



## From Stakeholders to Partners: Organizing Community Partnerships for Workforce Development

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Workforce development has become a major concern for employers and employer organizations, labor unions, elected officials, community-based organizations, and educational systems. By coming together, this powerful set of stakeholders possesses the potential to increase the level of skills available throughout a community. This promise is already visible. The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, the Colorado Alliance for an E-Business Workforce, the New England Telecommunications Collaborative, and other partnerships have distinguished themselves through impressive achievements in meeting the skill demands of employers—often replacing efforts that had been fragmented, disorganized, or in conflict. This Issue Brief provides a guide for *collaborative leaders* who aim to develop effective work force development partnerships.

Such partnerships among a varied collection of stakeholders arise in a broader economic context that encourages collaboration. Traditionally, a common interest in workforce development was insufficient to overcome competing priorities, “turf” issues, and an unwillingness to devote the time needed to build a productive partnership. Now, the labor market presents an economic incentive to collaborating around workforce development. New technologies, work reorganization, and global competition drive employers’ need for higher order skill at every level of the workforce.

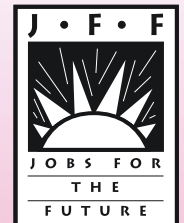
However, collaboration requires talented leaders who have particular attributes and skills. These attributes and skills make it pos-

sible for collaborative leaders to harness the largely untapped potential that rests in stakeholder groups for workforce development—and to avoid the pitfalls that cause unproductive attempts at collaboration.

### Who joins workforce development alliances?

Workforce development alliances typically bring together organizations that:

- **Represent the interests of business or workers**, including industry and trade associations, chambers, labor unions, and professional associations;
- **Hire skilled workers**, including employers from all industry sectors;
- **Provide education and training services**, such as community colleges, school districts, and community-based organizations; and
- **Examine, fund, and advance new solutions**, including government agencies, foundations, and research-oriented nonprofits.



## THE SKILLS REQUIREMENTS FOR COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

In the alliance approach, people from diverse organizations come together, determine a shared vision, allocate resources to bring that vision to life, and define roles and accountability to get the work done. However, at the start, alliances for workforce development usually lack an established structure for decision making or governance. Thus, the leadership function of managing the formation and development of alliances is unlike the traditional process of accomplishing a task within one organization, where goals are established in the context of existing accountability structures.

Building effective workforce alliances requires new skills in leaders who must manage the process of problem solving when no single organization has the authority to tell everyone else what to do. Leaders must *negotiate* both the priorities that the collaboration will address and the process by which the group will make decisions. This is often messy work, and most people and organizations will make the effort only if there are compelling reasons.

Collaborative leaders differ from traditional leaders in important ways. They are not necessarily the ones who know the most about the specifics of workforce development. Rather, they have the capacity to

engage the creativity and tap the resources of diverse stakeholders to yield shared benefits. They succeed through their ability to get a variety of organizations to commit resources toward a common goal. These leaders develop plans and strategies that satisfy the needs of many organizations. They build alliances that yield returns for the organizations that come to the table and create real benefits for the communities they serve.

### WHO ARE COLLABORATIVE LEADERS?

*Collaborative leaders do the day-to-day work of building successful alliances for workforce development.* Typically, these leaders are employed by a sponsoring organization that holds a stake in workforce development. They may come from employer organizations, private firms, public agencies, community-based organizations, or labor unions. Most collaborative leaders combine the responsibilities involved in collaboration with other duties, such as research, planning, project management, or fund raising.

*These leaders are not necessarily the formal leaders of their sponsoring organizations.* While top executives may be collaborative leaders, often they assign this responsibility to other staff members. The role of the top executive is to support the collaborative leader and help to identify the most strategic alliances. Without the power of positional authority, the tools of collaborative leaders are credibility, integrity, and the ability to achieve meaningful outcomes.

*The “charges” to collaborative leaders are both external and internal.* Collaborative leaders must be effective in the *internal* role of connecting the work of the alliance with the sponsoring organization’s mission and goals. They must also perform the *external* role of ensuring that the alliance produces meaningful outcomes for the community.

### WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCES?

Alliances for workforce development can be services-focused, policy-focused, or can focus on both areas.

#### Language of Alliances

**Collaboration:** The process of working together toward shared goals.

**Workforce development alliance:** A collection of separate organizations linked together to advance shared workforce development strategies that go beyond the purview of any particular organization. (For more details on types of alliances, see the WINs Issue Brief, *Working Together on Worker Training*, at: [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org).)

**Sponsoring organizations:** The employers of the people who participate on the alliance board, committees, and other activities. Employer organizations, community colleges, government agencies, small businesses, and local foundations are examples of sponsoring organizations in workforce development alliances.

**Collaborative leaders:** The people who do the day-to-day work of building successful alliances for workforce development. They engage the resources of sponsoring organizations toward achieving broad-based workforce development goals.

### Service-Focused Alliances

Some partnerships bring together organizations that aim to improve workforce development services. An example of this kind of localized and immediate-outcome-focused consortia are the Colorado Springs IC Fabrication Consortium, which pooled resources to fund a training program in partnership with Pikes Peak Community College.

### Policy-Focused Alliances

Some partnerships pool their resources to advance policy-making for workforce development. For example, the Colorado Association of Commerce and Industry Collaboration launched a workforce development council to draw business leaders to a common table. The council's agenda is to advance public policies that promote employer investments in workforce development.

### Mixed Service- and Policy-Focused Alliances

The Chamber of Commerce of Greater El Paso created a Workforce Development Division to coalesce the efforts of local workforce development stakeholders. The division has been active in both creating workforce services and advocating innovative policies. Its Center for Workforce Preparedness has collaborated with local community colleges, the Regional Workforce Development Board, the local School-to-Work Partnership, and numerous local employers to improve the functioning of the Greater El Paso labor market.

Collaborative leaders can participate simultaneously in a variety of types of partnership. For example, Rollie Heath, President of Ponderosa Industries, leads the CACI Workforce Council, with its focus on policy, and he also chairs a local manufacturers' council that focuses on building a skilled workforce for small manufacturing firms.

In every case, an alliance is more than just a deal to achieve short-term objectives. Bringing together independent organizations, it is a connection that can take many forms and that holds the potential for future collaboration. It is a mutual agreement to continue to work

together; therefore, its value includes the potential for a stream of opportunities.

### INTEGRATING THE INTERESTS OF MULTIPLE GROUPS: INSIGHTS FROM SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

Collaborative leaders often describe themselves as pulled in conflicting directions. First, they must advance the interests of organizations they represent—and that pay them. Second, they must seek to benefit the larger group, which means satisfying the interests of other partners. Finally, they must integrate these multiple sets of interests in a way that makes sense and has legitimacy for both internal and external stakeholders.

Successful collaborative leaders commonly *integrate* the tension between the needs of internal and external stakeholders through a four-step strategy:

- Acknowledge accountability to sponsoring organizations;
- Assess the interests of the other participating organizations;
- Apply the communication habits of collaboration; and
- Address challenges in substance and process.

The essence of collaborative leadership is harnessing the power of diverse organizations while simultaneously engaging them on the basis of the alliance's broad vision. These steps take collaborative leaders past the pitfalls of the traditional approaches to partnering and contribute to powerful partnerships.

#### Step One: Acknowledge accountability to sponsoring organizations.

Workforce development alliances are strengthened when collaborative leaders bring the resources of their sponsoring organizations

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#### Creating a Shared Vision

Most collaborative leaders agree that positional authority helps in building effective alliances. Even more important are the abilities to inspire a shared vision, work effectively with peers, and engage champions back at the sponsoring organization.

**Collaborative leaders know the needs of their organizations. They draw on their resources, but they don't push them beyond what it can deliver.**

to the table. As collaborative leaders engage in the early stages of alliance formation, a series of questions can help them to ensure that the process acknowledges the interests, risks, and resources of their “sponsoring organization”:

- Who, specifically, in the sponsoring organization will be held accountable for the benefit that the collaborative leader produces in this alliance?
- What benefit for the sponsoring organization justifies your involvement in this alliance?
- What are the potential risks to the sponsoring organization?
- What potential resources can the sponsoring organization bring to this initiative?
- Who are potential champions (such as board members or top executives) of the alliance within the sponsoring organization? Who would help to engage the commitment of the organization in the success of this workforce development alliance?

Successful collaborative leaders answer all of these questions. They understand that

workforce development investments unfold in an environment in which dozens of worthwhile initiatives compete for organizational resources. Therefore, the most successful collaborative leaders are selective in the kind of workforce development partnerships they pursue. They acknowledge that their own organizations are courted by many offers for collaborative action (e.g., to address health-care, environmental, or safety concerns). Collaborative leaders know the needs of their organizations. They draw on their resources, but they don't push them beyond what it can deliver.

### **Step Two: Assess the interests of the other participating organizations.**

Collaborative leaders know that even as alliances provide benefits, they may also create threats. However, successful collaborators learn as much as they can about the others around the table, just as they build successful strategies for their sponsoring organization by understanding the accountability, vulnerabili-

## **Alliance Leadership vs. Traditional Leadership**

The demands of collaborative leadership in the emerging context of alliances differ from either of the two predominant forms of leadership in U.S. culture: tactical leadership and positional leadership.

**Tactical leaders** have clear objectives: win the game or remove the cancerous tumor. Coaches and surgeons are tactical leaders. The tactical leader clarifies the goal, convinces others that achieving the goal is essential, determines and explains the strategy, organizes and coordinates activities, and deals aggressively with performance issues.

**Positional leaders** are at the top of a functional structure. The CEO of a corporation and the manager of a restaurant are positional leaders. The positional leader uses his or her authority to clarify goals, organize activities, motivate people, and reward success.

**Collaborative leaders**—who lead workforce development alliances—face roles and tasks very different from those of tactical and positional leadership.

**Collaborative leaders create new communities from divergent sets of interests.** Alliances cross many boundaries and engage people from diverse organizations, backgrounds, values, and experiences. Members of a workforce

alliance may come from employer groups, labor unions, educational agencies, and funder organizations. The typical tactical or positional leader deals with a much more homogeneous “follower” group than the leader of alliances in workforce development. Because the training, values, and experiences of alliance members may differ widely, creating a shared sense of vision is central in leadership.

**Collaborative leaders work in a context that lacks clear strategies for getting results.** The tactical leader has a clear strategy for removing the tumor or winning the game, but the challenges faced by leaders in alliances are not routine. Frequently, there is little agreement on the problem itself, let alone possible solutions.

**Collaborative leaders draw on the group's knowledge and skills to get to solutions.** In tactical leadership, the coach knows the game and has studied the opposition. In positional leadership, the CEO knows the organization and the market. Alliance leaders have a different focus: promoting and safeguarding the collaborative process. They rely on the member's skills and experience for the content and substance of the issues. Their task is to see to it that the best options emerge through an inclusive process, not to impose answers to collective issues.

ties, resources, and interests of their champions. Learning about the interests and motivations of others involved in the alliance demystifies their actions and fosters open discussions.

The process of learning about who is around the table takes time. Without discipline and consistent consideration for one another, some members of the alliance can easily misjudge the intentions of others. Moreover, in the process of collaboration, participants rarely lay all their cards on the table. Through a slow, subtle course of events, it becomes clear who is serious and who has resources to contribute—and who seems to be a high-risk partner. Outstanding collaborators are good at reading subtle cues, and they bring a set of flexible tools and common practices that can speed up the development of the alliance.

### **Step Three: Apply the communication habits of collaboration.**

The varied organizations that come together in workforce development alliances often arrive at the table with equally varied motives, goals, and agendas. Frequently, these differences include speaking organizational “languages.” Many new alliances must bridge this organizational culture gap by developing a common language for communicating among the partners. This is accomplished by engaging in the sometimes difficult work of learning to see issues from the other partners’ vantage points.

To develop this capacity within the alliance, and to strengthen cross-organization alliances, effective collaborative leaders:

- Focus on understanding, not critiquing, partners;
- Facilitate inter-organizational work;
- Learn new languages to build solutions;
- Identify and enlist champions for shared benefit;
- Are sensitive to the different stages of collaborative development; and

- Scout the territory, keeping the “bait on the water” and information in the air.

### **Focus on understanding, not critiquing, partners.**

Before jumping to judgement and critique, collaborative leaders seek to understand other organizations and the individuals that represent these organizations. “A very good example of destructive partnering is the educator who critiques the business partner,” says a leading collaborator. “Well, then they become immediately defensive . . . so we have this standoff. They aren’t doing it our way, so they aren’t very efficient. This posturing goes on, and soon, I’m defending my way and critiquing yours.”

### **Facilitate inter-organizational work.**

Successful collaborative leaders share information required to make the relationship work, including the goals of their organizations, priorities of leadership, and information about their roles within those organizations. They provide this information in an honorable way that justifies and enhances mutual trust. They understand that this teaching process is an ongoing one, requiring patience and a commitment to the long-term partnership.

### **The Job Titles of Collaborative Leaders**

As in many other workforce alliances, the individuals in the Colorado Workforce Development Initiative represent a broad array of organizations. Each person combines alliance work with other responsibilities within their sponsoring organizations. Colorado’s members include the:

- *Research Director* of the Colorado Association of Commerce and Industry;
- *Strategic Innovations Director* of the Community Colleges of Colorado;
- *Vice President for Workforce Development* of the Southeast Business Partnership;
- *President and CEO* of Ponderosa Industries;
- *Workforce Development Program Officer* of the Piton Foundation;
- *Executive Director* of the Colorado Women’s Employment and Education, a local community-based organization; and
- *Executive Director* of the Governor’s Workforce Office.

***Learn new languages to build solutions.***

The process of learning involves paying close attention to language. Successful collaborative leaders are careful to learn the meaning of expressions laden with significance, such as “the board.” They also attend to details of language by noting seemingly minor items, such as preference for titles or first names, the correct name of each organization, and the names of key leaders within the partnering organizations.

***Identify and enlist champions for shared benefit.***

Finding effective champions for the alliance is one of the most important jobs of successful leaders. Collaborative leaders who make a difference understand that part of the meaning of a message is the person who carries it. For example, in communicating with key legislators, one alliance engaged community leaders from targeted districts to build government support. Another partnership, which focused on improving workforce opportunities for older workers, involved a respected community leader to lead the dialogue.

***Be sensitive to the different stages of collaborative development.***

The process of creating common sets of knowledge around specific issues is a fragile one. New members with limited knowledge about the history of the alliance and the shared goals need time to learn. Successful collaborative leaders are sensitive to the vari-

ous stages of collaborative development. They foster a process of learning in which the more-experienced members of the alliance may have to go slower than they’d like in developing solutions while bringing newer members up to speed on the relevant workforce issues, the choices the alliance can make, and the implications of what it decides to do.

***Scout the territory, keeping the “bait on the water” and information in the air.***

Collaborative leaders describe the process of building alliances as scouting out hidden community assets. Rather than attempting to create new structures for workforce development, these agents connect with what is working. “Don’t look for what your community needs,” says a successful leader. “Look at what it has: its assets.”

Another leader builds internal support in the school district that employs him by bringing workforce development opportunities back to his organization constantly, like casting bait on the water until a fish jumps. Rather than insisting the district respond to each opportunity, he invites members to explore the possibilities. He uses e-mail to post opportunities on an ongoing basis, keeping workforce development innovation in front of the organization and creating an accessible door to participation.

**Step Four: Address challenges in substance and process.**

Collaborative leaders face a variety of challenges as they seek to garner value from partnerships. These challenges can break the partnership apart or burn out leaders and other participants in the process. Effective collaborators anticipate these barriers to partnership and build solutions into the process of moving forward. Collaborative leaders cite two common causes of failure: problems with the goal and problems with the process.

***Goal-Related Challenges***

Mediocre workforce development initiatives are often plagued by non-committal goals, such as “to be leaders in workforce

**Connecticut Business and Industry Association**

The Connecticut Business and Industry Association, an affiliate of the National Association of Manufacturers, has led an effort to pull together numerous partners to better serve the interests of Greater Hartford manufacturers and those of low-wage, low-skilled workers. CBIA collaborates with the Connecticut Employment and Training Commission, the Metro Hartford Millennium Project, the Regional Workforce Development Board, and the Hartford Public High School’s Technology Academy, as well as area employers. These collaborative efforts have resulted in numerous improvements in the local labor market’s ability to match low-skilled workers with occupations that pay higher wages and develop higher skill levels.

development.” In contrast, successful initiatives engender commitment precisely because their outcomes are clear.

*Goal clarity* implies a specific performance objective, phrased in concrete language that can reveal, without question, when the objective is attained. Experts on the collaborative process cite the Apollo Moon Project as one of the best examples of a clear goal. In committing themselves to “placing a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s,” three U.S. Presidents took a stand.

Effective goals are at once compelling, strategic, and concrete.

**Compelling Goals:** Strong workforce development partnerships have compelling and worthwhile goals. Members can point to real, substantive ways that their communities will improve.

Based on their understanding of the various interests partners bring to an alliance, collaborative leaders advocate goals that encourage joint action to achieve an important common purpose. This can be difficult. The loss of focus or concentration on elevating goals can come from a variety of factors, of which two are especially common:

- Partnership members start worrying less about achieving the ends and more about who gets the credit.
- Partnership members become embroiled in questions of leadership and power and lose their focus on solving problems.

**Clear Consequences:** Clear consequences make it more likely that partners will base activities on the goals they set. Collaborative leaders should advocate goal statements with teeth. Questions to be considered when developing goal statements are: What difference would it make if the workforce development partnership disappeared tomorrow? How would its demise affect the community, its businesses, and its residents? The strongest partnerships have a clear and shared sense of how they make a difference.

### Short-Term Objectives/Long-Term

**Goals:** In the context of getting to the big prize, short-term goals sustain momentum in partnerships. For example, the Colorado Association of Commerce and Industry Workforce Council took on the goal of developing tax policies that reward employer investment in workforce development. The short-term objective was to educate key CACI members and policymakers about the need for “demand-driven” workforce development approaches, such as tax credits for employer investment in worker training. The goals of a policy initiative are frequently long-term, making short-term, incremental objectives especially important to sustaining momentum.

### Process-Related Challenges

New demands arise that can take a partnership venture off its focus, so collaborative leaders must keep the process moving. Six process guidelines help leaders—and all members of a workforce development alliance—maintain the collective focus on clear, compelling goals:

**Facilitate when needed.** Look for opportunities to play the role of the facilitator, rather than advocating only for your sponsoring organization’s interests. By surfacing the needs, interests, conflicts, and concerns of others around the table, you can help to advance the work as a whole.

**The goals of a policy initiative are frequently long-term, making short-term, incremental objectives especially important to sustaining momentum.**

### Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership

The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership builds community partnerships among the public, private, and non-profit sectors to unite the employment and training needs of workers with the workforce needs of employers. The partnership has succeeded in meeting the demands of participating employers for skilled labor for several positions, as well as in preparing new entrants to the labor market for skilled, entry-level work.

Business and labor leaders formed the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership to support family-supporting jobs in a highly competitive manufacturing environment. The WRTP has developed successful models for: (1) implementing new technologies and work processes; (2) educating and training the current workforce; and (3) meeting the future workforce challenge.

**Create forums for top leaders to continue to come together.** Top leaders should not form an alliance only to abandon its nurturing to others. Increased interaction among the partnership's top leaders creates additional opportunities for collaboration. This, in turn, leads to more chances for the leaders to transform information into shared benefits, improving the odds that the alliance will evolve in directions that complement its partner organizations. If the top executives fail to sustain their shared work, then the staff members charged with implementing collaborative workforce projects should create the context to engage those leaders and keep high-level support visible.

**Remember that partners come together on their own timetables.** Differences in expectations around the pace of a venture are one of the most common sources of conflict among partners. Collaborative leaders understand that managing the partnership process is a subtle dance of pushing for outcomes, while allowing partners to go slowly to build broad-based support.

**Be ready to give more than you get.** Workforce development partnerships are not cold-blooded alliances based on impersonal exchanges. They nearly always depend on the creation and maintenance of comfortable and trusting human relationships. By being ready to give, you expand the vision of the partnership and contribute to a growing, future-oriented focus.

**Be generous in sharing the credit.** Alliances can produce exciting victories. How

an alliance deals with success can lay the foundation for future work—or destroy the potential for further collaboration when one partner hogs the credit.

**Assist in integrating new players into the partnership.** The best workforce development alliances are living, growing organisms, open to new ideas and new members. By helping to integrate new members into the alliance, collaborative leaders play a vital role in keeping the overall workforce effort creative and vital.

## CONCLUSION

Unparalleled economic growth, increasing skill requirements, and tight labor markets have produced a powerful opportunity to solve workforce challenges and create new collaborative capacity. Working together—across business, government, education, and community-based organizations—requires the alignment of sometimes competing interests.

Collaboration among various workforce development partners to solve common labor market problems is both effective and efficient. For their participants, collaborations heighten leverage in the local labor market. Moreover, multiple partners can distribute the risks of new ventures, and they can rapidly disseminate innovations from within the collaboration to the daily activities of the partner organizations.

Ultimately, workforce development is most effective when it engages a range of partners working together to achieve goals that meet diverse yet intersecting objectives. The effort required to develop successful collaborations pays off in a higher quality workforce, expanded local economic growth, and improved advancement opportunities for low-skilled workers.

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### The Rochester Resource Alliance

The Rochester, New York, Chamber of Commerce and the Industrial Management Council, an affiliate of the National Association of Manufacturers, have joined together to form the Rochester Resource Alliance, a 501(c)(3) that has gained authority to administer the local Workforce Investment Board. This partnership represents a unique, cutting-edge alliance among city and county government and leading firms from often-competitive organizations. It has brought an innovative and entrepreneurial approach to workforce development in Rochester.

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### Case in point: Why it is important to learn the interests of all the organizations of the alliance

Several years ago, an alliance came together to engage in workforce development policy planning. The alliance, which included participants from business, government, education, and employer organizations, met for several months before focusing on a plan to seek additional state funding for adult education. Once the partners established this common goal, however, the alliance deteriorated to a parochial squabble: the members' conflicting agendas became painfully obvious. Two agencies began to lobby to be the administrator of new dollars. Before long, it became clear that such authority, along with the associated visibility in the legislature, was the dominant interest of these organizations, rather than the common goal of improving the workforce development system.

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