

**Hamilton Roundtable  
for Poverty Reduction**

**MAKING  
HAMILTON**  
the best place  
to raise a child.

**JPC**

**Jobs Prosperity Collaborative**

Hamilton

# 5 *Key Lessons on Collaboration*

Learning from Hamilton's Poverty Roundtable  
and Jobs Initiative

Nancy F. Johnson  
January 2010



**WELLESLEY INSTITUTE**  
advancing urban health



**Hamilton**

THE J.W. McCONNELL  
FAMILY FOUNDATION

LA FONDATION DE LA  
FAMILLE J.W. McCONNELL



**HAMILTON  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION**

*Vibrant*  
**COMMUNITIES**  
CANADA

In 2009, two Hamilton multi-sector collaborations—the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) and the Jobs Prosperity Collaborative (JPC)—undertook an evaluation process. The evaluation, conducted by Dr. Arnold Love, surfaced a number of lessons and questions. Drawing from the evaluation report<sup>1</sup>, the HRPR and JPC have produced this short working tool, in the hope that it will be useful to other collaborative efforts. Five key lessons are highlighted here. They are just a few of the many that arose during the evaluation process.

The *Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction* (HRPR) was born out of concern for our community’s poverty challenge. Spearheaded by Hamilton Community Foundation and the City of Hamilton, the Roundtable has worked since May 2005 to understand Hamilton’s high poverty levels, focus the community’s attention on poverty, and begin to find solutions. HRPR is today a multi-sector 42 member body that has engaged more than 900 organizations and 42,000 individuals in Hamilton around a community aspiration: to Make Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child. The Roundtable is financially supported by Hamilton Community Foundation, the City of Hamilton, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and individual donors. In recent years, the HRPR has influenced the adoption of the Ontario Poverty Strategy and has helped leverage \$27 million in funding for poverty reduction priorities in Hamilton. In June 2009, the Roundtable was awarded the David Crombie Urban Leadership Award by the Canadian Urban Institute for its innovative approaches to tackling poverty.

The *Jobs Prosperity Collaborative* is a group of approximately 65 members committed to promoting Hamilton’s prosperity through job creation and retention. Members of the JPC include leaders from all sectors including government, business, labour, education, environment, social services, not-for-profit organizations, healthcare, and others. In its Framework for Action on Jobs, the JPC identified seven priority areas for collaborative work in Hamilton: Innovation & Learning; Hamilton’s Image; Quality of Life; Immigration; Commercial Land and Infrastructure; Supportive Planning Process; and Economic Portfolio. In each area, a Working Group of JPC members and supportive partners has formed to review best practices, understand the specifics of our Hamilton context, and develop strategic goals, actions and evaluation metrics to advance each priority.

This report, and the evaluation initiative on which it is based, was produced with funding from the Wellesley Institute, the HRPR and the JPC.

---

<sup>1</sup> Evaluating Collaboratives of Community Change: Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative. Arnold Love, December 2009 (at [hamiltonpoverty.ca](http://hamiltonpoverty.ca))

# Lesson 1

## A Big Clear Issue Where Only a Collaborative Will Do

*It must be clear that the complexity of the issue demands a collaborative response and that collaboration is the only approach that has a chance of success.*

Both Hamilton collaborations are addressing community-wide, complex, thorny problems—in one case poverty, and in the other job creation and prosperity. Clearly, no single sector or one organization or one leader can solve those problems alone.

Staying focused on such a complex challenge, and communicating the reality that only collaborative effort can be expected to produce significant change in that complex a problem, are ongoing tasks of each group.

The urgency of both challenges has underlined the need for the collaborations; providing current data on the problems has been critical to maintaining the focus.

Poverty levels in Hamilton, which are persistently higher than in other Ontario communities, were deemed unacceptable by the HRPR. The HRPR publicized the data, encouraged feedback, and confirmed that this concern over poverty is broadly shared in the community. For the JPC, the decline of traditional manufacturing in the city long known as “Steeltown” and the exacerbating economic downturn have together given the jobs agenda a greater sense of urgency throughout the community. Data on job losses in traditional sectors reinforce the need for the collaborative.

Hamilton’s media are also playing a key role in holding the community’s focus on these complex problems. “The sustained interest of media about the issues of poverty and job creation also contributed greatly to developing a collaborative response,” notes Arnold Love in his evaluation report<sup>2</sup>.

Both groups experience ongoing pressures to narrow their focus (launch a specific poverty alleviation program, for example, rather than staying big picture) or to enlarge the focus (expand the prosperity focus beyond job creation/retention, for example). They constantly must reiterate their mandate and focus.

### **TIP**

A clear, simply-stated shared vision—for example the HRPR’s rallying cry of “making Hamilton the best place to raise a child”—can raise the collaboration above individual interests and communicate a “tent” that includes all members in a larger cause.

Hamilton’s experience confirms the research and best practice literature that staying sharply focused on a big complex problem—despite pressures to broaden or narrow it—and continuously communicating that focus, is a key to successful collaboration.

---

<sup>2</sup> Evaluating Collaboratives of Community Change: Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative. Arnold Love, December 2009, page 5

*Some good resources:*

- Jay Connor on the nature of collaboration (thecollaboratory.us)
- Paul Born on comprehensive community change (tamarackcommunity.ca)
- Roz Lasker on synergy and collaboration (cacsh.org)
- Mark Cabaj tele-learning interviews on framing poverty as a complex issue ([http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61\\_VC\\_2009f.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61_VC_2009f.html)) and phases of collaboration ([http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61\\_VC\\_2009g.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61_VC_2009g.html)) along with associated resources

## Lesson 2

### Leadership, Leadership, Leadership—Trust and Skills

*Skilled, trusted leaders are absolutely key to the success of collaborative initiatives.*

Both collaboratives employ a “co-convener” model that drew well-respected leaders from different sectors together to form the groups. For the HRPR, the co-conveners were then Hamilton Community Foundation CEO and the City of Hamilton General Manager Community Services. The JPC grew out of the Hamilton Civic Coalition, co-convened by McMaster University’s President and the City of Hamilton General Manager, Planning and Economic Development. Later, McMaster’s co-convening role was taken over by Mohawk College. All these institutions—and their individual leaders—were well-known in their sectors and well-respected in the community at large.

In addition to the co-conveners, the two collaborations are chaired by a prominent local businessman, Mark Chamberlain. His profile as a successful entrepreneur and an engaged civic leader also enhance the initiatives’ profile and credibility.

The positive profile of the co-conveners and chair was essential to establishing the credibility of the collaboratives. Equally important, according to key informants in the evaluation process, were the strong relationships between the co-conveners and their ability to work effectively together. For the HRPR, the strong working relationship between the Community Foundation CEO and the City’s Community Services General Manager created a solid foundation for engaging multiple sectors. In the JPC’s case, the co-conveners also established an especially strong relationship with Hamilton’s Mayor, Council, and staff. The extraordinary commitment of local government to both collaboratives was, and continues to be, crucial.

All the literature on collaboration stresses the importance of building trust among participants throughout the process. Having a visible leader that all parties trust is crucial. Hamilton’s evaluation confirmed that all these prominent individuals are key to the success of the collaborations—both because of their profile and because of the levels of trust they enjoy.

#### **The KUBA Principle**

I hold fast to our KUBA principle in leading these collaboratives. To empower people to act, lead them through the KUBA steps: Knowledge, Understanding, Belief, Action. It works.  
– Mark Chamberlain  
Chair, HRPR and JPC

While trust is central, the skills these civic leaders bring to the collaboratives also need to be well suited to the collaborative process. Not all good leaders (though trusted and credible) are good collaborative leaders.

David Snowden, in his Harvard Business Review article on leadership and decision-making in contexts ranging from simple to chaotic, argues that in a demonstrably complex situation, leadership demands special skills: “instead of attempting to impose a course of action, leaders must patiently allow the path forward to reveal itself. They need to probe first, then sense, and then respond. [...] Leaders who try to impose order in a complex context will fail, but those who set the stage, step back a bit, allow patterns to emerge, and determine which ones are desirable will succeed.”<sup>3</sup>

Another expert on collaboration, David Chrislip, describes “facilitative leadership” as key to successful collaboration: “Collaboration cannot work without a few strong, facilitative leaders in the stakeholder group. These collaborative leaders promote and safeguard the process by keeping stakeholders at the table through periods of frustration and skepticism, acknowledging small successes along the way, helping stakeholders negotiate difficult points, and enforcing group norms and ground rules. They articulate the incentives for collaboration and serve as catalysts for moving to new more inclusive ways of working together. They use their credibility to bring other leaders together to accomplish the initiating and convening work necessary to start a collaborative process. They ensure inclusion of usual and unusual voices reflecting the broader community, help design a constructive process and define the educational and informational needs of the initiative.”<sup>4</sup>

Some good resources:

- HRPR, “Leadership and Lessons 2005-2007” ([hamiltonpoverty.ca/news.htm](http://hamiltonpoverty.ca/news.htm))
- David Chrislip on collaborative leadership ([SkillfulMeans.org](http://SkillfulMeans.org))
- Jay Connor on leadership that supports community aspirations, “Community Visions, Community Solutions,” Amherst H. Wilder Foundation and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations
- David Snowden on leadership and complexity science (David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone. “A Leader’s Framework for Decision making,” Harvard Business Review, November 2007)
- James Orbinski, a founder of Doctors Without Borders, on transformational leadership (“An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-first Century,” Doubleday Canada, 2008)

---

<sup>3</sup> David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone. “A Leader’s Framework for Decision making,” Harvard Business Review, November 2007

<sup>4</sup> David D. Chrislip, “The New Civic Leadership,” [http://www.skillfulmeans.org/stories/Chrislip\\_NewCivicLeadership.pdf](http://www.skillfulmeans.org/stories/Chrislip_NewCivicLeadership.pdf)

## Lesson 3 Staffing for Follow Through

# 3

*Skilled, adequate staffing is crucial to the ongoing success of the collaborative.*

Members of both collaboratives, fully engaged in their own work, contribute considerable (volunteer) time to the collaboratives in meetings, committee work, networking, etc. In some cases they also provide administrative help (arranging meetings for example), expertise (website construction; document design and printing), facilities for meetings and public events, and other important contributions. But there is still a fundamental need for skilled, paid staff whose job it is to move the endeavor forward.

Although the two organizations handle their staffing differently—the HRPR with a Director and small secretariat, and the JPC with a consulting firm—there is no doubt that having staff available to follow through on actions, track and report progress, raise necessary funds, manage communications, and fulfill other key functions has been essential to progress.

“The key informants identified the provision of a skilled ‘back office’ (staff and support) as another key factor,” says the joint evaluation report.<sup>5</sup> Following through on agenda items and decisions, and helping to formulate strategies and responses were some of the ways mentioned that staff gave essential support to the collaboratives.

Some good resources:

- “Staffing a Collaborative Project: Guidance for Voluntary Community Organisations,” UK Workforce Hub.<sup>6</sup>

## Lesson 4 Collaboration Is... Collaboration Is... Collaboration Is!

# 4

*Explaining the role and nature of the collaborative is a never-ending function—and is essential for success.*

Collaboration is difficult and time consuming. It challenges all participants to focus on long-term goals and rise above their immediate, in-house concerns. Conversations are sometimes circular as all points of view are explored and solutions built from diverging perspectives. Results can be slow to develop. It is easy for participants to become impatient, frustrated, disillusioned.

---

<sup>5</sup> Evaluating Collaboratives of Community Change: Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative. Arnold Love, December 2009, page 5

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/What\\_we\\_do/Collaborative\\_Working\\_Unit/Information\\_and\\_advice/Staffing\\_a\\_Collaborative\\_Project\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/What_we_do/Collaborative_Working_Unit/Information_and_advice/Staffing_a_Collaborative_Project_PDF.pdf)

### **At its best, collaboration is...**

Civic collaboration is a process of shared decision-making in which all the parties with a stake in a problem constructively explore their differences and develop a joint strategy for action. The ethic of collaboration is premised on the belief that politics does not have to be a zero-sum game where one party wins and one party loses, or where both sides settle for a compromise. If the right people are brought together in constructive ways and with the appropriate information they can not only create authentic visions and strategies for addressing their joint problems but also, in many cases, overcome their limited perspectives of what is possible.

– Scott London, “Collaboration and Community”

Both Hamilton collaboratives identified a constant need to reiterate the goals of the collaborative and the nature of the collaborative process—to remind people of the bigger picture and the longer time frame and the value of diverse input. Both on the part of participants in the collaboratives and the public at large, expectations often outpace the collaborative’s ability to demonstrate concrete results.

As key informants in the evaluations described the challenge, “A collaborative does not deliver services directly, but concentrates on building cooperation and promoting systems-level change. Developing multi-sector collaboratives requires building trust and understanding among members, as well as extensive consultations and network building. When members meet only a few hours once a month, achieving tangible results will take time. These distinctions regarding the roles of collaboratives are important for managing expectations and for avoiding duplication of effort with direct service providers. The key informants felt that HRPR and JPC must be vigilant and continuously reinforce the unique nature of collaboratives and manage expectations.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Describing the Collaborative's Role...**

We know that the JPC itself doesn't create jobs. Jobs get produced by businesses, by the public sector, by not-for-profit organizations. So why bother with the JPC? Because our role is to change the Hamilton environment in a way that facilitates job creation. The JPC's work on the seven pillars in our framework will make Hamilton a better community in which to create jobs. That's what this collaboration can do for all potential employers.

– Tim Dobbie, Director  
Jobs Prosperity Collaborative

Some good resources:

- “Collaboration and Community” by social innovation journalist Scott London provides a good overview of the nature of collaboration, its principles, dynamics, limitations, etc. ([www.scottlondon.com/reports/ppcc.html](http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/ppcc.html))
- Paul Born, “Community Conversations,” BPS Books, Toronto 2008 (and [www.tamarackcommunity.ca](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca))

<sup>7</sup> Evaluating Collaboratives of Community Change: Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative. Arnold Love, December 2009, page 5

# Lesson 5

## A Fine Balance—Process vs. Progress

*Maintaining the right balance between attending to process (the “who and how” of decision-making and planning) and making progress (what gets done) is one of any collaborative enterprise’s most challenging—and critical—tasks.*

Collaboratives walk a constant tightrope between attending to process and demonstrating action and results. Any collaboration, if it is constituted of a wide mix of participants, will have some members who want immediate action (“all this talk is fine but nothing has changed”) and others who want to establish principles and governance procedures to frame the work before moving to action (“we can’t just run off half-cocked, we need a plan”). In both Hamilton experiences, balance between process and action is a continuing pressure point that is given almost daily attention by organizers. Planning for inclusive process that respects the nature of collaboration is constantly balanced with strategies to produce and publicize short-term “wins” and longer-term gains. Finding the right balance is an ever-present challenge.

Some key informants in the Hamilton evaluation went so far as to speculate that the process/progress divide could be defined by sector—with business and entrepreneurs favouring action, and not-for-profit and government participants favouring process. Others said that the collaboratives’ attention to process actually helped to leaven the authoritative tendencies of some stakeholders. (No one promised collaboration would be easy!)

### **The Two Change Frameworks**

- Jobs Prosperity Collaborative, A Framework for Action on Jobs, November 2008 ([www.jpchamilton.ca/assets/JPC\\_Framework.pdf](http://www.jpchamilton.ca/assets/JPC_Framework.pdf))
- Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child: A Change Framework for Poverty Reduction, June 2006 ([www.hamiltonpoverty.ca/docs/HRPR-June12-06.pdf](http://www.hamiltonpoverty.ca/docs/HRPR-June12-06.pdf))

For the two Hamilton collaboratives, key informants in the evaluation identified the establishment of a “change framework” as an essential step in grounding the work of the collaborative.

The change frameworks—essential for the “process” camp—helped to lay out the scope of the problem, identified some perspectives and best practices, and essentially formed the basis for ensuing action plans. The process of developing the frameworks—especially in the case of the HRPR—engaged key stakeholders in defining the problem and suggesting strategies to address it. It was critical that both “grass roots” and “grass tops” were involved in that process—people living with poverty and their advocates, as well as service providers and community leaders.

### **Benefits of a Change Framework<sup>8</sup>**

- The process of creating it challenged members to carefully consider their theory of change, linking aspirations to outcomes, strategies and actions
- It presented a rationale grounded in change theories, evidence-based practices, and experience of members
- It whetted the appetite for change and fired public imagination to think big
- It served as a map for participants showing where they could align their efforts and contribute to the shared goal

With the foundation of a change framework in place, both collaboratives moved to an implementation plan. In both cases, they engaged broader participation in developing the action plans (though some felt more could be done to constantly involve both grass tops and grass roots). Forming working groups helped to engage more action-oriented participants.

The transition from change framework to action plan was identified in the evaluation as a critical point in the development of the collaboratives, and critical to their success and sustainability. Key informants “felt it was vital to establish a manageable number of goals together with concrete targets and tasks. The implementation of these goals should be sequenced over a period of several years and goals attainment should be carefully monitored and reported regularly.”<sup>9</sup>

The progress/process balance is not only real but perceived. Often, progress is being made but is not obvious to all participants. Reporting on progress is essential. The HRPR has adopted a model of “Reports to the Community” which involve stakeholder community events once a year, email blasts to members, blogs, and ongoing partnership with media to report on progress to the whole community.

Despite constant pressure to do more in more directions, both collaboratives are trying to maintain a manageable scope in their action planning, in order to demonstrate success and progress.

Another challenge in documenting progress for collaboratives is the attribution of “credit” for change in extremely complex systems. A direct relationship between a particular action and systemic or policy change is rarely clear. Despite that, the Hamilton evaluation was able to gauge the influence key informants thought the two collaboratives had had upon system-wide and policy change—and the influence was considerable. This assessment can be communicated to stakeholders as evidence of progress (another good reason to build evaluation into a collaborative’s action plan).

**TIP**  
Ensure that process aspects of the collaborative are carefully planned and supported by professional facilitators. This will help prevent “process creep” while still honouring the collaborative process.

Some good resources:

<sup>8</sup> As identified by key informants in the Hamilton evaluation

<sup>9</sup> Evaluating Collaboratives of Community Change: Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative. Arnold Love, December 2009, page 6

- Liz Weaver and Anne Makhoul, “Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction: Setting the Table for Change,” 2009 ([www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org))
- Paul Mattessich, “Can This Collaboration be Saved?” ([www.nhi.org/online/issues/129/savecollab.html](http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/129/savecollab.html)) and other publications
- Tamarack Institute ([www.tamarackcommunity.ca](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca)), Jay Connor ([thecollaboratory.us](http://thecollaboratory.us)), the Aspen Institute ([www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org)) on community change theory and change frameworks
- Collaboration on Policy: A Manual developed by the Community-Government Collaboration on Policy, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2009

**Want more detail?**

These are just some of the lessons learned from the Hamilton evaluation. For more, see the full report, *Evaluating Collaboratives of Community Change: Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative* by Arnold Love (December 2009) at [www.hamiltonpoverty.ca](http://www.hamiltonpoverty.ca)