

# WORKING TOWARD THE FUTURE:

## Why and How to Collaborate Effectively

By Judith Berman

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Corrections professionals increasingly are being called upon to collaborate with others in the criminal and juvenile justice systems. The efforts occur at multiple levels of practice, from multidisciplinary case-management teams that can include treatment providers, victim advocates, family members and others, to broad-based policy development initiatives that address some of the most challenging issues facing criminal justice systems. Such policy-focused activities include: reentry policy teams to better coordinate institutional and community corrections policies and practices, jail crowding projects designed to evaluate and maximize use of jail resources, female offender initiatives that look at differences between male and female offenders and how well the system responds to those differences, and general criminal and juvenile justice system councils to review and improve the administration of justice.

According to experts in organizational development, collaboration requires at least two types of basic competencies: technical competency, which refers to substantive knowledge and skills related to the project at hand; and personal competency, which is the ability to work with others as part of a team.<sup>1</sup> Those who possess both competencies are best equipped to move the field forward as collaboration becomes progressively more important to the practice of corrections.

### What Is Collaboration?

Collaboration has become something of a buzzword in the past several years. Federal grant programs often require evidence of a multidisciplinary project team as a condition of funding, and projects in both the public and private sectors are touted as collaboratives, as if this signifies particular creativity, efficiency or both. Collaboration has been recognized as an appropriate and effective strategy for addressing some of the country's most complicated, multidimensional problems, as well as for

maximizing efficient use of available resources. However, this does not mean that everyone who uses the term collaboration is actually doing it.

In some jurisdictions, holding interdisciplinary meetings to share information passes for collaboration. In others, signing a memorandum of understanding supporting another agency's project is considered collaboration. But, these activities fall short of the commitment, investment and vision necessary for true collaboration. According to David Chrislip and Carl Larson, two prominent experts in

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the field, collaboration is: “a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties to achieve common goals by sharing responsibility, authority and accountability for achieving results. It is more than simply

sharing knowledge and information (communication), and more than a relationship that helps each party achieve its own goals (cooperation and coordination). The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party.”<sup>2</sup>

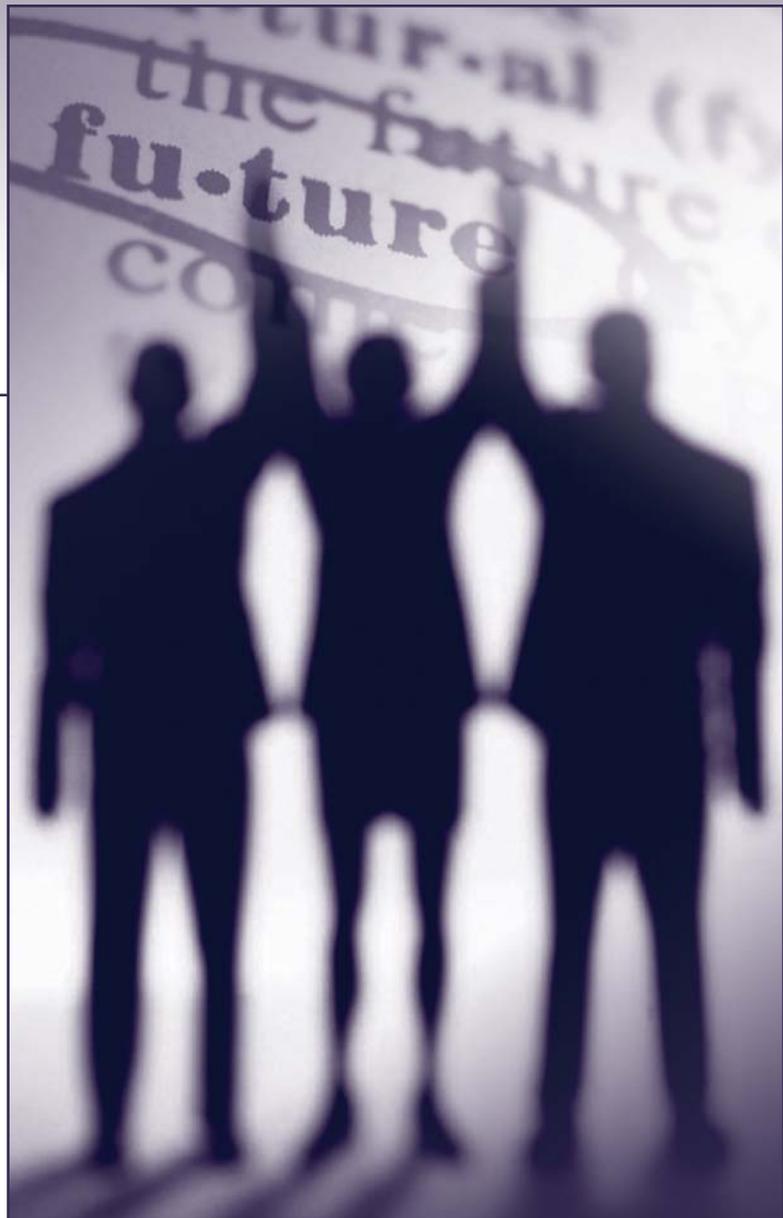
In the context of the criminal and juvenile justice systems, there are many concerns that affect each organization or agency that “go beyond the purview of any particular party.” Collaboration makes change possible within the criminal and juvenile justice systems that otherwise would be impossible.

Although definitions of collaboration can vary according to the particular context within which they are applied, all researchers in the collaborations field identify the need for a shared vision or common purpose to both motivate and structure the collaborative endeavor. For example, Chris Huxham notes that when groups collaborate they exchange information, alter activities, share resources and “enhance the capacity of another for the mutual benefit of all and to achieve a common purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Collaborations may be built around values that are common to those working in a particular field. For example, many working in corrections share a commitment to promoting public safety. The leadership of a collaborative effort may choose to invite only those stakeholders who are believed to share a particular set of values.

Nonetheless, the shared vision or common purpose must be defined and articulated by those stakeholders who comprise the collaborative team to ensure buy-in and agreement. Each member must come to see the team's purpose as larger than his or her individual interests, whatever those may be (reputation, revenue, publicity, personal satisfaction, etc.). Members must believe that any member of the team can be trusted to advance that larger purpose.

When teams come together to accomplish a particular mission, the work they do consists of both task functions and process functions. Task functions directly address the substantive topic at hand, such as collecting data on the number and types of offenders coming through the system or discussing the use of a particular type of intermediate sanction and the circumstances under which it might be applied. Process functions address how the team is going to do its work together, including setting a schedule of meetings, articulating a confidentiality policy for the group, setting up ground rules for team meetings, and articulating the vision and mission that will guide the team's work. Both task and process functions are necessary for teams to be successful, but most teams are both more familiar and more comfortable with task functions. Indeed, process functions can make some team members uncomfortable, because many criminal justice professionals are "doers" who have achieved success in their fields because they are confident, decisive and action-oriented.

What many of these doers miss is that actions are most effective when the goals are clear. If a team does not dedicate time to establishing a shared vision and mission, then an action (which a particular individual might consider effective) may not get the team any closer to its goals, since each team member may have a different idea of what those goals should be. Larson and LaFasto, whose book *TeamWork: What Must Go Right, What Can Go Wrong* documents the factors that contribute to successful teams, point out that "whenever an ineffectively functioning team was identified and described, the explanation for the team's ineffectiveness involved, in one sense or another, the goal." Similarly, if time is not dedicated to articulating roles and responsibilities of team members, accountability will be impossible and low standards will dominate. Getting a team ready to collaborate on substance does not



require that all task functions be set aside. In fact, incremental progress on a task is essential to building team momentum and securing commitment. But time must also be dedicated to the process of effective collaboration.

## Competent Team Members

To be a competent team member, then, is to be skilled in both task and process functions. This suggests that corrections professionals must know as much as possible about the policies and practices of the agency or department they represent, including where to go for information they may not personally have on hand. They should have some knowledge of the history of the agency or department, particularly in terms of its relationships with other agencies and departments. They should be up-to-date on research and best practice information, or be willing to invest the time and energy to become so. However, although this knowledge is necessary, it is not sufficient. Equally important, competent team members also must understand the purpose of process functions and be

willing participants in process-oriented activities. They need to understand group dynamics and how they can most positively influence the dynamics of the particular group, for example by volunteering to take on necessary tasks and showing enthusiasm for the project. They must be willing to participate in the give and take required by collaborative activities, share knowledge voluntarily and accept new ideas, especially when they come from others outside the corrections field. Competent team members must be willing to trust others in the system and know how to earn the trust of others.

The Center for Effective Public Policy has partnered with the State Justice Institute (SJI), the National Institute of Corrections, the U.S. Department of Justice and others to improve the capacity of state, local and tribal collaborative teams to develop effective criminal justice policies on a variety of issues. In more than two decades of work, there have been few policy teams that did not, at least at first, balk at the notion of spending project time and money on something as apparently superfluous as process. But these same teams, especially ones that consider their work successful, have invariably looked back on activities such as the process of developing a vision and mission statement (and the statements themselves) as providing crucial guidance to their work. In fact, the greater the challenges and obstacles faced by the team, the more they came to appreciate the steadiness of purpose provided by these documents and the experience of creating them. Chris Murphy, deputy chief of adult probation and parole in Montgomery County, Pa., and leader of a collaborative team that focuses on sex offender management, says that his work with victim advocates to create a mission statement was key. "It forced us to focus on what we have in common rather than on our differences," Murphy said. "When we all realized that we shared a commitment to ending sexual victimization, our work together could really begin."

Competency in collaboration does not mean that every individual is prepared to lead or facilitate a collaborative team. Leadership and facilitation are important skills but are not required of every participant. Basic people skills are required. Some professionals are more people-oriented than others, while some prefer working alone to working in groups. But whether group-oriented or not, there are ways to increase their collaborative competency. They should:

- Show up on time, give the group their full attention, turn their cell phone or pager to vibrate, and respond only to emergencies.
- Show up consistently. When team members make an effort to be present, others see that as a demonstration of commitment and, therefore, are more willing to make the commitment themselves.
- Adhere to whatever ground rules or standards are established by the group. If none are articulated, they

should set their own standards high. Better yet, they should suggest that the group establish ground rules and standards.

- Be prepared, participate and be willing to be held accountable. They should complete group or individual assignments/tasks. They should take advantage of process activities to get to know other members of the team.
- Be aware of their body language. They should not let their posture or facial expressions communicate a lack of interest or lack of respect for another team member's contributions. Instead, they should listen actively and make an effort to understand what others are trying to say before responding.

These basic practices are fundamental to all kinds of group work, but are especially important when working in collaboration with others. Successful collaboration requires trust, and these practices help to build a climate of trust so that effective collaborative work can take place.

## Challenges and Benefits Of Collaboration

Participating in criminal or juvenile justice collaborations can be challenging for all kinds of professionals for different reasons. Prosecutors and defense attorneys must relinquish their polarizing roles and find common ground in policies that both protect individual rights and public safety. Judges must be vigilant about protecting their neutrality, because even general issues addressed in a group can be perceived as influencing their position on individual cases.

Victim services professionals must be willing to participate in developing policies to help offenders succeed, insofar as success implies that offenders will no longer engage in offending behavior. For corrections professionals, the challenge may involve opening the often closed world of correctional decision-making to the scrutiny of others and allowing them to participate. It may also involve the challenge of cross-cultural communication, because institutional environments often have their own unique and distinctly hierarchical system of operations.

Among the greatest benefits of collaboration is the increase in mutual understanding. For many in the criminal and juvenile justice systems, cases end when an offender is sentenced or a delinquent is adjudicated. These practitioners often have little idea of how the choices they make impact the choices available to those who manage the offenders. A good example is how probation or parole conditions can enhance or limit a probation or parole officer's ability to effectively manage a particular offender or type of offender. Another is how a decision to start using jail instead of bail for a certain category of offender can cause crowding or understaffing in the jail. The simple exchange of information that takes place in the context of collaboration can often be sufficient to create positive change.

Perhaps a more important benefit to corrections is the ability to share responsibility for the safety of the public.

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Corrections professionals carry a huge burden in terms of ensuring that dangers posed by charged and adjudicated offenders are properly managed. When decisions are made in the context of a collaborative, the entire team, in effect, agrees to support the corrections professionals in their adherence to policy, even when particular cases do not turn out as successfully as everyone would have hoped. Team members speak out for funding for each other's departments and programs, understanding that the entire system will benefit when adequate funding is provided to corrections. When professionals have been working in a system that is fundamentally adversarial, where fingers are pointed and blame is assigned, it can be difficult to trust that others will genuinely stand up for each other in front of the community, the media or the legislature. But this is exactly what happens when collaboration is successful.

## Collaborative Justice

In recognition of the need for support in many jurisdictions throughout the country where collaborations are being developed (either by necessity, funding requirements or both), SJI and the Center for Effective Public Policy have developed the Collaborative Justice Web site, [www.collaborativejustice.org](http://www.collaborativejustice.org), to present several products that are dedicated to supporting collaboration in the criminal and juvenile justice systems. Products on the Web site include a training curriculum for a multiday workshop to enhance the effectiveness of criminal justice teams. This curriculum includes nine modules that address such issues as values, vision, problem identification, mission, group dynamics, and roles and responsibilities of team members. It also includes an experiential learning exercise that gives teams a new and vital perspective on themselves and their work together. The curriculum has been piloted successfully with hundreds of teams from around the country, including reentry policy projects, sex offender management teams, drug courts, juvenile justice enhancement teams, domestic violence coordinating councils and others. Corrections professionals have found it to be extremely effective. One parole supervisor who serves on a drug court reentry team called the First Annual Collaboration Institute (the first formal workshop convened after the curriculum was finalized) an "excellent workshop. Probably one of the best I've been to. I wish I would have had this workshop in the beginning of my career."

Monographs on the Collaborative Justice Web site cover a number of topics of importance to collaborative teams. These include effective facilitation, leadership and information-based system planning. Other products include an article addressing the growth of collaboration in criminal justice contexts and several in-depth case studies from jurisdictions that sought SJI's and the Center for Effective Public Policy's assistance to improve and sustain their collaborative efforts. These resources are unique insofar as they address particular benefits and challenges specifically for criminal justice professionals who are attempting to use collaborative approaches to problem-solving in their jurisdictions.

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## Working Toward the Future

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### Choosing to Collaborate

Collaboration is quickly becoming standard operating procedure in the criminal justice field. As corrections professionals begin to view corrections as the public does — more as a system and less as a set of discrete operations — their ability to work with others beyond the corrections field will become mandatory. Collaborating requires knowledge in addition to the expertise and technical skills needed to manage populations of offenders. It requires an understanding of how collaboration alters relationships between stakeholders, creating partnerships and leveling hierarchies. Perhaps more important, it requires a willingness to engage in activities that promote a unity of purpose with others and a recognition that these activities are essential in getting the job done well. As Murphy explains, “We’re better equipped to protect the community when we collaborate. The only ones who benefit from the system not talking are the offenders.”

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> LaFasto, F. and C. Larson. 1989. *Teamwork: What must go right, what can go wrong*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

<sup>2</sup> Chrislip, D. and C. Larson. 1994. *Collaborative leadership: How citizens and civic leaders can make a difference*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

<sup>3</sup> Huxham, C. 1996. *Creating collaborative advantage*. London: Sage.

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### Additional Resources

In addition to the resources cited in this article and those found on [www.collaborativejustice.org](http://www.collaborativejustice.org), the following resources are available to assist criminal and juvenile justice teams with their collaborative work:

Chrislip, D. and C. Larson. 1994. *Collaborative leadership: How citizens and civic leaders can make a difference*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

LaFasto, F. and C. Larson. 2001. *When teams work best: 6,000 team members and leaders tell what it takes to succeed*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

National Institute of Corrections and Crime and Justice Institute. 2004. *Implementing evidence-based principles in community corrections: Collaboration for systemic change in the criminal justice system*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections, Command Corrections Division; Boston: Crime and Justice Institute. Available at [www.nicic.org/Library/019343](http://www.nicic.org/Library/019343).

Straus, D. 2002. *How to make collaboration work: Powerful ways to build consensus, solve problems, and make decisions*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

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