

# Defining Collaboration: Process, Outcome or Both?

By Janet Rechtman

Part 1 of 2

**W**hen two grassroots family service providers in the same urban neighborhood competed for funds for their services, the Foundation that received the applications saw a match made in heaven. The program officer invited the two organizations to present a joint proposal for a shared position plus technical assistance in implementing their work together. With this new approach, everybody won: clients got improved quality of service, the agencies got much-needed professional staff, the neighborhood got new resources and the Foundation increased its knowledge about funding collaboration.

Increasingly foundations are investing in grassroots collaborations of diverse organizations to create systems of support in neighborhoods and communities or among people with special needs, such as cancer patients or undocumented guest workers. As more of these programs get underway, funders and agencies alike are learning that collaboration is a process as much as an outcome.

In fact, collaboration is an umbrella concept that includes a wide range of jointly realized outcomes. Imagine a continuum

that begins with simple goals like communicating with prospective partners about one's mission or available services. The next step may be relationship building, so that abstract "competition" becomes "someone I know personally." At some point, partners may agree to coordinate some efforts, sharing the expense of bringing a speaker, eliminating the date conflict between their major fundraisers, or simply agreeing to meet periodically to network and see what opportunities arise. In these types of collaboration, the partnering organizations invested only time and made no change to their operations or their organizational structure.

A deeper type of collaboration occurs when organizations agree to invest resources as well as information. For example, when five public broadcasting networks agreed to do a joint pledge drive, each partner took on specific responsibilities for the fundraiser, thus reducing the overall cost to each. The resulting program, called "Taste of the South," featured each network's celebrity chef and offered a cookbook containing recipes from all five states. The investment of staff time and resources paid off handsomely as the program broke all records for pledge drives in its time slot for a first-time airing — and for the rerun as well. Collaborations like

these may be called joint ventures, strategic alliances or cooperatives. In exchange for an investment of dollars, in-kind resources or staff time, the partners hope to reduce costs, share risk, or otherwise generate a benefit without actually changing their organizational structure.

Sometimes collaborations result in a new structure or stand-alone organization. For example, the staff person in the first example in this article "belongs" to both organizations, in effect creating a shared "resource," a "human structure" that bridges organizational boundaries. Other examples include:

- Two arts organizations collaborate to create a performance space that both would own.
- Twelve aging services agencies create a jointly funded resource charged with marketing their services to managed care providers.
- Faced with the prospect of closing its doors, an AIDS service organization merges with a larger organization, to ensure that its volunteers, expertise and other social capital are preserved even if the organization goes away.

In cases like these, the collaboration requires a financial investment or otherwise changes the ownership of some or all of the assets of some or all of the partners in the collaboration.

Once such collaboration is complete, the new organization has its own identity and its collaborative roots tend to be forgotten. United Way is just one example of a one-time collaborative that is now a major institution.

Because there is such a wide range of options, prospective partners should spend time up front determining the collaborative outcome that fits their needs and goals. At the same time, all involved should recognize that the collaborative process develops over time, moving from beginning steps like communication and coordination to more complex arrangements as relationships solidify and strategy becomes clear.

Foundations that are seriously interested in supporting collaboration among grantees should be clear about their own role. Are you a dictator, coach or strictly hands-off? Or are you an equal partner in the collaboration? It's essential for a foundation to recognize and define its role from the outset — and then be careful not to overstep bounds.

Foundations also should recognize that partnering adds costs to every project. In the first example, the Foundation provided additional in-kind support in the form of technical assistance and coaching for the partners. A number of foundations have developed training and support programs for collaborative projects, which they offer free of charge over the web and in grantee conferences. At least one foundation is adding a line item to collaborative projects, to allow the grantees to engage the kinds of technical assistance they need.

The learning curve for funding collaboration can be very steep. Next time, we'll look at some of the lessons for foundations from this exciting change in the nonprofit world.

