A Model for Successful Interagency Collaboration

David Twitchell, Ph.D.
Department of Veterans Affairs, VHA/EES
Salt Lake City, Utah
david.twitchell1@va.gov

Rebecca Bodrero, M.S., M.B.A., C.P.T.
Concurrent Technologies Corporation
Bremerton, Washington
bodrero@ctc.com

ABSTRACT

Within the federal government, training has traditionally been developed in organizational stovepipes, each agency expending resources to develop or acquire their own training. However, current training trends, directives, and advances in technology facilitating greater collaboration among federal agencies. Such collaboration fosters efficiency and consistency, resulting in greater cost savings and higher-quality training.

This paper examines a model developed in the context of interagency collaborative training development, with potential applicability for similar undertakings. Success and insights gained from these efforts generalize to best practices for inter-organizational collaboration beyond the specific field of training development. The model organizes principles of collaboration in five areas: (1) strategic focus, (2) leadership and governance, (3) interpersonal dynamics and trust, (4) tools, resources, and support, and (5) processes, products, and results. Checklists are provided for the application of these principles. The principles hold true for not only the design and development of individual programs, but also the lifecycle management of those programs.

The primary purpose of this paper is to advocate for collaboration: it provides advice on and methods for collaborating within individual federal agencies and particularly among federal agencies. Secondarily, the guidance in this paper can assist federal agencies in increasing their collaborative efforts with agencies at other levels of government, non-profit organizations, industry, and academic organizations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Twitchell, Ph.D. is an instructional design and development specialist currently working national e-learning needs for the Veterans Health Administration Employee Education System. He also sits on the interagency working group for government healthcare collaboration. Dr. Twitchell spent 5 years as a Program Manager of Instructional Design and Development for the U.S. Air Force. He has worked in analyzing, designing and developing large training efforts for government and industry for over 20 years. His abilities in analyzing education and training needs and prescribing workable, efficient, technologically sound solutions have attracted and benefited Fortune 500 companies and government agencies alike. He has helped unite and blend diverse corporate and government agencies, sits on many national councils, committees and boards, and continues to consult with corporate clients on instructional design, development, implementation and evaluation needs. Dr. Twitchell has published two books on instructional design theory and has published widely in conference proceedings, journals, and government circles. He has presented at numerous conferences and is responsible for hundreds of hours of web-based training.

Rebecca Bodrero, M.S., M.B.A., C.P.T., is a Program Manager for Instructional and Performance Technology in the Bremerton, WA office of Concurrent Technologies Corporation (CTC), an independent, nonprofit, professional services company that provides management and technology-based solutions to a wide variety of clients, representing state and federal government, as well as the private sector. Ms. Bodrero is also an adjunct graduate professor in the Instructional and Performance Technology Department at Boise State University. With a broad range of experience in different media, Ms. Bodrero has designed and developed instruction for the Department of Veterans Affairs, Navy, Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Centers for Disease Control, Marines, National Guard Bureau, Intermountain Healthcare, Boeing, Albertsons Inc, Idaho Real Estate Commission, Idaho Supreme Court, West Publishing Company, and the Smithsonian Institution. Ms. Bodrero's expertise and research interests are in facilitation and coordinating collaboration between multiple organizations. Within her work, she takes a business-oriented approach, focusing on quality products designed to meet defined needs and goals.

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"Government should be collaborative. Collaboration actively engages Americans in the work of their Government. Executive departments and agencies should use innovative tools, methods, and systems to cooperate among themselves, across all levels of Government, and with nonprofit organizations, businesses, and individuals in the private sector. Executive departments and agencies should solicit public feedback to assess and improve their level of collaboration and to identify new opportunities for cooperation."

> - President Barack Obama, in a memorandum for the heads of executive departments and agencies

Inspiring words, but what does it mean to collaborate? How can government agencies, with all their facets, work together in a way that will be beneficial to all parties and the general public? How can coordination and collaboration be improved in support of more substantive results that return higher-value?

The primary purpose of this paper is to advocate for collaboration: it provides advice on and methods for collaborating within individual federal agencies and particularly among federal agencies. Secondarily, the guidance in this paper can assist federal agencies in increasing their collaborative efforts with agencies at other levels of government, non-profit organizations, industry, and academic organizations.

FEDERAL COLLABORATION FOR HEALTHCARE TRAINING

Within the federal government, training has traditionally been developed in organizational stovepipes, each agency expending resources to develop or acquire internal training. Current training trends, directives, and advances in technology are forging the need for greater collaboration among federal agencies (Twitchell, Bodrero, Good & Burk, 2007). Thus, in September of 2005, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Employee Education System (EES), established a policy calculated to institutionalize, as far as is possible, a culture of openness and reusability in government healthcare training. This policy was based on an Executive Decision Memorandum (EDM) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, Employee Education System, 2005) and coincided with the formation of an Education and Training Workgroup (ETWG) under the Department of Defense (DoD)/VA Health Executive Council (HEC).

The establishment of this policy was dependent upon a reasonable business case and return on investment (ROI), as well as the probability of organizational interoperability and committed sharing partnerships and the alignment of this effort with VA/VHA organizational objectives. EES set the following goals (Twitchell & Bodrero, 2006):

1. Develop and conduct educational interventions that support VA and VHA strategic priorities and result in measurable learning and performance change.
2. Provide a learning infrastructure that increases access to and timeliness of learning opportunities.
3. Create partnerships to better develop, deliver, and use EES educational products and services.

In order to meet these goals, the VA EES determined the need to establish cooperative sharing partnerships with other healthcare-providing government agencies. Eventually this initiative grew into the VITAL Collaborative Training Network, named VITAL as the network has both business efficiency and healthcare necessity connotations. This network operates under the HEC ETWG. The VHA has agreements in place with the federal agencies shown in Figure 1.
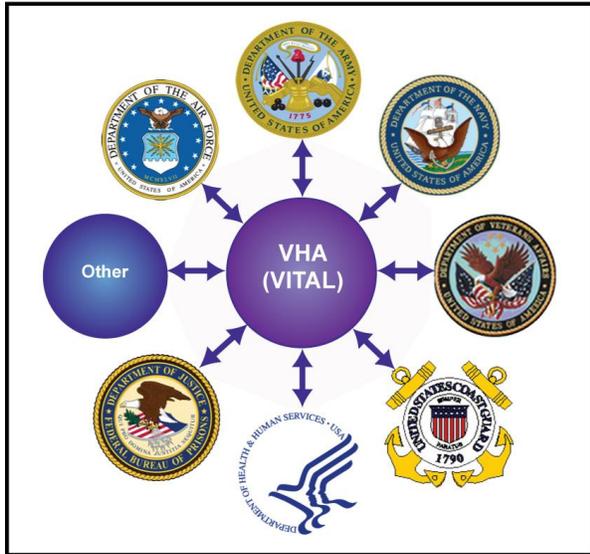
Figure 1. Federal Agencies Sharing Healthcare Training

The collaborative goals have been proven, and methods refined, through two pilot programs that held high potential for generalized application, reusability and return on investment. The first was a short course on the Prevention and Management of Disruptive Behavior (PMDB). Completed in 2006, it served as a pathfinder and prototype for larger collaborative efforts. It established a cooperative relationship and formulated a pattern for collaboration between the four federal agencies involved (Twitchell, Bodrero, Good & Burk, 2007).

The second pilot program was selected to prove the flexibility and applicability of the developing collaborative model across a range of training environments. A training program for federal pharmacy technicians was selected, as it would present challenges of both size and complexity, consolidating the classroom-based curricula of three federal agencies into a collective series of blended resources. These training resources can be implemented as appropriate for multiple audiences across the five partnering agencies. Currently in the final stages of completion, this program has indeed been dependent upon the ability of project members to collaborate at every turn. All stakeholders in the project, from subject matter experts (SMEs) to management and administrative personnel have had to interact not only with each other but also with the various established policies, procedures, and methodologies of their different organizations.

Ultimately these efforts have resulted in a refined model of collaboration that has applicability for similar undertakings. Success and insights gained from these efforts generalize to best practice models for interorganizational collaboration beyond the specific domain of training development.

CATEGORIES OF COLLABORATION

There are many types of collaboration. In simple terms, collaboration can take place at three levels: among individuals, among teams within an organization, or among organizations. The collaborative efforts upon which this paper draws are interorganizational, or interagency, efforts. They are also an example of a network, or relationships, among organizations working together to solve problems, influence policy, and offer services. Robert Agranoff defines four types of networks (Kamensky & Burlin, 2004, ch. 1):

1. Informational networks: partners agree to exchange information, but nothing more.
2. Developmental/capacity-building networks: partners agree to not only share information, but also share lessons learned so individual members' capacities to implement solutions in their home agencies are improved.
3. Outreach/information-exchange networks: partners exchange information and technologies, pool client contacts, and design their programs so their customers see a more seamless network, but the network partners still operate within their own agencies.
4. Action/collaborative networks: partners formally adopt collaborative courses of action in which they depend upon each other for their joint success.

The VITAL Collaborative Training Network is an action/collaborative network, operating within the federal government, in the larger healthcare industry, and in other related communities of practice. Communities of practice, as defined by Snyder and Briggs, are "social learning systems" where organizations "connect to solve problems, share ideas, set standards, build tools, and develop relationships with peers and stakeholders (Kamensky & Burlin, 2004, ch. 6)."

WHEN TO COLLABORATE

It is important to recognize that while collaboration can be compelling, it may not always be effective. Kamensky and Burlin (2004) explain, *"Successful collaborative ventures are premised on the existence of trust, a mutual obligation to succeed, and the ability to build consensus."* They also quote Professor Guffy, who has defined these prerequisites for public sector networks: the "right" political climate, a champion dedicated to providing leadership, ability to establish trust between participants, and the ability of participants to forge a shared vision of what they want to collectively achieve.

Healthcare is ideal for proving collaborative concepts, as the field has common goals and purpose, tried and true practices, accredited job functions, and established forums for communication and collaboration. The knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required in healthcare professions are similar, if not standard, throughout the industry (Concurrent Technologies Corporation, 2008). Within the federal government, healthcare-providing agencies cooperate to share and meet common goals. The intent of these collaborations is to foster efficiency and consistency, resulting in significant cost savings and higher-quality training.

A MODEL FOR INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

The concepts presented in this paper comprise a model derived from the authors' experiences in collaborative federal healthcare training efforts.

In this model, the foundation is established when stakeholders commit to a common strategic focus, craft a comprehensive plan for leadership and governance, and provide a framework for interpersonal dynamics and the growth of trust.

Boosted by this momentum, the necessary tools, resources, and other support power the project forward. A successful project then generates processes, products, and results in alignment with the original vision. Figure 2 illustrates this model.
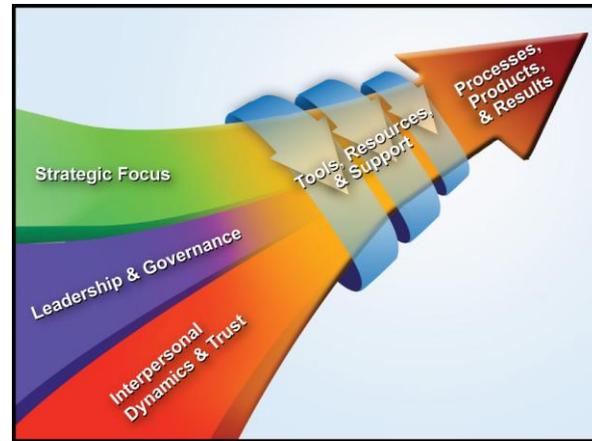

Figure 2. Model for Interagency Collaboration

In this paper, the model is analyzed by focusing on three aspects of collaboration for each of the major areas of the model:

- Critical success factors
- Summary of reflections from collaboration participants
- Interagency collaboration checklists derived from industry best practices and project lessons learned.

STRATEGIC FOCUS

A strategic focus gives a collaborative venture meaning, purpose, and vision. Meaningful vision requires a sound understanding of past history, present trends, and a bit of clairvoyance in forecasting the future. Strategic focus must be fundamentally factual with only a small leap beyond what is known and understood by all partners.

Critical Success Factors

Critical success factors for achieving strategic focus are:

- A clear vision with an operable route to that vision
- Defined goals and objectives
- Beliefs, actions, and values
- Identification of barriers and risk mitigation strategies.

Vision and strategic focus become motivating factors when effectively communicated, shared, and adopted. All collaborative partners must share the vision and be committed to helping the collective achieve the intended benefits.

Summary of Reflections from Participants

In this collaboration, there were un-integrated parallel efforts among the agencies. For example, there was some ongoing redundancy in tasks. It seemed that this redundancy grew out of each agency's commitment to ensure a viable training program independent of the collaborative effort. Understandably, each crafted ways to reassure themselves that this goal would be met for their own agency.

The project could not wait for 100% alignment of vision; nor should it have. Regardless of initial differences in vision or lingering hesitations about conflicting agendas, the timing was appropriate to establish a relationship among the agencies and this was borne out by experience. As the project progressed, a culture of collaboration evolved. While there continues to be some valid disconnect between the missions of the agencies, the stakeholders were able to focus strategically on common goals and commit to a plan to achieve those goals. One of the great success stories of this collaboration is that the participants continued to move forward, pushing the issues and forcing solutions even when faced with considerable challenges.

STRATEGIC FOCUS CHECKLIST

❑ Specify and evaluate common goals and interests (NASA, 2005)
❑ Align activities with vision, mission, and business objectives; don't force collaboration where alignment doesn't exist
❑ Strive for relevance, focusing on outcomes that make a difference (The Cochrane Collaboration, 2008)
❑ Define success measures, for both the collaboration outcome and the collaboration itself
❑ Identify potential barriers to success of the collaboration and corresponding mitigation strategies
❑ Identify the types and level of acceptable risk, as well as strategies for risk mitigation
❑ Build a reputation for reliability based on actions

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Leadership has long been recognized as a key element for business viability. In interagency collaborations where leadership is shared, governance unifies the effort by providing a set of rules, policies, and processes that operate above the level of any one leader. Governance affects the way a collaborative venture is directed and administered, and deeply impacts how its goals are accomplished ("Corporate Governance," n.d.). For successful collaboration, the needs of stakeholders and the goals of their individual agencies that facilitates effective shared leadership.

Critical Success Factors

Critical success factors for leadership and governance are:

• Strategic planning
• Accountability
• Defined roles and responsibilities
• Decision-making and arbitration procedures
• Change management.

When participants from different agencies join in collaboration, their role in the collaboration is typically different than their role in their home agency. Instead of managing and making decisions, they now provide input, exchange information, and build capacity (Kamensky & Burlin, 2004, ch. 6). While leadership is necessary from each agency, this individual leadership must integrate into a unified form of governance. Governance should be set from the beginning—giving authority, setting policy, and providing direction.

Summary of Reflections from Participants

In this collaboration, there was no pre-existing structure for the interagency effort. Roles, responsibilities, and work processes were defined at project initiation, and evolved as the project progressed. It was found helpful to engage a neutral third-party organization to assist in the management, facilitation, and organization and execution of project tasks. At times there were natural feelings of competition or power struggles between the agencies, but as stakeholders were committed to achieving project objectives, the group was able to work through the issues encountered, improving both the product and interagency relationships.

The group agreed on reaching consensus in decision making. Discussion lasted until each individual member could support the majority decision, even

though they might have preferred a different outcome. Arbitration procedures were defined to deal with any impasse—each participating agency carried one vote. In the more than 3-year span of the collaboration, the vote has been exercised only once or twice. Most importantly, it was in place before any critical disagreements arose.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE CHECKLIST

- ❑ Engage a champion at each organization who supports the collaboration within their organization
- ❑ Agree to rules of governance and representation of participating organizations
- ❑ Share leadership and decision-making (education.au limited, 2004)
- ❑ Advocate mutual responsibility (education.au limited, 2004)
- ❑ Establish a shared process and framework adaptable to the needs of the collaboration (education.au limited, 2004)
- ❑ Commit to a strategic action plan
- ❑ Document, communicate, and frequently call attention to schedule and milestone requirements
- ❑ Identify boundaries for participation; define roles and responsibilities of participants (NASA, 2005)
- ❑ Select participants based on expertise, skills (including interpersonal skills), availability, and authority
- ❑ Modify participants' existing organizational roles as required by the collaborative environment (Kamensky, 2004, ch. 6)
- ❑ Enable wide participation by reducing barriers to contribution and encouraging diversity (The Cochrane Collaboration, 2008)
- ❑ Mitigate participant turnover and establish a plan to minimize impact of this inevitability (Twitchell & Bodrero, 2006)
- ❑ Engage a neutral third party with management, facilitation, and technical expertise
- ❑ Distribute workload relative to capacity of organizations
- ❑ Agree to arbitration/dispute resolution procedures up-front (Concurrent Technologies Corporation, *Prevention and management of disruptive behavior*, 2006)
- ❑ Determine who bears the risk of loss for nonperformance, schedule slip, etc.

INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS AND TRUST

Trust has been defined as "a relationship in which people rely on each other. Trust implies an interpersonal dynamic… [a] belief that the trusted person will look out for your best interest…. You have faith that the trusted party is honest and sincere, will fulfill his commitments, and will act in a way that's congruent with his words." (Gottesdiener, 2007)

Critical Success Factors

Critical success factors found to promote trust and positive interpersonal dynamics are:

- Credibility
- Respect
- Fairness
- Diversity
- Communication
- Transparency
- Flexibility.

Summary of Reflections from Participants

Not surprisingly, interpersonal dynamics were found to be both the most challenging and the most rewarding component of this collaboration. It is the authors' opinion that trust is the fundamental requirement that determines the success or failure of collaborative projects—large or small.

Establishing trust in this collaboration happened slowly over time. At the beginning, some participants had significant reservations about the potential for success, and some felt a degree of healthy skepticism, but all were willing to participate and see where the initiative could lead. Perhaps because of the ongoing commitment to transparent communications, a focus on fairness, and processes built on proven approaches, this original reluctance turned to engaged enthusiasm. As

progress on project tasks led to project accomplishments, interpersonal dynamics improved and everyone benefited from the growing climate of trust.

Reina and Reina (2006) describe three types of trust: (1) contractual, (2) communication, and (3) competence. Over time, stakeholders experienced all three types of trust.

Contractual trust deals with schedules, roles, responsibilities, methods and management. It is present when participants know they can count on consistent behavior, established limits, and fair treatment. Communication trust deals with honesty, integrity, transparency, and openness in communications. It is present when participants fulfill commitments, consistently tell the truth (avoiding even half-truths), accept responsibility for failure, and remain open and communicative. Competence trust deals with levels of respect, responsibility and accountability. This quality

is present when the team adopts an approach of advocacy that includes all parties and seeks to represent their needs and positions even when they are not present.

When each member of a group is known for their strengths and weaknesses, skills and knowledge, and the needs of their organizations are clear, a mature collaborative trust creates a unified group. Partners in such a collaborative effort realize that the project will fail if this trust is compromised. It was also observed that one act counter to trust could negate many trust-building occurrences.

Once established, the unity of the group ebbed and flowed, yet because there was ownership of the process and commitment on the part of the participants, the sense of trust persisted even amidst difficulties and disagreement. The group continued to push forward, trusting that problems would be solved and the group would achieve their goals.

TRUST AND WORKING RELATIONSHIPS CHECKLIST

- ❑ Maintain open communication: share responsibility for communication and communicate regularly
- ❑ Respect diversity and equal opportunities for stakeholders (Michigan State University Museum, 2008)
- ❑ Involve people with different skills and backgrounds
- ❑ Avoid conflicts of interest (The Cochrane Collaboration, 2008)
- ❑ Promote exchange of knowledge, ideas, support, and resources
- ❑ Ensure fairness and equality; address input and concerns of all stakeholders (Twitchell, Bodrero, Good & Burk, 2007)
- ❑ Maintain transparent, open communication (Michigan State University Museum, 2008)
- ❑ Build teamwork based on trust and respect
- ❑ Use teambuilding activities, particularly in beginning stages (NASA, 2005)
- ❑ Foster environment of honesty, integrity, and, when necessary, confidentiality
- ❑ Be flexible, responsive, and open to criticism
- ❑ Encourage creativity; provide forums for creative thinking (NASA, 2005)
- ❑ Educate participants, when needed, for informed decision-making (Concurrent Technologies Corporation, *Prevention and management of disruptive behavior,* 2006)
- ❑ Contribute to transparent communication by eliciting explanations rather than settling on assumptions
- ❑ Suspend questions and doubts until questions can be answered
- ❑ Share credit and acknowledge individual contributions (Michigan State University Museum, 2008)
- ❑ Be patient; allow trust and group maturity to develop over time

TOOLS, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT

Allocating the resources necessary to accomplish a given objective can sometimes be a challenge for an organization acting alone. When multiple organizations are involved, the situation can rapidly become very complicated. Organizational leaders have

to have buy-in to the collaborative effort in order to devote scarce resources to its fulfillment.

Critical Success Factors

Critical success factors for the support of these efforts are:

- Formal interagency agreements
- Realistic funding model(s)
- Contracting specialist(s) skilled in interorganizational work
- Technical standards for interoperability
- Project participants with expertise and adequate time.

Historically, government agencies have had their own budgets and their own objectives; it has been easier to exist as separate and opaque entities. Redundancy and waste was an acceptable price to pay for autonomy. That era is gone; collaboration and sharing, especially among healthcare organizations, is economically, organizationally, and socially necessary—even essential.

Summary of Reflections from Participants

The collaborative project that created The Pharmacy Technician Training Program provides a solid base for understanding the requirements placed on individual participants, including time constraints and an inevitable learning curve. It also illustrates much about the uses of technology in collaborative efforts. Lessons learned specifically related to this project's use of tools, resources, and support have been documented and can be obtained from the author of this paper.

TOOLS, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT CHECKLIST

- ❑ Secure management and administrative support early in the planning from each participating organization
- ❑ Negotiate interorganizational agreements (Twitchell, Bodrero, Good & Burk, 2007)
- ❑ Determine how to leverage partner resources
- ❑ Agree upon financial and resource obligations of each organization (Twitchell, Bodrero, Good & Burk, 2007)
- ❑ Commit funds and other resources as agreed upon
- ❑ Establish contract with terms that support operational needs
- ❑ Enable the sharing of information and ideas (Concurrent Technologies Corporation, *Prevention and management of disruptive behavior*, 2006)
- ❑ Make participation in the collaboration a job responsibility, ensuring adequate time to complete related tasking
- ❑ Arrange for technical assistance (such as IT support or other technical expertise) to be on-call as needed
- ❑ Provide shared workspace, supporting as many face-to-face interactions as possible and using electronic environments to support distributed teams (NASA, 2005)
- ❑ Acquire adequate administrative support for contracts, budgets, etc.

PROCESSES, PRODUCTS AND RESULTS

Work processes enable the collaborative group to produce intended results. In the end, a collaborative venture will be judged by its outcomes, not only the products generated, but the overall tangible and intangible results of the collaboration itself.

Critical Success Factors

Critical success factors that led to effective processes and products with measurable results are:

- Standards and models
- Performance indicators and measures
- Quality assurance
- Continuous improvement
- Lifecycle management.

Summary of Reflections from Participants

Key to the success of this collaborative effort were agreed upon processes built on standard analysis, instructional design, and implementation practices. While these methodologies had to be adapted to incorporate the needs and circumstances of multiple stakeholders, they provided a solid foundation for execution of project tasks.

Unless a collaborative project culminates in a single event or point in time, continuation of the effort will be necessary, likely on a smaller scale, to maintain the

products and other outcomes. Future needs were recognized from conception of this collaboration and efforts are under way to plan not only for program implementation, but ongoing program governance and lifecycle management of the products. These efforts are resolving critical issues regarding how the training content is updated, where it is stored, and who has "ownership." Addressing these items has revealed other needs, such as an operational need for an interagency infrastructure for sharing technology. This is now being addressed as part of a separate collaboration.

It is important for lessons learned to be gathered and distributed. The process of reflection is most useful when it supports regular, continuous improvement throughout the life of a project and is available to all project participants. It is also important for lessons learned to be disseminated beyond the immediate project participants, to benefit future interagency collaborations. Regular process evaluation meetings allowed for both incremental and substantive changes to be made that improved the daily operations of the project as well as the final products.

PROCESSES, PRODUCTS, AND RESULTS CHECKLIST

- ❑ Encourage and facilitate stakeholder input (Concurrent Technologies Corporation, *Pharmacy technician training*, 2006)
- ❑ Agree upon a common process model
- ❑ Uphold a predetermined standard of quality (Concurrent Technologies Corporation, *Prevention and management of disruptive behavior*, 2006)
- ❑ Adapt standard processes to unique program aspects (Concurrent Technologies Corporation, *Prevention and management of disruptive behavior*, 2006)
- ❑ Provide frequent updates and in-process-products
- ❑ Ensure continuity in responsibility for reviews and other key functions (The Cochrane Collaboration, 2008)
- ❑ Link outcomes to performance indicators and measures
- ❑ Avoid duplication through coordination focused on maximizing economies
- ❑ Commit to a plan for lifecycle maintenance of products
- ❑ Communicate benefits of collaboration to stakeholders
- ❑ Document history to track evolution
- ❑ Document and share lessons learned

CONCLUSION

"Strength is derived from unity. The range of our collective vision is far greater when individual insights become one."

– Andrew Carnegie

In solving critical multi-national issues such as shortages of natural resources or threats to human health and security, the world is increasingly turning to multi-disciplinary, interorganizational collaborations, as no single discipline or organization has all the answers. It stands to reason that the government must take a similar approach in solving the critical and increasingly complex issues it faces.

The model for interagency collaboration presented in this paper was developed in the context of an effort that organized and focused the collaborative strengths of

multiple government agencies providing healthcare. The outcome is much more than a sharable high-quality training product. The outcome is also a significant contribution to the growing culture of openness and cooperation in government healthcare training.

The principles associated with the model offer guidance to others looking for the same kind of openness and cooperation in the pursuit of similar project goals, within the context of government or industry. It is anticipated that the model will continue to evolve as future efforts apply these principles, refine the methods, and continue to build on the momentum established.

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