

Explain THIS

# Collaboration- Based Approaches



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This resource is adapted from 'Collaboration-Based Approaches', by Graham Martin and Mary Dixon-Woods, part of THIS Institute's series '[Elements of Improving Quality and Safety in Healthcare](#)'.

## About the series

Explain THIS is a series of short, accessible microlearning resources designed to help people working in healthcare improvement understand key concepts and approaches. Whether you're new to improvement work or looking to refresh your knowledge, Explain THIS offers clear explanations and links to further resources to support your learning. Explore the series here:

<https://ths.im/explain-this>

## About this resource

This resource offers clear, practical guidance on using collaboration-based approaches in healthcare improvement. It defines terms, outlines key features, and describes four different types of collaboration-based approaches and how they can be used. The resource also includes practical questions to guide planning, alongside links to further reading for deeper insights. Whether you're starting a new improvement initiative or looking to expand and sustain existing work, this guide provides actionable advice to support your efforts.

# Definitions

**Collaboration-based approaches** describe a variety of ways people in healthcare can work together towards a common goal of improving care.

They bring together groups of professionals, patients, service users, and carers, who share knowledge, coordinate efforts, and support each other in learning and problem-solving.

A collaboration is built on a formal or informal network – a web of connections between people, such as colleagues in the same field, teams working on similar challenges, and patients who may have a shared interest in a health challenge. While networks simply connect people, a collaboration goes further by offering a structured and purposeful way of working together.

Successful collaborations rely on cooperation, shared commitment, and trust. When they work well, they create a cycle where mutual benefits encourage people to stay involved and contribute more, leading to further improvements.

## Features of collaboration-based approaches

### Based on networks

Though a collaboration needs a network, a network on its own is not a collaboration.

### Purpose-driven

Collaborations have shared goals, often focused on improving healthcare quality and patient and service user outcomes.

### Mutual learning and knowledge sharing

Collaborations emphasise collective learning. They create an environment where participants identify and share best practices, practical know-how, and lessons learned.

### Trust and reciprocity

Effective collaborations build trust, fostering a culture of openness and mutual support. This trust encourages ongoing participation and investment in the collaboration's success.

# Collaboration-based approaches

Collaboration-based approaches to healthcare improvement come in different forms. Some were developed within healthcare itself, others have their origins in different fields and have been adapted for healthcare.

They vary in their focus on quality, patient safety, whether they form naturally or are set up intentionally, and how formal or structured they are.

Four different types of collaboration-based approaches highlight different levels of control, self-organisation, and professional leadership.

## **Quality Improvement Collaboratives**

- Highly organised, with a clear structure, timetable, activities, and events.
- Bring together people from different professions and organisations.
- Typically focus on a specific clinical topic where there are large variations in care or gaps between current and best practice.
- Typically exist for a defined time period.

### **Communities of Practice**

- Groups of practitioners who share a common interest or expertise area.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange, skills development, and sharing practical know-how to support problem solving and workarounds.
- May develop and sustain in organisations that provide the right conditions for them to emerge and flourish.
- May be relatively informal in character and not necessarily engineered into existence.
- Generally decide what they will do rather than having their activities chosen for them or imposed externally.

### **Managed Clinical Networks**

- Clinical professionals working together across organisational and geographical boundaries to solve problems and improve services.
- Tackle complex issues that one organisation cannot tackle alone.

### **Clinical Communities**

- Networks of clinicians and others focused on specific clinical areas or patient populations.
- Balance between self-organising, member-led ethos, and necessary administrative and managerial support.
- Recognise the power of collaboration and professionally led improvement but acknowledge that careful use of control-based devices (such as data to hold units to account) can be helpful.

# Key considerations for collaboration-based approaches

## Balance structure and autonomy

Provide enough structure to help a collaboration organise itself without imposing levels of control that can stifle cooperation.



## Don't rely on goodwill

Collaborations shouldn't depend entirely on volunteers. Provide sustainable methods for participation, leadership, and support.



## Be flexible

Different contexts require different strategies. Clearly define the improvement goal and measurement approach but avoid rigidly adhering to specific templates or models.



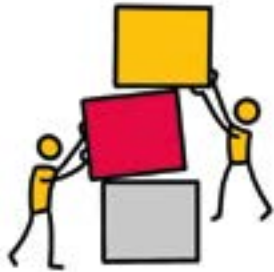
## Plan for sustainability

Trust, reciprocity, and a strong collaborative culture take time to develop. Avoid taking a short-term focus – this can undermine long-lasting impact.



## Consider the wider context

External pressures and organisational priorities can challenge collaboration. Think about how you will deal with these from the start.

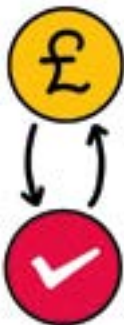


## Be inclusive

Engage a diverse range of participants. This strengthens collective knowledge and action and increases influence within organisations.

## Involve a range of voices

Patient, service user, and carer involvement is essential to broaden insights and inform objectives. Use co-production and co-design to incorporate these perspectives.



## Weigh up costs and benefits

Collaboration-based approaches can be resource-intensive, and the balance between cost and impact is not always clear. Consider if they are the best use of resources to achieve improvement.

# Practical questions

Here are some key questions to help you critically assess whether a collaboration-based approach is the right fit and how to optimise its effectiveness.

## Purpose and goals

1. What specific problem or challenge are you trying to address through collaboration?
2. What are your short-term and long-term objectives? Have they been co-designed?
3. How will collaboration lead to better outcomes than working independently?

## Stakeholders and participation

4. Who needs to be involved for the collaboration to be effective?
5. How will you invite membership? Who the invite comes from can matter as much as the invite itself.
6. How can you ensure diverse perspectives, including those of patients, service users, carers, and staff in different roles, are represented?
7. What strategies will you use to engage and sustain participation? How will you build trust between members of the collaboration?
8. How will accessibility needs be taken into consideration and addressed to ensure equity of participation?







# Useful resources

The following resources have been selected to provide further information for those working in healthcare improvement.

## THIS Institute

**Graham Martin and Mary Dixon-Woods**  
**Collaboration-Based Approaches**  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009236867>

**The Health Foundation**  
**Effective networks for improvement**  
<https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/reports/effective-networks-for-improvement>

**Institute for Healthcare Improvement**  
**The Breakthrough Series: IHI's Collaborative Model for Achieving Breakthrough Improvement**  
<https://www.ihl.org/library/white-papers/breakthrough-series-ihis-collaborative-model-achieving-breakthrough>

**Health Services Executive**  
**Improvement Collaborative Handbook**  
<https://www2.healthservice.hse.ie/organisation/qps-improvement/quality-improvement-collaboratives/>

**The Health Foundation**  
**Using clinical communities to improve quality: Ten lessons for getting the clinical community approach to work in practice**  
<https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/reports/using-clinical-communities-to-improve-quality>

**Q Toolkit**  
**Creative approaches to problem solving**  
<https://q.nhsconfed.org/resources/creative-approaches-to-problem-solving>



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