

Ten Tips for a Wise Hiker: Collaboration that Works

by Jane Kendall, President, N.C. Center *for* Nonprofits

Collaborating with other organizations is like going on a long hike together. Consider these tips before any collaborative venture – whether it's a joint program, a coalition, or merger. And review them periodically while you're on the trail. If you do it right, collaboration can offer an exhilarating hike *and* help your organization reach heights that you could not climb alone. Happy trails!

1. **Be sure you're climbing the same mountain.** First, clarify shared goals or a shared mission. Collaboration that doesn't help you fulfill your primary mission is a waste of your time and resources. Groups without clear goals waste a lot of their time – and others' time – trying to collaborate. Be clear why *you* are involved and what your group wants out of it. For some types of collaboration, it's okay for parties to have different goals *if* everyone is honest and clear about their goals, *if* the goals are complimentary, and *if* everyone respects the others' goals.
2. **You've got to trust the person holding the other end of the rope.** Hold the rope if you say you will. Collaboration happens between *people*. Go slowly and build trust. This will be essential further down the trail. If you breach this trust, the effort probably will collapse. People have long memories for such breaches because they take it personally as a violation of your word to them.
3. **Be sure you know who's bringing the food and the tent.** Be very clear about what each party's roles and responsibilities are. Write them down. Hunger can spoil a hike pretty quickly.
4. **Expect wildflowers, not an English garden.** Expect each group to approach things differently. Organizations have different capacities, cultures, histories, and ways to make decisions. Getting up any mountain takes different talents and styles. This synergy is one big reason to collaborate.
5. **Check to see if the map still fits the trail.** Before you go, agree to stop at specific intervals – every week or quarter – to take stock and renegotiate the roles as needed. Adjust the relationship to respond to changing needs and circumstances.
6. **Assume a tree will fall and hit one of the hikers.** Sustained collaboration requires the commitment of *several* people from each group. Draw in others from your organization and be sure they know how the joint effort fits your mission and goals. If you're talking about a merger, involve people at every level in both organizations.
7. **Consider hiring a guide.** It may make sense to hire a neutral, knowledgeable guide or consultant. Different types of collaboration require guides with different skills.
8. **Check your hiking boots.** Actively monitor the quality of the relationship between all the groups and people involved. As with your boots on a hike, check the underlying *process* of your work together. If your feet hurt, the trip gets tough and you're not likely to hike together again.
9. **Avoid hikers who smile but drink all the water.** Empire builders may seek "collaboration" but co-opt others' work. I've met only a couple of these in 30 years. You may just have to walk away.
10. **Barter is the law of the land.** Collaboration is an exchange. Reciprocity and a "fair exchange" are key. If a group's goals are not supported and respected, that group will eventually withdraw.

Jane Kendall learned these lessons firsthand by making every mistake in the book. As president and founder of the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits (www.ncnonprofits.org) and previously as executive director of the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, she has collaborated with more than 400 organizations over 30 years in the nonprofit sector.