

Collaboration Process

The number of partners, fuzzy lines of authorities and experimental nature of the project were all factors that had an impact on cooperation among the partners. One project team member interviewed put the problem this way: "You have to learn to exercise leadership in a peer group." The SCI team tried to attract participants to the project, but its real power was limited to that of its role within the government and persuasion. The involvement of partners was a function of their perception of the project going well, and it only went well if they cooperated, creating a vicious circle that was hard to break out of. The collaboration process therefore was a slow and somewhat painful one.

The fact that the project came under the TBS created some discomfort among participating organizations because many of the partners viewed the Secretariat as a controlling body rather than development agency. The TBS's authoritative role became hard to overlook, and this tempered the behaviour of the partners, who dared not complain too much, make demands or take initiatives. The implementation team was keenly aware of this problem and strove for a means of governance that would give the project greater stability in the years ahead.

In addition, the personnel assigned to the project had a high turnover rate. The same thing also occurred with the partners such that relations established at a first meeting could unfortunately not be carried on at the second. This high turnover rate was partly related to public service personnel management practices, which in turn inflated the costs associated with recruitment and training. But the uncertainty surrounding the project's future also came into play.

Cooperation among members of the Service Canada Coordination Committee also had its ups and downs. Initially, the turnover rate of Committee members and their inadequate decision making level slowed the work down somewhat, but various departments soon realized the importance of active participation in the efforts. The group gradually became more efficient and effective in managing the project even though at times the centralist mindset of some gave off the musty odour of the silo culture that had dominated public organizations in recent decades. In fact, at the outset, the departments were more concerned with the quality of services they were providing. Many departments and agencies had already developed a client-focused approach, but it was focused more on "their client" and, in fact, "the service" they provided for that client. As one interview subject put it, "Departmental officials serve two clients: the public and their Minister! And neglecting either is unforgivable."

Subsequently, the spirit on the coordinating bodies evolved. Attitudes changed as the key players tried creating more forums to foster horizontal cooperation. At one point, the partners even ended up sharing the same objectives, which represents a significant learning experience! Yet they lacked the common tools to cooperate fully. Missing, for example, were formal mechanisms for cooperation, especially agreements, as well as government recognition of cooperative efforts in terms of both resource allocation and partner accountability.

Since the accountability mechanisms had scarcely changed, cooperation created a few problems in this area. While the MOUs spelled out each partner's responsibilities, there were virtually no systems for transferring funds. In addition, the cooperative process itself, while costly, was not funded. Lastly, signing agreements with third parties became especially problematic because many community agencies refused to be accountable to the government in order to remain independent of public authorities.

Though a large distance physically separated implementation team members from the front lines, relations always remained cordial. The team closed much of the gap through visits, information exchanges, the supply of materials, management guides, as well as training and evaluation sessions. Genuine communication based on frankness, honesty and respect had to be established with each partner, and this took up a great deal of time. The same atmosphere of trust was also essential for the implementation team to function smoothly. The SCI Director played a key role in this regard. He defined himself as a coach who had to manage his own weaknesses and motivate his team, particularly by giving recognition to efforts and successes. His enthusiasm quickly spread to the team.

Managing the political dimension of SCI was more difficult. Even though the two projects were related, GOLI, which pursued the development of an electronic channel for service delivery (the website), was the main focus of attention and concern. GOLI had a high profile that gave it access to funding and drew the interest of politicians. Meanwhile the SCI project's low political profile meant fewer funds guaranteed for a very short term, a factor that tended to undermine the morale of the troops! This created a certain sense of insecurity that dampened the spirit of many and apparently also led to the departure of a few implementation team members. Make no mistake about it, however, despite the handful of problems described above, the partners and, more specifically, the personnel involved in the various regions were motivated by and enthusiastic about the project and concept of providing integrated, personalized government services for citizens based on their needs and even the region where they lived. In particular, the cooperation in setting up the access centres was almost exemplary, creating bottom-up pressure within the government hierarchy. Field personnel were often seen clamouring for more! There were

community networks in many regions, and many had taken things in hand so that the SCI simply had to furnish support and help them create coalitions with local partners as well as provide funding so that they could attain their objectives.
