

# Key Questions for Building Cross-Sector Collaborations to Strengthen Democracy

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*This resource is developed from “**A GUIDE TO BUILDING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY**,” which focuses on how to build cross-sector networks to advance election administration practices that serve our nation’s diverse electorate. Successful cross-sector networks are flexible, adaptable and reflect the communities served. This supplemental resource provides key questions to consider while building cross-sector collaboration and is designed for practitioner use in the planning and execution phases.*

## Include partners that are representative of the different sectors and communities served

A cross-sector network in election administration should include a range of election offices and nonpartisan nonprofit organizations representing the diverse electorate that will be served by the network. A range of partners provide networks with a breadth of expertise, resources, and credibility for collaborative work. Working with election officials from urban and rural areas will provide insights into the complexities of implementing election laws and regulations for different sized jurisdictions. Engaging nonprofits that serve diverse communities will inform the best way to engage and meet the needs of different voters. Below are some questions to consider for identifying the right partners:

- Who are the organizations representing the communities touched by the issue(s) the network will discuss and evaluate?
- Is the leadership from the prospective organizations willing to participate or empower a representative to collaborate in the network?
- Are network participants willing to work collaboratively with partners of a different sector?
- Are network participants willing to commit time and resources to accomplish network goals?
- Are there other allies who would support the collaboration?

## Articulate expectations for participating in the network

The participants of a cross-sector network will bring different cultures, backgrounds, and norms. Articulating clear expectations for how to participate in the network is key to developing productive cross-sector partnerships. Network collaboration requires understanding how to contribute to the network and how to engage with partners from different cultures and backgrounds. Each network should consider the factors that will create strong collaboration for its partners. Below are some questions to help define network expectations:

- Are participants committed to being active contributors to the work of the network by sharing their time, expertise, and resources?
- Are participants willing to engage in respectful and professional dialogue even through disagreements?
- Is confidentiality of network conversations important?
- Are there specific needs that should be considered to support successful engagement from all those involved in the network?

## Define a clear purpose and shared values for the network

All networks must have a purpose and shared values. A purpose unifies the network around a collective vision of the future. Values inspire the approach to collaboration. Expressing the network purpose and values unifies the network and strengthens its identity. Below are some questions to consider for finding the network’s purpose and values:

- What pressing policy issue(s) or practice(s) should be addressed to ensure election administrators succeed each election cycle?
- What pressing policy issue(s) or practice(s) should be addressed to ensure all voters can cast a successful ballot?
- Who are the beneficiaries of the policy issue(s) or practice(s) identified?
- Are partners willing to hold themselves accountable to diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- What additional values should the network uphold?

## Identify network priorities

Priority issues are urgent matters that the network chooses to advance to further its purpose and values. Priority setting should be done with the broadest set of partners to ensure selected priorities reflect the diversity of the network and secure the resources and commitments needed to accomplish goals. Below are some questions to consider for setting priorities:

- Do priority-setting discussions include all representatives for the communities touched by the issue(s)?
- What criteria will be used to select priority issues?
- What are the top three to five issues that cut across the interests of network partners, government, and the nonprofit sector?
- What is the window of opportunity for each issue? Can it move in a year or is it a longer-term issue?
- What resources are partners willing to bring to each priority? Are there champions that are willing to lead that issue?

## Adopt practices for productive meetings

Adopting practices for managing productive meetings is essential for partners to feel their engagement in the network is constructive. A few important management practices to consider are determining when and how the group will meet, setting an agenda for the meeting, adopting ground rules to ensure all voices are heard, and asking partner commitment on follow-up items. It is important for network participants from all sectors to contribute agenda items. Below are some questions to consider for managing meetings:

- How often and when will the group meet in-person? Remotely?
- Can the group identify a consistent time and date for meetings?
- How will meeting agendas be crafted? Who will collect agenda items before the meeting? Who will facilitate the meeting?
- Who will volunteer for action items and follow up to ensure items are completed before the next meeting?

## Maintain the network

Networks require maintenance to ensure cross-sector partnerships remain productive and collaborative for the long-term. Below are some considerations for network maintenance:

- Formalize network leadership to create accountability for monitoring progress toward mission, fostering collaboration and managing the health of the network.
- Track progress of network goals to demonstrate value of collaboration, or to identify when strategies may need to pivot.
- Monitor collaboration of partners to ensure network stays connected and active.
- Evaluate diversity of partners to ensure network represents the communities being served.
- Celebrate success to build network identity.