

A Suggested Model for Multi Organization Collaborations By Norman Olshansky, Co-Editor and Contributing Author: “You and Your Nonprofit”: Published by CharityChannel Press

Background:

For many years, funders of charitable organizations have encouraged nonprofits to address more of their time and resources towards:

- A. Articulation and implementation of a clear vision and business plan
- B. Capacity Building
- C. Achieving a better return on investment on their charitable dollars
- D. More focus on long term sustainability
- E. Avoidance of unnecessary duplication with what is offered by other similar nonprofits
- F. Collaboration with other organizations wherever possible
- G. Increase Board/Staff Leadership development

Given today’s grim economic environment, poor investment performance and limited resources, funders are even more focused on ways to maximize the impact of their limited resources.

Nonprofits have already been impacted by the declining economy and know that the conditions are likely to get worse before they get better. They are looking for ways to address flat or declining campaigns, the need to cut costs, increase efficiencies and find new ways to address total financial resource development.

The current environment can be used as a catalyst for funders and nonprofits to work together to address their mutual interests. The following are a few examples of areas of potential collaboration.

Facilities Management
Accounting, Bookkeeping and Auditing
Investing and money management
Fundraising - especially for capital and endowment
Staff and Leadership Development
Purchasing
Energy
Fuel/Transportation
Insurance
Marketing and Public Relations
Human Resources, and staff Recruitment
Safety, Security and Risk Management
Information systems and Technology

Many attempts to bring nonprofits together on collaborative initiatives have failed due to initial lack of trust between and among participants and a feeling that participation could result in a loss of control over their own destinies.

How collaboration is developed is the key to success.

Implementation Process

I recommend the following steps and suggest you engage a consultant/facilitator/project manager to direct the process. (Hereafter identified as “professional”)

The initial introductory process becomes critical to the creation of collaborative ventures.

There needs to be a funding organization or group of funding organizations which agrees to be the initiator of the process and take on this project. They need to be a significant player in the community and be respected by the organizations which will eventually be involved. The funding organization(s) provide initial seed money to retain a professional who will be the point person to work with participants. They provide the umbrella of legitimacy, seriousness and importance to the venture. They oversee the work of the professional.

A “professional” needs to be engaged who has experience working on collaborative ventures with nonprofits and is seen by potential participating organizations as highly professional, empathetic to their needs and impartial.

Initially, a group of organizations, which have shared characteristics, should be identified by the facilitating organization with input from the “professional”. Those similarities could be mission, size, location, relationship to facilitating group(s) and/or type of service provided.

The first group could be seen as a pilot or test group which, if successful, could expand at a future date.

The facilitating organization(s) must be willing to step back and let participants determine if and how they want to proceed.

The “professional” initially meets with recommended organizational Executives individually, to float the general idea that the facilitating organization(s) have proposed to encourage collaboration. Examples of what has been done in other communities is shared and a request is made for potential participants to attend an initial meeting with other agency execs to determine if such an effort makes sense and the best focus area(s) for such a collaboration. It is important that the top professional executive of each organization be the initial contact and participate in the collaborative process with his/her peers from the other organizations. During the initial private meeting, the “professional” answers basic questions about the process and assures the agency director that there will be no requests for commitments from agencies until or unless a plan has been developed by the group that has the approval of each of the participants and their leadership.

An initial group meeting of the organization Executives, who are willing to explore the idea, is convened by the facilitating organization(s) and led by the “professional” with no hidden agendas. Care must be taken that no one organization take over the process or become the “gorilla in the room”.

Patience and time is required to make sure that all questions, concerns and details are addressed and processed with each of the Executives and that they are given the time to review the ideas proposed with their own leadership.

Anything that is proposed must pass the test that it will benefit all participants, will be implemented in a fair manner, that all parties will have a say in the project and that there will be a large enough return on investment on time and resources to warrant going forward.

It is critical that whatever is agreed upon also include the need for all of the participating organizations to have “skin in the game”, including financial and human resources commensurate with their size and abilities.

Ultimately, whatever is agreed to must be formalized in memorandum of understandings between the facilitating organization(s), participating organizations and each other. These agreements will need to be approved by each of the participant boards.

The initial collaboration should be one that is not too complex/complicated and has a high degree of potential for success. Once organizations have participated in a successful collaboration they are more willing to consider ventures that may contain more risk but which also can provide greater reward.

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