Contextual Factors

6 contextual factors

analysis ... contextual factors

Standards

context of community

spider web

checklist

As can be seen in the *Framework,* the *Process Factors* are embedded within the context of the community. The relationship between *Contextual Factors* and *Process Factors* is reciprocal and mutually influential. *Contextual Factors* are characteristics of the ecology/environment that are related to the effectiveness of a collaboration. Ecology, here, includes but is not limited to the physical and the structural settings of the community, (i.e., resources available in the community), and the social context (i.e., political atmosphere). The collaboration may be able to influence these characteristics, but the group does not have control over them.

Within the *Collaboration Framework*, six Contextual Factors have been identified as important to the success of a collaboration: Connectedness; History of Working Together; Political Climate; Policies/Laws/Regulations; Resources; and Catalysts.

In cases where minority/majority tension underlies the issues of concerns to a community, respect for diversity is a key element. Has the leadership in a given environment historically voiced the "rhetoric for change" with no real positive outcomes, or has the leadership demonstrated sincere commitment to valuing diversity — a part of the community's fabric? The capacity of diverse voices to be heard and valued influences each contextual factor, beginning with the ability of diverse citizens to form strong bonds of connection within and outside their cultural society through seeing their concerns as equally important catalysts to initiate positive change.

Factor – *Connectedness*

Connectedness refers to the linkages between individuals, groups, and organizations. That is, how people know each other or how they are connected to one another. There are multiple types of connections that are not mutually exclusive. These types of connection include: individual, group, community, and networks. People are drawn together socially through organizations and groups, and by informal and/or formal rules, resources, and relationships.

An example of individual connection would be two individuals who are drawn together because of a social history that is not related to their careers or employment. Thus, on an individual level, Connectedness can be measured on whether an individual feels a linkage or bond with another individual. On a group level, people feel that they have associations or a sense of belonging to different groups and organizations. At the community level, Connectedness refers to universally understood principles and values of the community.

Finally, one can get a measure of communication by examining whether there are "natural" networks of information exchange at each level and across the three levels. These networks may be formal and/or informal, but they provide an established pattern of communication at each of the levels — individuals, groups, communities — and across them. Collaborations that employ both the formal and informal networks of communication to support them are more likely to succeed. In sum, collaborations that are effective involve well connected individuals, groups, organizations and communities and have established informal and formal communication networks at all levels of Connectedness.

Factor – *History of Working Together/Customs*

History, here, has to do with a community's past with regard to working cooperatively or competitively. Collaboration is more likely to succeed in communities that have a history of working together cooperatively (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Usually, in communities where there is a long history of cooperation, there exists a corresponding history of solving problems. These communities work on difficult issues by employing the available resources and developing creative, community– wide solutions based on the desired outcomes. Moreover, in communities where a history of cooperation exists, the collaboration members trust each other and the collaboration process. A diversity of members is welcomed as a resource and this diversity enhances creative solutions.

Finally, the power structure of the community also demonstrates the history of working together for the shared values of the community. In communities where a competitive history exists, it might be useful to implement education programs for potential collaborators regarding the benefits, costs, and processes of collaboration. Collaborations succeed in an environment that is oriented toward cooperation and away from competition.

Factor – *Political Climate*

Political Climate is the history and environment surrounding power and decision making. Political Climate may be within the community as a whole, systems within the community or networks of people. A healthy collaboration insures that Political Climates affecting or potentially affecting the collaboration have been identified and utilized in the positive development of the collaboration.

Recognizing and welcoming the Political Climate as a resource sets the stage for engaging a diversity of support for the shared vision of the collaboration. A wide cross section of people, groups and organizations within the identified Political Climate will better insure a mutually inclusive membership within the collaboration.

Widespread political support is important in developing and sustaining collaborations, particularly for policy making and implementation of policy. In collaborative Political Climates, there is a demonstrated willingness to dialog, accept and negotiate new ideas, to navigate through conflict, and to be open toward emerging trends. Moreover, it is important that a collaboration has members who know which decision makers need to be influenced and how to influence those decision makers.

Collaborations which have support and endorsement of key people, groups and organizations in power are more likely to be effective in reaching the agreed upon outcomes. Effective collaborations have the potential of fostering new and emerging leaders. Together with existing people in power, new and emerging leaders find an opportunity to align themselves with an agreed–upon shared focus and a wide range of people within the community who are committed to reaching positive outcomes.

Factor – *Policies/Laws/Regulations*

Solving problems collaboratively means transforming and changing Policies, Laws and Regulations. Indeed, Policies, Laws and Regulations represent all the concepts and activities that are used to resolve problems. Collaborations are more likely to succeed when supportive Policies, Laws and Regulations are in place. This is especially true with regard to the policies and regulations within the collaborating members' groups and/or organizations, contributors, and the people using the service.

Policies, Laws and Regulations contribute to the Political Climate, but also directly affect the environment. Thus, whether systems and their structures, norms, and decision–making processes are open and supportive of collaboration depends in part on existing Policies, Laws and Regulations. Sustainability of collaborations is often dependent on policies and practices in place.

Factor – *Resources*

Within a collaboration, resources refer to four types of capital: Environmental, in–kind, financial, and human. Much of what has already been presented has to do with environmental capital. The ecology can promote collaborations or it can discourage them. An environment where there is connectedness at all levels, a history of working together, a supportive Political Climate, and Policies, Laws and Regulations that encourage cooperativeness, increases the probability of a successful collaboration.

In–kind capital has to do with what each of the collaboration members and their organizations contribute to the collaboration, such as meeting rooms, supplies, and computers. Financial capital involves monetary resources, which are often assumed to be most important. Note, however, that collaborations that cooperate only to seek funding are more likely to fail than collaborations that form as comprehensive community–wide responses to a problem. That emphasis shifts into a vision.

Human capital is the most important asset in a collaboration. The investment of people's time, expertise and energy into a collaboration is an essential contribution to achieving the collaboration's shared vision. Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has." Each collaboration member and organization demonstrates commitment to the collaboration by contributing and/or realigning resources to the collaboration. The contribution can be in one or all four of the types of capital mentioned previously. However, the contribution of human capital to a collaboration is a crucial investment for Sustainability.

Factor – *Catalysts*

catalysts that initiate collaborative efforts

Catalysts get the collaboration started. The existing problem(s) or the reason(s) for the collaboration to exist must be viewed by the community and potential collaboration members as a situation that requires a comprehensive response. In this way, the problem(s) or reason(s) are the catalyst. For example, before the prevention of youth violence can be an issue to collaborate around, the community must view youth as having skills and gifts that can enhance the quality of life in the community.

In addition to a community–wide issue, the second type of catalyst needed is a convener. This is the person who calls the initial meeting of a collaboration and draws everyone into a dialog about possible solutions to the situation. If the collaboration is going to move forward and establish a shared vision, the person who convenes the collaborative group must be respected and viewed as a "legitimate" player. Conveners must have organizational and interpersonal skills, and must carry out the role with passion and fairness.