

## **“The Secrets of Successful Collaboration”**

*Neighborhood Empowerment in Reducing Health Disparities Conference 2/10/11*

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I'm pleased to be here today at this conference about reducing health disparities. At my Institute we've just started a project with the National Network to Eliminate Disparities in Behavioral Health, focused on a program for involving Spanish-speaking Latino families in mental health services for adolescents. So I'm here partly in learning mode, as we launch that new project.

But I'm here also here today as a scientist, to share with you what we know from research about how nonprofits, universities and community groups can collaborate. We've been studying this topic at my Institute for decades, using the viewing lens of psychology to understand what happens when a set of groups and organizations decides to collaborate. Out of this work comes a set of “secrets” for successful collaboration - most of which are not really as secret as you might think.

That's because our work and the research of many others makes it clear that successful collaboration requires a blend of science and common sense. How you collaborate with your family, in your church or in your neighborhood reveals a lot about how collaboration works - and what doesn't work. That common sense is just as important as the science I'll be sharing with you in terms of shaping a successful collaboration in your professional work. The lessons of experience in fact mirror the principles from science in many ways, and both are important sources of learning for success.

Especially due to the increased challenges to the nonprofit service sector brought about by the troubled economy, there is greater pressure than before on health, human service and other nonprofits, as well as on universities and other educational institutions, to develop effective collaborations. For instance, in their 2010 annual study of the Los Angeles County nonprofit sector, the UCLA Center for Civil Society found that *70 percent* of all nonprofits engaged in at least one collaborative activity. The most frequently cited activities were advocacy on behalf of the organization's clients, obtaining funding, reducing program expenses, and sharing space. The more organizations depend on government funding, the more likely they were to collaborate with similar organizations, according to the UCLA research.

Today I'm going to offer some definitions for the term “collaboration,” share with you eight strategies for success and five challenges to watch out for, then talk a bit about evaluating and sustaining collaborations, about the perspectives of funders on collaboration, and about how to make them successful in different cultural environments. You can refer to your handout for the strategies and challenges, and for some resources to follow up with if you want to know more.

After that we'll have some time for questions and discussion, and I look forward to learning from you.

## **Definitions**

Collaboration is one of the great rubber words in behavioral and management science, so let me start with the basic definition we'll be using in today's discussion. Collaborations (also often called partnerships) involve more or less formal structures, some temporary and some permanent, which bring together a group of people or organizations in a community to implement a new program, to change something that already exists, or to address a specific problem. They involve sharing goals, activities, responsibilities and resources. They're popular strategies for pooling resources to address a particular challenge.

So that's the "official" definition. Now I want to give you two more un-official, but also important ones.

The first one is from Former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, 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 second one is from 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." Both these definitions point to some of the secrets we'll be discussing here - how to address psychological factors like power differentials, trust and self-interest.

The reason this is all important is that research, as well as our experience, makes it clear that the dysfunction and mortality rates among collaborations is high - not unlike the high divorce rate in American society! Although the types of collaborations highlighted here have important differences from the individual counterpart of marriage (for instance, they typically do not involve co-mingling of funds), they are similar in that they involve deeply shared values, common missions that may spread out over a period of time, and emotionally complex relationships that spring from the first two features. At the very least, all of us can learn about work-related collaborations from our success, or frustration, with the personal partnerships in our lives.

For this reason, funders, community leaders and others helping to create collaborations would do well to heed the relevant French proverb, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." And in some cases "pre-marital counseling" in the form of training about how to engage in successful collaborations prior to embarking on one can be essential to success. Funders can often be a deciding force in these early stages by insisting on attention to process in forming the collaboration.

## **Strategies for Successful Collaboration**

Years of research on this subject has identified eight key elements of successful collaborations:

- 1 - Systematic planning, leading to objectives and activities that collaboration members can support.
- 2 - Addressing psychological factors, such as power differences or resistances based on previous bad experiences with other collaborations, and building on pre-existing trust and shared values.

- 3 - Clearly identifying the strong core idea at the heart of the collaboration.
- 4 - Finding the needed financial and human resources for the collaboration to be successful.
- 5 - Incorporating learnings from other collaborations, both successes and mistakes made.
- 6 - Encouraging the collaboration to evolve, responding to the changing community environment.
- 7 - Looking at costs and benefits of collaborating over the long haul, including the enduring self-interests and required sacrifices of the participants.
- 8 - Planning for sustainability at the outset, including creation of a revenue model to provide financial support beyond initial funding.

### **Challenges of Collaboration**

There are some reasons to be cautious about collaboration, according to the body of research:

- 1 - Not all collaborations work, and the science about effectiveness of collaborations is still limited.
- 2 - Not all problems can be solved by collaborations - sometimes the right decision is *not* to collaborate.
- 3 - People come to any new collaboration burdened by any negative experiences they've had with them in the past.
- 4 - People are tired of putting resources into collaborations that often have limited success (like endless meetings without any noticeable results). This can increase "collaboration fatigue" - people complain about spending half their lives in collaboration meetings.
- 5 - 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.

### **Sustaining a Collaboration**

Collaborations aren't free - they involve costs of operation which have to be subsidized either internally by the participants or by third parties. They are more likely to be successful over time if they pay attention to *funding stability*, particularly in the face of external events, such as reductions of public dollars when there is a budget crunch. This means having a "plan B" for approaching other funders or streamlining operations if there are sudden and severe cuts.

*Continuity* of communication and activity of collaborations is important, largely through regularly scheduled meetings of the partner organizations, with a strong press to send the same representative to the meetings each time, so that there is also a chance for interpersonal relationships to grow.

Collaborations that begin as a *response to a crisis* are likely to function effectively at first, but then need to move to a different level of commitment and organization once the crisis has subsided. Collaborations created in the wake of September 11th are an example of this.

Collaborations, like marriages, tend to *change over time*, and there must be recognition of that fact, including structures built in to deal with the shifting energies and commitments. For example, our local project, Valley Nonprofit Resources, which is a service center for the more than 4,000 nonprofits in the San Fernando Valley, is a collaboration between my Institute, CSUN and MEND, the poverty services agency in Pacoima. Our partners within CSUN have changed over the years - currently we are working primarily with the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. And we lost another partner several years ago because of a leadership change in that organization.

But because the three main partners have stayed the course, and we have excellent support from the community of nonprofits in this region, as well as from our funders, we are now in our fifth year of operation and going strong. Long-term effective collaborations create *lasting connections* deep within the participating organizations, which can outlast the collaboration and even the individuals who have participated in it, or outlast the service of board members on a given institution. That has happened already with VNR, and gives us the best chance for long-term success.

### **Evaluating Collaborations**

Very few collaborations get *evaluated* - either to learn how they could be improved, or to provide evidence to justify the resources they use. In 2003, we published *Evaluating Community Collaborations*, still the only book on this topic, bringing together the basic tools and concepts needed to design an evaluation for many different types of collaborations.

The topic needs special attention because of the complexity and significant psychological dynamics of most collaborations. Any collaboration and its outcomes are likely to be seen in quite different ways by different partners. This *Rashomon* effect makes it more challenging to assess collaboration success, and to obtain a range of viewpoints when doing the evaluation.

### **The Funder's Viewpoint**

Over the past few years, an increasing number of funders, especially foundations, have begun to require collaborations as a condition of their support. For example, as reported in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona now awards grant only to collaborations that work together to solve important community problems, not individual organizations. Last year it brought together 200 local nonprofits to discuss how they could work together, and received 29 collaborative grant proposals. Four collaborations received funding as a result - for example, a group of nonprofits organizing neighborhood-based services to help older people stay in their homes longer, a goal none of the collaborators could achieve on their own.

This trend towards “shotgun marriages” or “creative collaborations” by funders, depending on your point of view, first became evident when national foundations began supporting comprehensive community initiatives in the 1990s. For instance, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making

Connections initiative was a 10-year, 10-community effort to improve the lives and prospects of vulnerable families and children in some of America's toughest neighborhoods.

The Foundation provided resources to a community-wide collaboration in each neighborhood, brought together through peer networking groups both within each community and across the 10 sites. Peer networking often has been used in both government and foundation funded efforts to join together the diverse members of a collaboration so they can talk informally with each other, develop trusting relationships and solve problems together. At our Institute, we've been studying these peer networks for more than five years, both for Annie Casey and for The California Endowment.

The Endowment has set up a similar collaboration and peer networking operation in its recently-launched Building Health Communities initiative. This 10-year, \$250 million initiative supports 14 California communities in creating an environment where children and youth are healthy, safe and ready to learn. BHC aims at achieving four "big results" in each community - providing a health home for all children, increasing school attendance, reversing the childhood obesity epidemic and reducing youth violence.

For the 14 communities, all of which struggle with limited resources and other challenges, getting to these results will not be easy. Each community was selected to participate partly because they show promise for mobilizing residents, youth and community leaders to join together on this difficult set of tasks. Success requires this diverse body of people to work together effectively over a long period of time. A key way to facilitate that is to create in each site a peer network that provides a space for communications, resource-sharing and problem-solving.

Government support also has been used to start multi-site collaboratives that have been quite successful. For instance, the Federally-funded PROSPER project in Iowa and Pennsylvania has implemented substance abuse prevention programs for middle school students in 28 communities, using a collaborative model that brings together schools, community agencies, and prevention scientists at land-grant universities with the local USDA Extension Service as a principal partner. The ten-year project has been a great success, already reducing substance use and other problem behaviors in the target population. Also, in our Institute's research about PROSPER, we noted that all of PROSPER's experimental communities were able to recruit private-sector funds to continue supporting their programs as the Federal funds ended.

However, in recent years funders also have been exploring some of the limits of collaborations, with several essays on this topic appearing in the philanthropic literature. For example, foundation executive Jerry Kitzi, in a *Foundation News and Commentary* article on partnerships, reflects that most foundations find it easier to require collaborations among their grantees than to create them within philanthropy! In a self-published report, the McKnight Foundation offers the following well-balanced commentary on collaborations 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."*

## **Collaborating Across Cultures**

Most collaborations happen in part because reaching a certain goal requires people and groups that have different cultures, values and experiences to work together. The cultural differences may be racial or ethnic, may involve different lifestyles, or may be professional - such as physicians or other health professionals working with community advocates in a collaboration to reduce health disparities.

As with any effort to promote cross-cultural communication and action, the place to start, according to the science on this subject, is with framing a common language - what do common terms mean to the various collaborators in a group. Then the move can be to an initial discussion of common goals - what are at least a couple of goals for the collaboration that all at the table can agree with? This often is facilitated by finding some common history - what are some shared experiences and professional contacts, including past experience together in another collaboration?

There needs to be an agreement that differences will be tolerated - if there is an unspoken expectation in the room that all differences, even minor ones, must be removed in order for the collaboration to work effectively, failure will be guaranteed.

Resistance from various collaboration members is to be expected and will require attention. Not everyone will understand the value in making a change, and all the more so when they're speaking across the "cultural divide" of a different agency or professional background.

There also is value in identifying and making use of "dual passport holders." There are always people in any system who are members of more than one group. In his best-selling book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell speaks of many such people as "connectors," who naturally enjoy bringing together different parts of the world, and can do so with great effectiveness, using an informal, off-the-record style that the collaboration needs to cultivate.

These strategies for effective collaboration are not sure-fire, but collectively they can help to increase the odds that a collaboration will be successful, and will last over time. If the collaborations we all are involved with or want to create are to make a difference in the community, we have to find ways that the lions and lambs can all get some sleep, and that we all continue to do what we want to do in ways that benefit the cause that brought us together in the first place. Science about collaboration can be helpful in getting people's attention about strategies that are likely to work, even if they are difficult to implement, and so can stories that come from people's real lives and common sense.