

Top Twenty Questions to Ask Your Collaborative Partner

Think about the last time you created or joined a collaborative project or partnership. In my experience, I have felt optimistic, excited, and hopeful. I've also felt nervous, territorial, and skeptical. Did I outwardly share these feelings? Not usually, because like so many of us, we are focused on the work itself to explore new or enhanced potential programs, services, etc. We usually don't take the time to share and process how we are showing up to the work, our feelings, expectations, and needs.

In my decades plus work supporting multiple coalitions and collaborative projects, I have noticed the negative impact that can occur when we miss opportunities for early, deep, and authentic understanding. When we miss chances for empathetic connection with our collaborative partners it can unfortunately influence the impact we can achieve.

At its root, empathy is about understanding that your perspective is just your own and that you are making space for another person's experiences to live alongside yours. **We do not often address how each person (and by proxy, organization) might feel about the collaboration, what they fear, what excites them, and what they are wondering about.** Can you imagine how your collaborative relationships could be shaped by first drawing out authenticity and vulnerability vs. diving headfirst into the work?

Knowing the answers to these questions is key because collaboration should not only be focused on how we best leverage assets and superpowers, but ultimately how we meet people where they are and create mutual value. People will not participate fully in activities or solutions that do not create value or solve problems for them. We can't create collaborations that benefit all partners until we understand their needs, wants, fears, perspectives, and context, and that is the power of empathy and asking new questions.



Top Twenty Questions to Ask Your Collaborative Partner

- 1.** Why are we here? What is the challenge we are here to address?
- 2.** What is the vision and what are the intended outcomes?
- 3.** Why was my organization asked to be here? How was I selected to represent my organization?
- 4.** How have our separate organizations addressed this challenge in the past? What worked and what didn't?
- 5.** What work have we done together in the past? What was positive and negative about that experience?
- 6.** What are you looking for me and for each person to provide?
- 7.** How much time do you estimate my organization and I will have to dedicate to this project?
- 8.** What are the financial and other resources for this project? What are the total dollar amounts?
- 9.** How will money be distributed and how will these funds be divided among the partners?
- 10.** How will my organization be recognized for our contributions to the program or project?



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- 11.** Will my organization be able to present our own individual data and experiences to funders directly?
- 12.** How will my agency provide feedback about the success of the collaboration and the functionality of our partnership?
- 13.** Outside of this project, what are the key priority areas that your agency is focused on?
- 14.** What are some of the most significant challenges and opportunities that you are currently addressing as an organization?
- 15.** What are some elements about this collaboration that make you the most excited or hopeful?
- 16.** What are some elements about this collaboration that make you the most nervous or that make you the most concerned about in terms of impacting the success?
- 17.** What have you experienced in the past with other agencies that has generated successful collaborative work?
- 18.** What have you experienced in the past that did not work well for collaboration and led to disappointing results?
- 19.** What must be true for this to be a successful collaboration? In other words, what assumptions might we be making about our work together that could impact our ability to reach our vision of success?
- 20.** What are some ground rules that are very important to your organization and us working together?

