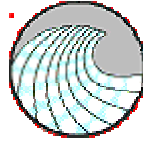




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World of Diverse Perspectives

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATIVE INTERNATIONAL/CROSS-
CULTURAL PROJECTS: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

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Abstract

All international projects involve working collaboratively with individuals and organizations. Building collaborative partnerships that are empowering is critical to the success of any project. Whether among non-profit, for profit or government agencies, at local, regional or national levels, there are techniques and processes that may be used to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes.

This participatory workshop is of interest to consultants, program managers, and project staff with previous and current experience in international collaborative projects in health as well as other sectors, and those who are interested in and anticipate future involvement in international projects.



Introduction

You are on a plane headed for Poland. You have been contracted as a consultant to work with key national stakeholders and representatives of two demonstration sites (one in an urban and one in a rural area) to help develop two Centres of Excellence in Primary Health Care.

(Refer to page 5 of this article for more detail on Centres of Excellence in Primary Health Care.)

You have never been to Poland before but you have experience working in Central and Eastern Europe and with other cultures, and you are a professional facilitator. The person who has contracted you was unable to describe what a Centre of Excellence in Primary Health Care was/meant for themselves or the Polish partners. Your initial meeting is at the Ministry of Health with key national stakeholders and demonstration site representatives.

- You have been hired to work with two potential project partners (one from Canada and the other from a Spanish-speaking country) to design an international project. You have one day to facilitate a meeting to frame the three year project.
- You have been contracted to design and facilitate an international workshop in Moscow that will involve participants from 15 different countries that you will facilitate in English with interpretation in Russian.
- You are contracted to design and facilitate a strategic planning workshop with Ukrainians who have recently founded a public sector organization in Ukraine. The workshop will be facilitated with the assistance of a Ukrainian interpreter.

These four scenarios are examples of international projects you, as a facilitator, may encounter. This paper will highlight some key issues and concerns related to planning and implementing such collaborative international/cross-cultural projects, and also discuss/identify

lessons learned from designing and facilitating such projects. Sample processes and techniques will be presented to add to the "tool kit" of experienced facilitators.

Clarification of Key Terms

*What do I mean when I speak of **international projects**?* International projects may be of short term or longer term duration. A short term project could involve the third situation/scenario listed above (i.e. the design and facilitation of an international workshop that involves individuals from different countries). Participants may speak the same language (e.g. Spanish) and come from similar cultures, or they may speak different languages and come from different cultures (e.g. both Western and Eastern Europe) with the primary language of communication for the workshop being English. A longer term project could involve consulting over a year or more on an international project that has been up and running but is not moving forward, or being involved on the "front end" development of a project and then managing it over three years.

*What is a **collaborative partnership** and what can be done to enhance the likelihood for success in building and maintaining international collaborative partnerships?* The literature abounds with definitions of partnerships; however one that I prefer is "relationships involving the sharing of power, work and /or support with others for the achievement of mutual and/or compatible objectives" (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, 1992). **Collaboration** is "... a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (Gray, 1989, p.5). Gray, an organizational theorist, sees collaboration as a kaleidoscope. She likens the pieces of coloured glass within a kaleidoscope to the various stakeholders involved in a collaborative process, which, when effective, leads to the forming and reforming of new images, or in other words to synergy, in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.



Thus collaboration is a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem or issue, can openly explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited visions of what is possible.

Habana-Hafner et al. (1989) developed a model that identifies three stages in the development of partnerships and a handbook that includes tools for use in each stage that is useful for facilitating new partnerships.

Based on my own experience and that of others, building and maintaining successful partnerships requires a process that involves the development of a shared vision; participating organizations' commitment to the vision (i.e. senior management of partners provides visible support); the early identification of roles, responsibilities and resource commitments of partners; regular, on-going communications; and flexible, complementary partners (Thompson & Stachenko, 1996).

Before moving to the development of a shared vision (as outlined above), it is important to have partners articulate the current situation (e.g. ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT SITUATION RELATED TO TEAMS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION IN AREA X - There are many teams focussed on a variety of specific topics; Variations exist in the functioning of teams; Some teams include nurses, physicians, lawyers, teachers, administrators, specialists, police and firemen; Have noted the positive aspects of collaborative work and see the advantages of sharing financial resources to accomplish tasks/goals. NOTE that these points would be facilitated with the facilitator providing the key question and outlining the process to get the group started.) Facilitating the "piece" on the current situation early on in partnership development, not only "grounds" people in the present which is necessary before visioning a

desired future, it also provides the consultants and partners with a better understanding of a group's context and perspective.

Key Issues and Concerns and Corresponding Lessons Learned

As a facilitator thinking about working in international/cross-cultural situations, a number of questions or concerns may come to mind. A few of these questions are listed below with corresponding responses/lessons learned.

Question 1: Will my processes work in another language and culture?

Response/Lessons Learned:

From personal experience, I know that many of the processes I use when facilitating in English in North America, work effectively in other languages and cultures. An example is the Issue Analysis. This involves structured brainstorming, theming and prioritization of key themes if the group wishes. The process can be used when initially working with a group who has not previously worked together; to break down a complex issue or project into its component parts; and to uncover a variety of perspectives on an issue in a nonjudgmental manner. An example of an Issue Analysis follows.

ISSUE STATEMENT: *What are your key issues and concerns related to moving Organization X toward the year 2003? (Write on flip chart.)*

Step 1: Encourage brainstorming of a list of ideas prefacing each one with "I wish" or "how to" ; (e.g. How to ensure the long term viability of the organization; How to capitalize on our Board's background and experience; I wish we knew what external factors will affect Organization X in the next 3 years; I wish I didn't always feel like I was just "keeping my head above water".) (Without interpretation allow 35 to 40 minutes; double this time if working through an interpreter)



Step 2: Generate the key themes (try to keep to a maximum of 7 to 8) from the above list of ideas (e.g. Financial; Human Resources) (Without interpretation 5 to 10 minutes; double if require interpretation)

Step 3: Prioritize the key themes: A1 = Essential; A = Very Important; B = Important; C = Nice to have/ a luxury (5 to 10 minutes; double this time if working with an interpreter)

Question #2: Do I need to be able to speak the language of a group to effectively facilitate group processes with them?

Response/Lessons Learned: From experience, I have found that it is not necessary for one to speak the language of a group to effectively facilitate group processes with them. However, it is obviously beneficial if one can speak the language of the group(s) one is facilitating. In these situations, a good interpreter who has been briefed in advance regarding how you work, is critical.

Question #3: Will participants understand and have words for the terms I use, and how will I know?

Response/Lessons Learned: If an interpreter is taking what seems like a long time to translate something, there is a good possibility a word or concept you have used does not exist in that language. An example is when I was facilitating a workshop in Moscow, Russia about a year after the wall came down and I used the word advocacy (an English speaking participant contributed this word). The interpreter took about five minutes to translate the concept as the word advocate or advocacy did not exist in the former Soviet Union. When I inquired what was taking so long (with eye contact and body language), the interpreter stated that the word did not exist in Russian and that he was discussing with participants how best to describe it.

Question #4: If I am working with an interpreter, how can I ensure (or try to) that what I am capturing in English on a flip chart (based on an interpreter's translation) is comparable to what is being contributed and spoken about by participants in a session? Conversely, how can I be certain that what I am saying in English to participants is being appropriately translated to them?

Response/Lessons Learned: One can never be 100 percent certain when working through an interpreter, that what they are translating (in one or both directions) is what has been communicated. However, a good way to check this out is to periodically ask if what you are saying is clear; watch for body language; and have a minimum of 2 flipcharts being written on simultaneously, one in English by you and the other by the interpreter or his assistant, in the other language. Following the session, have someone from the partner organization take responsibility for having the report typed in their language, you as facilitator have your report typed up and then have the other document read by someone fluent in (e.g. Russian) to ensure that all of the key concepts have been appropriately translated. If more precision is required, the foreign language report can be backtranslated into English by someone who was not part of the original workshop, and then compared with the English report to ensure consistency.

Question #5: How will I know I have been working effectively with a group whose first language I do not speak?

Response/Lessons Learned: One tool to assist in assessing how a facilitated session went with people working in English or through an interpreter/interpreters in another language, is to use a Participatory Evaluation. This process can be used at the end of a meeting, day-long session or at the end of a longer workshop. It involves setting up your flip chart with three columns headed by : What Worked (What I liked about today), Concerns, and Suggestions for



Improvement (e.g. If we were to do something similar in the future, what would you recommend?). Then you facilitate the feedback from participants requesting them to be candid in their assessment.

Some Additional Lessons

Be careful not to impose your own ideas and definitions on a group. Use processes that enable you to clarify the group's definitions and perspectives. For example, When working in Poland as a consultant to assist in reforming the health system, I was asked to work with national stakeholders and senior health system managers in a rural and an urban area to develop Centres of Excellence in Primary Health Care. I could have defined the term/concept from my own perspective and presented it to them at the outset to see if it was what they had in mind; instead I asked if they would feel comfortable brainstorming what a Centre of Excellence in Primary Health Care would look like for them. I happened to have "Static Images" with me (plastic flip charts that cling to walls without tape), posted them in an office and got the following from participants, which I later slightly massaged and used throughout the project to set parameters for work at the regional and local levels.

A Centre of Excellence in Primary Health Care:

- *Demonstrates interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration*
- *Is client-centred e.g. responds to health needs of local population*
- *Emphasizes health promotion and prevention*
- *Serves as a centre of education and research*
- *Makes contracts for different services e.g. palliative care*
- *Serves as an "expert" model for Poland*
- *Demonstrates quality, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of services*

- *Collaborates with foreign institutions.* (Thompson, January 1996, p. 10)

When facilitating the development of longer term projects in particular, the following set of values related to partnerships may be useful to have agreement on from each partner.

Values/Beliefs Related to Partnerships

- "1) The benefits of partnering outweigh the disadvantages i.e. together we can accomplish more than each of our individual organizations working alone.
- 2) Successful partnerships are characterized by openness, trust, and mutual respect.
- 3) Sharing a common vision and having commitment to that vision from individual representatives and their organizations is crucial.
- 4) The roles and responsibilities of partners are clearly defined and understood by all parties involved."

(Extracted from workshop handout "Building Effective Partnerships to Enhance Women's Health" presented by Pam Thompson and Monica Riutort at the 4th Canadian Conference on International Health in Ottawa, Canada , November 1997.)

Alternatively, this set of values may be used as a springboard for partners to develop their own set of values which may be facilitated. One way to do this is to use the stem: *We believe in/that:*

This section has provided a beginning list of questions and lessons learned which will be added to by workshop participants.

Conclusion

Designing and facilitating processes with clients from other countries and cultures is a challenging yet stimulating and rewarding experience. It provides opportunities to "test out" processes that work within our own cultural contexts and enables us to utilize our creativity.



Being flexible, feeling comfortable with people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, being open to new learning and self-reflection, having a sense of adventure and a willingness to take risks, are all qualities that are helpful for international work.

It is hoped that the issues identified and lessons learned, have provided you with some tools, techniques and insights that will assist you in planning and implementing future collaborative international/cross-cultural projects.

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The Presenter

Pamela Thompson, MSc. has been working internationally for more than 12 years. She has a broad background and experience working as a health care provider, university professor, and consultant, in Canada at the federal and regional levels, and internationally. She has extensive experience designing and facilitating multistakeholder meetings, workshops and consultation processes locally, nationally and internationally.

In 1992, Pam started her own consulting firm - InPro Consulting Inc. Her company specializes in facilitation, qualitative research (e.g. focus groups and indepth interviews), and research and writing. Her clients include: the World Health Organization, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Canadian Society for International Health, Health Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Coast Guard and the Pan American Health Organization. She is a member of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA) and ICA Canada (Institute for Cultural Affairs), and is currently a director on the Board of the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH Canada), an international nongovernmental organization. Pam has presented and published a number of articles, papers and a book chapter on such topics as: planning and implementing culturally sensitive health promotion programs, building and mobilizing effective partnerships, evaluating community development projects and multicultural health education.