

Collaborating for Youth Development in Hartford

Practitioner Guide for the Abridged Version of the Case

JAN W. RIVKIN, JORRIT DE JONG, AND LISA C. COX

Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case “Collaborating for Youth Development in Hartford.”

Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

BEFORE the discussion

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants have the option to fill out the attached worksheet to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheet, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for seventy-five to ninety minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

DURING the discussion

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there is no right or wrong “answer” to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus. Just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together.

Case Synopsis

This case tells the story of an ambitious but troubled collaboration in Hartford, Connecticut, that was awarded a high-profile US Department of Labor (DOL) “Youth Opportunity” (YO) grant in 2000. The promise of \$28 million in youth program funding over five years brought together many stakeholders, but not without the roadblocks and missteps that all too often hamper complex, high-stakes collaborations.

As the case opens, civic leaders in Hartford are scrambling to improve the lives of hard-pressed young people in the city and, to do so, have won a lucrative grant. As the group turns from grant-writing to implementation, however, tensions mount and dissension grips the coalition. A crucial decision—choosing the director of the program—looms large.

The case explores themes such as the vast difference between collaborating in word and collaborating in deed; the importance and challenge of building trust early; the importance of clearly allocating decision rights; the dangers of kicking hard decisions down the road; and the dark side of having \$28 million.

Key Questions

To prime a productive discussion, consider sharing the following questions with participants in advance of the group discussion.

1. How did Hartford’s civic leaders wind up in such a messy situation?
2. Looking back, what should individuals have done differently?
3. Looking forward, what should they do next? In particular, how should they find a director for YO Hartford?
4. Think of the way you approach cross-sector collaboration. What mistakes have you or your organization made in the past, and how can you avoid these in the future?

Conversation Plan

The following plan suggests an eighty-five-minute conversation.

Part 1: Introducing the Case (5 minutes)

Briefly review the case, starting with how this civic alliance in Hartford, Connecticut, has gone from a high—of securing up to \$28 million to help youth in the city—to infighting and disagreements, just as the coalition faces the key decision of choosing a director.

Part 2: Diagnosing Cross-Sector Collaboration Challenges (20 minutes)

To warm up the discussion, ask participants about their own experiences with cross-sector collaborations (CSCs) and whether YO Hartford’s problems feel realistic or exaggerated. Participants will affirm that this situation and these problems are thoroughly typical of CSCs; the extraordinary thing about YO Hartford’s problems is that they are so ordinary. Then, ask the following:

- *What went wrong in Hartford?*

While there is much to criticize, encourage participants to remain humble in their critiques. The leaders here were well-intentioned and were trying their best in the face of a difficult challenge. They fell into traps that are very common in cross-sector collaborations, and so could any of us! After a few responses, hand out (or display) the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions (see Appendix 1). Review this diagram and begin to organize their responses into the four categories of *public value, legitimacy and support, operational capacity, and coalition*. (See Appendix 2 for an array of sample responses.)

After a discussion of the four elements of the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions, summarize the points that participants have highlighted, such as:

- This case study exposes nearly all of the primary reasons CSCs fail.
- We can use the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions to catalog all the shortcomings.
- Conversely, the Triangle is essentially a checklist of things that cross-sector collaborators need to do well.

Note that the Triangle includes a sequencing. At a high level:

1. Have the right people at the table.
2. Build up trust among them.
3. Achieve sufficient alignment around public value before securing funding and committing to outcomes.

Sadly, YO Hartford took these steps dangerously out of sequence.

Part 3: Alternative Approaches Earlier (15 minutes)

We can deepen our understanding of the YO Hartford situation and the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions by asking participants to pinpoint actions that would lead to a better outcome in Hartford. This can be done in two ways: by examining what leaders could have done earlier (discussed in this section) and by considering what leaders should do in 2000, the time when the case is set (discussed in the next section).

For the first approach, ask participants to imagine they were leaders involved in YO Hartford and can go back in time. *How far back would they go, and what would they do earlier to avoid the problems we see in the case?* Possible critical points in time include 1993, when Mayor Peters was elected; 1996, when a study showed 175 programs for young people; early 1999, when the DOL announced the YO grants; and late 1999, when Hartford submitted its grant application.

- *What could you have done earlier? What alternative paths might have been available?*
Considering alternative approaches earlier will raise three general points with participants:
 - First, nearly all of the possible earlier steps involve the *coalition* at the center of the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions—not public value, operational capacity, or legitimacy and support. In YO Hartford as in most CSCs, the coalition was the glue that held the CSC together and the element that required the most lead time to build well.
 - Second, building up the organizational capabilities of a coalition is typically an iterative process. You get a workable coalition, take some action, see some success, build some trust, get momentum, build up the coalition further, take more ambitious action, and so on. Trying to build a complex coalition in a rush, as Hartford leaders attempted when the DOL announced its grant program, rarely succeeds.
 - Third, this iterative process rewards thinking ahead. In particular, it is valuable to anticipate who is likely to need to trust whom, so that one can build relationships before they are needed. Conversely, if there is someone with a future central role in the community who has not gained the community’s trust (Frank Chiamonte, in the case), it is important to build trust in them or replace them.

Part 4: The Path Forward in 2000 (15 minutes)

In this section, participants will grapple with what Hartford leaders should do in 2000—the time at which the case is set. Begin by asking for a prediction: *If Hartford leaders do not take corrective action, what is likely to happen to YO Hartford?* You may also ask what they would recommend at this point and organize their responses around the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions. The steps below are likely to emerge from the discussion.

- *What work would you do related to the coalition?*
 - Clarify and simplify the reporting relationships; there needs to be one boss, and many other people need to be sidelined.
 - Clarify that the ELT has only an advisory role.
 - Grant the to-be-hired director clear authority over operating decisions, without a lot of consultation with others.
- *What work would you do in terms of public value?*
 - Clarify what YO Hartford is supposed to deliver, to whom, and when.
 - Attach metrics to what is supposed to be delivered.
- *What work would you do related to operational capacity?*
 - Develop the ability to measure outcomes and perhaps the ability to track individual young people.
 - Identify and begin to fill the programmatic gaps for older young people.
- *What would you do regarding legitimacy and support?*
 - Confer with the DOL about modifying what they expect when and ensure realistic expectations.

- Seek support for YO Hartford from business leaders and local foundations, even if the DOL grant is not renewed.
- Assemble a community advisory group, involving young people, parents, business, etc.

You may wrap-up this discussion by asking participants (a) whether they believe the plan they have developed will be sufficient to make YO Hartford a success and (b) whether they believe that the actual leaders in Hartford will be able to turn around YO Hartford.

Part 5: Application (15 minutes)

Have participants work in groups to apply the concepts to their own collaborative challenges. For example, ask them to choose a collaboration in which they are involved and walk through steps 1–5 of the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions. The optional worksheet (Appendix 3) may be used as a guide. You might also ask if they made any of the same mistakes as in the case and how they might avoid those in the future.

Part 6: Wrap-Up and Takeaways (15 minutes)

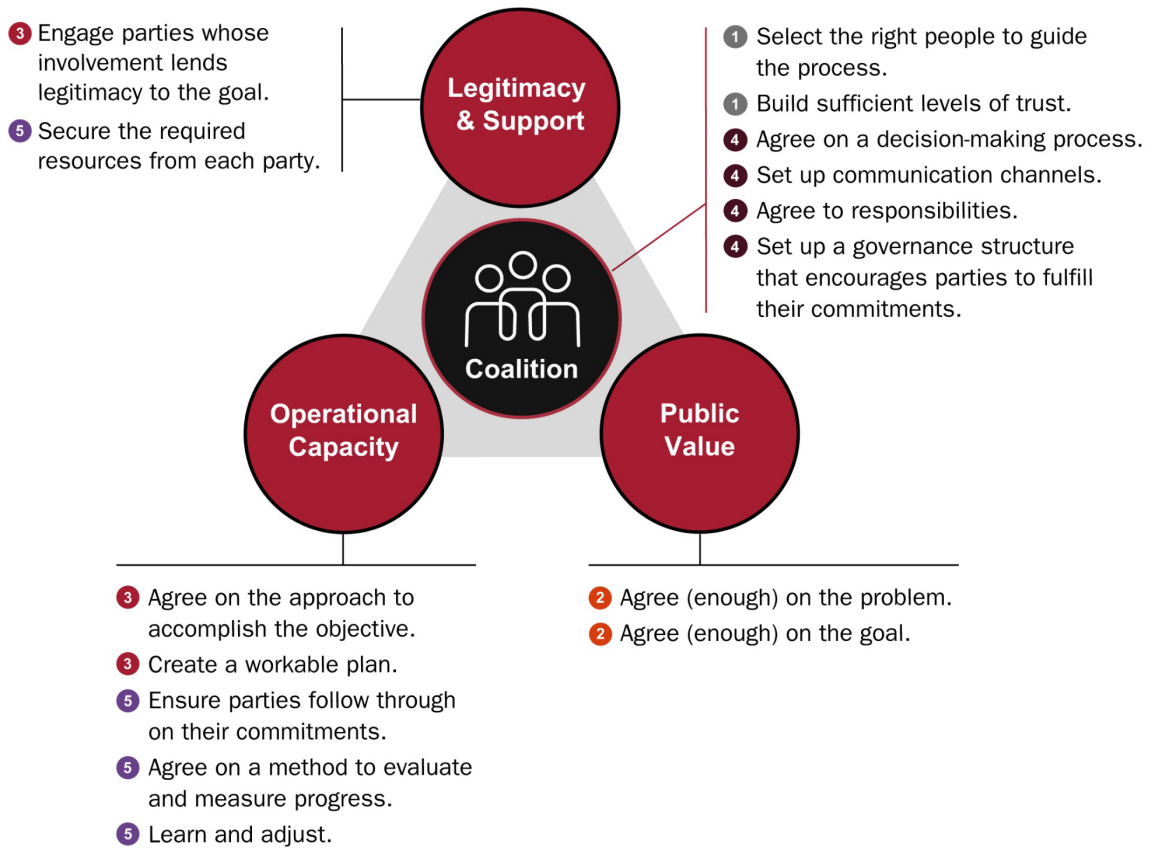
- *What do we learn from examining the rollercoaster ride of YO Hartford?*
 - First, we come to see the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions as a way to anticipate what cross-sector collaboration leaders must do in order to succeed—or conversely, what barriers to collaboration they must avoid. Sadly, leaders in Hartford hit these barriers rather than avoiding them.
 - Second, it allows us to see the Strategic Triangle as a dynamic tool. Typically, a cross-sector collaboration does not start with a fully fleshed-out coalition, definition of public value, operational capacity, and claim to legitimacy and support. Instead, it starts with just a collection of individuals who vaguely see that they can benefit collectively and individually if they work together. Over time, they iteratively commit resources together, take action together, and succeed enough to agree to commit more resources and take deeper action. Definitions of public value get clearer, operational capacity grows, legitimacy and support from other parties flows in, and the coalition becomes better able to work together. Unfortunately, YO Hartford did not experience this positive dynamic. Instead, it tried to leap quickly to full operations, and when it fell short of doing so successfully, it entered a negative cycle rather than a positive dynamic.
 - Third, the case illustrates the importance of managing relationships in a city *before* opportunities (like the DOL grant program) or challenges arise. This raises a core question for participants: *Are their city leaders developing the relationships today that their city will need tomorrow?*

This case does not present a cheery story of cross-sector collaboration, but it does present a realistic one. Research shows that most organizations move to collaboration from a point of failure. That is, they start to collaborate when individuals realize they cannot make progress without partners. Moreover, they typically resort to collaboration when they are working on difficult problems that no single organization can solve. As a result, they encounter all the barriers cataloged in the case. The barriers illustrated here are not intended to discourage participants from pursuing cross-sector collaboration, but to encourage them to pursue collaboration with open eyes.

Appendices

Appendix 1 The Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions

This tool outlines the tasks needed for a successful collaboration. The suggested sequence—steps 1 through 5—reflects a scenario where parties start with a blank slate and have control over the effort’s design.



Source: Adapted from the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* “Building Cities’ Collaborative Muscle” by Jorrit De Jong, Amy Edmondson, Mark Moore, Hannah Riley Bowles, Jan Rivkin, Eva Flavia Martínez Orbegoza, and Santiago Pulido-Gomez. Issue: Spring 2021.

Appendix 2 Responses to “What went wrong here?” using the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions as a framework for discussion

Public value

YO Hartford leaders were in deep disagreement on the public value they were delivering. They did not agree on the problem they were solving or the right solution:

- Ramon Rojano, city director of human resources, said the problem was that they were not putting youth at the center and viewing them as a “whole”; the solution was to infuse the city with a positive youth-development philosophy.
- Anthony Amato, school superintendent, said the problem was not enough vocational education; the solution was to increase it.
- George Bahamonde, president of the United Way, said the problem was fragmentation of youth development programs; the solution was to create a more coordinated and collaborative service-delivery system.
- Bob Rath, founder of PROGRESS, said the problem was that the right organizations were not getting the contracts to train young people; the solution was to award contracts to small, Hartford-based organizations.

Regarding a shared definition of the CSC’s public value, consider posing this follow-up question: *Does a CSC need to have 100 percent alignment on the problem and the solution to be effective?*

- In fact, some degree of misalignment is nearly inevitable in a CSC, especially in its early days. CSCs by their nature bring together parties with very different backgrounds and perspectives; that is part of their strength. But a consequence is some degree of difference in the definition of public value. To put it starkly, if a CSC waits for complete alignment on its targeted public value before it starts to work together, it will likely never begin. You need *sufficient* alignment, not necessarily 100 percent alignment.
- If a CSC is not totally aligned, everyone should know how it is not aligned and why. In the Hartford case, the CSC was not perfectly aligned, and the members did not seem to know how or why.

Legitimacy and support

The actors in Hartford had the DOL’s monetary support, but the money itself created problems. Bahamonde made a striking statement: “I never said this, but, in my heart, I always hoped we wouldn’t get the grant. I thought we would get more done without the grant.” Ask participants the following:

- *Why was Bahamonde wary about the grant money?* It is easy to imagine how the money didn’t help, but Bahamonde is saying something stronger: the money actually makes things worse. *How could more funding have hindered youth services in Hartford?*
 - Money can be a distraction, sometimes moving the focus from a group’s mission to competing for a large share of the pot. In short, money gives you something to fight over, something to gain, something for which to be responsible.
- As follow-up, delve further into Bahamonde’s statement about the grant being a hindrance: *What did we learn from his silence? Why didn’t he share his concerns with the group?*
 - Something in the group’s dynamic was preventing people from raising fundamental issues; perhaps a lack of trust.
- If time allows, ask participants to reflect on a time when they themselves have worked in a group and felt that they could not speak the truth. *What gets in the way?*
- Another factor of legitimacy and support is who is included at the table. *Did the CSC include the right parties? Who was missing?*
 - Youth and employers did not have seats at the table. For a program focused on youth employment, failing to include them was a major oversight.
- Touch on the mayor’s role. *Do you think Mayor Peters provided the right support?*

- The mayor convened leaders from fifty public and nonprofit organizations in the Hartford region to develop a strong grant proposal with widespread community backing. And that is the last we hear of him. *Would you say that the mayor's only obligations were to set a grand vision and convene people? Or is there more he could have done?* In fact, the mayor could have done much more, such as encouraged the parties to work out their differences early on and appointed stronger leadership.
- Share that Mayor Peters was a beloved leader in Hartford, yet even he fell into a common collaboration trap here.

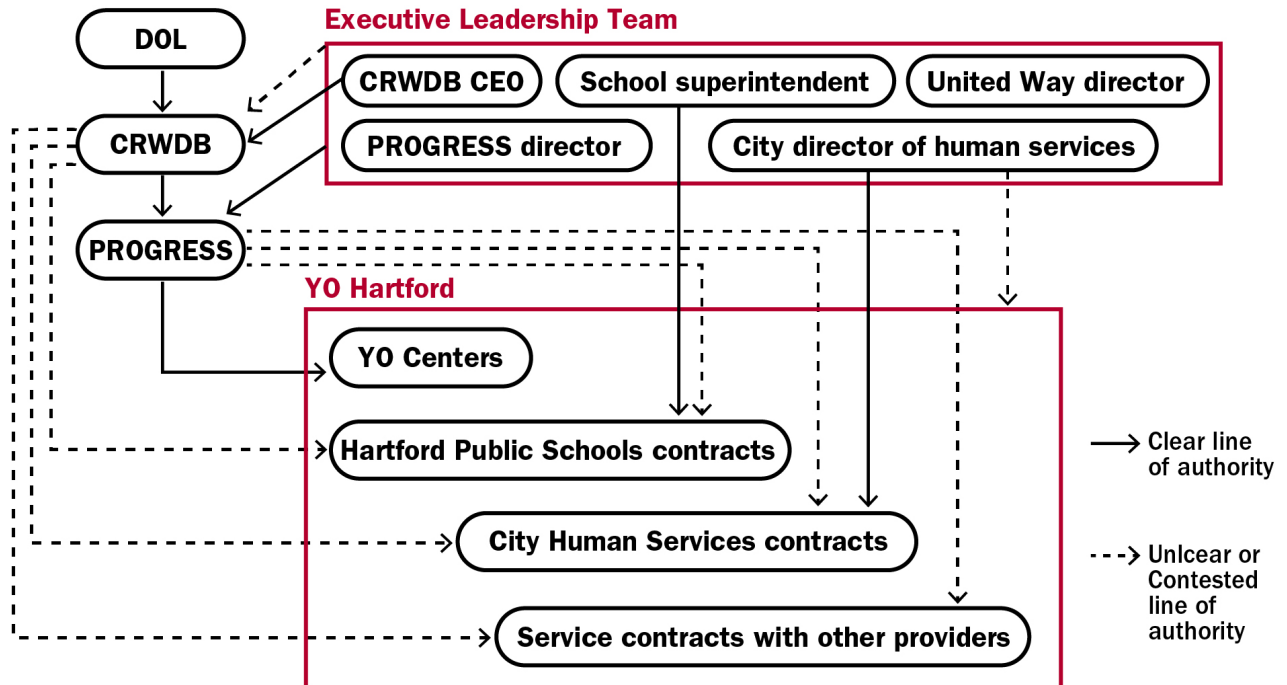
Operational capacity

- *Could the group have actually delivered on their promises to the DOL?*
 - No. While many Hartford youth programs existed (175 programs in 100 organizations), there was a dearth of programs for *older* youth.
- *How did leadership get into a situation where they thought all they needed was case management and coordination, when in fact, the actual programming did not exist?*
 - With 175 programs, no one knew what they all did, and leadership may have thought it reasonable to assume, "We must have someone who does that."

Coalition

Turn attention from the three corners of the Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions to its center to begin discussing the issues around the coalition. Ask participants:

- *How would you describe the reporting relationships and decision rights in YO Hartford?*
 - Overall, the rights and relationships are convoluted and unclear. The money had to pass through the Capital Region Workforce Development Board (CRWDB), though the group was not confident that the CRWDB would be an effective collaborator or write a strong grant. Frank Chiamonte, head of the CRWDB, was not trusted in town. Rather than directly addressing this problem, however, they tried to bypass the CRWDB.
- *Who was in charge?*
 - While there were different guiding organizations—including the CRWDB, the executive leadership team (ELT), and PROGRESS (which itself wasn't a unified organization)—it was unclear who should have made which decisions. It seemed that everyone wanted to oversee the process, and no one wanted to do the actual work.
- *Who contributed what to the group?*
 - It is unclear, and there were gaps between what actors believed they were contributing vs. what others thought they were contributing. For example, the CRWDB believed it was contributing leadership and direction while some saw them as simply a point of access to money. PROGRESS believed it was contributing operational leadership, though others weren't so sure about the value they brought to the table; for instance, Amato wanted to replace them. (To help illustrate the coalition's lack of role clarity, see the following graphic. The lines of authority were a mess.)



Source: Adapted from exhibit 4 of Pamela Varley and Xavier de Souza Briggs, "The Challenge of Multi-agency Collaboration: Launching a Large-scale Youth Development Project in Hartford," HKS Case C16-02-1673.0.

- *What decisions did the group make in an effort to get beyond their issues of having neither a strong program operator nor clear lines of authority?*
 - They appointed PROGRESS as the program operator, their best choice among what seemed to be mediocre options. Rather than work out their lines of authority and sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU), they delayed the MOU and agreed "on the basic concept." The grant application said that they would define an executive structure but it did not outline one. Furthermore, there was no mechanism for dispute resolution.
 - All in all, the group's willingness to kick issues down the road created problems and illustrated a general point: if you run away from your problems, they will chase you.
- *So, who was to blame for this mess?* Participants may point to a few individuals.
 - Mayor Peters convened many people and gave them a tough task without guidance or support.
 - George Bahamonde believed that they shouldn't apply for the grant but didn't stop the process.
 - The DOL gave cities lots of money and very little time. They set Hartford up for failure.
 - Frank Chiamonte claimed additional control over YO Hartford after the grant was won.
 - Superintendent Amato created a new "understanding" after the grant was awarded.

Though participants may find fault with different individuals, it is important to convey that "Which *individual* is to blame?" is probably the wrong question. The individuals here were presumably doing their best, but the interactions among the individuals in the coalition led the group into common pitfalls. Finding individual fault is a common reaction when a collaboration stumbles, but such "blame games" rarely result in progress.

