

# dancing with an octopus: the graceful art of collaboration

by Elizabeth Morgan Russell

Have you just had a great idea that would make your community a better place to live for children and families, and you know you can't accomplish your goal alone? Or, perhaps, after talking with other child care professionals, you've identified a common need or interest and a small group of colleagues actually wants to do something about your shared concern.

Collaboration — working with like-minded others to achieve a common purpose — is an action-oriented strategy (Carter, 2003) that you might want to consider as a way of reaching your goals. Because collaboration, as in dancing with an octopus (Dunkle & Nash, 1989), requires keeping track of many different points (or tentacles), planners who know when collaborations are more likely to work and what potential missteps could occur, are more likely to move with grace and style toward their goal(s). After reading this article, you will be able to list at least three:

- Characteristics of successful collaborative projects;



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- Potential missteps and strategies for avoiding, lessening, or resolving barriers to successful collaborative activities; and,
- Examples of collaborative activities for parents or providers.

## Why dance?

Generally, individuals, agencies, or organizations collaborate because they believe that together they can accomplish what could not be done alone. Also, their participation in the collaboration enables organizations and agencies to reach their program objectives (Bergman, 2003). In the field of early education and care, collaborations are frequently formed in order to improve services, and/or the systems that deliver the services, by:

- increasing the quality and quantity of services for children and families
- ensuring more equitable distribution of services
- minimizing expenses and service duplication
- addressing staff and space shortages
- equalizing regulations across early childhood programs (i.e., ensuring high quality standards are required for all forms of child care)
- improving training opportunities

- building public support and advocacy for early care and education (Kagan & Rivera, p. 52, 1991).

You may want to pause and consider within which of the above seven areas your collaborative idea falls. Can you think of other reasons for collaborating in the field of early education and care?

Collaborations may be short- or long-term; have local, state, or national memberships; focus on one or multiple goals; and include three or more partners. One agency may participate in more than one collaborative project.

Pause for a moment and consider the following questions: What are some of the collaborative projects that you have heard about or participated in? Do you think they were successful? Chances are, if the collaborations were successful, they shared certain characteristics. The following section provides an overview of some of the characteristics of successful collaborations.

## How do you keep the octopus from stepping on your toes?

An anagram of 'octopus' will provide the framework for a discussion about

the characteristics of successful collaborations and potential missteps:

Organization  
Climate  
Team  
Ownership  
Progress  
Understanding  
Share

**Organization:** One or more members of the collaboration, perhaps you, must take the lead role in organizing the planning efforts of the larger group. This core group of individuals (or planning group) recruits additional members for the collaboration, calls the meetings, sets the initial agenda, chairs the meetings, keeps the group on track and focused, takes and distributes minutes, keeps all the members of the collaboration informed of the group's activities and progress, and ensures that all members have an opportunity to be heard and to make tangible contributions to the collaboration's success (Malloy, Rodriguez, & Chance, 1996). Once the collaboration is underway, the membership of the core planning group can change in order to share the leadership responsibilities and avoid burnout.

**Climate:** A climate of cooperation or one of competition between collaboration members will have a profound influence upon the success or failure of the group's activities. If members have competed or are competing for the same service delivery area, clients (e.g., parents, children), funding or other resources, this must be acknowledged and resolved (Morgan & Searly, 1983). In order for the collaboration to be successful, the members must agree that the shared goal takes precedence over issues of turfism (Shaw, 2003). Members who have previously participated in successful collaborations can be asked how their group resolved issues of competition and turfism. Time, open discussions, and a shared focus can

frequently, although not always, build a climate of cooperation, and a feeling among the collaboration's members that they are all part of the same team.

**Team:** Successful collaborative teams demonstrate these characteristics (Malloy, Rodriguez, Chance, & Reid, 1997):

- Members, or at least a core group of the membership, regularly attend meetings.
- The membership is diverse and representative of any group that has a stake in the outcome of the collaboration.
- Meetings are held on a regular basis to maintain group momentum.
- Conflict resolution strategies used by group members strengthen rather than divide the team.
- Consensus is used to make decisions: "Although I may not be in 100% agreement, I can live with and support this decision."
- Members share responsibilities for achieving the collaboration's goal.
- The goal is in written form and was developed through consensus.
- The work plan and timeline are written and referred to on a regular basis.
- All members feel a strong sense of ownership in the collaboration.
- Periodic comparison of your collaboration's dynamics to the list could prove to be a useful self-evaluation exercise.

**Ownership:** Without a sense of ownership or 'buy-in' from group members, the collaboration is doomed from the start: attendance at meetings will decline, timelines will not be met, tasks will be done incompletely or not at all. It is essential that members of the collaboration feel emotionally and professionally responsible for the success of the project. The core group of planners can help members to buy-in by using initial meeting(s) to reach consensus on these issues:

- Why are we here? What needs to be done?
- What will this collaboration look like?
- What are the benefits of participation in the collaboration for my clients, co-workers, staff, and/or agency?
- Who's missing? Who else do we need to invite?
- What are the ground rules for resolving conflict, decision-making (e.g., consensus, majority vote), respecting diverse opinions and perspectives of collaboration members, turn-taking during meetings, wandering from the topic during meetings, poor attendance at meetings, setting agendas for meetings, determining meeting frequency, date and times, and communicating with each other between meetings?
- Who is responsible for doing what? Although some members may feel impatient or frustrated with the time spent building ownership, these initial steps are the basis of the complicated dance of collaboration. Time, hurt feelings, and the success of the project can be the costs of moving forward without buy-in.

**Progress:** Once an initial sense of ownership has been established, ongoing enthusiasm and investment in the collaboration can be fostered through regular progress reports. Members need to know their work is going somewhere (Malloy, Rodriguez, & Chance, 1996; 1997). Everyone is busy; dance cards are full. Periodic, brief progress reports which center around key questions — where have we been? Where are we going? How far do we have to go? Do we need to change directions? — will help members assess the progress of the project and determine when adjustments to the work plan and timeline are needed. "The members of successful collaborations understand that a change of direction is not negative, but natural, and — if used well — is an opportunity for growth (Kagan & Rivera, p. 54, 1991).

**Understanding:** An understanding of what resources (e.g., time, energy, expertise, contacts, funding, meeting space, supplies, postage, and so on) each member will commit to the collaboration should be established during the initial meetings of the project. In addition to building ownership, itemizing resources will help members determine if any resources necessary to the success of the collaboration are inadequate or missing. Some or all members of the collaboration must take responsibility for gathering the missing resources.

**Share:** Shared leadership, decision-making power (Shaw, 2003), ownership, and resources are characteristics of successful collaborations. In addition to being a basic step in the collaborative dance, shared leadership is an avenue for professional development. Early education and care professionals who have experience in leadership roles have the opportunity to expand their repertoire of group management strategies by watching other leaders in action. Simultaneously, novice leaders are exposed to a variety of styles and can practice their skills in a safe setting through the mentorship of their more experienced peers. Some participants in the collaboration, particularly members of the initial planning group, may have difficulty letting go of their leadership role. Group members may have difficulty in relinquishing their leadership role because they are so invested in the project and have thought so long about it, that they have formed a mental picture of what the collaboration “should look like.” Remembering the shared goal of the project and accepting the fact that input from others will alter the final picture may help these members modify their expectations. Setting up a system for sharing leadership early on in the collaboration could make it

easier for members to rotate and share this responsibility.

Because it takes a group of dedicated individuals to make a collaboration work, it is important to share credit for the success of the project with all members. Gratitude can be shown between members throughout the collaboration with letters, tokens (e.g., personalized mugs), food (e.g., ‘Thank You cakes’), cards, or fun awards (e.g., ‘Trial-by-fire’ certificate). Members of the project must be nurtured so they are better able to nurture the collaboration. Public acknowledgements of project success should recognize all members; each member’s contribution to the success of the project is unique and essential. Sharing the process as well as the outcome of collaborations with colleagues in the early education and

care profession extends the benefits of the members’ work to their communities, children, and families.

### So you just want to dance

In summary, an unsuccessful collaboration is like an octopus out of water; it flails clumsily around and goes nowhere. Alternatively, when all members of the collaboration are moving in the same direction, that is, when the collaboration includes a core planning group, fosters cooperation and teamwork, builds ownership for the project, encourages pooling of resources, and distributes leadership and decision-making power among members, phenomenal distance toward the goal can be covered through a powerful, efficient and, at times, graceful group effort.

For additional information, please refer to these references:

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