



What Does It Take to Make Collaboration Work? *Lessons Learned Through the Criminal Justice System Project*

Editor's Note

The Criminal Justice System Project was a 3-year effort by the National Institute of Corrections to help State and local policy-makers develop a method of working together on corrections issues. This article is adapted from an unpublished evaluation report on the project, "Criminal Justice System Project, Interim Report of Evaluation Findings," by Policy Studies, Inc., conducted under NIJ grant number 97-IJ-CX-0056.

What does it take to create and sustain an efficient and effective collaboration? One with lots of partners, different points of view, and potentially controversial subject matter?

Even with the challenges of multiple partners and shared decisionmaking, research suggests that collaboration is worth the investment. The Criminal Justice System Project (CJSP) evaluation, completed by Policy Studies, Inc., for NIJ, highlights the value of collaboration and provides practical tips

on how to make the collaborative process more efficient and more likely to produce favorable outcomes. These ideas can help ensure that collaboration will make the best use of a very valuable resource—time.

Here are the Top Twelve Lessons Learned:

Lesson 1: Ensure that the people or the group in charge is officially sanctioned and authorized to make decisions for the criminal justice system.

It is imperative for the leaders or lead team in a project of this nature to be authorized to make decisions and act on them. The sanctioning and authority may come from the State legislature or from a local governing body such as a county commission. Lack of

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM PROJECT

In January 1997, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) began a 3-year Criminal Justice System Project (CJSP) that emerged from a 1993 strategic planning process where the main priority was to develop an effective system of correctional sanctions. The project was run under the direction of the Center for Effective Public Policy (CEPP) and was evaluated by Policy Studies, Inc.

The goal of CJSP was to help criminal justice policymakers and leaders in State and local jurisdictions work together more effectively in the area of corrections. A key component of the plan was gathering justice system leaders on a single team, encouraging them to communicate more, and developing their abilities to cooperate and function as a unit.

NIC funded a study to outline an approach to developing a better system. Based on those results, CEPP prepared the *Guide to a Criminal Justice System Assessment: A Work in Progress*.¹ This guide provides a model, with specific tasks and activities, as well as a general approach to conducting criminal justice system assessments and developing new sanctioning policies.

The 10 sites selected for the project undertook a system-wide collaborative planning effort by creating local policy teams composed of representatives from all of the criminal justice agencies in the jurisdiction (plus citizen members at some sites). The task of these teams was to implement the model and approach outlined in the *Guide*. Technical assistance was provided by representatives (site liaisons and coordinators) from NIC and CEPP.

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1. Burke, Peggy, Robert Cushman, and Becki Ney, *Guide to a Criminal Justice System Assessment: A Work in Progress*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 1996. Available online at <http://www.nicic.org/pubs/1996/014690.pdf>.

formal recognition and authority can derail even the most well-planned effort. For example, in CJSP, one team was not sanctioned to act and, therefore, lacked the formal authority it needed to proceed on an important issue—whether to build a joint jail facility. As a result, other local committees formed and superceded the work of the team. An important decision (not to build the facility) was thus largely made without input from the CJSP policy team, which was put in place precisely to help make this type of decision.

Lesson 2: Ensure that the collaboration team is committed to the project/process and that it has a manageable number of people on it—ideally between 8 and 15.

Several CJSP teams had difficulty with the lack of commitment of some of their

members. It is critical that all team members understand their stake in the process and why they need to participate actively and work together with other team members. Every team member's commitment to the process should be obtained at the outset of the project. Explaining the purpose of the project, the targeted outcomes and benefits to be gained, the amount of time it will require, and the expectations of all team

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COLLABORATION VS. COORDINATION

Collaboration, as used in this study, follows the definition of the Wilder Foundation and is distinguishable from coordination:

Collaboration connotes a more durable and pervasive relationship than coordination. Collaborations bring separate organizations into a new structure with full commitment to a common mission. Such relationships require comprehensive planning and well-defined communication channels operating on many levels. Authority is determined by the collaborative structure. Resources are pooled or jointly secured, and projects are shared. Risk is much greater in collaboration than in coordination, because each member organization of the collaborative contributes its own resources and reputation.

Coordination is characterized by formal relationships and an understanding of compatible missions. Some planning and division of roles are required, and communication channels are established. Authority rests with the individual organizations, not the group, but there is some increased risk to all participants. Resources are available to participants and rewards are mutually acknowledged.

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members is important to securing the requisite commitment.

Several of the CJSP policy teams were larger than ideal for making policy decisions and promoting collaboration among team members. One response to this obstacle was to create a smaller executive committee or planning group from among the team members and let the committee make decisions about the project's direction and activities. What happened then, unfortunately, was that some of these decisions were not reported back to the larger group, leaving many policy team members uncertain about where CJSP was headed in their sites. A smaller policy team would have avoided this communication problem. (For more on the importance of communication, see lesson 12.)

Lesson 3: Team members need to create a collective vision.

Having a collective vision ensures that everyone on the team is striving toward the same desired future. This has proven to be extremely effective in establishing ownership for the project among members.

Lesson 4: Teach team members how to collaborate. Help them to understand how this process differs from traditional ways of working, interacting, solving problems, and making decisions.

Collaboration involves a different approach from the day-to-day problem solving that tends to dominate the energy of criminal justice system actors. The benefits of the collaborative approach may not be obvious to an agency faced with the pressure of daily problems that require immediate resolutions, such as whom to arrest or release from jail.

Systems thinking must be taught. It requires agencies to look beyond their own needs and consider the effects of their actions on other agencies. This will take time, especially in a system where agencies have competing roles and missions, where politics may frustrate interagency cooperation, and where power is often defined by an

agency's share of resources. Also, if a decision that affects the larger justice system can be made by a single agency, that agency may elect not to take the time to consult with other agencies to analyze the potential side effects of decisions and to seek joint decisions.

Lesson 5: Teach and help team members to ask the right questions, collect and interpret data, and use data to drive better policymaking and decisionmaking.

Promoting data-driven decisionmaking was an important goal of CJSP. Generally, data collection should be related to the issues that the policy team is planning to address. A generic blueprint for collecting data may be useful. This approach will help to uncover gaps in the availability of data as well as the need for automated systems that can facilitate and support data analysis.

Lesson 6: Provide team members with some structure for completing the project/process.

Teams need structure to function. This includes a clear purpose, a well-defined process for completing work, agreement on how decisions will be made, ground rules for working together, and definitions of member roles. The discussion of roles and responsibilities should include the team's expectations of members for attending meetings, completing selected tasks, and committing time to the work required.

Lesson 7: Lay out, inform, and educate team members about the specific steps of the project/process at the very beginning. Increase understanding of where they are going and what they will be doing for the entire duration of the project.

When the evaluators made their first site visits with the CJSP teams, very few team members at any of the sites seemed to understand what their site would be doing in the project. They could not articulate the overall purpose of CJSP, did not know what they would be expected to accomplish even

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in the short term, and were not familiar with the process aside from knowing that an assessment would take place at the conclusion of the project. It did not appear that any of them had seen a blueprint for the project. That is, they did not seem to know (1) the steps in and components of the process, (2) what time frames were reasonable for completing those steps, (3) how the steps would contribute to the final goals and outcomes, and (4) what roles the team would play and thus what resources it would likely need in order to fulfill them.

Teams need to have a clear picture of the whole project at the beginning. They also need to be given regular updates as to where they are in the process and what the next steps will be. Continuity from one meeting to the next, and from step to step, is key.

Lesson 8: Identify project/process outcomes, goals, and midterm milestones early in the project or process.

CJSP did not identify site-specific project or process outcomes or goals early in the project. Most teams had not yet done so even 2 years into the project. Midterm milestones or interim goals also were not established early on. As a result, the policy teams had

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no criteria on which to judge how well they were doing and no accomplishments to celebrate or publicize to those concerned.

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Lesson 9: Help policy teams identify and define their long-term priority/strategic issues (rather than their immediate problems) early on.

Strategic issues may be internal or external to the organization and often underlie or encompass what appear to be numerous unrelated or loosely related short-term problems. They focus on general directions rather than specific operations. As with a vision, identifying strategic issues early in the assessment process is important so that the policy team can begin thinking in the long term rather than just focusing on the most immediate problems occupying people's attention.

Lesson 10: Ensure that leadership roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and that policy team meetings and the overall process are facilitated effectively.

It is essential that the person or persons assuming leadership for the team have a clear picture of what they are to accomplish and how they intend to do it. Without that picture, important tasks may not get done, goals and outcomes may not be achieved, momentum will be difficult to build, interest and enthusiasm for the project may wane, people may not feel a sense of accomplish-

ment, viewpoints may get lost, and some team members may become alienated and withdraw from active participation.

The role of facilitator is often overlooked or undervalued. Some of the CJSP site coordinators and/or other members of the consultant team provided facilitation when they were onsite, but they were limited in the number of site visits they could make. In their absence, the policy team chairs usually facilitated the meetings, with varying degrees of success. Because the project could not provide outside facilitation assistance at each meeting, the policy team chairs would have benefited from some facilitation training. Alternatively, the important role of facilitator could possibly be filled by drawing upon other local resources in the community, such as other departmental agencies, colleges, or businesses that have and would be willing to loan skilled facilitators.

Lesson 11: Ensure that policy teams have the staff support and resources needed to coordinate project/process activities.

Lack of adequate staff support was an important theme raised in the evaluation surveys. Staff support is critical for arranging meeting logistics, producing useful minutes of team meetings, obtaining information and other resources for the team when necessary, arranging meeting schedules, and other tasks. The ideal staff person should be knowledgeable about the issues and be able to help create meeting agendas and prepare drafts of written products.

Few sites had adequate staff support at the start of the project. One reason may have been that sites did not understand or fully appreciate how much time was needed to complete project tasks. One site liaison mentioned that if she had known the time commitment required at the beginning of the project, she would have tried to arrange for more support. Based on their initial experiences, sites began to commit more resources to staffing for the remainder of CJSP.

Lesson 12: Communicate continuously the next steps and activities in the process and the rationale for doing them. Tie the work that is being done to the appropriate steps in the process and ultimately to the project/process outcomes.

Team members need to know and be able to explain the process, the activities, and why things are being done. They also need to be kept informed about their progress on a routine basis and to have work assignments between meetings.

Communicating progress in achieving goals and celebrating completion of project assignments help keep teams focused, encourage them to continue in their efforts, and allow teams to see progress in meeting their longer term goals and objectives. Communication and celebration keep members motivated and engaged in the process.

Learning From Experience

CJSP shows the value of a collaborative approach and of system-wide, strategic thinking in developing criminal justice system policy. The lessons learned through this project will be helpful to criminal justice professionals who are starting up, or are engaged in, other joint efforts at criminal justice problemsolving when the players in the project are ready to commit the time and resources necessary for true collaboration.

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For More Information

- Contact Policy Studies, Inc., 999 18th Street, Suite 900, Denver CO 80202.
- A summary of the final report on this evaluation is available online at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/189570.pdf>.