**Part 4: Social dimensions of interagency collaboration—**

**Joining the collaboration: Individual subscription**

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**INTRODUCTION**

When any group forms, the probability of long-term success is substantially increased if an environment is created that fosters member participation in the group-formation process. This participation contributes to the advancement and growth of the members when they are involved in collaboration or some sort of joint endeavor between participating agencies or within different sections of the same agency. Using a collaborative process allows for formation of a sustainable, high-involvement membership process. This active membership allows us to make use of the notion of “subscription.”

Social scientists have observed that when attempts to form new relationships exclude key leaders and members (whom we now call “stakeholders” in the new endeavor), the organization’s members (the “workers” or “front-line personnel”) often do not cooperate with management’s requests or support the new ways that have been announced. Often they just comply and “do as they are told,” or they “work to rule,” or they undermine the endeavor and its intent; in extreme cases, they actively rebel. In essence, they do not “subscribe” to the new relationship.

A reason for this lack of cooperation and participation is that the members of the group have not had the time to understand the history and formation of the organization and have not figured out how to make the new relationship work for themselves and their organization. At best, they may just bear with the formation and keep focused on getting their “real” work completed.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that getting people to actively support any organization is such a challenge. Using a collaborative process increases the chances for success and ongoing strength of the organization. Aware leaders and active members need to know what they will encounter as they move into any new endeavors. In this article, we will focus on what it takes to get individuals to “subscribe” to inter- or intra-agency collaborative endeavors.

**IMPACT OF AN ORGANIZATION’S CULTURE ON BEHAVIOR**

Individual behavior in an organization is largely defined by and dependent on the culture of the organization in which the individuals serve. In its simplest terms, organizational culture is the manifestation of the written and unwritten, spoken and unspoken “rules” of the organization. It is the way the members perceive what the organization wants, as well as the ways in which they are required to function in order to complete the organization’s work. Each organization has its own vision, mission, guiding principles, strategies, and goals. These aspirations define the organization and mold its culture. Each individual worker decides how he/she will take part. Each individual integrates him- or herself into the larger group and takes on the cultural vision and mission. Thus,
the individual creates his or her own connection to
the organization. The member is believed to be “com-
mitted” to the organization. Once members achieve
that state of commitment, their behaviors comply
with the organization’s ways. They have become
“acculturated,” since all of their behavior complies
with what is expected explicitly and implicitly by the
group.

Individual members respond to organizational
rules based on their particular perceptions of those
rules and their own individual interests and con-
cerns, which may or may not be in tune with the orga-
nization’s rules. Critical to the success of an inter- or
intra-agency endeavor is getting organizational stake-
holders (leaders and members) to subscribe to the forma-
tion process of the endeavor and alter their behavior as
required. When enough members subscribe actively, the
organization as a whole will begin to adopt and then inte-
grate the new ways. To state it differently, the organiza-
tion’s behavior with regard to inter- or intra-agency suc-
cess will change as more members take on the new atti-
tudes and behaviors. Stakeholders within the organiza-
tion can initiate and greatly accelerate this requisite
behavior change by creating opportunities and/or chal-
lenges that encourage leaders and members to change in
a particular manner.

If a multi-agency task force is formed with the
purpose of investigating potential threats, members
from the local, regional, and federal agencies all need
to work in a uniform and aligned way. One agency
should not “showcase” itself or jeopardize other mem-
bers by using its own ways of doing things rather
than the agreed-upon ways. On the other hand, if the
organization does not listen to its members and sim-
ply mandates specific behavior, the effectiveness of
teamwork and the many other dimensions of working
in a new way are negated.

**ESTABLISHING THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT**

It is important to understand how an organiza-
tion’s culture supports and/or undermines inter- or
intra-agency efforts, for, as you will remember, it is
often this collection of unwritten and unspoken “rules”
that determines the many factors that influence
“subscription” (or joining) behavior. Organizational
examples would include norms around the use of
information and/or how one processes it, stakeholder
support for change, time and workload demands,
reward and compensation systems, collaborative vs.
competitive practices, and customer satisfaction.
More specific factors include past experience with inter-
or intra-agency initiatives in general; recognition
of the problem(s) to be solved; the perceived
value of the initiative; the ability to address the prob-
lem(s); personal interests; and personal operational
style, including a risk-taking mentality.

If we were to create a team whose members
included police (local, state, regional, and federal),
fire departments (local, state, regional, and federal),
emergency medical services (the hospital system and
all the ancillary pieces), emergency management (all
the components at the local, state, regional, and fed-
eral levels), and Homeland Security and engage the
group in a special recovery-team endeavor, how
would the members of each faction interact and join
forces? How would they behave as a group? The non-
collaborative approach usually used is, X is in charge,
and he will tell you what to do, when to do it, and how
to do it; the others then comply. Using a collaborative
approach, time is initially spent discussing important
topics such as vision, mission, and how each party
contributes to the collaboration. This creates an envi-
ronment where each individual creates a connection
with the others in the collaboration and consequently
comes to own the new organization.

Establishing a cultural environment that sup-
ports inter- or intra-agency endeavors is the founda-
tion on which to build a strong organization that is
empowered to meet its goals. The culture must pro-
vide strong incentives for change and at least the
minimum of incentives needed to maintain the status
quo. Sponsorship and key alliances need to be devel-
oped to support collaboration.

**INFLUENCING INDIVIDUAL SUBSCRIPTION BEHAVIOR**

In order to understand the levels at which organi-
zational stakeholders work together and “subscribe”
to the new organization, we need to understand
the levels of engagement. Subscription behavior can be
described as on a continuum, from “very supportive”
to “actively undermining.” Table 1 contains the terms for the levels of subscription and their associated key behaviors.

With regard to any organizational venture/change, each individual will exhibit behavior that falls somewhere along this continuum. Some individuals will almost immediately commit themselves whole-heartedly to supporting the inter- or intra-agency endeavor. Some individuals may never get beyond apathy or noncompliance. Whether or not there will be individual subscription issues regarding inter- or intra-agency actions is not the question. The question is, How can the inter- or intra-agency professional deal with these issues in a way that effectively moves the organization as far as possible toward the commitment end of the continuum? Table 2 explores the levels of subscription and the actions of leaders and members at each of the five levels.

When forming a collaborative effort, the rule is to include stakeholders as much as possible. The more they express themselves and their concerns, values, and beliefs, and the more they can see those ideas incorporated into the venture, the more they subscribe to the process.

Another interesting factor in forming a collaborative effort is that many people exhibit caution when attempting to engage in a new effort. Usually a small group of members sees things in a positive way. These individuals exhibit less risk aversion and are excited by the thought of getting involved early and forming the endeavor. These individuals are called “early adopters.”

The antithesis of the early adopter is the “slow adopter.” Initially such individuals adopt the roles of noncompliant or disengaged individuals. These individuals are often highly invested in their own ways of doing things and need to experience how things work in another way. Eventually, many of these individuals will change their level of subscription, once they see it is O.K. to behave in the new ways and that they, too, can benefit from them.

When creating an inter- or intra-agency endeavor, it is important to be patient. It is necessary to create a structured program for people to which they can subscribe. Allow time and space for learning and changing of perspectives. Individuals will always accept change at their own pace; make it easy for individuals to “join the club” over time. Simply welcome them in and commit yourself to their success as enthusiastically as you did the early adopters, those first in. Encourage the constructive expression of emotions and concerns, and don’t take resistance personally.

Table 1. Subscription behaviors and definitions

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<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Wants to achieve his/her own vision using the formative inter- or intra-agency endeavor and its processes and is willing to go the extra mile to make it happen, including creating whatever new rules or structures are needed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrolled</td>
<td>Sees personal benefits in the vision and in using inter- or intra-agency endeavors and processes and does everything that is expected; understands the spirit of the law, which he or she follows to the letter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compliant</td>
<td>Does not see the benefits of the vision, but does not want to threaten or jeopardize his/her job or career. He/she follows the inter- or intra-agency endeavor and its processes just enough because it is expected or because he/she “has to” but also lets it be known that he/she is not really on board. These people “work to rule,” or they only “follow the letter of the law.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noncompliant</td>
<td>Does not see the benefits of the inter- or intra-agency endeavor, process, or vision and does not do what is expected. Basically, he/she has an attitude of “you can’t make me do much.” Perceived as apathetic or sometimes actively negative toward any new endeavor.</td>
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<td>Disengaged</td>
<td>Neither for nor against the inter- or intra-agency vision. Is often late turning in materials or turns in poor-quality work. No interest, no energy; attitudes of, “If I wait long enough, it’ll go away”; “This inter- or intra-agency stuff doesn’t affect me”; “Is it five o’clock yet?”; “I’ll be retiring soon.”</td>
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**Table 2. The five levels of subscription behavior**

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<th>Behavior</th>
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<td><strong>Committed</strong></td>
<td>Documents and communicates success stories based on work with the inter- or intra-agency endeavor.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engages stakeholders in planning for improvement of the inter- or intra-agency process or for departmental or organizational use.</td>
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<td>Engages stakeholders to act as spokespersons to promote the inter- or intra-agency endeavor and carry the vision forward.</td>
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<td>Asks committed inter- or intra-agency customers to test or pilot new inter- or intra-agency processes as early as possible in order to provide involvement. These early subscribers are the successes the sponsor(s) and/or the other members of the organization observe.</td>
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<td><strong>Enrolled</strong></td>
<td>Shows support and commitment to the sponsors and his/her goals.</td>
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<td>Engages sponsor(s) in analysis of the inter- or intra-agency function and/or inter- or intra-agency results, and shows them how they can increase effectiveness.</td>
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<td>Develops training for different aspects of the organization or the inter- or intra-agency endeavor to support ongoing efforts.</td>
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<td>Enjoys benefits from an inter- or intra-agency process in action.</td>
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<td><strong>Compliant</strong></td>
<td>Identifies individual needs and shows how inter- or intra-agency endeavor can help.</td>
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<td>Acknowledges accomplishments that wouldn’t have happened before inter- or intra-agency involvement.</td>
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<td>Engages in reflection on the inter- or intra-agency process, identifying what went well and what would be “even better if . . . .”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Noncompliant</strong></td>
<td>Identifies and emphasizes concerns that keep members from accepting or participating in the inter- or intra-agency endeavor.</td>
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<td>Focuses on identifying experiences, with as little delay as possible, that illustrate reasons not to be engaged in the inter- or intra-agency endeavor.</td>
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<td>Communicates problems with the inter- or intra-agency vision, including the significance and any missing benefits.</td>
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<td>Works with leaders of other areas to gain their cooperation in subverting the inter- or intra-agency endeavor.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Disengaged</strong></td>
<td>Doesn’t care about the new endeavor and continues with what he or she had been doing in his or her own ways.</td>
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<td>Does not engage in finding out the successes of the venture</td>
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CONCLUSION

It is critical that the leader of an inter- or intra-agency endeavor actively facilitates participation in establishment of an organizational environment (the culture and structure of the organization) that supports subscription to the inter- or intra-agency endeavor and its related processes. This includes:

- tying the newly formed organization closely to the visions of the original organizations from which the members come, and communicating how the visions support each other;
- gaining stakeholder support within each agency or department and openly valuing their varied contributions;
- letting the stakeholders determine how they will work together and operate to fulfill the mandated endeavor; and
- working closely with the team members to help them build and recognize success.

It is equally important to recognize that individual subscription to the new endeavor can take time, and that individuals respond to change in their own ways and at their own rates. Concentrate on subscription-enhancing efforts within the organization. Invite participation from early adopters and foster contribution from others. Over a period of time and with demonstrable successes, more and more individuals will move toward higher levels of subscription. Eventually, the membership subscription in the new collaboration will be large enough to sustain itself—and there will be no stopping it.

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