



MAKING OUR ALLIANCE WORK BETTER

When would you use this tool?

Most alliances among nonprofit organizations start with high enthusiasm and hope for strengthening the partners and benefiting the community. Somewhere along the way, it becomes clear that creating and sustaining an alliance is hard work, often filled with frustration or loss of trust in each other. This framework called the “Working Together Benchmarks” was designed to help members of an alliance improve the effectiveness and cohesiveness of their alliance.

Who should use this tool?

Alliances whose members are frustrated by a lack of enthusiasm or participation in the work of the alliance or who note that anticipated outcomes are not being achieved. Typically this framework requires the assistance of an alliance member who can be neutral and is skilled in facilitating conversations or an outside facilitator.

How would you use this tool?

This framework has six areas to discuss. The discussion topics are designed to build on each other and lead naturally into the next so should be discussed in the order given. This orderly discussion may take alliance members several meetings to fully complete. Be sure to record the results of the conversation to be reviewed at a later time.

How do you interpret the results?

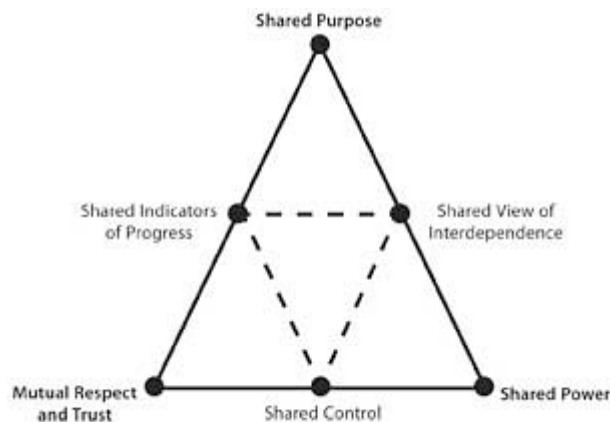
At the conclusion of their discussions, the partners should have a better understanding of how their alliance operates and have ideas to improve the alliance. This discussion works well when partners focus on the difference the alliance is making in its community, rather than focusing on judging each member's performance. The shared indicators (especially specific numbers or measurements that indicate progress) can give an alliance new energy. The discussion can also help the purpose of the alliance evolve alongside the needs of the communities it serves.

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The “Working Together Benchmarks” (First introduced by Chris Kloth, ChangeWorks of the Heartland) build the relationship dynamics of an alliance and increase its effectiveness. The framework has six components:

1. Shared purpose
2. Shared power
3. Shared view of interdependence
4. Mutual respect and trust
5. Shared control
6. Shared indicators of progress

The six components can be displayed in an interlinked triangle:



Each of these components is critical to the success of an alliance. When partners in an alliance develop concerns about the alliance or its results, they can turn to a set of questions to help them discuss the work relationships among partners.

Questions guide discussion

The following explanations and questions relate to each of the six components. Members of an alliance can use the questions to untangle work problems.

1. Shared purpose

Alliances must be based on shared goals to create outcomes that benefit all members. As time passes, goals may be completed or may change. To keep the momentum of the alliance going or to ensure that its purpose is still relevant, partners can review their shared purpose. Partners can ask:

- Do we (does each organization) have the same goals for the alliance?

The conversation that follows should result in a detailed description of the alliance's intended outcomes in concrete terms, including measurable goals. Partners often come together around a shared general purpose without reaching real agreement about the tangible goals they expect to achieve.

2. Shared power

The partners got into this relationship to accomplish some goals that were unobtainable working alone. Thus, the partners *should* be there because each has something that contributes to the net outcome—and without which the outcome would either falter or fail. Over time, differences in the nature of the contributions change, and this can contribute to differences in the way organizations perceive the power they have in the alliance. The results—a sense that power is out of whack—can undermine working relationships. Partners can ask:

- What knowledge, skills, relationships, and staff (or other resources) are necessary to accomplish the shared purpose?

The resulting discussion can help clarify how power is shared among alliance partners. If the outcomes of the project are not emerging as expected, the discussion can help partners review who has agreed to be responsible and who has the power to accomplish tasks that will deliver the outcomes.

3. Shared view of interdependence

Shared interdependence is the flip side of shared power: partners in a successful alliance recognize that they depend on each other to get their goals accomplished. But as work progresses, the nature of the interdependence can get obscured over time. Partners should ask:

- Do we really believe that we are interdependent?
- Why do we need each other to accomplish the purpose to which we aspire?

The discussion can surface areas where the partners are interdependent, as well as those where the partners can act independently of each other. If one or more partners discovers that they can have the same impact without the alliance, or that some alliance partners won't follow through on the commitments necessary to achieve the shared purpose, it's time to evaluate whether the alliance should continue.

4. Mutual respect and trust

Alliances often start as a great idea among a few people who know each other well. But when the actual work gets started, many more people are involved, and they often don't know each other. So an alliance needs to tend to its pools of mutual respect and trust, both by being sure that partners are delivering on their promises, and by working to build good personal relationships among the people who do the work. To better understand if mutual respect and trust are strong in the alliance, partners can ask:

- Do we believe we can accomplish our goals?
- Did each of us do what we said we would do?

The resulting discussion often leads partners to talk about what has been accomplished, and what needs to be accomplished.

5. Shared control

Shared control links shared power with mutual respect and trust. Control, in this context, consists of the systems alliance partners set up to ensure that shared resources are used effectively and efficiently. Examples of such systems include work plans, contracts, policies, and procedures. These systems need to be transparent, so that all the partners can have input, see what's going on, and make adjustments as needed. To determine whether control is being shared, partners can ask:

- Are we sharing the resources needed for the alliance in a complete and timely way?

If an alliance discovers that certain parts of the system are not being delivered on (say, some members are not following through on their part of the work plan) the discussion can help uncover where and why the system is failing.

6. Shared indicators of progress

The work of most alliances occurs over months or years. It's easy to get bogged down, and partners lose momentum when they don't feel they are successfully accomplishing goals. So, the alliance needs to be clear about what progress toward goals looks like. Partners should ask:

- In areas where we are progressing toward our shared purpose, what can we do to improve our results?
- Where we aren't progressing toward our shared purpose, what is making it hard to move forward?