

How long does it take to build a Collaborative Practice?

By Liz Ferris

As I work with attorneys, mental health specialists and financial specialists, one of the questions I am asked most frequently is, "How long does it take to grow a collaborative practice?"

Having worked with successful practitioners who have transformed their practice to 100% collaborative, I have observed that the answer is as long as it takes to build a collaborative community.

What is a collaborative community? A collaborative community is the synergy created by leveraging the talents and contributions of individuals, local and statewide groups and the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals.

Collaborative Community



Building a collaborative practice requires the growth of a collaborative community. For that to happen, attention must be given to each layer of the community

Individual Practitioner

The first layer of the collaborative community involves the individual collaborative professional.

The greatest myth I hear from individuals and groups is that they will

receive an increase in referrals for collaborative cases if they take a basic training, join a collaborative practice group and pay the annual fee for their group.

In my experience, however, the most successful collaborative practitioners in North America increased their collaborative case load by taking an active role in growing their practice versus passive participation.

The following are the four characteristics of successful practitioners:

1. Successful practitioners internalize the value and principles of collaborative practice. The most successful collaborative practitioners all have internalized, believe and clearly understand the principles of collaborative practice.

Lisa Alexander, a collaborative attorney from Vancouver, emailed this quote on the list serve during a heated debate on the difficulty of getting clients to agree to the disqualification clause: *"Let one who wants to move and convince others, first be convinced and moved themselves. If a person speaks with genuine earnestness, the thoughts, the emotion and the actual condition of their own heart, others will listen."*

—Thomas Carlyle

It has been determined that 50-70% of communication is nonverbal. Successful collaborative professionals have internalized the value of the collaborative process and effectively communicate this excitement to their clients and referral sources.

Cheryl Fletcher, a Collaborative attorney from Michigan and the

Chair of the Collaborative Law Institute of Michigan, was telling me how her collaborative practice was growing and how excited she was about the work she was doing and the results she was experiencing. At the end of the conversation we both agreed that her excitement and confidence about Collaborative was a critical factor in her success.

2. Successful practitioners are actively involved in the collaborative community. Creation of and participation in a collaborative community are essential to growing collaborative practice for two reasons. First, your contribution will strengthen your collaborative community, which is essential for accelerating the growth of collaborative practice in general. Second, the number one referral source for collaborative cases is other collaborative professionals.

You can increase your referrals from collaborative professionals by spending time getting to know them, participating in collaborative activities and making a contribution to your collaborative community.

3. Successful practitioners create a positive client experience. In the book, Purple Cow by marketing guru Seth Godin, he says the only way to grow a business is to provide remarkable service. "Something remarkable is worth talking about."

The best marketing strategy is through positive word of mouth. This will happen if clients have a positive experience with Collaborative Practice.

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4. Successful practitioners market their practices. Many collaborative practitioners have a negative association with marketing and see it as unethical, hype or just not something they want to do.

For those who see marketing this way, I understand and offer you another way to view marketing. Marketing is about educating people who could benefit from knowing about collaborative practice. Seth Godin says, "Marketing is the most powerful force available to people who want to make a difference." He also says, "Marketing is about spreading ideas and spreading ideas is the single most important output of our civilization. If you have an idea to spread, you're a marketer." As collaborative professionals, our "idea" is to transform how conflict is resolved worldwide.

(For tips on marketing your practice, sign up for the Accelerated Growth Newsletter at www.ferrisconsult.com)

Local/Regional Groups

Local groups are important for growing a collaborative practice because this is where relationships are formed, knowledge is exchanged and mentoring occurs. This is where the collaborative community grows and expands. Creating a successful group requires clarity of goals and meeting the support, educational and networking needs of members.

An example of a group that has created value for members is the Dallas group. Last year their meetings were not going well. People stopped coming, interest lagged. Group leaders determined that they did not have enough influencers attending the meeting and the agenda was not bringing value to the members.

They elected two co-chairs who put structure to the meetings. They recruited a few key influencers to get involved and created a venue that would take into account all the various levels of people in the group.



They separated the attendees into tables of eight and gave each table a key Collaborative question to discuss, e.g., "How do you effectively educate the client to use the collaborative team?" Each table would dialogue and then present their summary to the full group. This allowed members to meet new people and learn something that would advance their knowledge. Attendance at the meetings grew and the group is now sharing its success with other groups throughout Texas.

State/Province Groups

The purpose of statewide or provincewide groups is to help groups grow and expand collaborative practice and to be a unifying voice for legislative, training and public education initiatives.

Examples of successful statewide groups include Minnesota, Wisconsin and Texas, which has helped members promote their practice through a statewide web site, trained hundreds of practitioners through statewide training programs and provided practice resources and tools to members to improve practice excellence. Texas and North Carolina have initiated state statutes for collaborative practice.

International Academy of Collaborative Professionals

The final layer of the collaborative community is the IACP. The purpose of the IACP is to protect the essentials of Collaborative Practice, expand Collaborative Practice worldwide, and provide a central resource for education, networking and standards of practice.

Talia Katz, executive director for IACP says, "The IACP is uniquely positioned to join us together and amplify our communal message to the world. It is by joining together that we will be heard; loud, strong and clear."

Summary

How long does it take to build a collaborative practice? As discussed here, it will take as much time as needed to first build a collaborative community. For that to happen, it must occur at every layer--individual, local/regional, state/province and the IACP. The resulting synergy will move collaborative practice ever closer to our vision of transforming how conflict is resolved worldwide. ■

Elizabeth Ferris, founder of Ferris Consulting, specializes in assisting attorneys, mental health professionals and financial specialists to grow their practice through result-oriented marketing and practice development strategies. She has worked with attorneys, collaborative professionals and mediators across North America to implement effective strategies for increasing awareness and demand for their services. Elizabeth can be reached at www.ferrisconsult.com

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