaborative reports regularly on progress made by clients; a weak collaborative just report on "what happened last month," and focuses on what "we did" instead of what happened to the intended beneficiaries.

2. **A weak collaborative focuses mostly on the pilot project it is operating, instead of how to replicate it and take it to scale once it succeeds.**
   Operations drive out policy, which means that running a project can take up all the time and energy of some collaboratives. The longer-range issues disappear or are neglected - such issues as how caseloads need to be changed to achieve better outcomes or what outcomes we need to prove to funders to that they will be willing to replace temporary funding. Lisbeth Schorr discusses many of these issues in her review of "hidden ceiling on scale" in her book Common Purpose.

3. **A weak collaborative rarely discusses barriers to progress and what to do about them, accepting those barriers as given and unchangeable.**
   In strong collaboratives - those that are moving from just doing projects to beginning to change the rules of interagency efforts, there is an orientation to "barrier-busting" that is unmistakable. People ask, How can we change this rule that gets in our way? Instead of passively accepting that rules are not to be changed. A portion of the meeting is set aside to listen to frontline staff explain to their supervisors and policy leaders what obstacles they keep running into. At the same time, in a strong collaborative that respects what its frontline staff do, the policy leaders are accountable to report back regularly to frontline staff on how they are doing in busting those barriers.

4. **A weak collaborative assumes it is the center of things, instead of recognizing that it is merely one of several collaboratives and coalition in the community and trying to improve its "fit" with the others.**
   A common diagnostic clue that a collaborative is strong is the existence and regular updating of an inventory or matrix of several organizations and coalitions whose work may touch on that of the collaborative. In a weak collaborative, these groups are ignored or treated as "the competition." In a strong one, the question that comes up naturally is, How can our work and theirs come together for the good of the clients and the community? Bridge-building is a sign of good collaborative; wall-building suggests weakness.

For some collaboratives, simply raising these questions will be helpful - and painful. But growth and development are often painful. Staying at an arrested stage of development is not good for human beings - or for collaboratives. These questions may help us move on to the higher stages of collaborative evolution, in which collaboratives are not just meetings, but contributions to community well-being.