

7 Making Progress and Making Decisions: Structure and Decisionmaking Issues

This chapter focuses on the role that TB prevention and control program staff and partnership leaders can play to ensure that TB partnerships identify and use appropriate structures and decisionmaking styles—ones that create a sense of commitment while significantly improving TB prevention and control outcomes.

Partnership Structure: An Overview

Research Suggests

A TB prevention and control program should offer guidance and technical advice to those with whom it is partnering. However, partnerships addressing complex issues must be able to operate autonomously if they are to succeed. Each partnership is different and must develop the structures and decisionmaking styles that best fit its unique circumstances. There is no one best way to forge partnerships. However, the following conditions appear critical to developing effective partnership structures and processes for joint decisionmaking among diverse stakeholders:⁴⁵

- Stakeholders see themselves as interdependent, believing that their goals cannot be reached by any one group or partner working alone.
- Stakeholders assume collective responsibility for the direction of the partnership.
- Decisions emerge by dealing constructively with differences.
- Joint ownership of decisions exists.
- Partnering is viewed as an emergent process.

Effective leadership is key to creating these conditions. Whether acting through formal or informal partnership structures, effective leadership exhibits the following competencies when working with TB stakeholders:

- Communication, including respect for, engagement with, and mutual influence among people of different ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds
- The ability to effectively frame and communicate the vision and mission of a partnership to a broad range of stakeholders⁴⁶

Elements of Making Progress and Making Decisions

- Partnership structure
- Creating partnership structures that fit your needs
- Creating decisionmaking processes that fit your needs
- Anticipating and managing differences

⁴⁵Lewicki, R J, ed. 1999. *Negotiation: Readings, exercises, and eases*, 117. 2nd ed. Irwin McGraw-Hill; Roussos ST, Fawcett SB. 2000. A review of collaborative partnerships as a strategy for improving community health. *Annual Review of Public Health* 21, 370.

⁴⁶Ibid., 385.

- The ability to listen actively to partners and then repeat, in the listener=s own words, what he or she thinks the partner has said
- Encouragement of a team building process by which the partnership clarifies its goals, identifies barriers to achieving the goals, and develops strategies to remove the identified barriers
- The ability to resolve conflict and manage differences in a way that views conflict and differences as opportunities to expand the partnership’s common vision
- Flexibility as changes in the partnership’s needs and composition occur

Things to Keep in Mind

- Do not underestimate the leadership skills and abilities of TB partners and key stakeholders. It is important to accurately assess their leadership skills and abilities, as well as your own, and to encourage all partners to effectively use their leadership capabilities.
- Partnering is an emergent process, which means that partnerships are not static; they grow and develop over time. At their best, TB partnerships are co-learning experiences where all participants learn and grow.
- The skills and talents required for partnerships to operate effectively may change over time. Productive partnerships accurately evaluate and monitor their competencies, talents, skills, and limitations. They build on their strengths and seek new recruits and/or training to overcome their limitations.

Creating Partnership Structures That Fit Your Needs

Some partners will prefer establishing traditional formal structures, such as standing committees and elected officers; others will prefer allowing structures and leadership to emerge over time. As noted in Chapter 3: *What Successful Health-Related Community Partnerships Have in Common*, what leaders do is more important than how they are designated. (Specific leadership competencies and actions associated with high performance partnerships are addressed in that chapter.)

However, when diverse partners do not have a history of positive working relationships, it is often better not to choose formal leadership through majority vote early in the partnership’s development. Instead, a good facilitator can work with the partnership and help it to adopt operating principles, share information, develop a vision, and develop governing processes over time.

Several structural approaches that partnerships might wish to consider:

- **Project approach**—The partnership decides to undertake clearly defined projects that are consistent with the vision. Those most involved with implementing the projects

have decisionmaking responsibility for them. They regularly share their progress at partnership meetings, seeking others' feedback and guidance.

- **Stakeholder approach**—Partners from specific stakeholder groups provide leadership to the group on how to effectively develop TB prevention and control efforts within their communities that are consistent with the vision. Partners jointly identify the steps they will take to accomplish this.
- **Area of responsibility approach**—The partnership is organized by committees associated with ongoing areas of responsibility, such as overall partnership recruitment, media relations, community outreach, fundraising, and program evaluation. Partners join one or more committees charged with carrying out their areas of responsibility in accordance with the vision. The work of the committees may be coordinated through a steering committee.

These structural approaches are not mutually exclusive. TB partnerships addressing complex issues may find that a combination of structural approaches works best for them.

Creating Decisionmaking Processes that Fit Your Needs

A variety of decisionmaking styles is available to partnerships. Some partners may be accustomed to making decisions on individual issues using either majority vote or consensus frameworks. However, both of these decisionmaking styles will present problems for multicultural partnerships dealing with complex issues if partners try to use these decisionmaking styles to adopt “one size fits all” approaches that fail to consider cultural differences.

Partnerships need to create decisionmaking processes and styles that allow partners to customize projects, decisions, and activities to achieve maximum fit and productivity for the diverse groups they are trying to serve. A collaborative decisionmaking style can help to achieve these goals. With collaborative decisionmaking

- Partners maintain concern for their own interests as well as those of others
- Open sharing of partners' needs, interests, and objectives is encouraged
- Partners seek win-win options agreeable to all partners⁴⁷

⁴⁷Ibid., 89.

A Step-by-Step Approach for Collaborative Decisionmaking⁴⁸

- **Step One:** Identify and define the issue.

Identifying an issue may not be as straightforward as it seems. Diverse partners may have very distinct perceptions of the issue being addressed. Their perceptions may be rooted in strongly held preconceived views on the best way to address the issue. However, at this stage of the decisionmaking process, it is inappropriate to discuss solutions. For collaborative decisionmaking to occur, partners must first be able to create a mutually agreed-upon definition of the issue. A facilitator helps identify objective language that all partners find agreeable. Ideally, the issue or problem can be framed as a goal that partners will work toward, with any barriers that might need to be overcome clearly identified.

Collaborative Decisionmaking

1. Identify and define the issue
2. Identify and understand concerns
3. Create options
4. Evaluate alternatives and select an approach

- **Step Two:** Identify and understand concerns.

Collaborative decisionmaking is more successful when partners understand the interests, uncertainties, worries, concerns, and suspicions that partners may associate with the issue being discussed.⁴⁹ Partners can then use this understanding to craft decisions that minimize concerns, while maximizing progress toward the group's common vision.

Some partners will prefer to discuss concerns one-on-one with a trusted partnership leader, rather than in a group setting. It is important for them to have this option. As trust among partners increases, suspicions and worries will tend to decrease.

Concerns your TB partnership may encounter:

- Material concerns involve tangible issues, such as protecting one's job or the way in which a budget is distributed.
- Process concerns refer to how decisions are made. A partner may believe that because he or she has more knowledge about a situation than others do, his or her perspective must be given more weight.
- Relational concerns come into play when partners believe that powerful partners may retaliate against them, or they are concerned about damaging a valued relationship.

⁴⁸Ibid., 18–52, 111–126.

⁴⁹Ibid.

- Matters of principle occur when a partner feels strongly that there is only one right way to proceed, which cannot be compromised. When differences are framed as matters of principle, they are almost impossible to resolve.
- **Step Three:** Create options.

One or more of the following approaches may be helpful when creating options:

- When partners can agree that the main barrier to coming to agreement is a lack of resources, deciding to look for additional resources may be a simple way to move partners forward.
- When an issue is complex, it is often helpful to identify and subdivide the issue into its component parts. Partners can then discuss which parts matter most to them and why. This process often results in partners being able to craft an option that encompasses the outcomes of greatest importance to each partner, while minimizing concerns associated with the issue.
- A trade-off approach may be helpful when trying to decide between two valuable options that cannot be completed at once. An agreement may be made to complete them sequentially, establishing timelines and assigning responsibilities for each.
- **Step Four:** Evaluate alternatives and select an approach.

At this stage, all options are weighed against the vision and the partners discuss the potential benefits of each option, as well as possible pitfalls. Options that are not strongly supported are removed from consideration. The approaches used to create options can be used to help with final selection.

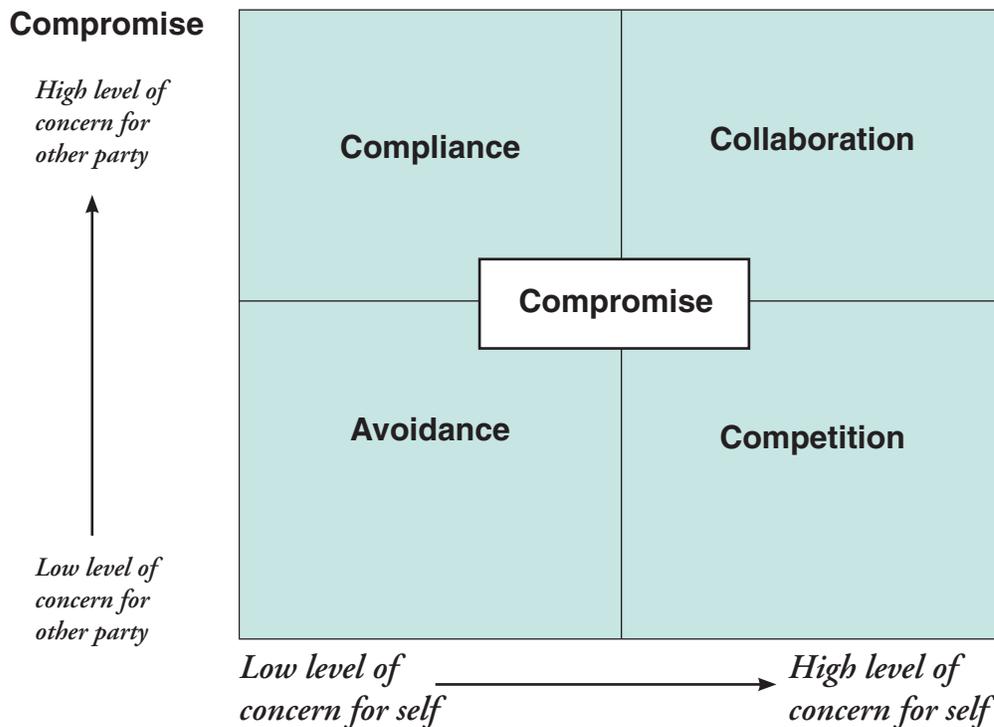
Anticipating and Managing Differences

Differences that result in conflict are a natural part of diverse groups partnering to address complex issues. Rather than seeing differences as a problem, it is helpful to view them as opportunities to expand the partnership's common vision and understanding of TB prevention and control. When partners are unable to view differences in this way, their differences can escalate into conflict. Unfortunately, perceiving differences as a problem appears to be a common occurrence in multisector partnerships addressing complex issues. Partners often try to avoid conflict by ignoring it or employ conflict resolution methods that are not helpful.

Conflicts are accompanied by tension. Consequently, recognizing the early signs of tension (body language, mild verbal expressions of frustration) and being prepared to address them before they escalate is a valuable skill. However, even the most contentious discussions can be effectively managed.

What follows are descriptions of common conflict resolution methods and the circumstances under which they are most helpful.⁵⁰

Conflict Resolution Methods



Adapted from *Essentials of Negotiation* (2nd ed.) by Lewicki, Saunders, and Minton.

- **Avoidance**—Avoiding or ignoring conflict appears to be the most common approach used by partnerships. However, its effectiveness is very limited. It may be popular because partners are uncomfortable or unskilled in dealing with conflict, or because they feel intimidated by another partner.

When the issue being avoided is important to one or more partners, it cannot really be avoided—only postponed. Often, postponement allows a difference to fester and become a full-blown conflict that threatens the partnerships ability to function. Avoiding conflict is only appropriate when the issue at the center of the conflict is of minimal importance to all partners. However, a partnership might choose to temporarily postpone addressing a conflict when partners need time to calm down. When this occurs, it is important to set a specific time when the issue will be addressed.

⁵⁰Ibid.

- **Compromise**—This is one of the more common conflict resolution styles used by health related partnerships. In fact, the term compromise is often viewed as synonymous with conflict resolution. However, this conflict resolution approach has limitations. It often results in mediocre solutions that are unsatisfying to the parties in conflict. The root of its limited effectiveness with partnerships may lie in an emphasis on seeking solutions before a conflict is fully understood
- **Compliance**—Partners more interested in helping the other party to arrive at a satisfactory outcome than in pursuing their own goals adopt this strategy. This approach is suitable when:
 - The issue is much more important to other partners than it is to you.
 - You could be wrong about the consequences or outcomes associated with your position.
 - The relationship with partners holding a distinct view is more important to the vision.
- **Collaboration**—As noted earlier in this section, partners using a collaborative approach maintain a high concern for their own interests as well as those of other partners. This approach is appropriate when the issue is important to the parties involved and input is required from multiple partners to solve a shared problem.
- **Competition**—By definition, partners who compete are most concerned with their own outcomes. This is a contentious approach to conflict management and may involve intimidating other partners. It is the conflict resolution strategy most often used when a win-lose outcome is desired or expected. It tends to be counterproductive in partnerships seeking to establish trusting relationships.

Tips and Strategies

Sometimes conflict escalates to the point where partners or stakeholders have become angry and unshakable in their differing perceptions of a situation. This can happen when partners or stakeholders:

- Fail to deal with the conflict in a timely fashion
- Have incompatible conflict resolution styles
- Communicate ineffectively and use accusatory language
- Lack confidence and respect for each other

When Differences Escalate into Conflict

- Diffuse tension and hostility
- Find similarities
- Divide the conflict into manageable parts

However, even the most contentious partnership differences can be managed effectively. The following are some approaches that may help⁵¹:

- **Diffuse tension and hostility**—Active listening can help to diffuse strong feelings. This type of listening requires acknowledging how the partners feel and sincerely showing that you empathize with them. By paraphrasing what the partner is saying, you communicate your understanding of the partner's points of view without expressing agreement with them. Depersonalize the conflict by helping partners separate the issues from the parties who hold them. Frame the conflict to make it clear that the issues are at stake, not the relationships.
- **Find similarities**—Parties in conflict may fail to remember they have anything in common. Acknowledging commonalities can help to de-escalate a conflict. The following approaches may help:
 - Mention goals and viewpoints that the partners share, including the partnership vision.
 - Have partners work with you to identify a conflict resolution process that is mutually agreeable and is in keeping with the partnership's operating principles.
- **Divide the conflict into manageable parts**—Addressing complex conflicts involving a number of issues can be cumbersome and frustrating. The following suggestions may help:
 - Acknowledge that the problem is complex and may not be able to be resolved in one meeting.
 - Have partners agree on a time limit for the discussions.
 - Work with partners to separate the problem into its component parts and discuss each separately. Start with the parts that seem to be the least contentious.
 - Help partners to frame differences in ways that minimize perceived matters of principle. When an issue is framed as a matter of principle, it is extremely difficult to resolve.
 - If partners fear that a solution will set an unacceptable precedent, help partners clarify whether they are willing to view the solution as an isolated agreement, rather than as a matter of precedent.

When you effectively manage the differences that exist within your partnership, you allow partners to develop higher levels of trust, commitment, and productivity.

⁵¹Ibid.

Related Resources

- *National Public Health Leadership Development Network*

The CDC, with the Association of Schools of Public Health and Saint Louis University, created this network. It provides a variety of resources and information designed to develop state and regional health care leadership dedicated to meeting local grassroots needs. The network's goals are accomplished by developing and enhancing individual and organizational leadership and management. Additional information on the network can be obtained from www.heartlandcenters.slu.edu/nln.