PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

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Everybody is partnering these days, it seems. Partnerships and collaborations of various types have become a central strategy for promoting community change. Funders require it, nonprofits see it as a potentially useful response to their problems of declining resources and increasing complexity (including multicultural complexities), communities demand it as evidence that the community is coming together to address problems of mutual interest in vital ways.

Thus, nonprofit organizations of all types frequently engage in partnerships with other organizations in their communities - to leverage resources, increase impact, and build their overall capacity to deliver services or otherwise respond to community needs. Funders increasingly require evidence that the projects they fund have created partnerships to support them. Training and technical assistance on partnerships are offered by nonprofit associations, university management training programs, and management assistance organizations. Numerous journal articles and book chapters on this subject have appeared in the nonprofit management literature over the last five years. Partnering is an idea whose time has come.

Briefly defined, partnerships (often also called "collaborations") bring together two or more agencies, groups or organizations at the local, state or national level to achieve some common purpose. Partnerships involve the sharing of goals, activities, responsibilities and resources. The relationship can be temporary or permanent, informal or structured through contracts or other legal agreements, and can be very limited or quite broad in scope.

But too often, partnerships fail to have as much impact as was hoped for. Many partnerships get created without first conducting an appropriate *assessment* - asking the question: is a partnership the right step at this time, in this community, to address this particular problem? Moreover, few partnerships are created with appropriate attention to the *behavioral and management science* that has accumulated over the last few years - both about how to create partnerships or collaborations and about how to sustain them over time. As a result, even when partnership is the right step to take, it isn't realized well, so it doesn't work or doesn't last.

The dysfunction and mortality rates among community partnerships is high, not unlike the high divorce rate in American society. And funders, communities and nonprofits developing partnerships would do well to take heed of the old French proverb, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure"! What we suggest here are some basics strategies of "premarital and marriage counseling" for partnerships, which if done well have great potential to benefit the communities in which they operate.

Importance of Partnerships

Partnerships involving a mix of nonprofits, communities and funders (both government and foundation) serve at least four major purposes:

1. *Leverage* - partnerships are a way of extending scarce resources used for the public good

2. *Capacity-building* - partnerships offer opportunities for the partners to learn from each other

3. *Community-building* - partnerships provide a way to bring communities together, both to discuss critical issues and to build an agenda for change

4. *Grantmaking* - increasingly, evidence of partnership is a requirement of foundations and government agencies that fund nonprofits; this is intended to show appropriate community involvement and strategic use of limited resources.

Science on Partnership Strategies

Partnerships have always existed informally in communities, and those which spring from the grassroots are often referred to as "coalitions," for which there is a separate but highly related literature (Kass & Freudenberg, 1997; LaBonte, 1997; Wandersman, Goodman & Butterfoss, 1997). Community partnerships have been especially prominent in the public health arena (Butterfoss, Goodman & Wandersman, 1993). For example, in the substance abuse prevention field, more than 250 partnerships, each with multiple public and private groups involved, have been supported by the Federal government through the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has for almost ten years funded the "Fighting Back" coalitions in 14 cities. RWJ also supports "Join Together," a national coordinating center for community substance abuse prevention which provides technical assistance to coalitions, as does the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) nonprofit organization.

As already mentioned, many partnerships are not successful, or at least are not sustained over time. The reasons for this are numerous, according to research on this topic (Kreuter & Lezin, 1998; Kreuter, 1998; Backer & Norman, 1998; AHEC/Community Partners, 1995). Turf and competition issues often arise, and there is often "bad history" in the community from past partnerships that have failed. Sometimes the partnership becomes more interested in sustaining itself than in doing the work it was originally created to do. And many such groups have endless planning meetings that don't lead to action.

There is, as a result, some skepticism about the current fervor for partnerships, both in the literature on this subject and among those involved in such activities in communities. Former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders put it humorously, but pointedly, in an address to the Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Symposium several years ago: "Collaboration has been defined as an unnatural act between non-consenting adults. We all say we want to collaborate, but what we really mean is that we want to continue doing things as we have always done them while others change to fit what we are doing."

There is both organized practice and some science on this subject, but it is little used to guide the creation and sustaining of partnerships. Strategies for creating and sustaining community partnerships have been studied in education (Kochar & Erickson, 1993; Tushnet, 1993; Knight, 1996), mental health (Center for Improving Mental Health Systems, 1995), health communication (Backer & Rogers, 1993), and other fields (AHEC/Community Partners, 1995; Schneider, 1994; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992).

Backer & Rogers (1993) draw attention to the management science literatures of interorganizational networking and strategic alliances (Gage & Mandell, 1990; Tichy, 1984), where considerable empirical research has identified principles for beginning and sustaining partnership-like arrangements. In the business world, major conferences and management magazine articles on strategic alliances are commonplace. This literature has seldom been used in the creation of nonprofit partnerships, however, even though the two types of activity appear to have much in common.

Mattessich & Monsey (1992) reviewed the research literature on collaboration in health, social science, education and public affairs. They identified a total of 19 factors from 133 studies examined. These 19 factors provide a first synthesis of critical factors in successful partnership:

Environmental Characteristics
- history of collaboration or cooperation in the community
- partnership entity seen as a leader in the community
- political/social climate is favorable

Membership Characteristics
- mutual respect, understanding and trust among the members
- appropriate cross-section of members
- members see collaboration as in their self-interest
- ability to compromise

Process/Structure Characteristics
- members share a stake in both process and outcome
- multiple layers of decision-making
- flexibility
- clear roles and policy guidlines are developed
- adaptability

Communication Characteristics
- open and frequent communication
- established informal and formal communication links

Purpose Characteristics
- concrete, attainable goals and objectives
- shared vision
- unique purpose

Resource Characteristics
- sufficient funds
- a skilled convenor

Some research now is being conducted on the training and resource infrastructure supporting partnership development. For instance, under funding support from the Stuart Foundation, Floyd Brown of the University of Washington is surveying California and Washington community

partnerships, to determine what kinds of training and technical assistance they have received, and how successful these interventions have been (Brown, 1998).

Funders are beginning to explore both the strengths and limits of partnerships, with recent essays in the philanthropic literature. For example, Kitzi (1997), in a *Foundation News and Commentary* article on partnerships, reflects that most foundations find it easier to require partnerships among their grantees than to create them within philanthropy! The McKnight Foundation (1991) offered the following well-balanced commentary on partnerships for an initiative to help families in poverty: "Collaboration results in easier, faster and more coherent access to services and benefits and in greater effects on systems. Working together is not a substitute for adequate funding, although the synergistic effects of the collaborating partners often result in creative ways to overcome obstacles."

In the health arena, partnerships are also the focus of considerable attention. At a February 1998 Grantmakers in Health conference, Kellogg Foundation CEO William Richardson said: "a central function of any partnership" must be to "give tools for decision making ... and influencing ... [to] local people." In a critical review of the literature, Kreuter & Lezin (1998) conclude that partnerships can be effective in changing health status and health systems, but only under certain tightly-specified conditions. They cite six programs in which such health systems change occurred.

Schacht (1998), in a study for The California Wellness Foundation, evaluated grants made to community partnerships of county health clinics which, in turn, gave grants to individual clinics and supported association-wide infrastructure development. Using these partnerships as intermediaries for a grantmaking program generally seemed to be successful. In two cases, the grantmaking actually helped develop a partnership in a County that didn't have one before (and there were significant challenges in getting the 60 health clinics in Los Angeles County to come together for this purpose!). The evaluation found that stronger infrastructure boosts clinic productivity, so there were direct health outcomes from this program as well.

Bibeau et al (1996) found that a community coalition was instrumental in increasing the ability of a local clinic to provide health services to the poor. Florin, Mitchell & Stevenson (1993) report a methodology for measuring the training and technical assistance needs of community-based partnerships. Gillies (1997), Francisco, Paine & Fawcett (1993) and Fawcett et al (forthcoming) present methods for monitoring and evaluating health partnerships. Partnership strategies, their impact, and ways of measuring that impact also have been discussed in the healthy communities movement (Minkler, 1997).

Multicultural Coalitions

In a recent study for The California Endowment, Backer & Norman (1998) examined 28 successful and five defunct multicultural coalitions in California. All of these coalitions were intended to bring together several racial/ethnic groups - most often African Americans, Latinos and Whites - in a community to address one or more urgent issues.

Results from this study showed that the multicultural coalitions or partnerships - oriented to such goals as economic development, response to community crisis (such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots),

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and improving children's health services - were more likely to be successful if they were created with attention to "creating stakeholders" among all participants, good strategic planning, and efforts to deal up front with intergroup conflict. Many of these coalitions also had to deal with cultural stereotypes in their own ranks; the long-term successful partnerships reflected attention to issues of sustainability (e.g., how to survive departure of a founder) in the earliest planning stages.

In all, 13 factors were revealed by this study that helped account for the sustained success of the coalitions studied:

1 - efforts by coalition leadership to plan ahead about how to sustain themselves over time

2- creation of a process for setting and communicating clear objectives for the coalition, to which the major membership groups of the coalition all subscribe

3 - early implementation of strategies for conflict resolution within the coalition and its leadership - assuming that conflict is an inevitable and normal part of a coalition's development

4 - implementation of strategies for handling cultural stereotypes within the coalition's own leadership, either through an internal process or the use of an outside consultant

5 - development of a sophisticated understanding of the process of change by the coalition's leaders

6 - especially in the early stages of a coalition, the use of volunteer structures which make it less likely that existing community nonprofits will feel threatened by the coalition "stealing their business"

7 - having a lead agency which encourages funding and may serve as a fiscal agent, and which supports systematic efforts to develop the coalition's capacity

8 - development of a written strategic plan for coalition operations

9 - orientation by coalition leadership to a basic vision, rather than just to an exchange of opportunities among groups

10- when appropriate in the coalition's life cycle, evolution of greater formality, especially if the coalition elects to implement programs rather than to identify/frame issues and build community in a more general sense

11 - acknowledgement of poverty as a central issue underlying the problems the coalition takes on

12 - effective use of ties the coalition has to related regional and national organizations

13 - efforts to build "social capital" in the community through the coalition's activities

Some of the important challenges multicultural coalitions in California have had to overcome (and which were not overcome by the defunct coalitions examined in this study) are:

* distrust of the coalition process itself within community groups

* "bad history" from previous coalitions in the same community (though this did not seem to be a major problem for the sustained coalitions studied)

* becoming more concerned with perpetuation of the coalition rather than with the issues it was formed to address

* being the product of a top-down rather than bottom-up creation

* difficulties in recruiting staff able to work in the complex environment of a coalition

Frequently the success of partnerships comes from their ability to empower disenfranchised groups in the community, and to deal positively with issues of cultural diversity (Kavanaugh, 1995; Backer & Norman, 1998; Yu & Chang, 1993; Norman, 1993, 1996; Regalado, 1996). Cultural differences in African American, Latino, Asian, American Indian and White groups or communities must be taken into account both in planning for and structuring the partnership, and in its ongoing operation.

Recommendations for Communities, Funders and Nonprofits

The Human Interaction Research Institute has been exploring the role of partnerships in community change for more than 10 years, including a current project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This project is testing a model for capacity-building technical assistance to nonprofit organizations wishing to begin or enhance a partnership. From these experiences, and from the literature reviewed above, we offer five recommendations for community leaders, managers of nonprofits, and program staff at foundations or government agencies to consider:

1. Begin discussion or planning about any potential partnership with an *assessment* of the objectives of the partnership, the characteristics and relationship history of the potential partners, the readiness of the community for a partnership to happen, and potential benefits and problems that a partnering activity would be likely to create.

For example, those planning a partnership can assess their community in terms of the five challenges to multicultural coalitions identified in the study reported above. How do key community groups feel about the process of coalition-building? Have there been recent "bad experiences," and if so, can key players be encouraged to talk about them candidly so that strategies for avoiding repetition of them can be devised?

And this assessment process needs to be repeated throughout the lifetime of a coalition. Most coalitions benefit from a kind of "sunset law" - an agreement among coalition leadership to revisit periodically whether the coalition should continue to exist. A key event in the lifetime of most coalitions is when they move from being an all-volunteer operation, or one coordinated through a fiscal agent, to becoming an independent 501-c-3 nonprofit corporation. Such a transition must be considered very carefully, because it does imply that the coalition will have long-term life - and this

may be appropriate, especially if the coalition has moved from identifying issues and bringing the community together, to actually providing services of some sort.

With such a transition, the coalition's leadership also may need to change. The kinds of people good at first-stage work (such as bringing the community together) often are not good at second-stage work (offering services, and administering the nonprofit organization the coalition has become).

In the study of California coalitions, the most problematic coalitions created top-down were those formed by county or city government. Community leaders may need to insist on grassroots involvement in such publicly-formed coalitions, or this will not happen - and the likelihood of success for the coalition is thereby decreased. This does not mean that public agencies should not be at the table, or that they cannot form a successful coalition, only that they appear to be prone to neglecting the wisdom of bottom-up creation!

2. Learn about and use the *management and behavioral science* on partnership in assessing whether a partnership should happen, in facilitating its implementation, and in promoting its successful operation over time. Something as simple as using the Mattesich & Monsey (1992) list of 19 attributes of effective partnership like a diagnostic checklist could have considerable impact. So too can early planning for conflict resolution and for sustainability.

The 13 factors for success identified in the multicultural coalitions study reported above also can be used as a planning tool. For instance, does the coalition leadership from almost its first meeting allocate time and energy to talk about sustainability? Is this an element of the coalition's strategic plan?

One of the 13 factors for success was a well-developed strategic plan, which can embrace attention to all of the other factors. Does the plan include clear objectives which were "vetted" by an open, community-wide review process, both to improve them and to build ownership of them? If there are major disagreements about purpose or strategy, have the tools of conflict resolution been used to create a working "agreement to disagree," perhaps with the assistance of a conflict management consultant?

The strategic plan may also include an educational process for coalition leadership - beginning with encouragement for all those leading the coalition to do some reading on this subject, perhaps some of the references cited here. Then a consultant (perhaps someone brought in pro bono from a local university or large nonprofit organization) can help the leadership group to distill and implement what they've learned in bringing the coalition together.

3. Deal up front with the challenges of *multiculturalism* in bringing a partnership together, especially in an urban environment like Los Angeles. This includes assuming that the leaders of a partnership will have their own normal, human prejudices, and that these too must be worked through if the partnership is to be successful.

4. Develop or seek *capacity-building technical assistance* on partnership skill - an early strategic consultation to potential partners can have considerable benefit on down the line in making the partnership successful.

Many communities now have nonprofit management assistance centers, or faculty at local universities, which can help with this task. And increasingly, local foundations are willing to make funding available to support capacity-building, either through a grant to the coalition or through services the foundation makes available directly.

5.Take advantage of opportunities for *convening* of communities, nonprofits and funders about the subject of partnership, so that both the larger knowledge base and the immediate experience of the community can be shared.

Both government and foundation funders can advance all these objectives by supporting the development of a community-wide (perhaps ultimately nationwide) *infrastructure* for partnership creation and sustainability, including capacity-building support. Since most community partnerships or coalitions were created informally in response to urgent needs, much of the infrastructure that has grown up naturally around other community change mechanisms simply hasn't arisen to nurture partnerships, or promote sharing and networking about them. Partnerships, when created strategically and "built to last," can contribute substantially to the process of community change, and are especially valuable approaches for dealing with the complex, fast-changing environments that will characterize the 21st century.

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