



Northeast Institute for Quality Community Action

Chalkboard E-Memo: Strategic Alliances.



Framing Collaboration Exploration.

A fast changing landscape of community needs, public policy and funding priorities creates both challenges and opportunities for Community Action Agencies to create new and strengthen existing collaborations with local groups and agencies to preserve critical services and make more efficient use of available human and financial capital. This series of NIQCA “Chalkboard” E-Memos are intended to help guide you through a structured process to help identify strategic relationships which enable two or more nonprofit organizations to work more closely together to preserve or expand essential services, strengthen organizational viability, share knowledge and resources and improve operating efficiency.

How can you determine if a collaboration could help more effectively meet community and corporate goals? The proposal is to use the C.O.R.E. Continuum of Collaboration © developed to guide nonprofit organizations in creating successful collaborations. As shown below, the C.O.R.E. model illustrates that nonprofit agencies such as CAAs can collaborate on four levels of activity. The levels include: 1. **Corporate** (Governance and Brand); 2. **Operations** (Programs and Services); 3. **Responsibility** (Administrative – Financial Systems) and, 4. **Economics** (Purchasing).

Agencies may choose to work on all four levels or, some combination of levels. The complexity of collaborations and the planning needed to construct relationships increases as the degree of required integration of identity, authority and resources grows from one level of activity to another (e.g., from Economics to Corporate). **The preferred form of collaboration is dependent on the clarity of the function the relationship is designed to perform.** Agencies working to frame a relationship which incorporates all four levels can best be described as creating a merger. Agencies working on one or a combination of less than four of the C.O.R.E. levels are seeking to create or strengthen an alliance.

C.O.R.E. Matrix.

Corporate Level (#4)	>>>>	➤ Governance and Branding
Operations Level (#3)	^>>>>	➤ Programs and Services
Responsibility Level (#2)	^>>>>	➤ Administrative Operations (e.g., Back Office, IT, HR, Finance)
Economics Level (#1)	^>>>	➤ Joint Purchasing, Facility Use, Etc.
^Level of Integration		>Types of Collaborations

Successful collaborations result from clarity of purpose, function and identification of shared strategic objectives. For example:

- **Corporate:**
 - ✚ *Expansion of geography or market share.*
 - ✚ *Strengthen/broaden scope of organizational influence.*
 - ✚ *Consolidate agency management and governance functions as part of an Executive transition.*
 - ✚ *Create size of scale structure to improve organizational viability.*

- **Operations:**
 - ✚ *Preserve or expand programs and services.*
 - ✚ *Improve access and integration of services.*
 - ✚ *Expand and diversify fundraising.*
 - ✚ *Team Staffing.*

- **Responsibility:**
 - ✚ *Share/provide back office functions e.g., IT; HR; Accounting, etc.*
 - ✚ *Staff Training and Development.*

- **Economics:**
 - ✚ *Joint Purchasing.*
 - ✚ *Collaborative Needs Assessments.*
 - ✚ *Shared Office Space, etc.*

While these objectives vary by the degree of complexity and corporate integration they share a common goal focused on the promotion of the mission of Community Action.

The following principles should be considered in deciding the type and level of collaboration which will best respond to an identified need, interest or opportunity:

✚ **Form Follows Function.**

A collaborations **structure should be shaped by the objectives** it is intended to achieve. The C.O.R.E. © Continuum of Collaboration is designed to help organizations identify and express in operational terms their motivations for collaboration and develop a plan and structure which supports the achievement of these objectives. Focusing on a structure before clarifying the function is a formula for both frustration and conflict in collaboration planning.

✚ **Effective Collaborations are Strength Based.**

Successful collaborations **preserve and build on the assets** and best practice policies of each organization. The customers and communities benefit when the unique strengths of organizations are coupled and exhibited in a streamlined and coherent fashion.

✚ **Effective Collaborations Help Build Stronger Communities.**

While building collaborative relationships between agencies can generate efficiencies of scale which can reduce costs, perhaps the **most important motivation for creating these relationships involves the benefits which can accrue to the larger community.** These benefits include the design of more accessible and coherent systems of service delivery, the broadening of community involvement in policy development and the preservation and/or creation of community assets (e.g., essential services, affordable housing, etc.).