CHAPTER TWELVE

Cross-Agency Collaborators

Jane E. Fountain

CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATORS

By Jane E. Fountain

One of political appointees' newer tasks in the next administration will be to continue to move the federal government toward more effective cross-agency collaboration. The Government Performance and Results Modernization Act (GPRAMA) of 2010 requires collaboration across agencies, from consultation and knowledge sharing to joint policy making and operations. Political appointees now need to increase their understanding of how to effectively implement cross-agency collaboration.

GPRAMA's passage recognizes contemporary political realities. First, complex policy problems, such as export promotion, disaster preparedness, and food safety, cannot be addressed by a single agency. Second, economic constraints make it increasingly problematic to continue spending on redundant and overlapping programs, services, and systems. Third, collaboration across agencies allows the federal government to streamline, simplify, and improve policy making and implementation. Collaboration has the potential to:

- Save money
- Simplify government for citizens and business
- Make public managers more productive

According to Donald Kettl, University of Maryland, "interwoven governance" has evolved over time, with lines blurring between programs, agencies, levels of government, and even public-private sectors. This blurring occurs in healthcare, environmental areas, and human services. Collaboration is a key strategy for coping with this blurring, starting back in the Clinton Administration. For example, the 1999 cross-agency e-commerce working group reviewed laws, regulations, technical standards, and licensing requirements that impeded e-commerce and recommended changes. In the George W. Bush Administration, the Quicksilver Initiatives in 2001 focused on making cross-agency electronic networks central to the delivery of services to the public, rather than the traditional agency-centric approach. The Obama Administration took this a step further, creating "cross-agency priority goals" that reach across agency boundaries.

Why is this trend toward greater collaboration important? A recent report on the root causes behind why agencies wind up on GAO's list of programs at the highest risk for failure is because they were ineffective in managing cross-boundary issues related to program implementation.

This chapter's basic message is this: Cross-agency collaboration is sustainable if, and only if, executives operate strategically within their institutional environments and develop two types of cross-agency collaboration:

- **Collaboration through people:** Relationship skills must be developed for effective executives and teams. Team-building skills are those used by

executives willing and able to work across jurisdictional boundaries to develop effective professional relationships and cohesive working groups. Effective executives need skills including active listening, fairness, and respect—qualities that produce trust in a cross-agency collaborative initiative. In cross-boundary teams, executives build informal relationships outside regular hierarchical channels. Teams function well when productive communities based on trust and professional experience form around a problem, project, or practice.

- **Collaboration through processes:** In addition to effective executives and effective teams, cross-agency collaborative initiatives need effective organizational processes, which include a focus on strategy, operations, systems, and their management. Effective organizational processes demand an organizational skill set that emphasizes rigor and clarity in setting goals, designing systems, building in milestones, attracting resources, and framing an organization that lies across agency boundaries.

To accomplish cross-agency collaboration, appointees need to use both relationship skills and organizational structures strategically, working within institutional constraints. The lessons reported in this chapter bring together a wide range of practical research, more than two decades of studying cross-boundary relationships, and working with government managers in the U.S. and other countries. This article provides a comprehensive approach to cross-agency collaboration. It is not enough for an executive to develop the interpersonal skills of persuasion or negotiation. Nor is it enough for a manager to focus exclusively on organizational processes such as performance and measurement.

Appointees who concentrate exclusively on passing new laws and budgets will miss other key dimensions of cross-agency collaboration. Management advice and research abound on collaborative governance, networked governance, joined-up governance, and more. Some advice emphasizes individual leadership skills in developing collaboration. Other studies emphasize building networks for innovation. Still others focus on social media and technologies that should somehow make self-organization possible. And others stress performance management with an emphasis on clear goals, measures, and accountability. Cross-agency collaboration demands all of these skills and more.

Implementing Cross-Agency Initiatives

What do appointees do to build a major cross-agency effort? The actions below are essentials.

Set and communicate clear, compelling direction and goals. Build commitment to a cross-agency vision, mission, long- and near-term goals, and objectives. Frame the effort, set the direction, and establish the culture as one

Key Ingredients for Successfully Implementing a Cross-Agency Initiative

- **Relationship skills.** Build and use relationship skills to be effective across agency boundaries. Be prepared to use persuasion, influence, and negotiation. Executives engender trust and commitment by delivering on promises and treating collaborating members with respect. Employ active listening, empathy, and respect to be sure that all relevant partners are heard and their particular constraints are acknowledged and understood. Invest the time required to build strong professional relationships.

- **Teams.** Build teams that work. Develop and sustain shared commitment among a core group of managers who will be central to the effort. A cross-agency program consists of executive, management, and several working group teams. Working groups will model their behavior on the tone set by core executive and management teams.

   As part of building teams, executives must resolve or buffer conflicts so that the collaboration can do its work. Sometimes, officials at an executive level must act to resolve conflict or change leadership or structure. Replace those who will not commit to the collaboration and its strategy.

- **Professional networks.** Leverage existing professional networks where they exist rather than trying to build a network from scratch. They are found in every functional area of management: finance, budget, IT, loans, grants management, procurement, etc., and in many policy domains. Members of these networks tend to know who the natural leaders are and know reputations based on past performance.

- **Shared learning.** Adapt the work and scope of teams and networks through real-time shared learning. Continue to incorporate perspectives and feedback but manage (or deny) requests for change that would be costly or shift direction. Adapt to changes in the environment. Cross-agency collaborations must continue to improve, refine, and adapt to changing technologies, legislation, stakeholder needs, and other environmental dimensions, so keep cross-agency management and executive groups intact and meeting intermittently.

that requires collaboration. Convince key managers that the new collaboration will produce better results than the status quo. An important overarching goal, a vision of the future, is a strong motivator and provides the initial logic for organizing the initiative. Keep the overarching goal and its benefits at the forefront through communication and framing.

   Fit the working group structure to the task. Collaborative initiatives require different types of authority structures and division of labor, depending upon scale, scope, urgency, and core task dimensions. Decide on an appro-

priate structure and define exactly what that will mean in terms of authority, resources, and division of labor. For example, some cross-agency collaborations are organized with a lead agency that supplies services to other agencies on a fee-for-service basis. GPRAMA requires creating a set of cross-agency priority (CAP) goals. These are typically led by a White House official, but the organizational structure of the cross-agency relationships is left undetermined. The lead agency or managing partner approach differs across projects with respect to how much joint decision making and problem solving will be used.

Establish specific roles and responsibilities. Who will do what? Who is responsible for what? Develop clear decision-making processes including conflict resolution measures. Cross-agency collaborations require strong executive and management groups and well-organized working groups.

Develop formal agreements. Codify in writing what is to be accomplished, and the principal means and the timeline for accomplishment. Formalize the collaborative arrangement. Revisit this document frequently. Making formal agreements public provides accountability and transparency. It exerts pressure on cross-agency members to fulfill commitments. As part of the formal agreement, create a work plan working backward from major goals to establish interim goals and milestones. Establish and enforce clear deadlines.

Develop shared operations and shared resources that support achieving the goal. These range from producing shared brochures and web pages to developing shared systems and standards; co-location, shared services, and information; fee-for-service operations; standardizing and streamlining to produce consistent operations across agencies; and consolidation. For joint policy-making efforts, coordination across agencies that share responsibility for key policy challenges—such as the CAP goals—may mean communication and joint planning to align strategies that are then implemented in parallel.

Many cross-agency projects have had to generate their own resources through sharing, borrowing, or otherwise leveraging existing resources. Similarly, many have been staffed with those on short-term details from several agencies. Many executives are excellent at bootstrapping until more consistent resources become available. Moreover, cross-agency collaborations must explicitly develop and include key internal stakeholders and external stakeholders (clients and constituents) to mobilize support.

Build shared performance metrics. During the Obama Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Housing and Urban Development set a joint goal to eliminate chronic homelessness among veterans. A key element of that initiative was developing a common metric of what constitutes "chronic homelessness" so they could gauge progress. Until this was done, the two departments had not been able to coordinate efforts effectively and hold each other jointly accountable. These metrics may provide an impetus for other efforts. Performance measures are necessary to enable tracking, monitoring, and measurement/evaluation of output and outcomes across agencies and programs. Measurement is important, but without consequences, measurements lack force. Align incentives, rewards, and sanctions.

Jane E. Fountain is Distinguished University Professor in Political Science and Public Policy and Adjunct Professor of Computer Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is the founder and Director of the National Center for Digital Government and the Science, Technology and Society Initiative, based at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.