You Say ‘Tomato,’ I Say ‘Tomato’: When Two Accreditors Collaborate on Interprofessional Education

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Every accredited provider – ACCME, ANCC, ACPE and more – has its own processes for developing and implementing continuing education initiatives and meeting similar, but often not exactly the same, accreditation requirements. When you are the only accredited provider, this does not present any issues. But when you are collaborating on a multi-certified interprofessional educational activity with another accredited organization with its own best practices and policies, it can be challenging, frustrating and even infuriating at times. However, if both organizations approach working together as a true collaboration, great education without much of the angst is possible.

What Is the Purpose of Collaboration?
Collaboration provides organizations with the opportunity to combine their knowledge, creativity, experiences and resources. Collaborations often allow for strengths and best practices of all organizations involved to be brought forward. However, organizations should not be naïve and overlook the fact that it can also bring forward weaknesses and threats. Establishing successful collaborative relationships is not easy, and it is important for organizations to approach collaborations carefully and methodically in order to ensure a successful outcome.

Picking a Collaborator
When entering into a collaborative relationship, there are several important factors to consider.

- Do we share common missions, approaches and personalities?
- Does each organization involved have a clear vision of why it wants to collaborate on and can that vision be clearly articulated to others?
- Does each organization have a clear idea of what the other organization is looking for in the collaborative relationship, answering questions such as: what’s in it for me and what’s in it for them?

While it is important that collaborators have common missions, approaches and personalities, it is perhaps even more important that collaborators begin by considering each other’s essence. Essence is defined in philosophy as “the attribute or set of attributes that made an entity or substance what it fundamentally is, and which it has by necessity, and without which it loses its identity.” As best stated by Ken Blanchard, author and management expert, “There are two parts of collaborating: One is essence and the other is form. Essence is the heart-to-heart and values-to-values; form is how you do it. Be careful in a relationship that goes to form right away, because if you do that, you always get bit in the tail by essence. Essence has to come first.”

Taking Blanchard’s advice to heart, two accreditors who are considering collaborating should first engage in the discussions that explore who each organization is and

Lessons Learned

- Start with essence.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Establish a primary point of contact for each organization.
- Do not make assumptions about processes, procedures or policies.
- Let go of the need to control every detail and embrace joint decision making.
- Avoid duplication of effort.
- Use technology when possible to make life easier.

Be flexible and open to different ways of doing things – you might learn something new!
what they are about before they figure out how they will collaborate. If red flags arise at this point in the process, it is better to agree not to proceed than to continue forward and later regret it.

**Establishing the Working Relationship**

Once you decide to proceed, you need to establish the working relationship. One of the first steps should be to discuss processes, documentation and management.

**Processes**

- How will you integrate your processes with those of your collaborator?
- What processes are required versus the way we have always done things?
- What are the preferred methods of communication?

**Documentation**

- Whose forms will be used? Can one collaborator’s forms be modified to meet both organizations’ needs?
- Who will be responsible for modifying any shared forms?
- Are all collaborators clear about what forms are required and by whom?

**Management**

- Who will be responsible for overseeing each aspect of the activity (i.e., completion and collection of forms, content development, faculty management and communication, disclosure and conflict of interest resolution, logistics, budget—including payment of invoices—grant submissions and reconciliations, onsite monitoring, evaluation and outcomes, and more)?
- How will decisions be made? Remember: No one is running the show alone.
- Who will be the point of contact with each other, commercial interests, the faculty, etc.? Communicate consistently with one voice both to each other and with other individuals and organizations.
- What technology will be used and who will manage it? For example, if the activity will have learners complete the evaluation and process credits online, whose system will be used? How and when will files be shared between collaborators?

Once processes, documentation and management have been discussed, develop a collaboration agreement that all parties agree upon before the collaboration officially commences. This is a requirement for some accreditations, but it is a good practice to do regardless of whether it is a requirement or not. A collaborative agreement is less about trust and more about determining the details, because as we all know, “the devil is in the details.” Well thought out agreements are beneficial to avoiding problems later on.

Collaborative agreements should state, at minimum, who is involved; the role of each person and organization in the collaboration, such as who will provide what service; payment amounts and terms if there will be funds exchanged for services provided; responsibilities; and how disagreements will be resolved.

**Negotiating and Managing the Unexpected**

No matter how proactive collaborators are when establishing a working relationship, unplanned situations will occur that will need to be negotiated. Both collaborators must recognize and accept this going into the relationship.

Similar to a good marriage, accreditors interested in collaborating need to ensure that their essences are compatible, their systems and processes work well together, and both organizations are willing to work toward mutually acceptable compromises when necessary. Organizations that take the time up front to ensure these things reduce the likelihood that they will wake up one day and ask themselves, “What were we thinking?”

**References:**