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COLLABORATIONS Ensuring a Fit With Your Partners and Your Plans

At the start of a recent NPCC workshop on how to make collaborations successful, Paul Connolly and Laura Colin Klein, consultants with The Conservation Company, offered four definitions of collaboration. While these definitions seemed to conflict with each other - each offered their own take as to what a collaboration is and what it entails - they also brought home the point that there is no one right, all-encompassing definition of collaboration. Similarly, the circumstances surrounding each collaboration are as unique as the nonprofits who are embarking on these ventures. There is no one right formula for collaborating, but there are a host of things to consider that will help ensure success.

Collaborations vary by level of formality. They can range from two organizations informally making referrals to each other to agencies formally merging. While some collaborations concentrate on administrative functions, such as sharing back-office space or a database, others are program-oriented, such as blending services and programs or hiring a joint fundraiser.

The real reason to collaborate should be to better achieve your organization's goals. A collaboration should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. Some of the motivating factors that lie behind deciding to collaborate include tangible goals like strengthening and improv-

ing programs, increasing efficiency and effectiveness, and improving organizational skills. Less tangible reasons may include the desire to raise commitment, fellowship and the potential for more effective problem-solving. Collaborations may also help develop a deeper understanding of specific issues; increase clout by attracting greater public attention; integrate programs and services that better serve complex needs. Organizations that already have common goals and mutual needs and interests may want to collaborate for economic reasons. On the less altruistic side of the coin, collaborations may address threats from the competition, specifically in response to those from the for-profit sector.

Some of the reason why not to collaborate are when funders ask nonprofits to develop partnerships for the funders' own purposes. Conversely, a nonprofit seeking to collaborate solely to secure funding is a really bad reason. Collaborating should not be done just because "it's new, it sounds different, and everybody's doing it."

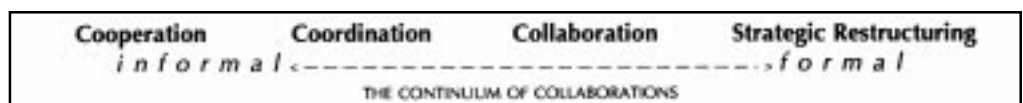
Klein presented a model of the continuum of collaborations. She noted that this is just one example

of several models. Several workshop participants voiced differing opinions about the need for a lead agency: one individual

to the complex (far right). Connolly noted that there is a higher level of both risk and reward as you move toward the right of the continuum. Klein suggested that those organizations without any collaborative experience may want to begin with simple ventures; start informally by sharing resources. It may prove to be riskier starting out with complex endeavors if you've no experience.

Complex and formal collaborations will necessitate formal documentation, contracts, etc. However, even simple collaborations should have some type of document spelling out what is expected of the parties involved. This may be a memo, a letter of agreement or a contract. Whether complex or simple, those collaborations that also include a document that details the benchmarks that the project will be measured against are probably going to be more successful. These benchmarks need not be "set in stone," and can be adjusted.

There are two basic models for collaborations. One, the democratic model where every organization at the table is equal, and two, the hierarchical model where there is a lead agency that takes responsibility for coordinating the other participants.



of several models.

This model views collaborations as ranging from the simple (far left)

Several workshop participants voiced differing opinions about the need for a lead agency: one individual

felt that there must be a lead agency or the effort would fail while another person felt that a true collaboration does not have a lead agency. Klein noted that neither of these opinions were necessarily incorrect.

Another attendee noted that to solve the problems of leadership, ego, and turf wars they had both a lead agency and an unbiased convener who was from outside the area of interest to the collaborating agencies. This arrangement allowed the lead agency to "own the table" in that they had rules already written when the groups began meeting, so there were none of the petty issues of who is serving whom, or which agency does what better. The facilitator got everyone to a level playing field and helped the groups to be flexible.

A collaboration could be between two groups or it could be between twenty. Similarly, those involved in a collaboration could be just the executive directors or it could be an organization's entire universe (staff, clients and funders). It all depends on the situation and how it is defined. Attendees told of several instances where the participants evolved: In one venture the executive directors started meeting and soon realized that they had to include the people who ran the after-school programs. Another reported that the mid-level managers initiated a venture that was then handed over to the executive directors of the organizations. In one venture, those agencies that wanted to participate were required to send their top-level person from the organization to show that they had the commitment to the process.

Research by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation has revealed the following factors which influence collaboration. The items marked with an asterisk are the most important, for if a collaborative venture has these el-

ements it is more likely to succeed.

ENVIRONMENT

There should be a history of collaboration or cooperation in the community. Collectively, the group should be seen as leaders in the community. The political and social climates should be favorable.

PURPOSE

First, the collaboration must have a unique and higher purpose. If any one of the organizations could achieve the collaboration on its own, it weakens the effort and begs the question, why bother? There must be a shared vision that can be translated to common objectives and goals, and these goals and objectives must be concrete and attainable.

CHARACTERISTICS

The skills, opinions, and characteristics of the individuals and the organizations need not be identical, but should be compatible. *There must be mutual respect, understanding, and trust among the members. *An appropriate cross-section of members, probably a mix of high-level or mid-level staffers, may help ensure success. Members view collaboration with an eye toward their own self-interest, so the outcome needs to be greater than the loss of turf.

PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

Members should have a sense of ownership in both the process and the outcome. Clear roles and policy guidelines need to exist. However, rigidity shouldn't rule: things should be flexible and adaptable. For example, create benchmarks, but review and revise if necessary.

COMMUNICATION

*Open and frequent communication is crucial. Establish both formal and informal lines of communication.

RESOURCES

*Sufficient funds are needed to help ensure the success of the venture. Many organizations underestimate the resources-financial and personnel-needed to undertake a collaboration, especially those required by the lead agency. Whether a collaboration is for a mission-driven or an administrative-based venture, it usually costs money to save money.

Rushing a collaboration will probably doom the venture. "Collaborating in order to receive a grant will likely lead to trouble." Connolly warned, "Invest the time in building a relationship first."

A handout provided by The Conservation Company is available to NPCC members by sending a self-addressed stamped envelope affixed with \$.32 in postage. Send a note requesting the Collaboration handout to Marcia Brown at 121 6th Avenue, New York 10013. This handout includes a suggested reading list on collaborations and a list of questions to consider when evaluating potential collaborations.

The Conservation Company provides management consulting and planning services to nonprofit organizations, philanthropies and corporate community affairs departments. The firm's services for nonprofit organizations include strategic planning, organizational assessment and development, restructuring and repositioning, and program design and evaluation. The Conservation Company has offices in New York (50 East 42nd Street, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10017, 212-949-0990) and Philadelphia (One Penn Center, Suite 1550, Philadelphia, PA 19103, 215-568-0399). The Conservation Company's Web site address is www.consco.com. ♦