

## **Fostering Sustainable Collaborative Relationships**

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As nonprofits face reduced funding and greater competition for resources, the era of independent institution building is quickly giving way to an era of collaborative relationship building. While collaboration is a concept and process that has been around and tried for some time, many are still uncertain about what it is and how to foster a sustainable collaborative relationship.

Agencies who have experimented with collaboration have had problems with the process. In 1995, the Support Center conducted a series of focus groups with executive directors. The executive directors described how difficult it is to collaborate with agencies that are of a different size and age. Some had tried to hold joint planning meetings, but the people who attended did not have the same decision making power. Two agencies were represented by the executive and associate directors, while the other players at the table were program directors or direct service providers. Another small, three year old agency had a very informal communication and accountability structure. When a larger agency tried to collaborate with it, the executive director and staff were constantly having to second guess and double check whether the right information got to the right person.

Respondents spoke of how collaboration actually costs more in additional reporting procedures, added telephone calls, and additional time for someone in each agency to administer the collaborative effort. A decision may have involved a few people in one agency. Within a collaborative agreement, however, executive directors had to contact many people, work around their schedules, make sure everyone had the needed information, and wait for those people to communicate to whomever had to know about the decision, before the decision could be made and implemented.

Distrust and turf issues often interfere with collaboration. Two agencies joined together to form a hot-line. Every time there was an opportunity for news coverage or other publicity, each agency insisted on having its own news release. One agency eventually took over the hot-line because the two groups could never fully agree on the goals for the program, and they could not sustain commitments they had made about who controlled what.

A number of the respondents said also that granters seem to be calling for collaboration but they are not offering financial and training support to do it; nor are they collaborating among themselves to have unified reporting procedures. In fact, their reporting procedures encourage competition over clients. Funders call it double counting if the same client is seen by two different agencies who are attempting to collaborate.

### **Other Studies of Collaboration**

When the Wilder Foundation conducted a literature search of articles and books on collaboration,

it identified a number of key factors which influence the success and sustainability of collaboration within an agency and between agencies:

- There is a history of collaboration or cooperation in the agency and with other agencies.
- The agencies desiring to encourage collaboration internally among their programs and externally with other agencies are seen as leaders in the community.
- Political leaders and the general community support the mission of the agencies seeking to do more collaboration.
- There is mutual respect, understanding and trust among the members of the agency and the other agencies they seek to collaborate with.
- The members of the team who will work on the collaborative agreement represent an appropriate cross-section of the agencies.
- Each agency's staff see collaboration producing benefit to their own work and those they serve.
- Each agency's staff feel ownership of both the process and its outcome. There are multiple layers of decision making in each agency with everyone being clear about how they can participate.
- Those who seek to collaborate are willing to deal openly with conflicts, willing to compromise, and willing to be flexible.
- There are clear roles and responsibilities and policy guidelines within each agency both before the collaborative process and as a result of the negotiations during the process.
- There is open and frequent communication with both formal and informal communication links.
- There are concrete, attainable goals and objectives that are clearly related to the collaborative process.
- There is a shared vision about outcomes and about the process.
- Collaboration is seen as being the means to obtain unique objectives that may not be otherwise obtainable.
- There are sufficient funds to carry out the collaborative process.
- Finally, the collaborative group has a convener skilled in organizational and interpersonal skills.

## An Urban Example

While the Wilder Foundation derived its factors from a broad literature search, John Selsky's study of a Philadelphia area membership association, the Delaware Valley Council of Agencies (DVCA), offers concrete guidelines for agencies considering collective efforts in a highly diverse urban setting and a good example of a collaborative effort between practitioners and academics.

Formed in the mid 80s by an ad hoc group of managers, researchers, and consultants, DVCA's purpose was to cohere a loosely organized, interest-based group of agencies and build their capacity for collective decision making and collective resource acquisition. Common to many nonprofits in urban settings who relate to each other only as they cross paths in the same geographical area, the agencies who chose to join DVCA faced four challenges:

- Limited resources and diverse players in their geographical area
- For-profits beginning to provide nonprofit services
- Uncertain sources of funding
- Competition overriding cooperation and little understanding among the nonprofit agencies

The DVCA's first successes were low-risk, high payoff projects: an exchange network and resource bank of donated equipment and furniture. Those efforts were soon followed by joint contract purchasing arrangements for office supplies, photocopy paper, and fuel oil; and programs for health, dental, and retirement insurance. DVCA moved on to design events, conferences, and newsletters to facilitate interaction among the members. As trust grew, DVCA also advocated for public policy changes which directly benefited member agencies, such as sales tax regulations, donor option policies, and resolution of liability insurance problems.

Even though DVCA's membership increased over the four years that Selsky studied the Council, Selsky points out that not all agencies can be expected to participate in the same way. Only 41 of the 148 agencies who joined the council were members for the full four year period. When the council sponsored as many as 12 programs, only from 2% to 37% of the members participated. Also, of all DVCA's activities, the members indicated that the most important to them were direct benefit services such as vendor discounts, information provided by the newsletter, and the resource bank; the least important were group insurance, representing the nonprofits to outside constituencies, and computer related services (though 11 out of the 50 agencies responding did consider the computer services important).

Selsky offers seven guidelines for fostering collective efforts drawn from his study of DVCA:

1. ***The collective network must be designed.*** Attention is paid to establishing explicit policies, an independent resource base, and recruitment plans for the potential membership. Without

conscious strategies, there is the chance that each organization will optimize its own position. Whenever possible specific agreements are negotiated and formalized.

2. ***The network should be built by concentrating on the major resource needs of the member agencies.*** The collective shows how it can give access to resources agencies would not have otherwise. In addition there are shared values about how to obtain those resources together.
3. ***There is a need for a development activist to foster participation of skilled individuals from the various agencies.*** The activist can organize the various players for projects and help them to learn from each other. The activist can foster trust among the members and put the needed thought and energy into designing meetings and planning processes.
4. ***The significant players in the collective need to have an experimental outlook.*** Even though each agency comes to the collective with different needs, they are willing to experiment and discover shared values and needs.
5. ***A collective needs to appeal to multiple incentives and offer various ways to network.*** It is impractical to expect all the agencies to participate in all the programs; therefore, there need to be ways to foster pre-existing networks, create segment networks, and link dissimilar organizations. In other words, there are a variety of interest focused networks and collaborations within the overall collective effort.
6. ***The network should be developed incrementally.*** The collective can gradually build its membership by inviting more agencies to participate as projects prove to be successful.
7. ***Expect outcomes to be distributed differently across the network, instead of there being one clearly defined outcome.*** Each member and clusters of members are going to derive different benefits from the collective efforts. There are going to be individual, segmental, and shared achievements depending upon the size and capabilities of the participating agency.

Given the likelihood of continued competition for resources in a turbulent funding market, collective strategies to secure resources, such as a council of agencies, are effective first steps toward encouraging more collaborative efforts among nonprofits in a large, highly diverse urban area.

## References

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