



Convening collaborations

By Tanya James

Like all large scale inter-organizational collaborations, the Stronger Families Alliance has been through three broad stages of development. All three stages require the Collaboration Convener to have a good working knowledge of different facilitation approaches and process design skills. Each stage also calls on the Collaboration Convener to play different roles and therefore use different knowledge/skill sets.

Stage 1: Developing a vision

The first stage, problem setting, involves drawing all the players to the table and getting agreement that they share joint system level issues that require collaborative action. The primary first stage tasks are to:

- Develop a vision that engages home base support to set up the collaboration
- Identify and individually engage the potential collaboration members and
- Design relational workshop learning experiences that enable the participants to commit to the collaboration vision and to gain systems knowledge.
- The Convener's primary role in this first stage is that of 'facilitator'. I drew on the following

aspects of my professional background to support this stage:

- Social policy research (for human services best practice)
- Anthropology (for an understanding of systems)
- Organizational communication management (for stakeholder analysis)
- Mediation, appreciative inquiry and narrative therapy (for workshop design)

Stage 2: Setting directions

The second collaboration stage involves direction setting. For the Stronger Families Alliance direction setting was done through early experimentation with putting new programs on the ground collaboratively and through writing the Child and Family Plan – the group’s 10 year strategic roadmap.

During this stage, the Convener’s role continues to include facilitator but moves to incorporate manager and leadership role attributes. Professionally I drew on the following aspects of my professional background in this stage:

Organizational development: Particularly the ‘learn by doing’ approach to adult education (which was applied to social innovation); strategic planning and leadership.

Communication management: Corporate level document production

Stage 3: Structuring

As the Stronger Families Alliance enters the third collaboration stage, structuring, it is difficult to tell what will be required. This stage involves achieving the necessary shifts in structure, power and resources for the collaboration to implement its direction.

This year I am focusing on managing our governance structure so that its relational qualities become better institutionalized; designing and implementing a leadership program to strengthen our member’s collaborative leadership & internal change-maker abilities; and implementing professional and public communication strategies about the Alliance’s work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tanya initiated the development of the Stronger Families Alliance in 2006 as part of her work at the Blue Mountains City Council’s Community Outcomes branch. The Alliance is a unique network that fosters collaboration between child, family, community, civic and business organizations to maximize the wellbeing and resilience of children and their families. The Alliance applies the best international research to the challenge of solving seemingly intractable problems – such as rising rates of child abuse, social isolation and the literacy divide. In 2010 the Alliance launched its Child and Family Plan – a ten year road map for the development of an outcomes based, unified and collaborative service system in the Blue Mountains. The Plan has been described by experts in the field as one of the best constructed and researched initiatives for children to be found anywhere in Australia.

For more information, including a list of Alliance members, go to www.strongerfamilies.co

Tanya James is an Organisational Development specialist with a focus on leadership & coaching, implementing strategy and culture development. She is known for her ability to design and facilitate transformative and strengths based processes for individuals, teams and large organisational and inter-organisational groups. She has a Masters Degree in Communication Management and is currently studying a Masters of Positive Organisational Development at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, USA.