



*a program of the Nonprofit
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PARTNERSHIP AND PROGRESS

PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

Within the nonprofit sector, many books and articles have been written on the topic of networks, coalitions, and the merits of collaboration. Issues that have been analyzed include: the motivations of organizations to collaborate; the benefits that may accrue to partners because of their networking efforts; the reasons that coalitions are successful or not; and, the emergence of collaboratives as influential voices of the nonprofit sector.

Collaboration is a positive approach that enables a single organization to broaden its impact and leverage other resources. To collaborate does not mean to lose an individual organizational identity, but rather to gain strength from common plans and goals. These efforts can be as informal as a regular exchange of ideas and resources or as structured as a separate entity with a Board, staff, program plan, and funding.

There are several fundamental tenets that will increase the potential for successful collaboration.

Nonprofit organizations that consider collaboration should be philosophically compatible. Within the nonprofit sector, the philosophic differences among potential collaborators may be very subtle or vastly distinct. An analysis of issues, such as approaches to service delivery and theories about consumer interests, may reveal substantial differences in organizational philosophies, striking similarities, or a mixture of both. Nonetheless, a philosophic consensus must exist among the group to effectively define a common purpose and goals.

Organizations must share common perceptions of the needs to be addressed. Organizations must reach a consensus about the most pressing issues that are to be addressed collectively. Definition of these issues may provide a common ground for collaboration, but consensus will heighten the potential for successful efforts.

A track record of successful joint efforts should exist among the collaborating participants. Positive experiences working together in the past usually means that the participants are willing to try again. If previous experiences were negative, there must be a willingness among participating organizations to overcome these problems. Although past collaborative efforts may have been difficult, or even unsuccessful, the participants must be agreeable and excited about trying again for success.

Participants must perceive tangible benefits and/or see it in their self interest to collaborate. In addition, there should be consensus among individual participants as to the nature of these benefits. It is not enough to say that "enlightened self-interest" will motivate individuals to work together successfully. The collaborative must take into account each participant's self-interest, and the collaboration must ultimately produce tangible results for its partners.

Outcomes can be beneficial to both an individual organization, as well as the collaborative effort itself. For example, increased funds, improved facilities, or added staff may result from a successful collaboration. Non-duplication of programs and enhanced community visibility are less measurable, but are nonetheless tangible benefits that can be enjoyed by the group as a whole.

Once the collaborative effort stops providing benefits to its partners, it will find itself without support. The collaboration cannot put its own needs in front of those of its participants. It exists, at least in part, to serve its partners.

Participating organizations must be willing to share resources and information with the other participants, if collaborative efforts are to be successful. No single organization can know all potential resources available to them, nor be able to afford the vast array of training opportunities. However, information can easily be shared between staff and cooperative training sessions can prove to be very cost-effective.