



Data Governance:

Tips for Data Collaborative Builders and Partners



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“Governance is everything.”

“**Governance is everything.**” We can’t remember who said it first, but it’s become somewhat of a mantra within the workforce data community, including Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) grantee states. WDQI is the US Department of Labor’s effort to support states in building longitudinal data systems so they can report more efficiently and learn from program results more effectively. In the project’s early days, governance was understood as the set of agreements – memorandums of understanding, data-sharing agreements, contracts, and so on – that allowed data managers to link or share data across programs and agencies. We have come to understand that governance is about more than the agreements themselves. Data governance, at its core, is about the formal and informal structures, norms, and principles that guide how data stakeholders collaborate.

This brief summarizes key concepts pertaining to data collaboratives and offers a three-phase model for implementing effective governance practices. It is informed by Social Policy Research Associates’ (SPR) experience supporting state data teams, partner BrightHive’s expertise managing data collaboratives at the highest levels of government, and ongoing research into the topic by both organizations. It summarizes key concepts and offers a three-phase model for implementing effective governance practices.

Data governance guides the actions and decisions of stakeholders, ensuring that data are stored, transferred, and used responsibly, and that the privacy of the people (and sometimes organizations) represented in the data is protected. A comprehensive governance structure defines the data, establishes data ownership and authority, and provides clear processes for sharing, storing, linking, matching, and using data, and for adhering to existing law, policy, and mutually determined timelines and permissions for each of these elements. A clearly articulated governance structure will ensure that proper data management and use are integral to the design and management of shared (or shared access) data systems.

Key Terms

Data Collaborative:

A partnership in which data providers from across different sectors – public programs and agencies, nonprofit organizations, universities, colleges, think tanks, and private sector actors – collaborate to create public value.*

Governance Board:

A group of key stakeholders who oversee the operations of a data partnership. In accordance with a charter and/or contractual agreement, they supervise how data sharing accomplishes goals and evaluate progress in the pursuit of a shared vision.

Governance Structure:

The people, policies, procedures, and technologies required to manage the operations of multi-party data sharing under the direction of a managing body.

Charter:

A document that outlines a common set of values and motivations, sets specific goals for the partnership or collective, and considers how various barriers to sustainability can be overcome.

Guiding Principles for Governing Data Collaboratives

We have identified four key principles common to successful governance programs in the public sector and in broader data collaboratives that include private-sector or nonprofit partners. These principles help stakeholders safeguard data quality and security while enabling responsiveness in the face of changing priorities, use cases, and leadership.

1 - Diversity within the governance board.

Inclusion of diverse members and perspectives on the governance board – including stakeholder organizations and agencies that represent end users – is critical for effective governance. Diversity helps mitigate risk by ensuring consideration of unintended consequences. It also boosts the potential of data partnerships for identifying new value-creating opportunities.

2 - Flexibility.

Data-sharing needs and requirements change over time. An effective governance structure is flexible enough to allow data partners to satisfy their own agency needs while also adding value to the collaborative, even as circumstances change over time.

3 - Shared responsibility.

No single individual or entity is responsible for the management of the data-sharing collective. Responsibility falls collectively to all of the members and the governance board. This distributes power and responsibility and helps sustain collaboration.

4 - Contributor ownership and control of data.

Agencies that contribute data to the collaborative maintain ownership and control over their data. Data ownership means that contributors have a vote in all matters impacting their contributed data, and they maintain the right to control its access and use.

Key Phases in Building an Effective Data Governance Structure

We have identified three phases common to many successful data governance structures. In this section, we briefly describe these phases and provide links to strategies for achieving the goals of each phase.

Phase One: Building the Collaborative

The first phase is all about getting partners and stakeholders on board. Organizers (e.g., state grantees) need to identify the benefits of and barriers to data sharing and collaboration, determine which agency stakeholders should be involved, and develop a theory of change that explains how impact might be achieved. Through consultation, dialogue, and understanding, organizers and partners can craft a shared vision that can be enshrined in a charter that outlines a common set of values and motivations, sets specific goals for the partnership, and considers how barriers to sustaining and growing it can be overcome. For WDQI grantees, a common goal in recent rounds has been to move beyond a focus on reporting and compliance and build the capacity to uncover cross-agency insights about how people move through education and workforce programs and systems and what combinations of services are most effective for groups of people with different needs and circumstances.

Exemplar: Colorado

COVID-19 has accelerated the need to connect job seekers to open positions. When OnwardCO – a platform intended to help streamline information about state and local COVID response strategies – asked the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment to share data so that citizens in need could find training programs, the state’s data governance structure was put to the test. The request came on a Friday, and by the following Tuesday the Colorado Data Trust’s governing board was able to meet and vote to approve the new use case. API credentials were issued the next morning so that authorized data could be accessed.

Because stakeholders participating in the Data Trust had already developed a shared understanding of goals and data-sharing procedures, they were able to focus their assessment of the opportunity on OnwardCO’s alignment with the Governing Board’s mission and potential for impact. The board was able to vote quickly and launch implementation efforts – identifying needed data fields and protecting sensitive information – immediately afterwards.

Phase Two: Defining the Operations

In the second phase, partners create a governance structure that identifies stakeholder roles and responsibilities, accountability levers, group decision-making processes, ethical and security safeguards, and [mechanisms](#) for incorporating feedback and enhancing the performance of the collaborative and of governance itself. In this phase, the loosely structured group of participants evolves into a collaborative partnership and begins to operationalize its plans. Partners define a set of operations for the shared data system (in WDQI vernacular, this is the longitudinal data system, or LDS) and a small number of agency partners (i.e., a “coalition of the willing”) who agree to pilot data sharing. Pilot partners detail concrete [roles and responsibilities](#) for each agency involved to ensure [continued trust](#) and accountability, outlining processes for collective decisions and for evolving governance as needed. The charter developed in Phase One can serve as the basis for the governance structure going forward. For public sector data stakeholders in particular, the decision-making process may involve establishing a voting protocol (e.g., determining which issues require a vote and who has voting rights) aligned with legal requirements and policies of participating agencies.

Phase Three: Driving Impact

In the third phase, partners use the [feedback loop](#) developed in Phase Two to revise and [improve](#) the operational, ethical, and legal aspects of the collaborative and emerging LDS. Common improvements range from collecting better metadata and documentation to improving security standards to inviting other agencies to join the pilot or the collaborative. This [iterative process](#) can improve the specific data-sharing project and build data-sharing capacity for collaborative partners over time. Updating interoperability standards in order to streamline data sharing across agencies is a common operational improvement among WDQI grantees; revising decision-making processes as new agencies and partners join is a common governance improvement.

The Governance Charter

Comprehensive governance frameworks provide clarity on the rules and regulations surrounding the maintenance and management of shared data systems, including state LDS. We have found certain key elements to be common across the most robust governance structures. BrightHive has created [a charter template](#) based on these findings that is available to use at no cost. The key elements are as follows:

Key Elements of the Charter:

- The purpose of the collaborative.
- The context in which the collaborative emerged, including:
 - the values and motivations of partners and stakeholders;
 - the identification of populations and stakeholders likely to benefit from data collaborative activities;
 - and the most salient [legal](#), [security](#), [privacy](#), [organizational](#), and [ethical](#) considerations.
- The goals of initial data-sharing projects and the scope of work intended to achieve those goals.
- The members of the collaborative, their roles, and their areas of expertise.
- The authority or the mechanism to confer authority on specific actors to ensure effective operations.
- The operational plan, including decision-making mechanisms, membership-change procedures, and rule-making processes.
- The mechanism to assess performance.
- A timeline and milestones to guide performance assessments for the collaborative.

Exemplar: Virginia

Codified in the [VLDS Book of Data Governance](#), Virginia's governance structure features a statewide committee made up of representatives from every data-sharing organization as well as general system management. The state's data governance structure has successfully supported cross-agency collaboration by allowing members to get to know one another and each agency's interests and priorities. Four subcommittees—Technical, Communications, Legislative, and Research—allow representatives to examine topics in greater detail and offer guidance to the full group.

Since 2011, we have seen WDQI grantees develop governance structures to formalize partnerships with education, workforce, human service, and other agencies across their states. These structures have evolved as innovations rapidly emerge in spaces of data privacy, security, and technology. They will continue to do so, as states adapt to more virtual communications, respond to emergencies, and as states develop the capacity to conduct more robust research agendas. We hope that the tools and resources offered in this tip sheet provide a framework for decision making for states embarking on new challenges and opportunities.

Resources Cited Throughout the Tip Sheet

- [Theory of Change, A Practical Tool for Action, Results, and Learning](#)
- [Stakeholder Analysis: Securing the Buy-In You Need](#)
- [Toward Metrics for Re\(imagining\) Governance: The Promise and Challenge of Evaluating Innovations in How We Govern](#)
- [The Three Goals and Five Functions of Data Stewards](#)
- [Building Trust for Cross-Sector Data Collaboration](#)
- [Closing the Feedback Loop](#)
- [Iterative Development](#)
- [Legal Issues for IDS Use: Finding a Way Forward](#)
- [Nothing to Hide: Tools for Talking \(and Listening\) About Data Privacy for Integrated Data Systems](#)
- [The Right Data Governance for Your Organization's Culture](#)
- [The Ethics of Data Sharing: A Guide to Best Practices and Governance](#)
- [VLDS Book of Data Governance](#)

Note:

*This definition is modified from DataCollaboratives.org, a project of New York University's GovLab co-founded by Stefaan Verhulst, who also serves as a subject-matter expert to the WDQI project. "Data Partnership" and "Data Collective" are alternate names for partnerships of this nature.