

Powerful Connections: Building Partnerships Across Organizations

Individuals who have trained in the same profession and do related work have a lot in common. Cross-organizational partnerships provide structures for individuals to find each other and pursue topics that are of shared importance to them. Partnerships help individuals to define their roles and develop shared beliefs and practice standards. Increasingly, partnerships are going beyond the boundaries of defined organizational missions and collaborating with external groups that are influential in creating changes that they support.

Tips for Building Cross-Organizational Partnerships

1. Show interest in potential partners. Learn what they do and with whom they do it.
2. Be aware of current initiatives. Be ready to show how your work might expand or deepen a current investment.
3. Study partners' stated positions. Be able to express how your work will enable them to advance or confirm a stated position.
4. Let partners know who your allies are. Show potential partners the reach you and your allies have on the issue.
5. Ask for input. Learn how your new partners see the issue and the collaboration by asking for input on ways to approach issues. Reflect on what they tell you.
6. Know what is at risk for partners. Ask them to stretch, but be careful about asking them to take risks.
7. Share the work and the credit. Be keenly aware of relationships in early collaborations. Check in often.
8. Focus on the task *and* the relationship in every collaboration. Even long-standing partners must feel valued.
9. Tell your partners how your collaboration has uniquely impacted your outcomes. Ask about the benefit to their outcomes.

Professional associations, family groups, and issue-based entities are all examples of cross-organizational partnerships. These groups can coalesce participants, impart information, and shape practice. Individuals pay attention to messages that come from the partnerships to which they belong. When faced with a practice change, practitioners and families often rely on the positions expressed by these partnerships to inform their behavior more than the information provided by formal leaders in their respective organizations.

Given their reach and influence, partnerships can be conveners of collaboration or gatekeepers to interaction. In an increasingly connected world, partnerships unlock the power in working across organizations to form networks that garner shared support on issues. See *Tips for Cross-Organizational Collaboration* for a summary of key tips for successfully partnering within and across organizations.

Organizations can form partnerships through cross-stakeholder collaboration, which offers great opportunities and some unique challenges. The IDEA Partnership, an investment in authentic engagement and stakeholder expertise made by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), provides some transferable lessons summarized in several useful tools.

- **Partnerships across organizations are learning endeavors.**

Partnerships are not about convincing another group to agree or using another group's standing in the field to advance your own issues. Partnerships are an exchange, a negotiation in which both sides learn about an issue that connects them in the current work and beyond. The initial exchange is important in setting the tone for future work. Potential partners need to be comfortable with the ways they will interact. Sometimes, one partner must demonstrate value before the other can envision the new relationship.

Visit *Leading by Convening* and access the tool, [Give Value First](#).

- **Partnerships across organizations are reciprocal.**

Each partner must find value in the new shared work. For a collaboration to impact practice, it must have value to the members to the extent that they will take the work into their own networks.

Visit *Leading by Convening* and access [Four Simple Questions](#), with special emphasis on Questions 3 and 4.

- **Partnerships across organizations are investments.**

Relationships are often undervalued as strategic investments. Initial work can often build relationships that can play out on many issues and over time. In a partnership, focus on both the task and the relationships. Build a reputation as a collaborator.

Visit *Leading by Convening* and access the tool, [Your Brand](#).

- **Organizing helps us to be better collaborators.**

- **Initial partnerships are often challenging as new work exposes differences that may not have been apparent initially.**

The term *collaboration* is used so easily and so often that many people fail to ask what it means to a potential partner. Depth of collaboration varies from symbolic participation to co-creation, co-branding, and lasting relationships as allies. Take time to learn what a potential partner envisions. Imagine together what might be!

Visit *Leading by Convening* to access the tool, [Defining Our Core](#) to help learn to express connections clearly and simply.

- **Differences in vocabulary can present substantial barriers if they are not addressed.**

Every discipline has its own ways of talking about shared issues. Potential collaborators must find their way through these differences. Some groups talk about developing a shared vocabulary. Others ask, "Why would we create a vocabulary that neither group uses in daily practice?" Understanding the language of partners is both a sign of engagement and a genuine learning experience.

Visit *Leading by Convening* and access the tool, [Learn the Language: Make the Connection](#).

Operating as an engaged and informed collaborator can help make collaborations stronger and more effective. These strategies can help ensure that partnerships are beneficial to all participants and help advance knowledge and action on the issue at hand.