



To: Neighbourhoods and City Development

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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No 88 Collaboration, sectoral protectionism, and reticulists in public policy

Top line: Collaboration is generally recognised as a logical and welcomed approach to both policy development and delivery. However, there are many barriers to effective collaboration. Being aware of these may help more collaborative ventures to succeed.

The rationale for collaboration is that there are benefits to be gained which can only materialise through collaboration with partners who recognise the win-win potential. Moreover, this potential must be perceived to outweigh any risks arising from the necessary investment in collaborative working. Whatever the term, there is always a degree of joint working and networking underlying collaboration, which has been termed as:

the pooling of appreciations or tangible resources... by two or more stake holders, to solve a set of problems which neither can solve individually.¹

Collaboration can also create opportunities to exchange and share the beliefs and values of different sectors and organisations. Through this inter-sectoral collaboration creates 'arenas for dialogue'. In sharp relief, barriers to collaboration include vested interests, structural complexity, and divergent professional and organisational cultures. Any of these can lead to mistrust. Also, organisations are characterised by multiple and often conflicting values and priorities requiring those working inter-sectorally and sharing the same vision and values to compete for political favour and scarce resources 'back at base'.

Degeling has highlighted the problems of professional cultures and the way professions organise and operate. These tend to reinforce barriers through the defining of boundaries that separate them from other sectors.² Sectors are often characterised by specialised discourses of knowledge and expertise in seeking their legitimisation and maintenance. Each sector has well established functions and its primary interest is normally to maintain and develop these. Some writers also focus on lack of awareness and ignorance. There can also be considerable ignorance about potential collaborators including structural ignorance about the way that other organisations work; ideological ignorance about underlying organisational philosophies; ignorance of other professional cultures; procedural ignorance about implicit and explicit organisational goals; personal ignorance; positional ignorance of how to achieve desired ends.

In order to avoid or overcome some of these barriers the concept of 'reticulists' has been identified. A reticulist is someone who possesses skills in creating, servicing and manipulating communication networks, and is astute at identifying where in an organisation a decision in which she/he is interested would be made.³ Reticulists, it is suggested, understand where coupling, inter-dependencies and fissures are likely to occur. They are skilled at identifying the strategic points in the existing web of relationships from which entry can be gained and leverage can be exercised to achieve the benefits which cannot be achieved by one organisation or sector alone.

¹ Grey, B. 1985 Conditions facilitating inter-organisational collaboration, *Human Relations*, 38, 911-936.

² Degeling, P. 1995. The significance of 'sectors' in calls for urban public health intersectoralism: An Australian perspective, *Policy and Politics*, 23(4), 289-301.

³ Power, J. 1973 The reticulist function in government: Manipulating networks of communication and influence, *Public Administration* (Australia), 32(1), 21-27.