Promoting Coordination, Cooperative Agreements, and Collaborative Agreements Among Agencies

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO WORK TOGETHER?

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be strong enough to pick up a car? You probably think that job is best left to superheroes. Well, let's think again. What if you had 20 or 30 people all picking up the car together? Isn't that a little more in the realm of possibility? Try it out sometime for fun and see what happens. You may be surprised to find out that you and your friends can do it.

And while you're thinking about what is possible with a group of 20 or 30 people, let's take it a step further - what if you multiplied that number by two or three? In other words, what if you had several groups working together to solve difficult problems? They might be able to lift a small truck!

Let's face it - solving problems in communities can seem daunting at times. Problems with education, jobs, housing, the environment, and crime are complex and interwoven. How does just one individual or one group make a dent in solving these broad problems?

There is real strength in numbers. *When you have many groups with different views, resources, and skills applying their intelligence and strength to solve a problem together, the results can be like the work of superheroes.*

This section is about *organizations working together to accomplish goals*. By networking, coordinating, cooperating, and collaborating, organizations working together can accomplish goals they couldn't reach working in isolation.

Groups of people can work together to accomplish amazing tasks. They can figure out ways to garner the necessary skills, funds, and time to solve community problems and improve human services. What you need are people who are well-organized, cooperative, and determined.

And as we work together, we are not only accomplishing our goals, such as making health care more accessible or creating more jobs for youth; we are also learning how to bring the local decision-making process into the hands of community members. We are getting better at making democracy work. And that's no small potatoes.

What could your organization accomplish by working together with others?

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT WAYS THAT ORGANIZATIONS CAN WORK TOGETHER?

There is a whole range of working relationships that organizations can have with one another. Some organizations will establish relationships just to share information. Others will pool resources in order to accomplish common goals, and others might do anything in between.

So first, let's describe some of the possibilities. Then we'll discuss how you might choose among them.

NETWORKING

Organizations have a networking relationship when they exchange information in order to help each organization do a better job. For example, if a school and a community counseling center share information about their counseling services for youth, that is a form of networking. Or, if a number of grassroots community organizations in a small town share their yearly calendars of public events, that will help those organizations foresee and forestall any scheduling conflicts. Networking requires the least amount of commitment and time from organizations and can in itself have significant positive results.

Networking can also be a good starting point for people to work together in other ways. In one small town, a group of grant writers from different non-profits began meeting on a monthly basis to network with each other. The members of the group found the meetings informative and supportive. After meeting for more than a year, the group began to work on projects together that benefited each organization and the whole town.

Organizations can network in a number of ways. They can meet together for lunch, share newsletters, participate in e-mail networks, or meet at seminars and conferences.

COORDINATION

Organizations have a coordinating relationship when they modify their activities so that together, they provide better services to their constituents. If a school and community counseling center modify their services so there are more counselors available to youth during the hours services are needed, that is coordination. Another example of coordination is if organizations not only shared their calendars of major public events, but also changed the dates of some events, so there would not be major conflicts. In both cases, coordination helps fill in the gaps and also helps prevent service duplication.

Coordination is important because it gives people a better chance to get the services they need. It can be highly exasperating for someone to deal with institutions that don't coordinate their efforts. For example, if a four-year college does not coordinate its class sequences to facilitate an easy transition for incoming students completing a two-year community college program, then those students may have to wait a term or even a year to begin their new required classes. Or if a person who qualifies for health care benefits has to go through a screening process at several different health centers before she can access her benefits, that is an unnecessary barrier.

A coordinating relationship requires more organizational involvement, time, and trust than a networking relationship. However, the results can significantly improve people's lives.

COOPERATION

When organizations cooperate, they not only share information and make adjustments in their services - they share resources to help each other do a better job. In a cooperative relationship, organizations may share staff, volunteers, expertise, space, funds, and other resources. For example, if the school and the community counseling center share physical space for evening services in order to better meet the needs of neighborhood youth, they are in a cooperative relationship. Another example would be if community organizations in a town shared staff time to put out a yearly calendar of major events for the whole community.

Cooperating requires more trust and a greater investment in time than either networking or coordination. In order to enter into a cooperative relationship, organizations also have to let go of some turf issues. Organizations have to be willing to share the ownership and the responsibility, to risk some hassles, and to reap the rewards of their efforts together.

COLLABORATION

In a collaborative relationship, organizations help each other *expand* or *enhance their capacities* to do their jobs. For example, a school and community counseling center may jointly apply for a grant to train the staff of both organizations. In another example, several grassroots organizations in a town may co-sponsor a large public event, in an effort to expand the memberships of all the organizations involved.

As Arthur Himmelman says, "Collaboration is a relationship in which each organization wants to help its partners become the best that they can be." In collaborative relationships, people begin to see each other as partners rather than competitors. This shift in view is profound in a society that has had so much emphasis on individualism.

Himmelman goes on to say that when organizations collaborate they have to, "share risks, responsibilities, and rewards." In sharing risks, each organization is, to some extent, throwing its lot in with another organization. For example, when the school and community counseling center jointly apply for a training, they are both risking their time and credibility in an effort to raise money to improve the capacity of each organization.

In a collaborative relationship, each organization must also carry its share of the responsibilities. Just like in the "Little Red Hen," if one group "plants the wheat, harvests it, takes it to the mill, and bakes it," then that one group will also "eat the bread" by itself. On the other hand, if everyone does the work all the way through, "everyone can eat the bread together."

Additionally, all the organizations can and should share the credit and recognition. For example, if a news reporter comes to the Winter Hill Community Corporation to do a story on the highly successful affordable housing program it is sponsoring, then Winter Hill's representative should tell the reporter all about the three other organizations collaborating in the effort and give them appropriate credit.

Collaboration is a much bigger enterprise than networking, coordinating, and cooperating; but the potential for change can also be greater. It implies a much higher level of trust, risk taking, sharing of turf, and commitment. Collaboration can give people hope, because it demonstrates that people from different groups can overcome their mistrust and other obstacles to accomplish larger goals together.

MULTISECTOR COLLABORATION

Multisector collaboration is similar to the collaborations described above, but it has an even greater potential for change as well as greater challenges. In multisector collaboration, private, public, and nonprofit organizations from different parts of the community and sometimes ordinary citizens, form a partnership to solve systemic problems in a community, such as a failing educational or health care system, a poor business climate, or an unskilled workforce.

Complex and intertwined problems like these require cooperation throughout a community in order to make positive changes. No one organization or even one sector can make significant movement without the help and cooperation of the other sectors. Often multisector collaboration occurs when organizations or sectors have tried to solve problems by themselves, and have failed.

An example of multisector collaboration is when community organizations join forces with government, schools, and businesses to solve a number of connected problems, such as a lack of jobs for youth, youth crime, a climbing high school drop-out rate, and a lack of a skilled labor force. The different groups will come together to define the problem and then plan and implement a strategy to prepare young people to become skilled workers. In this case, businesses' needs for a skilled workforce are similar to and linked with the needs of community activists, and with the goals of educational institutions.

Multisector collaboration is markedly more complex and challenging than the other organizational relationships. It requires that all the parties involved put aside the narrow interests of their own organizations or sectors and give priority to the broader common good of the larger community. Everyone involved must come to the recognition that only when the larger community solves its key problems will each organization have a better chance at getting its needs met.

Multisector collaboration is a long-term enterprise in which the rewards are great, but so is the investment of time and resources. It requires a high level of trust, a compelling need, and the will to make a change. Often, developing trust and a commitment to the broader common good takes a period of months, or even a year or two, depending on the scope of the project and the initial level of trust.

Multisector collaboration has the greatest potential for communities to become empowered and more democratic. In multisector collaboration, community members can become equal players with business and government in making decisions that affect community members and their human service needs.

Now that you know what the different organizational relationships are, how do you decide which is the best for your community, group, or organization?

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE AMONG RELATIONSHIPS?

Networking, coordinating, cooperating, collaboration, and multisector collaboration are all very different relationships that accomplish different goals and require different levels of human resources, trust, skills, time, and financial resources.

It is important to be clear about the different kinds of organizational relationships that are possible before you enter into one. You want to choose an organizational arrangement that will accomplish the goals you set out for. You also want to work out an arrangement that is feasible. For example, a few organizations may have the goal of improving conditions for youth in the community. Those organizations may be in a good position to cooperate to sponsor a neighborhood youth celebration together, but may not have the commitment and resources to collaborate on a youth job development program.

You can always build organizational relationships, one step at a time. You can begin working together in ways that are less formal and require less commitment. If the results are positive, then the different groups may have built up some trust that will help you take on a greater challenge.

With each step you take in building organizational relationships, you lay the foundation for the next step. To accomplish your goals and avoid big messes, it's best to choose relationships that are a good fit.

As you go through the process of choosing an appropriate organizational relationship, consider these factors:

- What does each organization want to accomplish by working together?
- Which kind of organizational relationship is necessary to accomplish those goals?
- Are there resources available for this kind of organizational relationship, such as time, skills, financial resources, community support, commitment, and human resources? If not, can those resources be accessed?
- Is there sufficient trust and commitment to support this kind of relationship?

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES THAT ORGANIZATIONS CONFRONT WHEN THEY ARE WORKING TOGETHER?

When groups work together, the potential benefits are great, but it is not always easy. Like a friendship, the more commitment there is, the greater the rewards, but also the greater the difficulties. In addition, there are factors in our society that discourage groups from working together cooperatively. Here are some of the challenges that you may confront when establishing and building organizational relationships. Can you think of how you might surmount them?

PEOPLE SOMETIMES BELIEVE THAT INDIVIDUAL EFFORT IS MORE BENEFICIAL THAN COOPERATION

We live in a individualistic culture. People often don't have a vision of what can be gained from working with others. And many people think they can do better if they fight their battles alone - or that it's just not worth the effort to cooperate. So it's difficult to put aside short-term personal goals, in favor of long-term broader goals of a community. Overcoming this belief is helpful and sometimes necessary in order for people and organizations to form a successful working relationship.

PEOPLE ARE OFTEN MISTRUSTFUL

People are afraid to work with others because they are not sure others have their best interests in mind. It takes time to establish confidence that everyone will act honestly and responsibly toward each other. It also takes time to trust that each group will be mindful of each other's interests. Building trust is a natural process that can't be rushed too quickly. Only when trust is strong can it bear the weight of bigger and riskier projects.

PEOPLE SOMETIMES DON'T HAVE THE NECESSARY COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR WORKING TOGETHER

People working together need communication, listening, and negotiation skills. Let's face it: Communication is difficult enough between two people. Among a group of people, it is even more complex. And when you have more than one group trying to communicate, the possibilities for misunderstandings multiply. People need to learn to become skillful and disciplined communicators in order carry out the often complex and delicate exchanges that must take place to accomplish goals.

RACISM AND OTHER FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION KEEP PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS ISOLATED FROM EACH OTHER

Groups are often mistrustful of each other because of racism, classism, and other forms of prejudice or lack of understanding that are a part of our larger society. When alliances among different groups are established, people can almost always see that they have more in common than they previously imagined, and that there is much to be gained by working together.

Still, mistrust and misunderstandings need to be addressed throughout the life of a relationship in which different groups have historical societal divisions. People in these organizational relationships will need to commit themselves

to learning about the cultures and histories of their working partners, as well as to understanding how their partners have been mistreated by the society as a whole. Also, differences in communication styles, expectations, and cultural values will need to be understood in order for people to successfully communicate and accomplish their goals.

A LACK OF STRONG LEADERSHIP CAN HINDER THE FORMATION AND CONTINUATION OF SUCCESSFUL GROUP INTERRELATIONSHIPS

Without strong leaders to navigate the challenging waters of working together, organizational relationships can flounder. Organizations need strong leaders with vision, commitment, and the ability to win others over to a forward-moving program. Leaders will also have to be able to weather the mistrust, setbacks, attacks, and other problems that arise in these relationships.

PEOPLE MAY INTERNALIZE A SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS THAT MAKES THEM UNABLE TO TAKE INITIATIVE TO FORM WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Many people have had experiences that leave them feeling discouraged, hopeless, and powerless to move larger forces that affect their lives and their communities. Getting people to act, take initiative, and participate is often a necessary step in getting different groups to work together.

Encouraging everyone to be a part of the process is essential. It is also important to get people to contribute their thinking and voice their opinions to help people overcome that sense of powerlessness.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC FUNDERS SOMETIMES REQUIRE ORGANIZATIONS TO COLLABORATE IN ORDER TO RECEIVE FUNDS

Many funders like collaboration, for the very same reasons we do. But as in all relationships, organizations need to develop relationships on their own terms, not in response to the outside funding pressure. Each organization involved has to have the desire and the ability to establish a working relationship in order for it to succeed. These relationships have to develop at their own pace, not according to the timeline of a funder.

Organizations should work with funders to help them understand their need to build relationships their own way. If an organization feels that it must go along with the funder's requirement, it should work honestly with the partner organization to face the problem together and establish a relationship that makes sense and is likely to succeed.

HOW DO GROUPS BEGIN TO BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH EACH OTHER?

Where do you begin in building organizational relationships? Here are some general ideas of how to get started. These are basic guidelines that may be helpful and sometimes necessary to begin any such relationship.

INVOLVE THE STAKEHOLDERS

Make sure that everyone who is affected is involved in the process, directly or indirectly. Who is that? It includes all the stakeholders (that is, everyone who has a stake in the outcome), including leaders of the organizations, staff who will implement the programs, constituent groups of the organizations, people who will be involved in the programs, the larger community, and people who may be affected indirectly.

Why should you involve all these groups? Because if you want your effort to succeed, you will need the cooperation and, better yet, the help of those who can benefit from a good outcome. The level of involvement among the different groups will vary. Some people will come to every meeting, while some people may only fill out one survey, and everything in between. The important thing is to make sure that people know they have a real say in a project that will affect their lives.

For example, if you are going to have a few organizations work together to expand the counseling hours of a teen counseling center, you will want to get input from counselors, teens themselves, parents and teachers, neighbors who live around the center, and any one else who could potentially help or hinder your program. If you do so, the teen center will run more effectively.

ESTABLISH ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONSHIPS, AND BEGIN TO BUILD TRUST

It may seem obvious, but an organizational relationship is built on many one-to -one relationships between members of each organization. People who will be working together and taking risks together will need to get to know each other and establish trusting relationships.

This can begin in a variety of ways. For example, a person or two from each organization might get together for lunch. Or a few people from each organization can meet for informal discussions, retreats, social events, or other informal gatherings. Often a skilled facilitator can help by conducting exercises or leading discussions.

Whatever method you use, make sure to:

- Take it slow. Trusting relationships take a while to develop. Don't give into feelings of urgency or having to "get things done quick." Establishing trusting relationships is the most important preliminary step; it will provide a foundation for all other actions.
- Make sure that, at some point early in the process, each person involved gets time to talk about himself, his organization, his stake in the issue and community, his interest in the partnership, and his concerns about the relationship.
- Establish guidelines that people will be honest with each other, respect confidentiality (when decided upon), and be responsible to the group.
- Establish a tone of cooperation. Help people understand that they might be able to advance each other's goals.
- Build communication skills. As people get to know each other, help them learn to communicate in ways that are most productive. Again, a facilitator can help here.

Once people have gotten to know each other, trust should to continue to build. And as people work together successfully, trust will grow naturally. Throughout the relationship, you should be aware of the trust level of the group. If something happens that endangers trust, make sure action is taken to repair the trust and keep it growing. Other suggestions in this list also will contribute to building trust in an organizational relationship.

CLARIFY THE GOALS EACH ORGANIZATION WANTS TO ACCOMPLISH

Each organization should clarify its need for a relationship, its definition of the problem, and how it thinks an organizational relationship could help. The time necessary for this process will vary, depending on how many organizations are involved and the scope of the problem. If a few organizations are meeting to network, this process won't take much time. If, on the other hand, this is a multisector collaboration in which people haven't yet defined the problem, this process will take a while, and that should be built into the plan.

DECIDE ON AN ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIP THAT MAKES SENSE

Once needs, goals, and resources have been clarified, choose the kind of relationship that makes sense. For example, is it better for us just to network at this time? Or, are we ready to cooperate or collaborate more actively?

ESTABLISH PROCEDURAL GROUND RULES

Early on in the relationship, establish ground rules for important procedures, such as:

- How decisions will be made

- Who will speak to the media
- What should be considered confidential
- How information will be distributed
- The role of representatives
- Any other important procedural guidelines

Ironing out these policies early will prevent mistakes and misunderstandings. It is especially important to avoid any decision-making that goes on in unscheduled sessions at which all partners are not included.

LEARN HOW TO LISTEN

It can't be said enough: learn how to listen. Group process is at the core of making organizational relationships work well. So many decisions must be made in a group and so much information needs to be exchanged. And in order for people to begin to see each other as partners, they need to tell each other what is important to them -- their values, their experiences, and their ideas - *and* they need to know they are *heard*.

Each person involved needs to be able put aside his or her own concerns long enough to listen to others. All this sounds so simple, but it can be difficult, especially when the risks are high and everyone has emotions related to the outcomes. Still, it is important that the group develops listening skills - and you can lead group exercises that will help people learn how to listen well.

For example, give everyone a turn to speak for a few minutes without being interrupted. Or break into pairs and have each person take a turn to talk for five minutes while the other person listens. These simple exercises can let everyone have a chance to think without being interrupted. It can clear people's minds so they are more able to listen to someone else.

BUILD ON POINTS OF AGREEMENT

Don't require people to agree on every point. There will be diversity of opinion, and that is good. Keep track of what people agree on and build on those ideas. If people can't agree on an entire program, work towards winning people over to a building -block agreement, in which they agree to smaller pieces of a program. Once part of the program succeeds, people might be more inclined to add more blocks to the structure.

LEARN ABOUT EACH OTHER'S CULTURES

As was mentioned above, it is important when organizations cross cultural lines, members learn about the culture and possible oppression of their organizational partners. Taking the time to do this will build trust and prevent problems and crises from taking place.

Cultural celebrations can help build understanding. Also, facilitators can lead discussions and exercises that will help people talk about their cultures and their experiences of oppression. These kinds of exchanges can help people from all perspectives heal from the hurts of oppression and discrimination. Also, most people sincerely want to learn about cultures other than their own.

When people go through this kind of exchange and healing process they usually have a stronger sense of unity. They also often feel more ownership in the organizational relationship and may be more ready to participate in it fully.

DON'T REQUIRE ORGANIZATIONS TO GIVE UP THEIR IDENTITIES

Each organization has its own unique identity and culture which hold its members together. Joining efforts with another organization may worry some members that their own organization's identity will be diminished. Leaders

should reassure members that the identity of their organization will stay intact and that joining efforts with another organization does not mean you have to blend into one.

EXPECT PROBLEMS AND DISAGREEMENTS - AND HAVE PATIENCE

You will have setbacks, and upsets, and disagreements. That is part of the process, and you should not become discouraged when this happens. Make time to listen to people voice their concerns and try to resolve the problem. Then, minimize the divisions, focus on what has been accomplished, and set out again to reach your next goal.

CELEBRATE EVERY SUCCESS, LARGE AND SMALL

We all need some fun and connection with others to help us keep our eyes on the prize. Celebrating helps people maintain their excitement, recognize the progress being made, and focus on the next step. Whether it's a pizza at the end of a meeting or a gala ball, don't forget to celebrate. All work and no play make a dull organization.

IN SUMMARY

There is power in numbers - not just numbers of people, but in numbers of organizations too. Many nonprofit organizations whose goals are to improve the lives of community members can learn how to be more effective by teaming up with other organizations.

In many regions of the country, in both urban and rural settings, groups are overcoming their isolation and their cultural and political differences in order to solve problems and improve conditions for people. People are learning how to cooperate, pool resources, time, and create relationships that can help them do what they do better.

As organizations become better at working together, we are creating a new culture. It is a culture in which we are learning how to include many people, and many groups, in making decisions about our lives and about our communities. We are making democracy work in a new way. As we get better at working together, we will develop a clearer and greater vision of what we can actually accomplish. If we figure out how to work together cooperatively, there are really no limits to what we can do.

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