



Career Compass No. 71:

Why Won't They Collaborate with Us?

by Dr. Frank Benest

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Dear Frank:

I'm a youth services supervisor in the city's Library Department. I'm committed to developing a tutoring program for high-risk youth. I'd like to involve the senior citizens from the Senior Center as tutors. My proposal would be a great way to help young people with their school work as well as attract youth to our library. My manager likes the idea and supports my efforts to reach out to the Senior Center, which is operated by the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

I did not know the Senior Center supervisor, so I made an appointment. When I pitched the idea, the supervisor did not show much interest or enthusiasm for my idea. The best I got from him was he agreed to talk to his boss. When I got no response, I scheduled a second meeting a few weeks later.

The Senior Center Manager just made excuses, such as "we don't have adequate staff" and "I'm too busy."

I'm convinced that my proposal is a good idea. How come this other department won't collaborate with us?



DR. BENEST: You do have a good idea, and I commend you for pursuing it. The problem is that you can't force collaboration with another department even though you perceive an excellent opportunity to serve youth better.

Why Collaboration?

Collaboration across the division and department silos is required to solve “adaptive” (vs. “technical”) challenges. As opposed to technical problems, adaptive challenges (such as educating youth) cannot be solved in your department silo. Adaptive challenges require that you cross department boundaries. When you cross your department boundaries, you have no authority and can't tell people what to do. To make matters worse, and there are no right or wrong answers in addressing adaptive challenges. To address these kinds of challenges, you must often engage stakeholders who have different interests and perspectives, yet you need to leverage their resources as well as yours.

Your youth education problem is an adaptive challenge. All the significant challenges facing local government are adaptive in nature and require leaders at all levels to cross department boundaries. These challenges include:

- Homelessness
- Affordable housing
- Income inequality
- Gentrification
- Environmental sustainability
- Climate protection
- Public safety
- Opioid epidemic
- Traffic congestion

What Collaboration Is and Is Not

We in local government often confuse collaboration with better **communication** with other departments or stakeholders or more **cooperation** from others to achieve our goals.

For instance, we often think that better communicating or presenting our ideas will get others to buy-in and support us. Better communication will not achieve cross-department collaboration.

We often also try to get others to better cooperate with us so we can implement our ideas. You want the other department to accept your idea and help you implement it. Cooperation by other department does not typically modify or enhance the idea.

Collaboration happens when two or more people or groups work on shared goals to create something better. Collaboration often involves diverse players with different ideas. It typically requires giving up some control and thus becoming somewhat vulnerable. You cannot force someone to collaborate.

Collaboration is messy.

Avoid Seeking Buy-In

When you pitched your idea, you were “selling” your idea and seeking buy-in. We in local government often think and act to achieve buy-in from our employees, other departments, top management, elected officials, and community stakeholders.

The problem with buy-in is that it’s fundamentally manipulative. Even if you have a great idea, people from other departments will resist because you are trying to sell your idea.

If you seek buy-in, you will lose.

Why Is Collaboration So Difficult?

Many obstacles impede cross-department collaboration. Each department has a different focus, mission, goals, department-specific functions and expertise, and sometimes different capabilities, constituencies and clientele.

The organizational structures of local government also undercut collaboration since they create silos and competition for attention, influence and limited resources. Silos isolate talent, hoard resources, and focus on department-specific needs and interests (see Dan Rockwell, [“Destroy Silos Before They Destroy You.”](#) Leadership Freak blog, May 9, 2012.) To exacerbate matters, each department is typically overwhelmed by their current workloads and growing demands.

To further inhibit collaborative problem-solving, when a leader from one department crosses a department boundary, he or she has no authority to tell anyone else what to do.

Therefore, you cannot force collaboration. To develop collaboration across department boundaries, you must build relations and connect with others in the other department.

Promoting collaboration is one of the key “soft” skills of leadership.

How Do You Start?

Instead of immediately jumping into problem-solving with another department, you must start by forging relationships. Relationships need to precede problem-solving and collaboration.

So, how do you build relationships and connect with those at the Senior Center? You can begin by:

- Spending time at the Senior Center and finding ways to informally meet and interact with Center staff and the seniors who participate at the facility
- Sharing yourself, your personal interests, goals, and aspirations
Encouraging others to share themselves
- Figuring out how to support the program goals of Center staff
- Starting a few conversations about how to serve library and Senior Center participants

Relationship-building takes time and patience, but it is required to promote collaboration.

To make cross-department collaborations happen, here are seven strategies to gain support for collaboration and seven strategies to implement a collaborative project.

Strategies to Gain Support for Collaboration

1. Start conversations

Once you have established some minimum relationship with the Senior Center supervisor, you do not seek buy-in for your idea but rather engage the supervisor in conversation. You help create good conversations by asking questions.

Some powerful or catalytic questions include:

- What are the big goals of the Senior Center?
- What would the Senior Center like to achieve if it had adequate support and resources?
- How could the city Library Department support the Senior Center?
- What are some potential opportunities to collaborate with the Library Department to make a big difference in the lives of people in our community?
- How might the Senior Center be interested in the tutoring idea?
- What are some issues or problems with the idea?
- How might we deal with your concerns?

Through conversation, you may discover some interests that you can incorporate into your proposal. For example, perhaps the Senior Center staff would like the opportunity to promote the intellectual stimulation of Center participants. The Library Department could organize some panel discussions or educational forums or book clubs. Alternatively, perhaps the Senior Center needs additional facilities and could use some branch library spaces. You may also discover that some senior participants may desire supplemental income or more engagement beyond the meals program and leisure activities offered at the Center.

To further build relationships through conversation and explore opportunities, you need to be open to the conversations, truly listen, and allow the conversation to change your idea and perspectives.

As the actor Allan Alda said, “Real listening is a willingness to let the other person change you.”

(See [Career Compass #61 “Leadership is the Art of Conversation.”](#))

2. Practice “positive regard.”

To figure out what will resonate with the other department staff, you must have “positive regard” for their interests, goals, concerns, and fears. Even if their interests and problems do not particularly align with your goals, you must acknowledge their interests and integrate them where possible into your proposal.

3. Focus on the “why.”

Typically, we focus on the “what” we want to do and the “how” we are going to do it. It is always a good idea to start with the “why,” especially when trying to develop a cross-department project or other collaborative efforts if people from diverse groups do not see why they won’t be open to the collaboration.

4. Frame the idea

While you may think of your idea as a tutoring or educational program, your conversations may suggest that you frame the collaboration differently for the Senior Center staff and participants. So that the proposal resonates for the Senior Center, you may wish to frame it as an intergenerational or senior engagement program, or a way of serving the next generation, or creating a legacy, or providing supplemental income.

By framing the project differently, you are not trying to secure buy-in; instead, a proper frame helps others to consider the opportunity given their interests.

To help the other department consider collaboration, you should try to tie your idea to a broader agenda. If the Parks and Recreation Director, or City Manager, or City Council have a broader agenda focusing on healthy and engaged communities, or public safety, or jobs, tie your idea to that larger agenda or a larger initiative favored by organizational leaders.

5. Get everyone's finger-prints on the collaborative idea

Through informal conversation and then perhaps some formal meetings, you can integrate the interests of the Senior Center and respond to their concerns. By getting everyone's finger-prints on the proposal, your idea becomes "our idea." The process creates ownership and makes collaboration viable.

By exploring opportunities through conversation, you may, for instance, look to focus on senior engagement and make your tutoring idea an inter-generational program as well as an educational project. You may also desire to seek a grant or other funding to provide pay or stipends for the senior citizens who tutor the youth.

Your original idea thus becomes more robust and a more elegant solution.

6. Go slow to go fast

Starting conversations, brainstorming ideas, and solving problems together all require patience. Once the staff from the Library and Senior Center have concluded that collaboration will serve their mutual interest, the cross-department project team can then move forward together.

Go slow to go fast.

7. Be aware of the "collaboration blind spot."

As Lisa Kwan suggests in her article "[The Collaboration Blind Spot](#)" (Harvard Business Review, March-April 2019), many champions of collaboration are unaware of the "collaboration blind spot." When trying to engage another department or agency in a collaboration effort, they may sense a loss. It could be a loss of control, resources, or identity. If this potential loss is not recognized and minimized, it creates resistance on the part of the other organization.

Therefore, in the case of your proposed tutoring program, the Senior Center staff may fear at some level that the Senior Center will no longer be considered the central location for senior citizen programming. They may fear the loss of being recognized as the "go-to" experts in dealing with senior issues. Alternatively, they may worry that Senior Center resources will be siphoned off for other purposes. The Senior Center staff may not acknowledge these potential losses, but they are real for them.

Given this blind spot, you must work to minimize these losses. For example, you can secure a grant to fund an inter-generational tutoring program. Alternatively, you can conduct the tutoring at the Senior Center, not the library. Eventually, you can bring some of the activity to the library, and you can certainly promote the Senior Center staff for their expertise.

Strategies to Implement a Collaborative Project

1. Form a cross-department team and create a shared vision

At a certain point, you and the Senior Center staff can decide to form a cross-department team.

The first issue is to explore and establish a shared vision. A shared vision is created by discussing a few questions, such as:

- What significant difference do we want to make?
- What is our “collective ambition”?
- What value do we create together?
- What do we need from each other to succeed?
- What does “success” look like?

(See Ron Carucci, “[How to Permanently Resolve Cross-Department Rivalries](#)” hbr.org, Sept 25, 2018.)

2. Create a team charter and work plan

It is often valuable for the team to create a written charter (or memorandum of understanding between departments) and work plan. The charter and/or work plan should address a variety of issues:

- A shared vision for the team
- Project goals
- Team leadership, membership, and responsibilities
- Schedule of meetings
- Protocols for making decisions and resolving conflicts
- Initial assignments
- Milestones and timelines

A team charter and work plan formalize the collaboration, help members deal with problems and obstacles and make adjustments. The team should do its best to be clear about the ultimate goal but be flexible about how to achieve it.

Collaboration requires clarity plus flexibility.

3. Promote psychological safety

To generate ideas from everyone, especially divergent opinions, team leaders need to promote “psychological safety” in the team. Psychological safety in a team is when group members feel safe to express themselves. In a team characterized by psychological safety, team members:

- Feel that they can give voice to their ideas and perspectives without fear of reprisal, rebuke, or embarrassment
- Believe that if they make a well-intentioned mistake, others won't penalize them or think less of them

Psychological safety allows team participants to regard mistakes and failures as pathways to learning and growth and better performance over time.

Psychological safety helps team members disagree yet struggle to find solutions together.

4. Try a pilot

To test your idea and assess feasibility, it's often wise to try a "beta test" or pilot. A pilot project helps the team to see what works and what doesn't. There is usually less criticism during a pilot and mistakes happen because a pilot project suggests experimentation. It also gives team members from different departments the opportunity to work together.

Piloting a collaborative effort minimizes risk and helps build momentum.

5. Keep the collaboration moving forward

Even though cross-department efforts are necessary for addressing significant challenges, collaborations are often challenging to implement. To keep collaborative efforts moving forward, team leaders need to identify and achieve a few early easy wins and generate momentum.

It's also necessary to focus on progress. Since collaborations take time to achieve project goals, leaders must help team members see progress. As Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer say in their book [The Progress Principle](#), people will keep motivated if they see progress. Also, when the team hits a milestone, don't forget to celebrate progress with coffee and bagels or cupcakes or a small ice cream social.

While the team may have a work plan or MOU outlining responsibilities, assignments, milestones, and metrics, there will be mistakes and missed assignments or timelines. Instead of trying to enforce the MOU or work plan, team leaders should look to re-enforce relationship. You are showing empathy, sharing information, maintaining conversations and focusing on learning from mistakes all help to maintain relationships which is the key to successful collaboration over time.

As the collaboration proceeds, it is valuable to do team "health checks." The team should discuss:

- What's going well?
- What's not going so well?
- What's bothering some of us?
- What adjustments in how we interact would be beneficial for team performance?

These health checks can assist the team in resisting the "blame game" when mistakes happen and create a shared responsibility to fix problems as they occur.

6. Learn as you go

A cross-department project is a journey. You generally know the direction but not the precise destination. There are many twists and turns.

Learning is key to collaborating. In your proposed tutoring project, team members may learn about educational strategies, ways of engaging senior volunteers as well as disadvantaged youth, and intergenerational programming.

As you struggle to overcome internal and external obstacles, you want to debrief the experience with the team. Debriefing will help team members learn as you go. Moreover, learning is one of the critical benefits of collaborative efforts, both for the individuals involved and for the organization as a whole.

7. Celebrate and reward cross-department teams

To reinforce cross-department collaboration, you must celebrate those efforts. For instance, leaders can create positive visibility for the cross-department teams and their projects in the city's employee or community newsletters. You can also feature the teams at city-wide management meetings or Commissions and City Council meetings.

To further promote collaboration, senior managers can reward cross-department team leaders and team members by providing monies for sharing their learning at conferences and including cross-department collaboration as a specific item in performance evaluations. Merit and performance bonuses should be based in part on cross-department activities.

(For more ideas on implementing collaborative projects, go to William Chiat's article "[No Longer Can We Go It Alone—Effective Multi-Disciplinary and Intergovernmental Collaboration](#)" 2016.)

Champions Make Collaborations Happen

Cross-department collaborations are difficult to pull off. Successful collaborations require many ingredients, but perhaps the one key element has enthusiastic even passionate champions.

Champions are willing to start conversations across boundaries, model collaborative behaviors for others, struggle to keep the collaborative effort moving forward, and take the necessary risks.

If successful in collaborating with others, champions can help change the world for the better. Will you be that champion?

Readers:

What are the significant challenges that require cross-department collaboration in your agency?

What is your biggest fear about championing collaboration?

What is an effective strategy that you have used to promote collaboration?

To answer these questions and be part of the conversation, join us on [Facebook](#)

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *Career Compass* is a monthly column focused on leadership and career development issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's Liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a leadership or career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com