

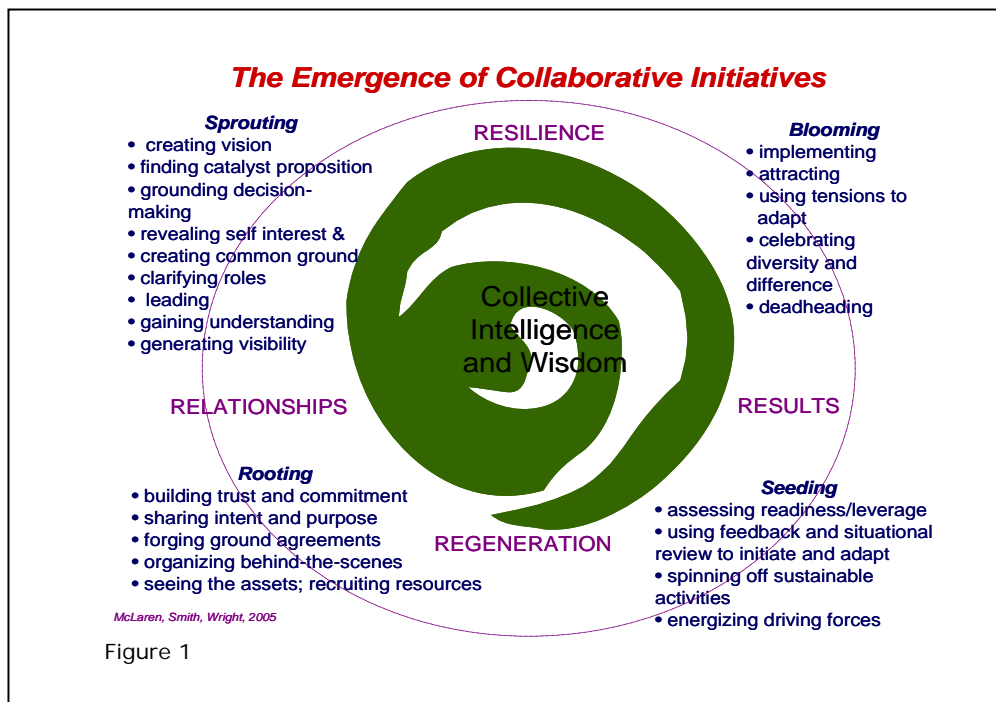


## A Birds-Eye View of How Collaborations Grow

Community and inter-organizational collaborations are being used across Canada [and throughout the world] by private, public and non-profit sector organizations to achieve goals that are bigger than any one individual or organization can achieve alone. While collaborative ventures between organizations rely on all the things that enable collaborations between individuals, there's more. To have a collaboration that engages the organizations behind the individuals, a number of other factors should be understood.

Typically, collaborations between organizations grow in a non-linear way – and it's often difficult to identify when they begin and end, and when they move from one stage of evolution to another. Figure 1, below, illustrates the evolutionary process of collaborations as a cycle of growth and development, requiring periodic renewal and re-visioning.

They tend to grow in an iterative manner – often starting by undertaking a needed project (blossoming), then going back and building some of the underpinning agreements to enable the collaboration to continue (rooting, sprouting). Over time, the purpose of the collaboration can shift (i.e. from information-sharing and coordinating to developing joint programs). The players can and do shift. As community conditions and forces driving the effort change, the speed of evolution of the collaborative may respond.





## Checklist for Inter-Organizational Collaborations

Collaborations among organizations and in communities *often grow from existing networks, but sometimes they are deliberately formed, often to achieve a specific objective. This check list is for those who are starting or in a collaboration, as you engage with the key players. It is organized using The Emergence of Collaborative Initiatives [Figure 1], as a template to help you see the collaboration in its many facets. It is also informed by the “players” in a collaboration, as depicted in Figure 2.*

### Seeding

*The “seeds” –the potential - of collaboration in a community are always present. Certain conditions in the landscape and climate provide the appropriate environment for a collaboration to take root and flourish.*

- Assessing Readiness/Leverage:** Is there a nucleus of interest, a specific need, and/or some urgency? What is the inherent and/or untapped capacity? What results are you wanting/working toward? Are there opportunities to undertake initiatives with potentially high impact and low effort?
- Energizing Driving Forces:** What forces are driving towards the same purpose? Where are they operating in the community? What is the energy level of key players like at this point? Are the driving forces strong? What processes are in place to rejuvenate and recharge?
- Feedback and Review:** What processes are in place to initiate, reflect, evaluate and use learnings to evolve?
- Spin-Offs:** What has occurred in the community environment that may have laid the foundation for collaboration? Are these intended or unintended? How are these seen and acknowledged?

### Rooting

*“Rooting” or creating the foundation for the collaboration is very important. Its main purpose is to build an agreement to move forward around a common goal. It involves clarifying purpose, getting the right people at the table, and forming relationships and understanding of each others’ way (this takes time and can’t be done at the very beginning). It is not necessary and sometimes not desirable to have all the “i’s” dotted and “t’s” crossed before moving into other stages. Indeed if too much time up-front is spent on rooting, key players can begin to feel bogged down in talk instead of action.*



- Purpose and Intent:** What purpose is bringing the collaboration together? Is it clear and compelling?
- Building Trust and Commitment:** What is the level of authentic communication and sharing between the key players? How are people expressing their self-interest? How much respect is there for each organization's unique capacity, mandate and contribution? Where is there congruence between values? Is critical communication constructive?
- Forging Ground Agreements:** What are the shared core values? How do these emerge as operating principles? What processes will ensure that this foundation is upheld in all situations?
- Engaging and Organizing:** Are the appropriate organizations at the table to achieve the purpose? How will they be engaged? Is there a willingness and capacity to act?
- Focusing on Assets:** What are the strengths, interests and assets of each key player in the collaboration? Outside? Do you have the people from within the groups and organizations at the table that can ensure that appropriate resources and from each organization are mobilized, AND that the group's plans are organized and implemented (often needs an operational person or team).

## Sprouting

*The sprouting phase introduces more momentum for action. It also brings in more structure and clarifies agreements. Many groups leave this phase and move right to the blossoming stage until they trip over something that needs attending. This can work where there's strong relationship or where there are no contextual factors that are likely to undermine the partnership.*

- Fostering Leadership:** Do you have leaders at the core of the collaboration who are articulating the purpose, vision and attract collaborators, modelling collaborative practices, brokering agreements and representing the initiative? Do you have leaders at the implementation level who can get the job done in a way that builds bridges at the same time, and can influence effectively and responsibly up and sideways as well as down?
- Vision:** Is there a powerful vision for how the system will adapt to move toward the purpose? Is it shared by all the players? How deep does the ability to articulate go within the participating organizations?
- The Catalyst Proposition:** What resources of each partner are of value to the others? Do potential benefits of collaboration outweigh the risks?



What resources, capabilities and benefits can be created by the collaboration? Are benefits equitably balanced between the participants? Has value exchange and creation depreciated? If so, to what extent?

**Revealing Self-interest and Creating Common Ground:** What are the innovations in the system that are promising? What are the current strengths? How are these recognized and nurtured? What activities are being undertaken right now to foster inter-organizational collaboration – and early wins? Are these visible and held up as models to learn from?

- **Learning Capacity:** What learning capacity is in place within key players, system-wide and within participating organizations? How are they supporting learning related to the purpose?
- **Environment:** What are potential converging forces affecting movement towards the purpose?
- **Best Practices:** What are the best practices in the field? How are these being communicated within?
- **Relationship-Builders:** How well does each partner understand the other's business? What are current and potential areas of overlap between missions, strategies and values of partners?

**Grounding Decision-Making:** Are players clear on roles and responsibilities? How will decision-making work?

**Visibility:** How visible are the early benefits of the collaboration to inside and outside stakeholders at all levels of the system? Are communication strategies building support from key internal and external players? Is communication diverse and comprehensive?

**Forging Ground Agreements:** What are explicit and implicit agreements among the key players regarding decision-making and resource-sharing?

- **Structure:** How is the collaboration be governed and managed? Does each partner have someone responsible for managing the partner relationship?
- **Decision-making:** Is there clarity about who makes what decisions? Is there perceived transparency and accountability, particularly around decisions related to resources? Are decisions made in a timely way that supports ongoing momentum? Is consultation to inform decisions appropriate?
- **Communication:** What channels and vehicles are used to communicate? How is communication happening throughout: within the collaboration; between the collaboration and participating organizations



(in both directions); between collaborating organizations; and between the collaboration and key stakeholders and the larger community? How is the collaboration perceived?

- Recruiting Resources:** Are there enough resources to support the next round of collaborative activity? Are collaborating organizations contributing to the resources to the extent feasible (it's important to acknowledge that each organization will have a different capacity to contribute depending on size and mandate)?

## Blossoming

*Collaborations blossom in many ways, achieving results and attracting energy and commitment. Accompanying this are often competing interests, tensions, differences and diverse interests. As these inevitably emerge, the 'foundation' elements of earlier elements of the cycle become critically important, and may need to be revisited. This is a time for celebration and reflection.*

- Implementing:** How are the activities undertaken by the collaboration brought from idea to action? Are plans feasible, and adequately resourced? Is planning balanced with action? Are players clear on their roles and able to act with support and room for latitude? How are diverse contributions brought together in reality?
- Attracting:** How are the successes in the system attracting energy – building confidence and capacity? Is the effort well-known? Do you have positive profile? Is the support growing from outside and inside? Do participants feel ownership of the process and outcomes of the collaboration?
- Using Tensions:** What are the inherent tensions that are existing within the collaboration? How are current tensions being identified and used to advantage? Are conflicts, disagreements, and differences dealt with?
- Celebrating Diversity and Difference:** What differences are apparent? How do they contribute to the whole?
- Picking and Deadheading:** What results are happening? What course – corrections and changes need to be made? What needs to be trimmed, made room for?
- Achieving Synergy:** What is the 'magic' at work? How has each individual and group 'blossomed'? What results are being achieved? What is the impact of working together??



The process of growing a collaboration is a cyclical one, as stated earlier, and sometimes there is a need to revisit and reflect on actions taken at a previous stage of the cycle. Ultimately you are aiming to grow the collective intelligence in order to grow the system's power to make a positive difference. This process of action, reflection and reengagement builds resilience and collective intelligence and wisdom in the 'system' that makes up the collaboration.

## The Interrelated Dimensions of a Collaboration

*An inter-organizational collaboration is always part of an interrelated system. So, while it's important to take account of what's happening within the collaboration, it's equally important to see what's happening in the larger context of the collaboration. Figure Two show the elements to look for.*

- **Supporting Individuals:** including leaders who are in a position to generate energy and attract support, enablers who can open doors or block progress, and supporters who can till the earth on which the collaboration grows.

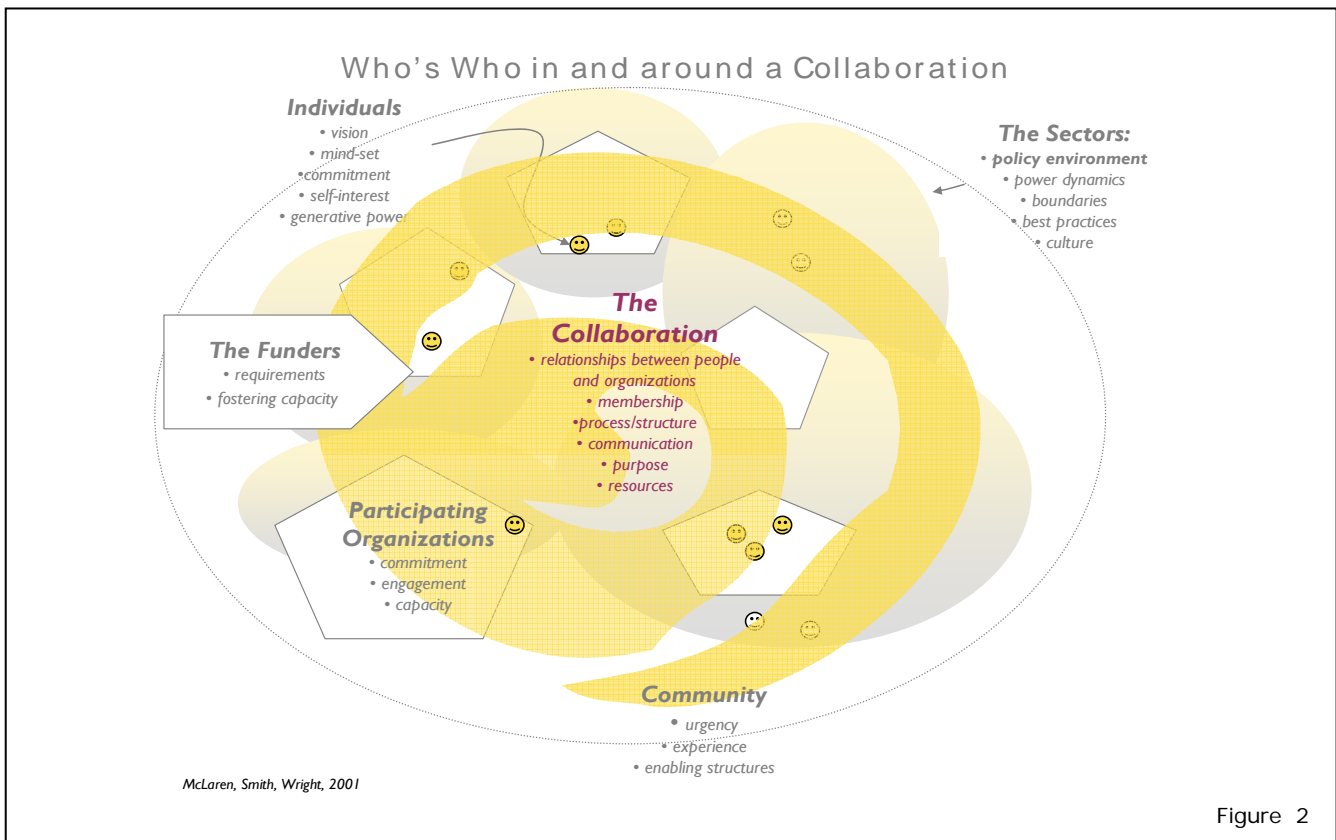


Figure 2



- **Participating Organizations:** each of which brings varying degrees of enthusiasm and determination based on capacity, core mandate, internal culture, and its previous experience with collaborations. These variables are important bell weathers for future success.
- **The Collaboration Initiative itself:** can generate vitality or lose steam depending on several factors. Mattesich and Monsey's review of 133 studies of collaboration identified the following inherent dimensions as important to success:
  - o *membership characteristics* (representation, ability to trust and compromise and aware of self-interest),
  - o *process/structure* (decision-making including conflict resolution, flexible and adaptable structures, clear roles and policy guidelines)
  - o *communication* (open and frequent, formal and informal links,
  - o *purpose* (concrete, attainable goals and objectives, shared vision, unique purpose; to this we would add clear business case)
  - o *resources* (sufficient funds, skilled convenor).
- **Environment - socio/economic sectors:** the particular nature of the sector(s) within which the participating organizations operate will influence the collaboration. Particular professional and practice cultures and their related power dynamics affect the experience of participating individuals and organizations. The legislative and policy environment within sectors affect the mandates and degrees of flexibility of participants. The boundaries of the sector and their degree of flexibility affect the ease of inter-sectoral action. The predominant understanding of best practices of the day can help or hinder collaborative propositions.
- **The Funders:** Beginning in the 1990's funders, particularly granting bodies and those allocating public sector grants, have viewed collaborations favourably. Some have made it a requirement for eligibility. Many partnerships have been conceived on paper within the last few days before a funder's proposal delivery deadline. Some funders have recognized the challenges in creating fruitful collaborations and have supports in place to foster collaborative efforts, such as funds available to finance the invaluable "rooting" activities



- **The Community:** Community action and recognition of a need can spur a collaboration to address the issue. Experience with successful collaboration helps seed others in a community. Our Canadian city has growing experience with community-wide collaboration, based on early successes. The presence of enabling structures, such as inter-sectoral planning bodies in the community, can foster a culture of successful collaboration.

## The Nimble Collaboration

Karen Ray, in her book, *The Nimble Collaboration, Fine-Tuning Your Collaboration for Lasting Success*, uses the word 'nimble' to describe a successful collaboration. The dictionary definition of nimble is 'Quick as in movement or action...deft.' It also implies cleverness in understanding, being flexible and being responsive. For her:

*"The nimble collaboration is based on results that are clearly defined, relationships that are deft, and a structure that is resilient, leading to productive action."*

We've incorporated those three dimensions into the model of how collaborations emerge and we've added an additional dimension: re-generation. Collaborations spin off, die off, cast off, and take off. All of this is part of re-generation. Ultimately, collaborations are powerful "netting" within a system's ecology. They help create a collective intelligence that enriches individuals, partners, and communities and that ultimately can lead to growth in the power of the system to make a positive difference.

This framing of collaboration is a work in progress, an ever-evolving process which grows for interaction and reflection. Please contribute to its development by using it, and by being in touch with the Ginger Group about your experience.

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**The Ginger Group Collaborative** is a dynamic network of professional organizational consultants and scholars with years of experience working with multi-party partnerships and collaborations. We bring our expertise as planners, organizational development specialists, educators, evaluators, facilitators, coaches and change agents. We have worked with community coalitions and joint ventures, national federations, public and private sector organizations, and with all levels of government

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