

Civil Society as a Force for Community Change

Thomas E. Backer, PhD
Human Interaction Research Institute

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Civil society stands for all the forces in our community that help bring us together to live, work and solve problems we share in a healthy way. It's about business and professional networking organizations, it's about neighborhood organizations and grassroots advocacy groups, it's about all the sources of what Robert Putnam calls "social capital," the glue that holds our community together.

Professor Anheier and I are glad to be with you tonight to help launch the Valley Leadership Institute's Executive Dialog series, because we see this group as a microcosm of the collaborative forces for community change here in the San Fernando Valley. That's important to us not only because of our research interests about community change, but also because we both live here, in the hills of Sherman Oaks, and because my Institute's headquarters are here too.

Tonight Helmut's going to share with you some recent research from his Center at UCLA about the nature of some problems we're currently facing in the Valley and throughout LA. I'm going to take my few minutes to share with you some research-tested principles about community collaboration. We're both going to be brief, because our role here is to be the catalyst to your chemical reaction - engaging with tonight's theme about how you, as representatives of civil society in the San Fernando Valley, can build a common platform for communication and problem-solving. Our dialogue tonight will lead naturally to Dan Mazmanian's talk on core values and civic leadership, Deone Zell and Alan Glassman's evening on thinking strategically, and your evening at ICT on the future of leadership development.

Defining the Problem

The place to begin any problem-solving process, of course, is to focus with laser-like precision on how to define the problem. As the Center for Creative Leadership's David Campbell said - in the title of his book on career development, *If You Don't Know Where You're Going, You'll Probably End Up Somewhere Else*. Thus I'm going to start by telling a story I read recently in *Fortune*. Last December, the NASA folks monitoring the Galileo space probe 500 million miles away orbiting Jupiter discovered that it could no longer relay to Earth the big chunks of data it was sent to collect. The fix-it assignment fell to Greg Lavanias, an engineer at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena. His detective work to fix this problem half a billion miles away is an extraordinarily good model of problem diagnosis leading to effective problem solving.

Lavanias started by getting the probe to report on electrical functions inside the data-sending tape recorder that seemed to be the source of the problem. He took apart a duplicate recorder in his lab to try to figure out what the problem was. Here's where it gets interesting: he knew that in November the probe had passed through a high-radiation region on its way to one of the Jovian

moons. Radiation can damage equipment, and the Galileo mission had been extended by two years, so perhaps the radiation it was built to withstand had been exceeded. Further mulling over data sent by the probe, he developed the hypothesis that the problem was in a circuitboard that controls the tape motion. Lavanas later recalled: "I looked at the recorder and asked: What's going to die because of radiation in a machine that was working perfectly before?"

The suspect turned out to be an LED that provides light for an optical encoder that's involved in making the tape move. He talked to radiation experts at JPL, who said that when LEDs are damaged by radiation you can partially fix them by annealing, that is, running current through them for some hours. This could be done from 500 million miles away by giving an appropriate instruction to Galileo, and sure enough, when he did this, he fixed the problem! Finding this solution on earth for a problem in deep space took creativity and focus, but once the problem was clearly identified, the solution emerged - not for a complete fix, but for enough remedy to enable the mission to continue. And we had similar problem-solving activities just recently with our two new "friends" on Mars.

Collaboration

Now, let me define what I mean by collaboration, one of the great rubber words of behavioral and management science! We see it as essentially the same thing as "partnership" - both involve more or less formal structures, some temporary and some permanent, which bring together a group of organizations in a community to implement a new program, to change something that already exists, or to address a specific problem or crisis. They involve the sharing of goals, activities, responsibilities and resources.

Collaborations are not without their problems. 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." The risks of collaboration were put even more directly by Woody Allen, in his book *Without Feathers*: "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, but the lamb won't get much sleep."

These definitions, both humorous and serious, help us to focus on the human challenges and the reasons why top-notch creativity is needed to do collaboration right. Our Institute's research over the last 10 years on this subject has showed that there are eight key elements of successful collaborations:

- 1 - Systematic planning, leading to objectives and activities that partnership members can support.
- 2 - Addressing psychological challenges, such as power differences or resistances based on previous bad experiences with other collaborations - including early "due diligence" about the mutuality of interests among the partners
- 3 - Clearly identifying the strong core idea at the heart of the collaboration
- 4 - Finding the needed financial and human resources to be successful

5 - Incorporating strategies learned from other successful collaborations, and mistakes made or false paths taken.

6 - Encouraging the collaboration to evolve and maintain responsiveness to community environment

7 - Continuing “due diligence” in looking at costs and benefits of collaboration over the long haul.

8 - Planning ahead for sustainability at the outset, including creation of a revenue model to provide financial support beyond initial funding.

There are some reasons to be cautious about collaborations, according to our research:

1 - Not all collaborations work, and the science about their effectiveness is still limited. Our Institute’s book, *Evaluating Community Collaboration*, is a step forward in addressing that gap, helping nonprofits, communities and funders to measure the impact of a collaboration, both to improve it and to justify investments in it.

2 - Not all problems can be solved by collaborations - so sometimes the right decision is *not* to partner. If this is the accurate outcome of a “due diligence” process, that is a good thing!

3 - People are tired of the rather limited success of some collaborations, and of the resources they take up despite this poor payoff (endless meetings without any noticeable results, for instance). They come to any new collaboration burdened by negative experiences they’ve had with them in the past. In some cases, there is also a real phenomenon of “collaboration fatigue” - people complain about spending half their lives in meetings for one collaboration or another, and are thus resistant to getting involved in a new one, no matter how important it seems.

4 - Collaborations can sometimes be a tactic for delaying action or obscuring responsibility so that change doesn’t happen - but no one individual or organization can be blamed for this outcome.

There is one other caution here. Not all collaborations should survive. Funders in particular have been reluctant to look at or share their failure experiences so this is a tricky subject to consider - few funders have been as brave as the Annie Casey Foundation was with its major initiative whose problems were chronicled in its report, *The Path of Most Resistance*.

This is hard work, but it is hopeful work, and a larger perspective helps. As George Washington University’s Peter Vaill famously put it, “we’re all living in permanent white water.” But Charles Paulus at the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina, whose hobby is river-rafting, says that Vaill’s metaphor is just a starting place for designing change interventions.

He talks, for instance, about how experienced river rafters “read the river.” White water, it turns out, is not random, it is chaotic, with deeper patterns that are meaningful if you have a trained eye. Good river rafting depends on learning how to recognize these patterns, and understanding their effects on rafts. This is a final reminder of the need to drill down into the patterns of complexity we face in making collaborations successful, so that they can contribute to needed change in the community.