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Collaboration and System Change: Pepnet 2 and the Road to New Opportunities

By Pauline Annarino

Alone, we can do so little. Together, we can do so much.
~ Helen Keller

For more than a century, we—professionals, parents, deaf individuals, and students—who are involved in education have discussed the question: “How should deaf education change?” Today this question continues to dazzle and frustrate us. We want deaf and hard of hearing students to have higher achievement across academic areas and to fully participate in the world around them. Yet too often test scores remain unacceptably low, and our students are not empowered to take advantage of the resources that would allow them to participate fully in the world around them.

Change must occur. In order to create different outcomes and for change to be successful, we must embrace two fundamental tenets:

1. The change must be system-wide.
2. Collaboration is essential.

System Change: What is It and How Do We Do It?

System change is an event, or process of events, in which the usual and accepted way of doing things is replaced and a new way becomes the usual and accepted way of doing things. A system change can impact the world, a field, an organization, a classroom, or even one’s family.

No doubt changing a system can feel overwhelming. It takes time, a coordinated effort by more than one individual, and the belief that change is both necessary and possible. A successful system change often requires a change in the knowledge, attitude, behavior, and skill of all those who have a stake in the system. Those changes—in knowledge, attitude, behavior, and skills—are recognized as so essential that educators often refer to them by the acronym “KABS.”

Photos courtesy of pepnet 2



At left and below:
The power of collaboration—
Summit participants
put their talents
together for success
in this team-building
activity.



Change and Pepnet 2

As part of pepnet 2's five-year Summit initiative, individuals on 50 state teams representing agencies throughout the country committed to effecting change in their state as it related to student transition from high school to postsecondary education or the workplace. Each team comprised five individuals, representing teaching personnel, vocational rehabilitation professionals, and parents. Team members developed goals that meant changes for their states. The anticipated changes varied depending on individual state needs. For some states, the changes meant opening up the lines of communication and working together in consistent ways. For other states, the changes involved new legislation, and for still other states, the most important changes provided tools to empower parents. In every state, change meant individuals working together in a committed collaboration.

After four years, these pepnet 2 teams offer these lessons learned:

- **Be visible to all.** Everyone—those who effect the change within the system, those who endure it, and those who hold authority over it—must be aware of the change underway. One Summit state team printed T-shirts and business cards advertising the collaborative process underway, sharing both with parents, teachers, administrators, and politicians.
- **Be passionate.** Care about what you do. Participate in what you care about.
- **Share your passion.** Use every opportunity. If you have a captive audience, grab the opportunity and say, “Hey, have I shared with you what we’re doing? Would you be interested in collaborating?”
- **Keep your eyes on the goal.** Keep your spirits high. Appreciate small successes. Know that small successes can result in big gains. Don't give up!

Collaboration: What is It—and How and Why Do We Do It?

Simply stated, collaboration is an event, or process of events, that brings people with unique strengths and opportunities together to enhance efficiency and accomplish something that none of them could do alone. A successful collaboration achieves its goals and outcomes, maintains long-term impact, and creates long-lasting relationships.

Collaboration is an idea that resonates with funders and change agents, and for larger projects, it is often the only way to effectively make pronounced changes in a community. As dedicated professionals, we share the common goal of enhancing student success. When we seek a collaboration, we are eager to begin and motivated to achieve the intended outcomes.

Sometimes individuals refer to collaborating as “playing well in the sandbox.” A blog focused on the subject maintains that collaboration is “simply put ... a mindset: the rest follows in terms of culture, process, and technology



in that order” (Dominguez, 2011). Those of us who regularly engage in collaborations know that collaboration requires roots deeper than a sandbox permits—and we only wish it were as easy as play!

Type “definition of collaboration” in a search engine and you confront 190 million possible links. It is no wonder

that getting everyone on the same collaboration page is challenging. Asked what they believed collaboration meant, Dominguez (2011) gathered the following replies:

- *Collaboration is binding different attitudes and thoughts to form a new rigid approach.*

- *Collaboration is an act where people come together to discover new approaches to old ways.*
- *Collaboration can be challenging but also invigorating.*
- *Just so long as nobody mistakes good collaboration for decision by committee, which is a bad thing and dilutes creativity!*
- *With collaboration we can solve any big work easily.*
- *Collaboration is being an active member of a group that works together to achieve a common goal. Being an active member means you not only participate in conversations, meetings, and interactions passively (i.e., only listening and learning) but you add your piece of contribution to the group.*

We may not know how these individuals will operate behaviorally or the skills they bring to the collaboration table, but their choice of words gives us some insight about their knowledge and attitudes.

Factors that Support Collaborative Success

Collaborative	Participant Experience
Has direction	A goal and an understanding of how to achieve it
Is provided with nurturing	A feeling that somebody wants him or her to work together and to help him or her succeed
Is engaged with the participating organization(s)	Active involvement
Is connected to the participating organization(s)	Connectivity to the work he or she is doing
Is valued by the participating organization(s)	Individual skills, talents, abilities, and experiences are recognized; participant has opportunities to contribute and to feel his or her contributions are appreciated

**Adapted by Annarino from Six Success Factors (The RP Group, 2014).*

Taking Time to Collaborate

Collaboration takes time. It requires letting go of ego and the needs of the individual or organization and working toward the goals that are part of the larger agenda of the collaborative. To achieve a good collaborative outcome requires a good process. A good process requires the same five fundamental elements that promote healthy, mutually beneficial relationships. These elements, at once publically present and individually internalized, enhance a positive outcome. They include:

- mutual acknowledgement of a shared goal;
- a shared sense of equality;
- respect for the role, responsibilities, and capabilities of each party;
- demonstrated integrity, honesty, and, ultimately, trust; and
- clear and regular communication.

Is Your Institution Ready for Collaboration?

By *Pauline Annarino*

Members of institutions engaging in collaboration should have clear answers to a myriad of questions, including the following:

- Do we in our institution operate within a culture that is conducive to collaboration?
 - What do we understand about collaboration and what it means to collaborate?
 - Are we willing to assure our partners that our commitment to a collaborative project will be binding and reciprocal?
 - Do we view our work, materials, and tools as proprietary? What information are we willing to share with our partners?
- Do staff and leadership agree on the goals of the collaboration?
 - Is the leadership comfortable releasing time for staff to engage in activities not directly under the purview of the leadership?
 - Is the leadership comfortable respecting time commitments made by staff to the collaborative even if those commitments create hardship on the organization?
- What do we know about our collaborators and other groups or organizations that provide similar services?
 - Do we view them as sister agencies, competitors, or both?
 - Do we currently have a collegial relationship with them?
 - Do any of those potential collaborators receive support from the same funding source? And from what other sources? Would collaboration create greater funding opportunities for all agencies involved?
- What are the tangible benefits we might experience if we consider collaboration?
- In considering a particular collaboration:
 - Do our missions and goals align?
 - Will it create staff hardship?
 - What are the tangible benefits we will experience as a result of the collaboration?
 - What are the odds of successful outcomes and future collaborations?

Working in a postsecondary setting, I am surrounded by a culture driven by the aspiration for student achievement. Recently, I was reminded that students are more likely to achieve their goals when certain factors are present—the same factors that are necessary for collaborative success. These factors include the feeling of having a clear direction and being nurtured and connected as they—individual students and participants in collaborative endeavors—work to achieve their goals. (See Table: Factors that Support Collaborative Success.)

Collaboration is part of the culture of today's professionals. Educators engage in it with each other and with parents. Some collaborations grow organically while other collaborations are the products of grants, politics, and administrative mandates. Most agree that collaborating for change and improvements in systems and in learning is important and that changes effected through collaborations tend to evolve with more strength than those that occur through the dictates of single individuals.

Maintaining the Collaborative Passion

Collaborations created for the right reasons and with all members holding a personal belief in the collaboration's goals create synergy and a sense of excitement. The juggling of other equally important work with the passion of the new collaborative can be a challenge. The pepnet 2 state Summit teams are consistent in their “keep the passion” message. The teams suggest that all those working in collaborations:

- set clear intermediate milestones that demonstrate forward movement

toward the goal;

- define recognizable signs that will reinforce that the team is on the right track and making a difference;
- find value in all sizes of success and reward team members for smaller jobs well done; and
- meet regularly with a clear, set agenda.

Why Some Collaborations Struggle Overcoming the Barriers

The other day, I found myself in the role of collaboration broker, that is I was

bringing individuals together from two independent entities to consider a first-time collaboration. While discussing the collaboration at hand, one of the parties noted that an unrelated collaboration was hitting roadblocks because the stated goal—a joint effort to create a new degree program between two colleges—was perceived by a member of the collaboration team to be one college simply seeking more students to strengthen an existing program. I suspect this collaboration did not start out deceptively but rather this impression resulted from unintended missteps. A clearly delineated agreement

In order to achieve long-term change, it is imperative that we work together. This work is hard. It takes courage to stretch and grow.

~ Summit state team member

What Does Collaboration Mean for the Process of Transition?

Transition is the process all students go through as they move from a high school setting to what lies beyond. Transition programs assist students and their parents as they prepare for life after high school in a proactive and coordinated way. An effective transition program provides students with the tools and the confidence to assume responsibility for their educational and employment decisions as they move into adulthood.

Data tell us that a strong transition plan is the result of a team process that engages all who have a stake in the success of the student; the stakeholders include the student, his or her teachers, parents or guardians, and other service providers. When a person is involved in the identification and decision making of an activity, goal, or plan, the person has a greater stake in the outcome, and working towards the outcome is more likely to be successful.

For students who are deaf or hard of hearing, however, who often do not experience ready access to incidental learning, student involvement in transition planning is critical. Students need to learn what their strengths and needs are, understand their hearing loss and/or other disabilities, and note how these affect them in different settings. They also need to explore what they want to do after they complete their high school education. Their opinions, wants, and desires need to be taken into consideration if transition goals are to be on target.

While it is so important that the student contribute, participate, and practice important transition skills, the role of the family in transition planning cannot be underestimated. They are able to contribute information that the school does not have about the student's life and the student's support systems outside of school. When parents understand the transition plan and its importance to their child's success, there is a greater prospect for their commitment and contribution to the plan—and for their child's long-term success.

and revisiting the agreement periodically may have avoided this collaborative “bump in the road.”

As we know, not all collaborations are voluntary. Outside forces often drive a new collaboration. These collaborations can be more difficult. In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summarized for Busy People*, Lencioni (2013) notes that teams or collaborations can fall apart when one or more of the following conditions are present and participants and their leaders do not know how to address and reverse them:

- fear of conflict,
- lack of commitment,
- absence of trust,
- avoidance of accountability, and/or
- inattention to results.

When participating in a collaboration, keep an ongoing sense of the internal culture of the collaborative to ensure the dysfunctions described by Lencioni do not unintentionally infiltrate the group.

Authors Trusko, Pexton, Harrington, and Gupta (2007) believe eight barriers to change are likely to occur. Having an eye on these potential “bumps” in the road and addressing them before they become roadblocks goes a long way in moving collaboration forward to a

positive outcome. These barriers include:

1. Cultural complacency, resistance, or skepticism
2. Lack of communication
3. Lack of alignment and accountability
4. Passive or absent leadership support
5. Micromanagement
6. Overloaded workforce
7. Inadequate systems and structures
8. Lack of control plans to measure and sustain results

Respect each other's time and be honest. If you can't do the task or give 100 percent focus ... say so.

~ Summit state team member

Maintaining Change

As professionals, we know that once it occurs, change is hard to sustain. One state team, talking about the importance of change sustainability, noted, "We all want system change, and we want long-term commitment to making change, but in order to stay committed, we learned the importance of creating a sustainability plan [that went beyond the creation of the change]." Change is fluid, and it must be tended to if it is to continue and maintain the impact we seek. This team was wise to recognize the importance of identifying the sustainability tools needed to shore up outcomes.

The Forum for the Future

(www.forumforthefuture.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping businesses make the world's systems more sustainable, recognizes that change is difficult and promotes a six-step process toward achieving and maintaining change. The steps begin with understanding the need for change and end with ensuring change is maintained. Here are the steps:

1. Understand the need for change.
2. Diagnose the system.
3. Create pioneering practices.
4. Enable the change to take place.
5. Sustain the transition.
6. Set new rules for the mainstream.

In deaf education, individuals at all levels—in state agencies, classrooms, and living rooms—report experiencing the need for change. Our commitment to our students and the passion for what we do is undeniable; our desire to change the status quo of deaf education is real and necessary. We know that collaboration can be hard, but when executed well, it can be so very rich in process and in outcome.

For the past four years, individuals who are members of the Summit teams of pepnet 2 have demonstrated that we

Six Steps to Significant Change

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2. Diagnose the system.
3. Create pioneering practices.
4. Enable the change to take place.
5. Sustain the transition.
6. Set new rules for the mainstream.

~ Forum for the Future

don't need "Jupiter to align with Mars" to make collaboration work. We need individual expertise and collective knowledge peppered with commitment, patience, and respect. However, if Jupiter aligning with Mars can contribute to change that results in better academic outcomes for deaf and hard of hearing students, they are welcome to join my collaboration team any day!

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