
The Role Every Collaborative Relies On, And Too Few Understand

Defining the role of collaborative coordination and outlining the four core responsibilities that underpin a collaborative's success

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ABOUT THE "MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: THE STRATEGIC ROLE, LEADERSHIP, AND PRACTICE OF COLLABORATIVE COORDINATION" SERIES

Collaborative work does not simply emerge or endure on its own. It relies on a range of enabling conditions, including the often-overlooked but central roles of skillful coordination and collaborative leadership. Yet, these roles often remain poorly understood. Whether their title is coordinator, manager, or director, individuals in these roles perform essential functions that help collaboratives build relationships, maintain alignment, activate collective action, manage operations, and sustain long-term impact. What follows is the first in a series of articles that we are calling "Making the Invisible Visible: The Strategic Role, Leadership, and Practice of Collaborative Coordination."

In today's world, landscape conservation and stewardship collaboratives¹ are critically important mechanisms with which to address our complex and interwoven biodiversity, climate, and environmental injustice crises at a systems level. As the number of collaboratives and the importance of the work they advance continue to grow, their members are grappling with what it takes to effectively build and maintain them.

Activities inherent in managing collaboratives are often referred to as "coordination," and may happen informally (e.g., someone does it without it appearing within a written job description) or formally (e.g., it is added to someone's job description and/or a dedicated position is created). As a formal position, it may have a variety of job titles, including "coordinator," "manager," or "director."

The title partners choose to use for this role is not merely a matter of semantics. Investing in a coordinator, manager, or director represents an intentional or unintentional choice about the level of leadership, authority, decision-making responsibility, and strategic oversight needed to support the collaborative's success. For the purposes of consistency in this first article, we use "coordination role" as

¹ For the purposes of this article, the umbrella term collaboratives is used for cross-boundary partnerships that bring together organizations, agencies, Tribes, communities, landowners, and other interest-holders to pursue shared environmental, social, economic, or cultural goals no single entity can achieve alone. This includes partnerships, coalitions, alliances, networks and other groups.

an umbrella term. Future articles in this series will explore in greater detail how and why the language used for this job title matters.

Regardless of title, this role is complex, challenging, and dynamic, yet it is often widely misunderstood and unintentionally diminished as simply an administrative function rather than a form of strategic leadership.

Discrepancies in the ways funders, governing bodies, and collaborative participants perceive the role and what it actually requires often means that those acting in this coordination capacity may not be positioned for success. Unclear or undefined expectations regarding the scope and purpose of the role means that many struggle in seeking clarity for how best to allocate their time and energy, face unrealistic expectations, or lack clear authority, all of which can create [sources of stress](#). Addressing these structural deficiencies in how the role is conceived and implemented and bringing sharper focus to what is involved in successfully coordinating a collaborative's activities enables the collaborative to reach its potential.

The following outlines the core responsibilities and representative tasks that we believe are foundational to landscape collaborative coordination.

Weave a Network

This is the work of fostering and tending a dynamic web of connections. At its core, a collaborative is a network of relationships, the breadth and strength of which determines its capacity to function effectively. But building and maintaining personal and professional connections takes time. Those in coordination roles must continually weave this relational fabric—fostering trust, making new connections and nurturing those that already exist, and finding opportunities for alignment. This requires understanding people's interests, perspectives, capacities, and relationships, and requires the significant capacity needed to identify and engage those who may not be a part of the group but who are critical to its long-term success. When done well, network weaving is not about being the central hub through which everything flows. Rather, it is about cultivating the conditions that enable participants to connect and work together—so that they may realize shared goals.

REPRESENTATIVE TASKS

- Conducting regular individual partner check-ins and relationship-building
- Facilitating connections around aligned interests and/or priorities
- Helping partners see how they fit within the broader collaborative
- Managing outreach and engagement for potential new partners
- Co-creating and stewarding the culture that shapes the ways partners engage

Hold the Big Picture

This is the work of ensuring alignment with the collective vision. Collaboratives face an inherent challenge in that most (or all) of their participants have other jobs, engaging only intermittently and from within their own organizational or personal contexts. Even the most committed partners are probably not thinking about the collaborative on a daily basis. But the person in the coordination role is. Often, they alone are responsible for helping partners in newly forming collaboratives articulate a shared purpose or sensing where and how the vision for a more mature group may need to evolve. Similarly, their work helps enable appropriate and seamless participation in the collaborative space, grounding partners in the collective narrative—where the collaborative has been, where it is now, and where it is going—that is critical for maintaining coherence, alignment, and momentum.

Someone must continually hold the collaborative's vision, history, context, and evolving direction.

REPRESENTATIVE TASKS

- Guiding strategic planning and direction setting
- Ensuring transparency and clarity in how the collaborative operates
- Designing and guiding an effective long-term strategic collaborative process
- Understanding the collaborative's broader context and the needs/opportunities it can meet
- Holding the group's history and codeveloping its narrative
- Managing alignment across various working groups or work streams

Activate Collective Action

This is the work of translating a shared vision into shared accomplishments. A collaborative's transformative potential lies in its ability to achieve what no single participant can do alone. Those in coordination roles create the conditions that allow this to happen. Effectively doing so involves identifying pathways for action, cultivating shared ownership, and creating the structures and processes that allow partners to contribute their energy and leadership to the group's work. This includes structuring and facilitating productive discussions; helping partners navigate differences; and creating spaces for shared learning, decision-making, and problem-solving. It may also involve providing centralized oversight or direct project management support for coordinated activities and priority projects that emerge from within a collaborative. However, the coordination role should not become the default for implementing all of a collaborative's priorities; shared ownership of the work is essential for these groups to meet their full potential.

REPRESENTATIVE TASKS

- Managing and facilitating the governance process (e.g., steering committee)
- Discerning the need for and co-developing working groups and/or taskforces
- Handling meeting design and facilitation
- Building consensus, supporting and documenting shared decision-making, and managing internal communications
- Fostering co-ownership around shared tasks and opportunities
- Managing coordinated action, and project/program work plans
- Sustaining accountability pathways, and tracking project milestones, dependencies, and follow-through
- Analyzing and tending to power dynamics
- Managing conflict
- Supporting shared learning and adaptive management

Oversee Operations & Administration

This is the work of tending to day-to-day needs. Like any organization, collaboratives have many operational elements that need to be stewarded, including internal and external communications, fundraising, progress tracking, event planning, budgeting, invoicing, and grants management. These routine but essential tasks benefit from continuity and direct oversight, something that those in coordination roles are often best positioned to do. When this responsibility is effectively addressed, a collaborative is able to maintain the infrastructure that allows it to function smoothly and reliably.

REPRESENTATIVE TASKS

- Tracking collaborative decisions, successes, progress, and outcomes
- Managing repositories of shared data and other resources
- Scheduling and handling logistics for core meetings
- Overseeing external communications
- Managing event planning and logistics
- Fundraising and grant management/reporting
- Budgeting/fiscal management

Those coordinating collaboratives are not simply administrators. They are leaders whose work spans relationship-building, strategy, facilitation, operations, and collective action.

Although they are described separately here, these four core responsibilities are dynamic and interconnected. In many ways, the art of skillful coordination comes in the ability to see and leverage their intersections and fluidly navigate the entire process.

Together, these responsibilities encompass functions that range from those commonly associated with administrative support to those typically expected of an executive director. Despite this breadth, many collaboratives default to placing a single individual in the central coordination role, expecting that person to effectively meet this full range of responsibilities. This is not only unrealistic, but it can also become a structural barrier to a collaborative realizing its full potential. Our experience is that high-functioning collaboratives are intentional about how they leverage the capacity of those in coordination roles and about how they strategically organize, facilitate, and mobilize this capacity alongside the partners' collective capacity. Holding coordination responsibilities collectively rather than individually not only increases the likelihood that those filling these roles will succeed but also strengthens the collaborative's overall long-term capacity and sustainability.

It is also important to note that the balance among these responsibilities is likely to shift over time. Emerging collaboratives often require intensive relationship-building and vision development, while more mature groups may place greater emphasis on implementing their goals, adapting to change, and sustaining their long-term impact.

Regardless of where a collaborative is in its lifespan, investing in capable and well-supported coordination is essential—and will only become more vital as collaborative approaches become increasingly important in landscape conservation and stewardship. Simply assigning someone to a coordination role is not enough; partners must clarify the role's purpose and responsibilities to help ensure individuals are equipped to succeed. This has practical implications for the way collaboratives are designed, funded, and staffed: clarity on the coordination role helps collaboratives distribute responsibilities more effectively, strengthen shared ownership, and increase their long-term impact. It also has practical implications for those in coordination roles, giving them greater confidence in understanding and articulating their work and a greater degree of support. We hope this article serves to acknowledge the responsibilities and value of the individuals who do this essential work, and provides a vocabulary and framework for continued critical reflection about what is actually required for effective collaborative coordination.

LOOKING AHEAD: WHAT'S NEXT IN THE SERIES

As the first in the "Making the Invisible Visible: The Strategic Role, Leadership, and Practice of Collaborative Coordination" **series**, this article focuses on clarifying the scope and complexity of the coordination role. The next piece in this series will further examine what it means to truly recognize coordination as a strategic collaborative function. It will explore concrete approaches for reframing, supporting, and elevating this role so its full impact can be more clearly realized.

About the Authors

As practitioners with a combined 60-plus years in the collaborative field, we ground these articles in our experience coordinating collaboratives from local to international scales, managing staff in coordination roles, convening peer learning opportunities for collaborative leaders, and conducting applied research that investigates critical collaborative capacity needs. For more detailed information about the authors and the series, please see the “Making The Invisible Visible: The Strategic Role, Leadership & Practice Of Collaborative Coordination” [series website](#).

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