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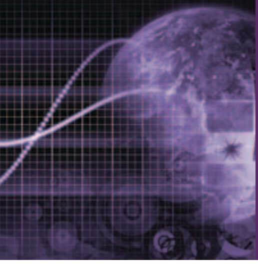



By **David W. Holaday** & **John A. Warnick**

# Getting "Buy-In" to Develop a Collaborative Team

Why, when and how to invite your clients' other advisors to work together with you

We believe clients and advisors alike are best served when advisors collaborate in multidisciplinary teams. Collaboration among complimentary and noncompetitive professionals has the potential to generate better outcomes for clients and a more satisfying experience for the participants. Yet, our observation is that true collaboration happens very rarely. We'll discuss a step-by-step process and give you practical tools to get "buy-in" from the client and from his advisors to begin a collaborative process immediately.[1]

Unfortunately, true teamwork among advisors is rare. The problem isn't that advisors refuse to communicate with each other, it's that most advisors work in their own silo as their default work style. In other words, their typical process can be completed with little or no input from other advisors. They communicate and they may even cooperate, but they rarely collaborate. Trying to collaborate with a competitor won't likely turn out well. But possessing collaborative skills can give you an advantage.

## When It's Warranted

The "trusted team" model of collaboration we'll describe isn't necessarily warranted in every situation. If a client's net worth and income are low and the planning needs are very simple, it may be best to address these needs in a conventional fashion. In our experience, establishing a collaborative team with other advisors begins to make sense for clients whose net worth exceeds $5 million and have one or more of the following situations:

- Family business
- Blended family
- Large spike in taxable income
- Plan to sell a major asset
- Desire to make a significant family or charitable gift
- Psychological or addiction issues

## Collaboration Defined

It's important to clarify what we mean when we use the term "collaboration." Here are three primary models of collaboration we've observed:

1. **Alpha dog model.** This is by far the most common model. It barely qualifies as collaboration. In this model, one advisor assumes the role of the pack leader (or primary advisor). He may obtain information from other advisors, but makes recommendations to the client with little or no input from the others.

2. **Preformed association model.** The preformed association is a group of advisors who come together in advance, develop a unique value proposition and mutually agree to pursue new client relationships together. The association is generally a multidisciplinary team that includes at least a lawyer and financial advisor.

3. **Trusted team model.** Almost every high-net-worth client has a group of key advisors, usually including a lawyer, accountant and financial advisor. This group of advisors becomes a "trusted team" when

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one of them recognizes the need for collaboration and takes the necessary steps to enlist the client and other advisors. This group forms because all the advisors realize it would be beneficial to the client and to each other to work together to best serve their mutual client. For this model to be effective, the team members must have complementary skills. This means that "each must have a skill the others do not, but the skill possessed must complement the skills of other members."[2]

We'll focus on the trusted team model.

## Collaboration Process

To provide leadership, one must have a vision for how things could be better in the future. It's essential that the advisor who wishes to collaborate has a vision and a process that engages the client and the other advisors. Each participant must see how he can benefit. The overall process must be flexible and robust enough to accommodate the requirements of each professional advisor.

The process for initiating the trusted team model requires five critical communications: 1) initial client collaboration conversation; 2) client request of other advisors; 3) advisor-to-advisor introduction meetings; 4) advisors' strategy session; and 5) client recommendation meeting.

## Initial Conversation

Clients don't recognize that their advisors aren't collaborating, and clients can't be expected to initiate a collaborative process. Rather, one of the advisors, who understands both the benefits of collaboration and the necessary steps, must become the catalyst for collaboration. This initiative starts with a conversation with the client. Without client authorization, none of the other advisors will change their behavior.

Before we begin our conversation with the client about collaboration, we ask, "Who would you consult before you made a major financial decision?" The advisors on this list will be the ones we invite onto the trusted team. From here, we explain the benefits and process of collaboration to the client.[3]

Once we help the client to see the value of collaboration, we show him how to authorize and encourage all key advisors to participate.

## Client Request of Other Advisors

The client must be the one who asks the other advisors to collaborate. We want this communication to happen after we're engaged, not before. Only after we have a signed engagement agreement and retainer check do we proceed with having the client communicate with the other advisors.

We've found that sending an e-mail is the best way for the client to ask the other advisors to collaborate. This method enables us to have more control over the message that's delivered. We give the client a sample e-mail message[4] and tell him to edit it to his liking. Usually, the client sends it without modification.

> It's important to describe your idea of what effective collaboration looks like, including processes, roles, commitments and expectations.

We ask the client to copy us on the message to each other advisor. That way, we know that the message went out and exactly what the client wrote. We then contact the other advisors after they receive the e-mail from the client. Now, we're authorized to build the collaborative team.

## Advisor-to-Advisor Meetings

It's important to meet with the other advisors individually and in person to talk about collaboration and invite their participation:

> Use face-to-face meetings to build and develop shared understanding and commitment, as well as to get un-stuck. Such meetings are important

early on when the group is beginning to develop the mutual respect and understanding required to succeed.[5]

To set up the first face-to-face meeting, we make a phone call,[6] rather than send an e-mail.

Our goals for the face-to-face meetings are to:

- **Create safety.** We always try to be alert to things that could threaten the other advisors, like loss of control, influence or revenue. Fear inhibits collaboration.
- **Define a mutual purpose**. It's well understood that the primary purpose of the collaborative effort is to serve the client. However, each advisor has another important purpose, which is to have a productive client engagement. This involves generating revenue and building client confidence and trust to enhance an ongoing client revenue stream. It's important to communicate your understanding of and commitment to the business purpose of each other advisor.
- **Build mutual respect.** We demonstrate our understanding of and respect for the role of each other advisor in the process by emphasizing how important it is for them to contribute their professional wisdom and knowledge of the client.
- **Reach a common understanding of collaboration.** It's a mistake to assume other advisors know what you mean when you use the term. To some, collaboration may mean nothing more than sharing information and going about their practice as usual (alpha dog). Therefore, it's important to describe your idea of what effective collaboration looks like, including processes, roles, commitments and expectations. We usually end by agreeing on next actions.

It's important to build trust and goodwill by letting others demonstrate their expertise.

We use an agenda[7] to prepare for this face-to-face meeting. We don't print or distribute this agenda. Rather, we adapt it as needed and use it as a guide to be sure we cover the most important things in the meeting.

## Advisors' Strategy Session

The advisors' strategy session is a face-to-face meeting with all the trusted team members. The meeting's purpose is to reach consensus on the best strategies to recommend to the client. Prior to the meeting, we e-mail a meeting invitation[8] to each trusted team member.

To reduce tension and encourage openness and participation, we refer to ourselves as facilitators, not directors, quarterbacks or leaders and certainly not as the most trusted advisor. While we do, in fact, assume many functions of leadership, we're always aware of the possibility that members of the group may be highly sensitive to anything that might make them feel threatened.

Here's how we facilitate the advisors' strategy session to encourage active participation and contribution by all key advisors:

1. **Review and discuss the current situation analysis.** Acknowledge helpful contributions that other advisors have already given. Most advisors will offer new details. This is a comfortable way to start the group discussion process.

2. **Review and discuss goals.** This may be the first time some advisors actually look at a written set of client goals. We talk about each goal and consult the client, if necessary, so all advisors have the clarity they need. If there's not genuine buy-in by the advisors on client goals, the rest of the process won't be fruitful.

3. **Discuss possible strategies.** We give other advisors the chance to bring up their ideas first. It's important to build trust and goodwill by letting others demonstrate their expertise. Although we come prepared with our ideas, we generally let others speak first. This step is treated as a brainstorming session. We don't criticize ideas. We may ask specifics, such as, "What assets would you use?" or "How much would you put in?" After an hour, dozens of strategies

may have been discussed.

4. **Agree on a list of the best strategies for detailed analysis.** Most clients aren't willing to implement a dozen strategies. We need a way to develop a short/best list without offending any of the advisors. We ask, "What would be the ideal number of strategies to recommend to the client?" The answer most advisors suggest is from three to five. The next question is, "Which, of all the strategies we have discussed, belongs on this short list?" We've found that the group will usually agree on which strategies to include.

5. **Agree on next actions.** As we wrap up the meeting, we review our conversation and clarify who has specific tasks. We look at calendars and set up the next advisor meeting.

The meeting was successful if all advisors had the chance to speak, felt that their ideas were valued and believe they have an important ongoing role throughout the planning process.

## Client Recommendation Meeting

When key advisors agree on the best course of action, clients have confidence in the recommendations and they make decisions. The best way for a client to see this is for all advisors to enthusiastically participate in person during the client recommendation meeting.

This kind of meeting may be new to many advisors. It's a mistake to assume that they know what you expect of them. It's important to communicate with them in advance about how the meeting should go. There's a time for dissent and vigorous discussion of alternatives, but that time is in the strategy session among professionals, not in the client meeting. The client meeting is a time for unity.

To prepare for the client recommendation meeting, we discuss the following:

- What should be our objectives for this meeting?
- What do we hope the client will think, feel and do?
- Are we fully agreed on our recommendations?
- What's our agenda for the meeting?
- Who should moderate the meeting?
- What role will each of us play?

It's reassuring to the client when an advisor communicates with conviction about the importance of a strategy for which he'll receive no compensation. Therefore, during the meeting, we make a point to communicate our support for the strategies to be implemented by other members of the team and encourage the other advisors to do the same.

## Beyond Individual Expertise

We produce the best possible results for the client when we work collaboratively. The trusted team approach must start and end by honoring the client's unique circumstances and goals. It may not work perfectly the first time you try it, but don't give up.

Collaboration is hard work. It requires skillful facilitation and the best contributions of each key advisor. It allows a team of advisors to function at a level that's far greater than the sum of its parts. Following the protocols and steps we've outlined to achieve buy-in from a client's various advisors will substantially increase the quality of the experience and the end results.

The final products of a successful collaborative process include a highly satisfied client and more opportunities to work as a trusted team through cross-referrals and the client's introduction to other friends and family members. The trusted team approach is truly the magic that transforms individual expertise into collective excellence.

## Endnotes

1. In a previous article in another journal, we described what effective collaboration looks like, identified barriers to overcome, defined key roles, suggested protocols and described components of a shared process. *See* David W. Holaday, "Better Results through Better Collaboration," *Journal of Practical Estate Planning* (April/May 2010).
2. Dr. Donald B. Egolf, *Forming Storming Norming Performing* (2001).
3. Sample documents illustrating this point can be found in the supplemental information available at *www.wdcplan.com/trusts&estates*.
4. *Ibid.*
5. J.R. Katzenback and Douglas K. Smith, *The Discipline of Teams, Creating the High-Performance Organization* (1993).
6 *Supra* note 3.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*