Making the Leap

A practical guide to inter-agency collaboration

Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

the Australia and New Zealand
School of Government

Government and community-sector agencies have an equal stake in producing better social services. Many novel policy ideas have come to government from the not-for-profit sector, and there is a long record of governments fostering community-sector innovation. Now, there is an increasing understanding that no single agency can address complex social problems on their own. This has brought about a new interest in how agencies can pool their complementary expertise to design and deliver more effective programs and services.

There is a growing literature on collaboration but very little of it serves as a guide for practice. This guide aims to fill this gap by sharing practical insights drawn from interviews with public and community sector managers with recent first-hand experience of inter-agency and cross-sectoral collaboration. It has been produced in the hope that the tips contained here will offer concrete guidance for managers who want to 'make the leap' from cooperation to genuine collaboration with like-minded agencies.

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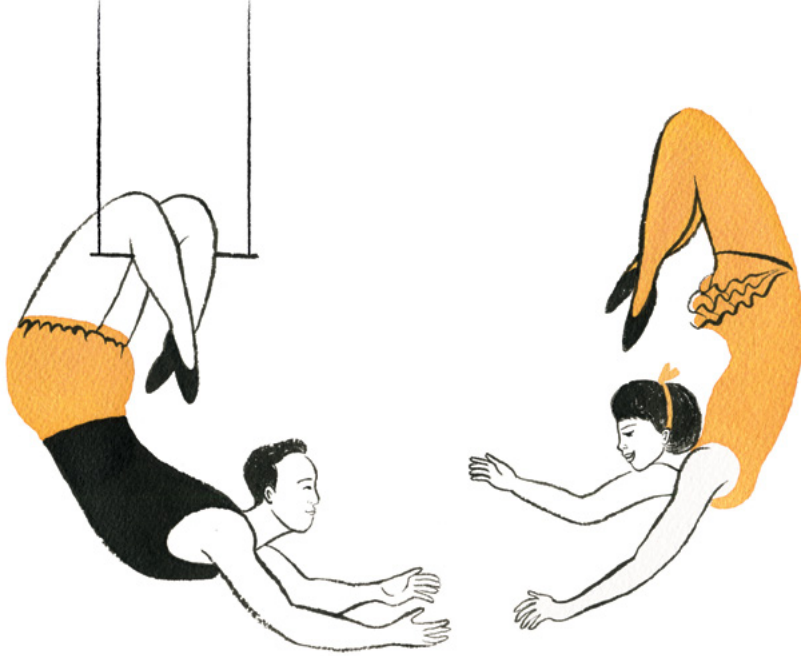
Reach out to allies.

Policy innovation demands a fresh perspective. People from different agencies see problems differently. This can be a good thing or a bad thing. Complex problem solving requires specialist knowledge. But within the silo, specialisation can lead to stale thinking that reproduces a narrow service response. When organisations come together, they bring distinct viewpoints to the conversation. Initiate dialogue with other agencies to form a more complete understanding of the problem. Look outside your own context to fully appreciate the other party's context and language. Focus on the bigger picture: a more nuanced outlook opens up the possibility of a creative policy response.

'You can often look at the service system and you could say, "That's not working." You can point to the resources and the funding and how that can be delivered in a different way.'

- A community sector manager

Prepare
to collaborate.

Collaboration is a durable relationship based on a shared purpose. It is not just networking or sharing information. Nor is it outsourcing policy design. Successful collaboration hinges on trust, but trust must be built up. Engage in open and honest dialogue about what your organisation wants to achieve. Expect to pool knowledge and resources, and to share both risks and rewards. Collaboration doesn't mean agreeing on everything, but committing to move forward together.

'It's hard to know what the magic ingredient was. I tend to think it was alignment, because there was alignment around what we wanted to achieve, and a desire to be creative in that space.'

- A public sector manager

Get the right people on board.

Once you have clarity of purpose, it is time to assemble your team. This could take the form of an inter-agency steering committee or working group. Whatever form it takes, what matters is that it brings together the people needed to take the policy idea forward. The right people will include those who have the knowledge of what needs to happen and those with the authority and capacity to get it done.

'It was great that they trusted our people. I mean we certainly had a good team on board. Without that, you wouldn't have been able to build that trust and confidence.'

- A community sector manager

Enlist a champion.

Innovation inevitably encounters some resistance. This may be because the project breaks with established ways of doing things or directly contravenes existing rules. Sometimes this resistance is warranted, at other times these conventions are no longer fit for purpose and need to be confronted. To do this, you need someone on side who commands broad respect and has the authority within government to broker a solution.

'Governments are such big machines that you need advocates within the bureaucracy. You really do need advocates all the way up the line. It is really important to get people that advocate for the program and want it to continue. If you don't, you don't go very far.'

- A community sector manager

Build on common ground.

Even when you're committed to the same cause, differences of opinion are unavoidable. But it is important not to let tensions derail the project. Managers must instil an 'us' rather than an 'us versus them' culture. This may involve keeping everyone focused on what they can achieve together and leading though example, for instance by cultivating a respectful relationship with their counterparts.

'There's a natural tension. It's not about you, you can't be precious about your own views. You have to be up for some arguments along the way and be true to what we're trying to achieve. It's not about us versus them, it's really about looking at how this works on the ground in practice.'

- A community sector manager

Demonstrate commitment.

Building trust requires more than rhetoric. For the parties to trust one another, they each must show that they are prepared to go beyond their contractual obligations. One way to demonstrate commitment is to invest ample resources – time, effort and money among them. Set aside power differences and territorial disputes. It's not about one party getting their way or asserting dominance. You need to establish that you are motivated by the common good, not narrow self-interest.

'One of the big trust elements is that we're all committed to the outcome of the program. It's pretty hard not to want to pull together if you've got a common set of values and a common goal. It's much easier to start working together than otherwise.'

- A public sector manager

Combine
your strengths.
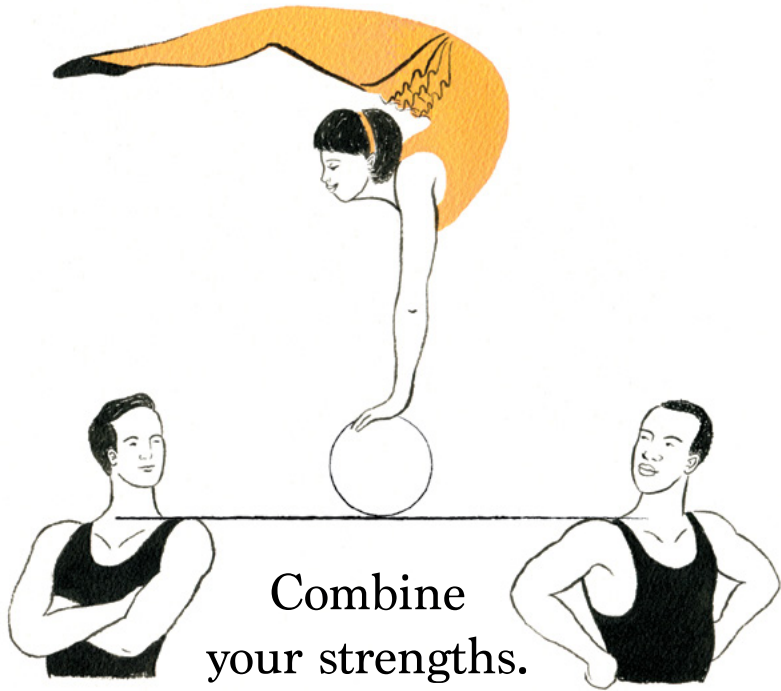
By working together, your team can achieve things that would be impossible for one agency to accomplish alone. Reflect on what your agency does well and what others can do better. Your organisation may have the big idea but your partner has the nous to make it real. Admit your weaknesses and acknowledge your partners' skills and experience, and how it complements your expertise. Work out a fair division of labour that makes the most of your different attributes and maximises the impact of your combined effort.

'It was very much a case of working collaboratively, and understanding what they knew, because they knew that stuff much better than we did, so you had to respect that.'

- A community sector manager

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Our mission is to research, develop and implement innovative and high-quality services, practices and policies to drive change that benefits all Australians. For more information visit <www.bsl.org.au>

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