Trust Is Key to Collaboration in Managed Care Health Service Delivery Networks

“Knowledge Sharing in a Third-Party-Governed Health and Human Services Network” by Kun Huang draws much-needed attention to the crucial role of formal and informal relationships between and among networked service providers in the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based service innovations. In these times of intensive knowledge expansion and mounting pressures to contain service costs through managed care, the article also examines the influence of a network administrative organization (NAO) in fostering the willingness of provider agencies to share competitively sensitive information, best practices, and strategic opportunities.

While Huang’s article empirically analyzes these factors in a statewide delivery network managed by a for-profit NAO that does not provide health and human services, my 48 years of health care experience as chief executive officer and board member of several national and regional health care organizations correlates with the article’s observations and conclusions. As Huang correctly notes, “It is important to recognize that interorganizational relationships are enacted by agency leaders or key staff members. Their positive or negative interpersonal relationships could either facilitate or hinder collaboration. Thus, collaborations are both interorganizational and interpersonal.”

Of course, the quality of interorganizational and interpersonal relationships directly affects successful outcomes in all kinds of networks and multifaceted organizations, but it is particularly significant for community health care organizations seeking to serve the widely varying health needs of diverse populations within a context of shrinking financial resources. The key success factors in strong network relationships are frequent communication (both structural and social), collaboration, and cooperation—all of which are grounded in and facilitated by trust.

There is only one way to engender, nurture, and sustain trust: by being trustworthy. Paraphrasing other researchers, Huang asserts, “Interorganizational trust refers to a common expectation among the members of an organization that another organization’s members will act in accordance with any explicit or implicit commitments between the two organizations. Thus, the extent to which an organization can be trusted, or trustworthiness, is determined by its perceived fulfillment of commitment by the leader or key staff members of a partner organization.”

Trust is the essential prerequisite for authentic collaboration, which is distinct from compelled or coerced collaboration. Moreover, to maximize information exchange, creative thinking, and innovative solutions, authentic collaboration also requires the participation and input of diverse interests, viewpoints, experiences, motivations, and agendas. With a rich diversity of backgrounds and perspectives, trust-based collaboration is typically synergistic, often producing astute insights and unexpected opportunities that otherwise may have remained undiscovered.

A case in point is the 2013 Community Health Profile for Santa Fe County, New Mexico, which was jointly sponsored by the Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center’s Community Health and Wellness Committee, Santa Fe County Community Services Division, and Santa Fe County Health Policy and Planning Commission (see http://www.santafe-countynm.gov/userfiles/HealthStatusProfile6-2-2013.pdf). This comprehensive health needs assessment was derived in part from public documents and in part from the input of health care providers, policy and resource allocation decision makers, and the general public. With the benefit of extensive community relationship building, trust-based collaboration was initiated at the inception of the study and continues into the decision making and implementation stages.

As the authors of that profile observed, “Santa Fe County faces serious health and health care challenges. … Some health problems may not be ‘solvable’ at the community level, but progress can be made in reducing the prevalence and detrimental impact of virtually
every negative health factor and outcome through policies and programs implemented locally. *Initiating and sustaining these policies and programs, however, requires collective and sustained action by a broad spectrum of community members and organizations.* This report identifies and can draw broad public attention to the health factors affecting Santa Fe County and, in so doing, *can motivate key stakeholders to sit down at the same table to develop and implement a plan that addresses their shared challenges and builds on their communal strength* . . .

“By identifying those areas of health and health care in which the need is greatest and in which policies and programs can have the greatest impact, community health needs assessments can inform resource allocation decisions by both the public and private sectors and serve as the foundation of evidence-based local health policies and programs” (emphasis added).

This is how trust-based collaboration and cooperation, whether on a local, regional, or statewide level, can generate a whole greater than the sum of its parts.