GLOBAL JOURNAL OF
Community Psychology Practice
PROMOTING COMMUNITY PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL BENEFIT

Toward a Definition of the Management Function as it relates to Collaborative Community Problem-Solving

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Recommended Citation: Julian, D. A. (2017). Toward a Definition of the Management Function as it relates to Collaborative Community Problem-Solving. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice, 8*(2), pages 1-12. Retrieved Day/Month/Year, from (http://www.gjcpp.org/).

Volume 8, Issue 2 June 2017

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Abstract

This article provides a brief review of the concept of management as it applies to collaborative community problem-solving. Several management tasks are described as essential to effective collaboration: 1) Facilitating group process consistent with the requirements for true collaboration; 2) Initiating and managing the steps in the collaborative problem solving process; 3) Designing, building and sustaining infrastructure necessary to support collaboration; 4) Assuring that fundamental roles are filled and managed in relationship to one another; 5) Developing and applying problem solving and decision making procedures; 6) Using appropriate tools to support collaboration and instructing stakeholders in the use of such tools; 7) Selecting and recruiting individual and organizational participants with the potential to be effective collaborators; 8) Motivating individual and organizational participants; and 9) Managing specific projects that arise out of the collaborative problem solving process. Implications for research, practice and training are discussed.

Julian and Ross (2013) suggest that there are several distinct roles inherent in community collaboration. These roles range from leading collaborative problem-solving to planning and policy development to managing the problem-solving process. For the most part, the management role has been neglected in the literature. However, research, theory and evaluation provide important information related to the importance of management as a necessary ingredient in successful collaboration (Florin, Mitchell, Stevenson & Klein, 2000; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson & Allen, 2001; Viola, Olson, Reed, Jimenez and Smith, 2015; Ansel & Cash, 2007; Deyle & Wiedenman, 2014; O'Leary, Gazley, McGuire & Bingham, 2009). The purpose of this article is to define specific management tasks associated with collaborative community problem-solving.

In general, management of collaborative community problem-solving can be defined in terms of initiating appropriate procedures at the appropriate time, encouraging and fostering relevant role related behaviors and applying appropriate tools in the appropriate sequence in the interests of achieving specific collaborative outcomes (Julian & Ross, 2013). This definition implies that effective managers must be well versed in knowledge and skills related to collaborative community problem solving. What follows is a synthesis of selected literature that addresses specific management tasks. This is offered as a means of stimulating debate about what constitutes effective management and to generate researchable hypotheses relative to the impact of management on the effectiveness of collaborative community problem-solving.

This is an important question as indicated in the literature. There are numerous empirical studies and theory that describe conditions necessary for effective collaboration. For example, Merek, Brock and Savla (2014) identify seven factors related to effective collaboration including process and

organization, communication, articulation of goals and objectives and effective leadership. In a meta-analysis of collaborative planning projects, Ansell and Cash (2007) identify several factors related to effective collaboration including history of cooperation, incentives to collaborate, quality of relationships, and effective leadership. Finally, in an important empirical investigation of factors impacting collaborative transportation planning, Deyle and Wiedenman (2014) verify many of the hypotheses related to factors that influence successful collaborative planning. However, the management tasks associated with fostering conditions reflecting these factors are rarely addressed in the literature.

Coalitions, Collaborative Community Problem Solving and Community Practice

As noted by Bayne-Smith, Mizrahi and Garcia (2008), the terms collaboratives and coalitions are used interchangeably. The Community Toolbox (2016) defines a coalition as a group of individuals and/or organizations working toward a common goal. In this article, the author refers to collaborative community problem-solving to identify instances where representatives of a specific community, physical or otherwise, are engaged in a collaborative partnership in order to address recognized community issues. Collaboration requires a willingness to share information and resources, alter activities and enhance the capacity or interests of partners (Himmelman, 2001; Wolff, 2010).

In such instances, members of the collaboration must balance internal demands related to the functioning of the collaborative partnership, and at the same time external demands of the larger community (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011; Provan & Kenis, 2007; O'Leary, Gazley, McGuire & Bingham, 2009).

Community practice is defined in terms of strengthening the capacity of communities to meet the needs of constituents and assist constituents in realizing their dreams (Julian 2006; Chavis 1993); by definition it's collaborative in nature. The author proposes that effective collaborative community problem-solving is dependent upon competent management and managers who occupy an important community practice role.

Management of Collaborative Community Problem Solving

McGuire and Agranoff (2011) suggest that the need to effectively manage partnerships is growing as organizations become more involved in such activities. These authors (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011, p. 280) also suggest that managing and leading collaborative networks is "more difficult than is commonly portrayed." Provan and Kenis (2007) indicate that the role of management is a critical feature of goal directed collaborations. McGuire (2002, p. 599) states that the "practice of managing across governments and organizations outpaces empirical description and theoretical explanation" while Provan and Kenis (2007, p. 248) suggest that the role of management needs to be addressed in "greater depth." Finally, McGuire (2006) states that new techniques and competencies are necessary to enhance the ability of public sector managers to effectively manage collaborative partnerships. Management of collaborative community problem-solving is an elusive concept but might be addressed in terms of the dissemination of knowledge, development of relevant skills, building and nurturance of collaborative relationships, and engagement in a variety of critical activities.

Management as the Dissemination of Knowledge

There is a wealth of theory and research related to the basic foundations of collaboration. The literature provides important guidelines for initiating and conducting collaborative problem-solving activities. For example, there are a number of manualized processes that include worksheets and/or tools designed to facilitate collaborative community problem-solving. These processes include, among others, "Communities that Care" (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992), "Partnerships for Success" (2008), "Getting to Outcomes" (Chin, Imm & Wandersman, 2004), and the "Community Toolbox" (n.d.). While process is a component of collaboration; commitment to actual collaboration presents a significant challenge (Wolff, 2010). True collaboration requires that partners place the highest priority on collaborative goals and outcomes. This is particularly difficult because it may mean, in some cases, acting counter to individual organizational interests given the objectives of a specific community.

The knowledge base related to collaborative community problem solving also includes how the process of collaboration is related to infrastructural requirements necessary to support collaboration and the roles and expectations of participants. For example, Bryan and Henry (2012) describe a series of steps designed to support collaborative school and community partnerships. The Bryan and Henry process includes: 1) preparing to partner; 2) assessing needs and strengths; 3) coming together and creating a formal collaborative group; 4) creating a shared vision; 5) taking action; 6) evaluating and celebrating success, and 7) maintaining momentum. Such procedural steps, argue the authors, provide a strong foundation for effective collaboration.

Similarly, proponents of collective impact address the importance of infrastructure to effective collaboration. Kania and Kramer (2011) suggest that five conditions are necessary to launch successful collective impact initiatives: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support. A common agenda requires a shared understanding of issues and vision for change. In addition, stakeholders must agree on the ways success will be measured. Mutually reinforcing activities imply that various actors contribute in ways that are consistent with their skills and in ways that compliment other actors. Continuous communication offers opportunities to develop trust and effective working relationships.

"Backbone support" refers specifically to the infrastructure supporting collaboration (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Corcoran, Hanleybrown, Steinberg and Tallant (2012, p. 34) state that "dedicated capacity to support a collective impact initiative is critical." They suggest that the backbone function consists of six key functions: 1) guiding vision and strategy; 2) brokering relationships to align strategy; 3) developing shared measurement procedures; 4) promoting public awareness and support; 5) advancing policy, and 6) securing funding. Kania and Kramer (2011) also point out that the backbone function is best undertaken by a separate and dedicated staff whose focus is on highly structured procedures. More specifically, Kania and Kramer define the role of backbone staff as project managers, evaluators, and facilitators.

Roles relevant to collaborative community problem-solving include leading collaborative groups; planning and policy development; providing needs and best practices information; mobilizing and engaging the community; acquiring and investing

resources; delivering direct services; providing useful evaluation data; and managing the problem-solving process (Julian & Ross, 2013). Importantly, each of the roles in collaborative community problem-solving must be filled and managed in relationship to other roles. The identification and understanding of roles and role related behaviors provides a basis for understanding how collaboration differs from more traditional problem solving activities.

According to Julian and Ross (2013), leading collaborative problem solving is distinct from managing the problem solving process and focuses on creating a vision and inspiring others to action. The planning and policy development role provides a basis for making collective decisions about appropriate courses of action. Providing needs and best practices information requires access to research and other information in order to define needs and when appropriate, identify evidence-based responses to specific problems. Mobilizing and engaging the community revolves around formal activities that create awareness and support for community collaboration. The resource acquisition role is critically important as collaborative community problem-solving is likely to require investment of resources to implement specific interventions or projects while the service delivery role is typically filled by local services providers. Finally, effective problem-solving requires access to useful evaluation information. Access to such evaluation information often provides the opportunity to define and measure key outcomes and processes. The preceding discussion suggests that effective management requires managers to understand and disseminate a unique knowledge base to collaborative partners and other stakeholders.

Management as Building and Applying Skills

It is clear that effective collaboration is different from the typical hierarchical approaches to problem solving often used in business and government (Viola, Olson, Reed, Jimenez and Smith, 2015). As such, there are numerous technical skills that must be mastered in the interest of promoting effective collaboration. For example, it can be argued that creating and sustaining the infrastructure necessary to support collaboration requires the application of a variety of technical skills. Infrastructure consists of the structural arrangements and procedures necessary to develop common goals, acquire financial and non-financial resources, implement specific interventions, and apply approved measurement processes. In addition, considerable skill is required to manage key roles necessary for effective collaborative community problem solving (Julian & Ross, 2013).

Facilitation of the collaborative problem-solving process is also a critical skill associated with the management function. Group facilitation can be defined as a neutral process that increases a group's effectiveness and assists groups in achieving collective goals (Swartz, 2002). It is important to point out that there are well developed theories of group dynamics and facilitation; scholarly journals that publish research and practical guidelines, and abundant training opportunities available to aspiring group facilitators. Facilitation skills include planning meetings, ensuring logistical arrangements, developing meeting agendas, building consensus, and a host of other important tasks. Anyone who has participated in a skillfully facilitated meeting can attest to the potential importance of facilitation skills to the management of collaborative community problem-solving.

Collaborative managers must also possess the skills necessary to apply a variety of tools that have the potential to support collaborative community problem-solving. Many descriptions of the collaborative process make reference to specific tools. For example, the Community Toolbox (n.d.) refers to more than a dozen "toolkits" associated with specific problem-solving procedures. These toolkits have names such as "Creating and Maintaining Partnerships" and "Developing Strategic and Action Plans." Wolff (2010) identifies 11 tools that include the "Continuation of Collaboration Worksheet" and "Coalition Member Assessment." The Partnerships for Success (PFS) Toolbox includes more than 40 tools (Partnership for Success, 2008). Examples include a Workgroup Charter, Tracking Data Trends Worksheet and Defining Measurable Outcomes Template.

The Work Group Charter is used to specify expectations related to membership in a collaborative group or sub-group (Partnerships for Success, 2008). In the Partnerships for Success process, subgroups are often convened and charged with specific tasks such as needs assessment. The Tracking Data Trends Worksheet provides a means for understanding trends across a number of indicators and assessing conditions in the community. The Defining Measurable Outcomes Template provides the opportunity for stakeholders to consider a number of questions relative to a specific intervention and develop a formal and measurable outcome. Using appropriate tools at opportune times is clearly a critical management task as is training members of collaborations to use such tools.

Furthermore, there are a number of approaches that offer detailed, step-by-step procedures for identifying a specific course of action relative to an identified community issue. For example, the classic rational planning model (Alexander, 1979) includes several distinct steps: 1) problem definition; 2) goals specification; 3) analysis of future trends; 4) alternatives development; 5) implementation analysis; 6) evaluation, and 7) implementation. So (1984) defines seven strategic planning steps: 1) performance monitoring; 2) environmental scanning; 3) internal analysis; 4) implications of internal and external analysis; 5) development of goals, objectives and strategies; 6) implementation, and 7) evaluation and feedback. Effective collaborative community problem solving requires initiation of formal problem-solving procedures including specification of how group decisions will be made in order to arrive at a response(s) to a specific community issue.

Finally, many collaboratives create specific programs or other interventions designed to address identified community issues. Implementation of such programs represents a fundamental set of skills that can be grouped under the rubric of project management. Project management[1] can be described as applying knowledge, tools and processes necessary to meet project requirements (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). The Project Management Institute (2013) identifies 47 project management processes that are grouped into five categories including project initiation, planning,

[1] There are numerous resources related to project management that are available from the Project Management Institute and other sources. In addition, the Project Management Institute (PMI) provides formal certifications related to project management.

executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing. For example, in the project planning phase, various types of tools are used to identify project activities and individuals responsible for completing specific tasks (Project Management Institute, 2013). Given that collaborative groups often focus their energies on implementing specific activities or interventions, project management skills would appear to be essential to the management function.

Management as Building and Nurturing Relationships

The collaboration literature suggests that trust and quality of relationship among participants are critical features of effective collaboration. Thus managers must be skilled relationship builders and must promote appropriate participant behaviors consistent with building trusting and mutually beneficial relationships. McGuire (2002) indicates that the manager's responsibility focuses on promoting teamwork and providing leadership. Isett, Mergel, LeRoux, Michen and Rethemeyer (2011) and McGuire (2006) point to the importance of fostering trust. Similarly, Provan and Kenis (2007) indicate that a manager must be adept at handling tensions that might arise in collaborative problem-solving groups.

The nature of collaboration requires individuals; typically representing organizational entities or constituencies to come together and plan, implement, and evaluate specific responses to a problem or issue. Robertson and Smith (2001) point out that high level work performance requires specific skills relevant to tasks to be performed as well as competencies related to organizational citizenship. These authors also suggest that selection of personnel is ideally based on a comprehensive job analysis that captures task specific and organizational citizenship criteria. Thus personnel selection and recruitment represent critical management tasks for managers of collaborative community problem solving.

In addition to personnel selection, individuals charged with managing collaborative community problem-solving must be adept at motivating team members. This is particularly true in situations where the willingness to collaborate is low. Rosas and Camarinha-Matos (2010) define willingness to collaborate in terms of a partner's attitudes and intentions relative to a specific proposal to engage in a specific collaboration. They have developed a formal model with a number of factors predicting willingness to collaborate. These factors include beliefs that collaboration will lead to desired outcomes, the value associated with anticipated outcomes, external influences, and a number of other factors. Such factors may provide a basis for motivating participants to fully participate in collaborative community problem-solving.

Sofit (2012) defines motivation in terms of inspiring an individual to engage in a desired course of action. Kroth (2007) provides a useful summary of a variety of theories and approaches to fostering highly motivated workers or stakeholders that draws on the organization studies literature. Kroth's analysis concludes with the development of a model that encompasses several different theories related to motivating workers. According to Kroth (2007), a leader or manager must create a motivating environment by encouraging behaviors that suggest that the organization (or in this case, the collaborative team or community) cares and values the problem-solving effort.

In order to create such an environment, the collaborative group must promote fairness and respect and value individual opinions

and/or opinions of the organizations that are part of the collaborative group (Kroth, 2007). Other factors identified by Kroth have particular relevance to the management of collaborative community problem-solving and include setting motivating goals, designing intrinsically motivating assignments, supporting goal pursuit, and managing expectancies. For example, a collaborative problem-solving team might be required to conduct a needs assessment related to the goals of a community collaboration. In addition to managing the technical aspects of the needs assessment the manager must be prepared to position the needs assessment as an important activity in the problem-solving process sufficient to motivate participants to engage in required data collection and analyses activities.

Management as Action

Agranoff and McGuire (2001) describes four different types of management activities, the first types of management activities are referred to as activation. Activation focuses on acquiring the resources (money, people, skills, knowledge, etc.) necessary to achieve desired outcomes. The second type of management activity described by Agranoff and McGuire (2001) is framing; referring to the efforts to create and encourage implementation of appropriate structures, roles, norms and values. Mobilizing is aimed at developing commitment and support for the operations and outcomes of a community collaboration. Finally, synthesizing is the process of creating productive relationships among members of the collaboration. These tasks imply a variety of actions that in theory promote effective collaborative community problem-solving.

A Synthesis of Management Tasks

McGuire (2002) states that the most important question relative to collaborative problem-solving focuses on the degree to which the actions of a manager contribute to the effectiveness of multi-organizational arrangements. In order to address this question, it is imperative that researchers and practitioners have a detailed understanding of the management function. The preceding discussion implies a number of distinct tasks that define the management function relative to collaborative community problem-solving. These tasks are highlighted in Table I and run the gamut from facilitating group processes to assuring that fundamental roles are filled to project management. Each of these tasks requires significant knowledge and mastery of specific technical skills. In addition, a manager of collaborative community problem solving must be skilled at building relationships and motivating participants to participate in a manner consistent with the tenets of true collaboration.

Implications for Research

The review summarized in the preceding paragraphs suggests that collaborative community problem-solving holds great promise for effectively addressing many of the issues encountered in contemporary communities (Berkowitz, 2001). Evidence and theory imply that effective collaboration is driven by a high degree of structure and process (O'Leary, Gazley, McGuire & Bingham, 2009). These concepts imply that collaborative groups function best when there are clear procedures and recognized roles. However, there is little empirical data available to guide collaborative groups in how to develop structural arrangements and procedures that facilitate collaboration.

The author argues that such tasks fall under the guise of management. This article attempts to provide a definition of the management function relative to collaborative community problem-solving. Of

course, the primary research question implied by this review focuses on whether the presence of a competent manager who actively manages the problem solving process yields more effective collaborative problem-solving (McGuire, 2006). Theory and experience would suggest that such is the case. However, future empirical research is necessary to test this critical hypothesis. This review provides a starting point for defining the management function.

Management Task
1. Facilitating group process consistent with the requirements for true collaboration
2. Initiating and managing the steps in the collaborative problem solving process
3. Designing, building and sustaining infrastructure necessary to support collaboration
4. Assuring that fundamental roles are filled and managed in relationship to one another
5. Developing and applying problem solving and decision making procedures
6. Using appropriate tools to support collaboration and instructing stakeholders in the use of such tools
7. Selecting and recruiting individual/organizational participants with the potential to be effective collaborators
8. Motivating individual and organizational participants
9. Managing specific projects that arise out of the collaborative problem solving process

Table 1. *Management Tasks Associated with Collaborative Community Problem-Solving*

There are a number of other variables that might impact the effectiveness of collaborative community problem-solving. Collaborative groups vary across a number of key variables: leadership (as distinct from management), action orientation, breadth of desired impact, tenure, diversity of membership and jurisdiction, just to name a few (O'Leary & Bingham, 2009; Community Toolbox, 2016). Effectiveness of management can be added to this list. The author argues that effectiveness of the management function transcends other key variables. That is, all things being equal, an effectively managed collaboration will be more impactful than a collaboration characterized by less effective management.

Implications for Community Practice and Training Community Practitioners

There are several implications of this discussion for community practice and training community practitioners. The first implication focuses on practical application. It is clear that collaborative groups are a well-established fixture in many communities and are utilized to address a variety of complex issues (Wolff, 2010). It is equally clear that practitioners from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines are being called upon to manage the collaborative community problem-solving process (Kania & Kramer,

2011). This is occurring even if job descriptions do not explicitly include references to the management function. Thus practitioners must acknowledge their management responsibilities and acquire skills related to managing groups of individuals engaged in collaborative community problem-solving.

The second implication focuses on training. Experience suggests that considerable effort could be spent in mastery of any one of the management tasks presented in Table I. It is also safe to assume that these activities represent some but not all of the critical tasks associated with effective management of collaborative community problem-solving. There are undoubtedly other activities that could be added to the list of critical management tasks. Thus educators should consider the results of relevant theory, research and evaluation and develop training programs that prepare practitioners to function in the management role.

Participation in such educational endeavors may provide sufficient expertize for practitioners to perform some of the tasks indicated above and/or provide a basis for the delegation of tasks to qualified individuals or groups. At a minimum, it would appear prudent to build some level of management capacity into future collaborative efforts and to assess the impact of such management capacity on the effectiveness of problem solving efforts. Finally, community practitioners are well positioned to take on roles consistent with the management function. Evidence suggests that attention to the management function is a critical factor related to the success of collaborative groups charged with addressing complex social issues.

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