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A Collaborative Culture

Collaboration Is Not Something Organizations Do, But a Way of Being

By Marisa Sanchez

In our complex environment, we find increasing instances and opportunities for both inter- and intra-organizational collaboration. With advances in technology, the world is becoming smaller and we are experiencing in very tangible ways that we are interconnected economically, socially, and politically. To solve complex problems as well as to harness greater opportunity, we must break out of our isolation and join with one another. The increasing number of large-scale partnerships across entire sectors of government, industry, and non-profit, both domestically and internationally, is a testament to this movement. To be successful in this environment, organizations must learn how to collaborate well with others.

As an organization development and change management consultant who frequently works with federal government agencies, I often facilitate change projects that result from mandates levied on agencies by oversight organizations such as the Government Accountability Office, Inspector General's Office, and Office of Management and Budget. These change recommendations often demonstrate real insight into the underlying problems an agency may be experiencing. However, my own preferences for participation and engagement cause me to believe that these recommendations would be even more powerful and relevant—not to mention more often implemented—if the agencies themselves were able to collaborate with the oversight organizations to examine the issues and formulate solutions. It was with this idea in mind that I began to research

how organizations collaborate when one organization has power over another. Specifically, what factors enable collaboration within a hierarchical organization system? How are problems framed and who frames them—and to whom? How are solutions developed and who participates? What does collaboration feel like when one organization has legitimate power over another?

This article is a précis of my research and consequent dissertation on interorganizational collaboration and power. The results of the research indicated that collaboration is not simply a series of prescriptive steps to follow when one organization wants to partner with another; instead, collaboration is a way of being. Collaboration is a behavioral result of having a collaborative culture, one that embraces particular values, principles, and behaviors that together, not only promote collaboration, but support an expectation of collaboration.

Research Background

Although I searched for successfully collaborating government agencies within a hierarchical system to include in my research, I was met mostly with responses such as “that kind of collaboration would be really valuable, but I’ve never seen it here.” In two instances where I did find success stories, the organizations’ legal advisors did not allow external research. Given my research time constraints, I welcomed an offer by a nonprofit organization to study collaboration of its parent and subsidiary organizations.

The North American Family Institute

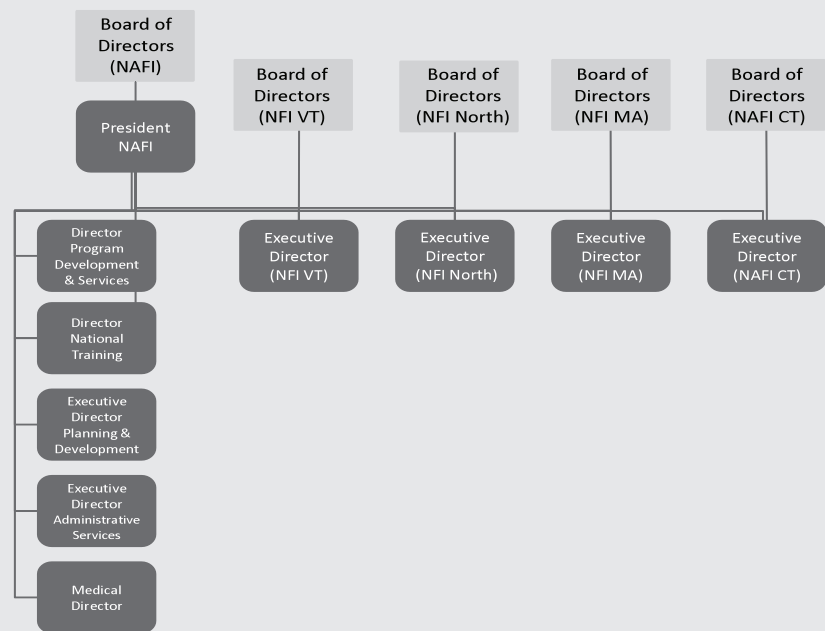
(NAFI) is a human services organization that partners with state agencies and other nonprofit organizations to provide alternative services to youth and young adults demonstrating emotional and behavioral problems. NAFI's mission is to "create community environments based upon principles of dignity and respect that help children, adults, and families to grow and change in order to better their lives and the world around them" (www.nafi.com). NAFI accomplishes this mission by viewing behavioral issues as systemic problems that require systemic solutions. Programs are designed around the creation of cohesive communities with shared goals.

Four subsidiary organizations and a parent organization comprise NAFI. Each of the four subsidiaries is incorporated in a separate state in New England and each of the subsidiaries and the parent organization have their own boards of directors, although the nomination of each board is under the control of the parent organization. The Executive Director position of each of the subsidiaries is an employee of the parent, thus creating a linking organization structure between parent and subsidiary (Figure 1).

The research focused on identifying potential factors that enabled collaboration between the parent and subsidiary corporations to solve two specific issues: (1) spending and budget reduction, and (2) change in health insurance plan. Below are brief descriptions of each initiative.

Spending Reduction Initiative. NAFI's spending reduction initiative began in earnest at the end of 2008 with organization-wide discussion and 2-year implementation of spending reduction across the corporations and parent to respond to state decreases in requests for services as a way to reduce state budgets. States were not only decreasing dollars spent on services but increasing qualification levels for individuals to be eligible for service. I interviewed those individuals at NAFI primarily involved in discussions about spending, such as executive directors; assistant executive directors; directors of operations, programs, and finance; chief financial officer; and president. Although not all

Figure 1: NAFI Organization Structure



subsidiaries were suffering from financial losses, the parent and all subsidiaries collaborated with one another to reduce their own spending in the best interest of the entire organization. The spending reduction initiative was then followed by a planned budget reduction for the following fiscal year.

Health Insurance Initiative. In the past decade, as health insurance costs have risen, NAFI had elected to absorb the majority of those costs and pass only very incremental cost increases on to its employees. The generous Cadillac health plan was viewed as a substantial benefit to employees and aligned with values of covering costs for preventive and wellness services. With the national economic recession and recent NAFI budget reduction in 2009, NAFI found it difficult to continue to shoulder the health insurance cost burden. NAFI was estimating up to \$2 million of unfunded liability. The health insurance initiative began in earnest in September 2009 with presentations by NAFI's insurance broker and meetings with the executive team, resulting in agreement that costs could not be absorbed and further examination of alternatives was needed. In January 2010, a committee was formed to research NAFI-specific data on rising health insurance premiums and opportunities for cost savings. For

my research purposes, I primarily interviewed individuals who participated on this committee as well as executive directors and assistant executive directors of each corporation about their perceptions of this initiative as a collaboration across parent and subsidiaries.

Before moving into the research results, I provide background on the terms *collaboration* and *interorganization*. The literature differentiates between collaboration, cooperation, coordination, partnership, networking, mergers, acquisitions, and other interorganizational relationship types, where collaboration takes on a high degree of mutuality, joint creation, risk, and trust. Specific studies have been conducted by Wood and Gray (1991) and Thomson (2001) to research definitions of collaboration found in the literature. Wood and Gray reviewed nine articles across six theoretical perspectives and identified common elements of various definitions of collaboration: autonomous stakeholders; interactive process related to a change-oriented relationship; shared rules, norms, and structures; preference for action or decision; and domain (or problem) orientation. Thomson conducted an extensive literature review and field survey to empirically derive a definition of collaboration. In her work, she identified five key dimensions of the definition: governance, administration, capacity,

mutuality, and trust. Definitions in the literature did not differentiate between individual, group, or organizational collaboration and seemed to account for all three, either generally or specifically.

Terminology such as *interorganizational* and *multi-organizational* is used in many ways throughout the literature. Eden and Huxham (2001) state that “the extent to which any group may be considered *multi-organizational* is a matter of degree rather than clear definition. ... The definition of ‘organization’ within the context of a multi-organizational setting is always likely to be open to many interpretations.” Thus, although my research is set within one larger organization, the collaboration I studied was of the interorganizational parent-subsidiary relationship.

A Collaborative Culture

The research identified key factors that promoted interorganizational collaboration at NAFI in the two specific initiatives of study: organizational values, leader-directed engagement, a sense of family, and employee longevity. Each of these factors is summarized below, but it is important to understand these factors as part of an integrated whole that describes a complex organizational culture. This culture incorporates a common language and expected ways of working with one another; these expectations of behavior are reinforced through the leadership of the organization.

Values of the Normative Community Approach. At the heart of NAFI’s work is its normative community approach, an experiential treatment philosophy that guides the way frontline employees work with their clients (youth and young adults with behavioral issues) and their clients’ families and communities. The intent of this approach is to bring individuals together in community, have members develop norms of living that support the community’s mission, and support one another in living according to those norms. Individuals have responsibility to the community in achieving its mission, and the community has responsibility to support

the individual in achieving his or her goals. The founder of NAFI developed the normative community approach as a family therapist prior to founding the organization. This approach evolved to include theories about community development, individual development, group process, and change management. Core values embedded in the normative community approach are as follows:

- » People can change
- » People can grow
- » People always have more to learn
- » People have inherent skills and talents
- » People have inherent dignity and worth
- » People need to belong to communities
- » People are influenced by their communities
- » People need positive communities to thrive and grow
- » The way to influence people is by engaging and involving them
- » People have the right to their own opinions
- » People deserve respect
- » Diversity is a source of strength

NAFI social workers bring their clients together with one another as well as with their own network—families, teachers, other important members in the clients’ lives—to create communities. These communities adopt the values of the normative community approach and practice respect, equality, direct and intentional communication and feedback, and transparency. Communities are empowered to create their own mission, vision, shared goals, policies, procedures, and expectations, and hold each other accountable to these agreements. Group work conducted within interactive community meetings encourage the community to talk about, review, and revise norms to ensure consistency with the community’s vision and mission and to help each other learn to respect and abide by the norms. This group process, along with individual competency building, teaches community members to educate and advocate for themselves, exercise greater control over their lives, increase personal resiliency and overall wellness, and adopt positive attitudes and belief systems for the good of the community. Membership in the

community comes alongside responsibilities to oneself and to the community, and is positively reinforced by fulfilling individuals’ needs to belong.

NAFI operates using a concept of *parallel process*, borrowed from psychotherapy, which is the recognition that behavior demonstrated in one relationship plays out in another relationship. With this recognition, the internal management of the NAFI organization is aligned with the values and principles of the normative community approach used with NAFI’s clients. Employees are made responsible for the good of the organization and the organization must be respectful of individual needs and diversity. Likewise, from an interorganizational perspective, subsidiary corporations must act with the good of the entire organization in mind; however, the parent also empowers subsidiary corporations to make decisions in their own best interest and the parent supports activities to increase success of each subsidiary. Evidence of this global collaborative culture was observed at all levels of the organization: between parent and subsidiary, among subsidiaries, within subsidiaries.

Research participants frequently responded that the parallel process of the normative community approach was the key factor in promoting collaboration across parent and subsidiary. The values within the normative community approach most cited as contributors to NAFI’s collaborative culture by the research participants were the following:

- » Belief in involvement. Involving those affected by a decision or change not only yields smarter solutions but also reinforces the value of the individual. This belief underlies the expectation that the parent organization will involve the subsidiary corporations in planning, problem-solving, and decision-making.
- » Local control or autonomy. This organization saw a close relationship between collaboration and autonomy: to collaborate, one must have ownership over one’s contributions toward a shared goal and be able to demonstrate one’s unique capabilities in support of that shared goal.
- » Organization-as-community. The

normative community approach NAFI uses with its clients is based in part on the importance people place on belonging, so this sense of being part of the larger community is intentionally created and sustained. Using the parallel process, each subsidiary sees itself as part of the larger NAFI organization. This sense of organization-as-community engenders desire for shared success and unity.

- » Enjoyment and pride in helping. Many research participants expressed a genuine sense of pride and joy about opportunities for one part of the organization to help another part of the organization. They recognize when they have been helped in the past and feel proud to be able to return the favor.

Leader-Directed Engagement. A second key factor this research identified in promoting interorganizational collaboration was the prominence of leader-directed engagement, in which leaders set up conditions for collaboration by engaging the organizations in joint problem-solving, ensuring involvement by individuals from the parent and subsidiary organizations. For example, the president of NAFI named a cross-organizational committee to focus on the health insurance plan initiative; this ensured representation from various organizations, management levels, and job types. In another example, the president mandated that all organizations, parent and subsidiary, participate in the spending reduction initiative, even those subsidiaries that were not experiencing immediate budget constraints. Again, this leader-directed engagement reinforced the culture of NAFI as a community that pulls together and collaborates with one another for the greater good.

Sense of Family. The interviews that I conducted revealed a strong theme of family amongst the NAFI employees. There was a sense that organizations help each other because that is what one would do in a family—care for one another, support one another, encourage one another. The sentiments expressed in the interviews indicated high levels of trust, protection,

wanting the best for one another, and a deep bond or connection in service of the organization's mission.

Although many participants cited the focus on family as a factor in promoting collaboration, it also could be suggested that collaboration reinforces the sense of family. Having shared goals, being involved in the process, having open lines of communication and sincerely soliciting feedback are all parts of collaboration that help to strengthen relationships and, perhaps, strengthen this sense of family.

Longevity. A surprising data point cropped up during my interviews with NAFI employees across the parent and subsidiary organizations—employees stay with this organization for a very long time. Many have been part of the organization for decades—I spoke to very few people who had been in the organization fewer than 10 years. The president founded the organization almost forty years ago and still serves as an active leader.

What are the implications of this employment longevity? First, it reinforces the organization's culture. As new employees join the organization, they are formally and informally inculcated into the culture of values and principles of the normative community approach and the internal parallel process. In fact, several leaders named themselves and others as "culture bearers" and viewed that as a very important role in the organization. Second, such longevity allows individuals to remember when one part of the organization helped another part in the past. They are not only eager to return the favor, but know that it was only through such collaboration toward a shared goal that parts of the organization survived difficult times. The organizational memory reinforces the importance of collaboration for the good of the overall organization. This organizational memory is so entrenched that even newer employees refer to this history as a way to communicate the need for collaboration. Finally, as long-time employees have held different positions in both the parent and subsidiary corporations, they have come to know each other in many different roles—sometimes reporting to each other, sometimes

working within the parent organization, sometimes in a subsidiary. Employees have built trust based on a long time of appreciating each other's strengths and shoring up each other's weaknesses.

Although the research suggested that longevity promotes collaboration, it could also be suggested that the collaborative environment at NAFI has supported the long tenure of its employees. If this organization is unique in the way it operates, applying democratic and developmental norms, the individuals who appreciate and thrive in this environment will feel lucky to have found this organization and stay. In fact, one participant reported that it is not unusual for younger employees who leave NAFI to return after recognizing how unique the culture is that this organization embraces.

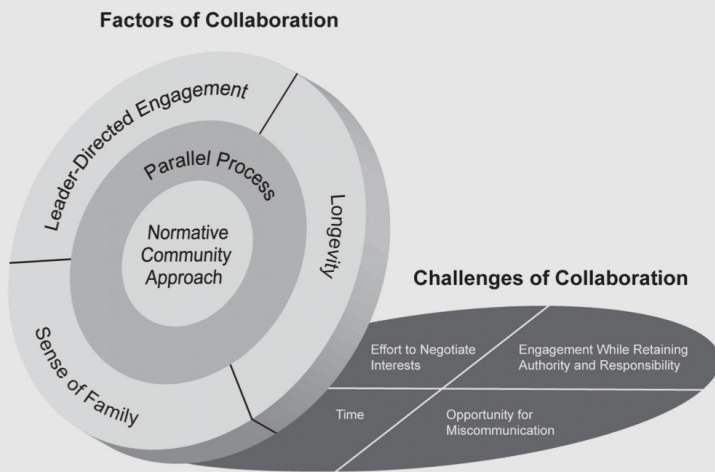
In summary, this research illustrated that at NAFI, collaboration is not simply bolted onto existing operations when the need arises, but is a strong force throughout the organization's culture. Several themes tie these results together:

1. The values and principles of this organization's culture promote collaboration not only in times of crisis or opportunity but every day.
2. The collaborative culture, employment longevity, and sense of family reinforce one another.
3. Leaders use authority to promote collaboration.
4. Collaboration requires autonomy.

Challenges of Collaboration

A secondary result of this research was the acknowledgement that collaboration comes with some negative consequence. First, it takes longer to collaborate than to follow a mandate, so enough time must be allocated to allow for the sharing of ideas and consensus decision-making. Collaborative efforts require disciplined approach to continually check in with one another about everyone's understandings of decisions made and potential unintended variations in interpretations, so a second challenge cited was opportunities for miscommunication. Another challenge named by several leaders was engaging while retaining

Figure 2: Relating Factors and Challenges of Collaboration



authority and responsibility. At the end of the day, leaders are accountable for the performance of the organization, and they cannot give that up when they move from a directive to a collaborative style. Leaders must genuinely open up conversation and empower people to collaborate with one another while retaining the direction and shaping the conversational agenda. Finally, participants cited the effort involved in negotiating the interests of various stakeholders in collaboration. Inevitably, difficult issues must be addressed at a personal level, including turf issues, different priorities, and resistance to change. Even the different ways in which people prefer to reconcile differences bring a host of challenges. Continually going back to the shared goal can help the negotiation, but it is a constant process.

It became apparent to me that these challenges are an inherent part of collaboration. They should not be perceived as negative consequences that must be minimized or eliminated for more successful collaboration but recognized as ever-present elements of collaboration and, perhaps, part of the collaborative culture itself. Borrowing from Carl Jung's concept of *shadow*, I metaphorically relate the challenges of collaboration as the shadow side of collaboration, challenges that individuals experience as difficult and undesirable yet must be integrated with the conscious factors that promote collaboration (see Figure 2).

Although this Jungian metaphor is far from a perfect fit, it facilitates

understanding of how to not only accept but embrace these challenges. For example, the time to collaborate will most likely take longer than the time for one individual in power to impose a decision. Healthy collaboration allows for this time, acknowledging it as a necessary component of collaboration rather than attempting to minimize it. Organizations should incorporate this time into their planning and even leverage positive aspects about the time involved in collaboration to yield other benefits, such as building relationships or allowing ideas to emerge. Each of these challenges similarly cannot be denied but must be recognized and even embraced as part of the collaborative culture.

Implications and Future Research

The purpose of this research was not to determine whether or not organization change is more successful in a collaborative environment but to investigate the factors that promote collaboration. The literature on collaboration is heavy with processes to facilitate collaboration, or lists of characteristics that authors suggest must be present for collaboration. Much of this literature suggests invoking these processes or developing these characteristics when the need for collaboration arises. My research with the NAFI organization revealed a culture of collaboration that is a constant way of being, not one that is turned on and off. According to Mankin and Cohen (2004), the best collaborations

occur when organizations work on being good collaborators themselves.

NAFI's culture, steeped in values of involvement, autonomy, helping, and being part of a community, was cited as a key factor in promoting interorganizational collaboration within the organization's parent-subsidiary structure. However, this research was limited in its small sample size. More research on interorganizational collaboration across various organizations and organization types is needed to learn more about factors that promote collaboration within hierarchical configurations. I list several possibilities for future research below:

- » Increase the sample size and use a methodology that identifies factors that promote collaboration across a number of cases that report successful collaboration across legitimate power configurations.
- » Examine cases from other industries, as the results of this research seemed inextricably tied to the values and principles of the work of the organization, particularly of social work and psychotherapy.
- » Use an ethnographic approach to observe the organizations at various times throughout one or more initiatives, allowing the researcher to document activities and behaviors rather than, or in addition to, collecting individual perspectives about past activity.
- » Focus on how collaborative cultures develop or evolve over time. For example, a case study of the NAFI culture, collecting data about important events and leaders in its history, might reveal more about the evolution and sustainability of this collaborative culture.

In conclusion, I turn back to my original research interest and my work in the federal government space. As I reported my findings to colleagues, many suggested that results such as sense of family, organization-as-community, and engagement do not translate well to the bureaucracy of government. Although I recognize some parts of government must operate from a culture of enforcement or audit, that type of culture does not need to be predominant

across most agencies. As with most organization leaders today, government leaders focus much of their time on transforming process and practice and working across organization lines to achieve extraordinary missions. Many government employees have very long careers with one or more agencies and often do experience a sense of family within their own divisions.

Although this study is limited in its ability to be generalized to other organizations, the results have left me with hope that a widespread culture of collaboration can apply to government organizations and that government leaders—particularly career employees—could leverage their own leadership authority to build and develop collaborative cultures. Such organizations would view collaboration not as something an organization *does* when needs or opportunities arise but as a way of *being*.

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