Designing and Managing Cross-Sector Collaboration: A Case Study in Reducing Traffic Congestion

By John M. Bryson, Barbara C. Crosby, Melissa M. Stone, and Emily O. Saunoi-Sandgren


In August 2007, five urban regions were selected by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) to participate in a path-breaking federal transportation initiative. Known as the Urban Partnership program, the initiative funded a total of $1.1 billion in grants for integrated transit, highway pricing, technology, and telecommuting strategies aimed at reducing traffic congestion in major urban areas. The Minneapolis-St. Paul region was selected to receive one of the five grants. This report describes the history of that initiative, from collaboratively putting the proposal together in 2007, to grant award, to implementing the grant in 2008.

The Urban Partnership program involves complex collaborations among government agencies at local, county, regional, state, and federal levels, and between governments and private partners. It has also involved an unconventional assembly of conventional technologies for transportation management held together by a shared vision of significant reduction in congestion. The Urban Partnership program led to new or expanded coalitions of cross-sector, cross-level interests backed by significant policy and public funding incentives.

This article focuses specifically on a cross-sector collaborative effort to significantly reduce traffic congestion in the Twin Cities metropolitan area of Minnesota. The organizers of the program concluded that a collaborative, multimodal approach was crucial to making real headway on a longstanding, costly, nearly intractable public problem. Cross-sector collaboration is now increasingly both necessary and desirable as a strategy for addressing many of society’s most complex public challenges.

Understanding Cross-Sector Collaboration

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We define collaboration as the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by the organizations separately. Note that, by this definition, the power sharing in a collaboration does not imply equal power, nor does it necessarily imply much in the way of shared interests and goals. Indeed, in our experience, collaboration typically involves uneven power and mixed motives.

Cross-sector collaboration occurs for many reasons. The first is simply that we live in a shared-power world in which many groups and organizations are involved in, affected by, or have some partial responsibility to act on public challenges (Crosby & Bryson, 2005). Beyond that, in the United States, advocates of power sharing across sectors are often responding to a long-standing critique of the effectiveness of government when it acts on its own.

At the same time, cross-sector collaborations do not solve all of the problems they tackle. Indeed, some are solved badly, and some solutions have created more of the problems they were meant to solve.

Collaboration—especially cross-sector collaboration—is no panacea. This is partly because of the interconnectedness of things, such that changes anywhere reverberate unexpectedly and sometimes even dangerously throughout the system. Complex feedback effects abound. How to respond collaboratively and effectively to problems that are so interconnected and encompassing is a major challenge.
We will offer insights about what has contributed to successful collaboration and what has hindered it. We present lessons learned for public leaders attempting to organize collaborations, including specific lessons for project sponsors and champions.

Key Factors in Successful Cross-Sector Collaboration

This report draws on our previous extensive research into cross-sector collaboration and our ongoing federally and University of Minnesota-funded research on the Minnesota Urban Partnership Agreement (UPA). The research involved a detailed literature review and set of propositions that guided the work. We also carefully reviewed newspaper and other accounts of the effort. We conducted 26 interviews of key actors at federal, state, and local levels, and we used an advisory team to help guide the research, interpret the findings, and draw out implications for practice.

We have also found that collaboration is a way of creating institutional change. As relationships are developed among government agencies and across sectors, existing organizational structures, processes, and norms are changed, and new practices are adopted. In this context, collaborative work can become a catalyst for transcending existing institutional structures and approaches. Implementation of initiatives such as the UPA program thus offers a potential strategy for developing new institutional forms that may be more effective and responsive than existing structures. The UPA experience indicates that different parts of the transportation field have not historically worked well together. It appears however, that these different parts of the field—highway engineering and transit, for example—are now developing more effective working relationships.

Key Factors in Successful Cross-Sector Collaborations

- **Understanding Prior Initiatives and the Environment**
  Cross-sector collaborations are often formed in a somewhat turbulent environment and often follow sector failure. Getting collaborative efforts off the ground requires powerful sponsors, a variety of linking mechanisms, formal and informal networks, and general agreement on the problem.

- **Developing Effective Processes, Structures, and Governance Mechanisms**
  The process dimensions of collaboration bring individuals and their social and political relationships into the mix, and the flow of their action shapes and is shaped by structural arrangements. Governance involves both formal and informal mechanisms and influences the effectiveness of collaboration.

- **Understanding the Roles of Key Actors**
  The main locus of power will shift over the course of a collaboration process, often following a funding source.

- **Demonstrating Leadership and Key Competencies**
  Cross-boundary and multilevel leadership is important to forging successful cross-sector collaborations; so is extensive visionary and political leadership by numerous formal and informal leaders. Crucial to the success of a collaboration are competencies, or the abilities, technologies, or processes that help a collaboration perform well against important goals or critical success factors.

- **Creating an Outcome-Oriented Accountability System**
  A collaboration’s success depends, in part, on having an accountability system that tracks inputs, processes, and outcomes using a variety of methods for gathering, interpreting, and using data—and using a system that relies on strong relationships with key political and professional constituencies.
Lessons Learned

Based on research conducted for this case study, the following lessons emerged from our analysis of the Minnesota UPA project. The lessons are organized around the key factors presented in this article.

Understanding Prior Initiatives and the Environment

Lesson One: When initiating a program that involves massive multilevel, multisector collaboration, the program sponsors and champions in the federal government clearly should not underestimate the requirements for stakeholder involvement built in large part on existing relationships. This implies that federal-level sponsors and champions of cross-level and cross-sector collaboration at the state and local levels should:

- Fund up-front collaboration work, including building cross-level and cross-sector relationships
- Use the Request for Proposals process to evaluate the extent and quality of pre-existing working relationships in order to determine the viability of submitted proposals

Developing Effective Processes, Structures, and Governance Mechanisms

Lesson Two: Project sponsors and champions should recognize that total agreement on “the problem” is not necessary to move forward; however, a coalition is needed of members who are in agreement enough to proceed.

Lesson Three: Critical to the success of a collaboration is a project manager who can connect all the parts of the collaboration, is willing to pursue tasks in ways that are at odds with normal procedures and sequences, and is willing to assume a reasonable amount of calculated risk.

Lesson Four: Sponsors and champions should recognize that often inclusive processes and flat structures are initially necessary to reach agreements on how to proceed. Once agreements are reached, a more hierarchical structure involving limited participation processes may work better.

Lesson Five: Sponsors and champions should recognize the merits of relying on respected, neutral organizations and conveners to help stakeholders hammer out important project details during the planning phase.

Lesson Six: Regular meetings among major subgroups of key stakeholders are very useful. This includes using preexisting and new forums. Regular meetings in preexisting and new forums are important components of building the cross-level, cross-sector, cross-boundary understandings and commitments.

Understanding the Roles of Key Actors

Lesson Seven: Sponsors and champions at all levels should pay careful attention to issue framing. The way in which an issue is framed determines the way in which key actors interpret their interests and assess the costs and benefits of various proposals. Issue framing also influences the construction of winning and losing arguments.

Lesson Eight: Sponsors and champions at all levels should seek the support of key political leaders so that elected-official support is available when needed.

Demonstrating Leadership and Key Competencies

Lesson Nine: Sponsors and champions at all levels should work to have in place the competencies needed to lead and follow through on a successful cross-level, cross-sector collaboration effort.

Specifically regarding the competencies of the sponsors and champions themselves:

- Sponsors have formal authority that they are able to bring to bear in securing political support and other resources for the effort.
**Champions**, who often lack formal authority, supply ideas, energy, and determination to help stakeholders define public problems, evaluate alternative solutions, and push for the most promising solutions. The most effective champions have considerable facilitation skills but also are able to articulate and frame the policy idea in comprehensible ways to multiple constituencies.

**Lesson Ten:** Organizational and collaborative ambidexterity is important to successful cross-sector collaborations. Ambidexterity means being able to manage tensions, often separated by time or space. Typical tensions include:

- Stability versus change
- Hierarchy versus lateral relations
- The existing power structure versus voluntary and involuntary power sharing
- Formal networks versus informal networks
- Existing forums versus new forums

**Creating an Outcome-Oriented Accountability System**

**Lesson Eleven:** Sponsors and champions should ensure creation of a system that tracks inputs, processes, and outcomes; and should use a variety of data gathering, interpretation, and usage methods to track accountability and to evaluate the project’s outcomes, including effects that may not be observable for some time.

**TO LEARN MORE**

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