

Defining Collaboration: Lessons for Foundations



By Janet Rechtman Part 2 of 2

Legend has it that when he was General Eisenhower, the soon-to-be President of the U.S. said, “We had to have a plan to take the beaches at Normandy. Once we landed, everything had changed and so we threw the plan away and started over.”

So it is with non-profit and community based collaborations. Armed with a plan called a grant proposal, non-profits have invaded this new land called Collaboration. And, like Ike, they have discovered reality changes everything. Thanks in part to these all these changes, new knowledge about collaboration has begun to emerge. Here are some insights from the cutting edge of this dynamic field.

What does it take to succeed?

Reviewing more than eighty studies of a wide range of collaborations, a team of scholars found that certain conditions must be present to promote effective collaboration and build sustainable community change — something they called collaborative capacity. When collaborative capacity is present, individual organizations (the partners) see the collaboration as a way to enhance mission effectiveness (in contrast to a way to get more funds). The people who represent these partners see the collaboration as an opportunity to cultivate internal and external relationships that are important to the collaboration as well as to their own organizations. Rather than duplicating services, the collaboration unambiguously extends, complements or supplements the work of the member organizations. And finally, the collaboration has a clearly defined route to sustainability, so that it can work continuously to improve the quality and scope of the programs it offers.

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Lesson for Foundations: *When evaluating grant-making opportunities, ask for evidence of collaborative capacity. As a prelude to investing in programs and services, consider supporting technical assistance to help a particularly attractive partnership develop collaborative capacity.*

How do we know we're making progress?

Dr. Jennifer Brinkerhoff, who received the Independent Sector's 2002 Virginia A. Hodgkinson Research Prize, identified several signs of progress in developing collaborations.

- The partners agree about the do's, don'ts, and success factors for their working relationship and they walk the talk of these agreements.
- The partners “act” like partners. They keep commitments to each other and work as a team on the issues they have chosen to address.
- The partners have defined the expected outcomes of their relationship and these outcomes make sense for the partner organizations as individuals as well as for the collaboration.

These signs indicate progress on the process side of collaboration. At the same time, they are necessary steps to achieving program and service outcomes.

Lesson for Foundations: *Allowing time and resources for partners to address process questions like these in the early stages of development increases the likelihood of a successful collaboration.*

What kind of help does collaboration need?

In a now-classic work, sociologist Bruce W. Tuckman defined the stages of team development as: testing-dependence (form), conflict (storm), cohesion (norm), and

functional roles (perform). Facilitative leadership is critical in the form and storm stages of developing collaborations. This facilitation creates a holding environment in which members of the group can learn about each other as individuals and as a team. Within this environment, participants disclose concerns, shape ideas and surface (and sometimes resolve) conflicts while deferring the engagement of personal or organizational resources until the collaboration is more firmly defined. As the collaboration progresses, parties to the collaboration take on more responsibility, capable leaders who are members of the group and who have a long term commitment to the collaboration emerge and replace the neutral facilitator. At this time, the collaboration takes on a life of its own.

Lesson for Foundations: *Ensure that developing collaborations have access to neutral facilitation during the form and storm stages by engaging a professional facilitator or by coaching the partners on the skills of facilitative leadership.*

This is just some of the knowledge that is emerging as foundations, non-profits, educators and communities explore the brave new world of collaboration.

References:

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“It’s a little late in the day to argue that foundations should simply grant themselves away, when many of the people who created these organizations stipulated in their wills that the foundations that carry their names exist in perpetuity and charge the governing boards with making sure that they do.

“There is also the argument that a dollar spent today is worth more than a dollar spent tomorrow. Mrs. duPont left a corpus of \$42 million when she died in 1970. That corpus is worth \$250 million today, and the Fund has given away \$210 million since 1977 — five times what she left to the foundation. I trust that the organizations that continue to receive these dollars appreciate the fact that Mrs. duPont created a perpetual foundation, and that the trustees of her estate have invested the Fund’s money wisely.”

“At the end of the day,” Magill concludes, “the current debate omits all discussion of donor intent and direction, suggests that all administrative expense narrowly supports internal operations and thus cannot be justified, and misses the glaring, obvious evidence that increasing private foundation giving — whether we do it directly by mandating an increased payout rate or indirectly by disallowing administrative expense — will not replace the loss of public dollars for support of nonprofits who serve vulnerable populations.

For more information or updates about H.R. 7 and the debate about disallowing private foundation administrative expenses as part of required payouts, visit the Members Only section of the SECF website, www.secf.org/membersonly.asp, or the Government Relations section of the Council on Foundations website, www.cof.org.