

Collaboration

Building Relationships to Improve Health

*In selecting a theme for its annual meeting each year, Grantmakers In Health (GIH) chooses among important current issues that it expects will challenge health grantmakers long after the meeting closes. It then keeps those issues on the agenda as it plans future programs and products. On the eve of GIH's 2002 Annual Meeting, it seems to be a good time to recall the theme of last year's meeting, *Collaborating for Change: Exploring Health Partnerships That Work*, because of its continuing importance to grantmakers. The following is drawn from remarks made by Lauren LeRoy, president and CEO of GIH, at that meeting.*

At my first GIH Annual Meeting in 1998, an eminent grantmaker stood up during a plenary session and pointed to what seemed to be the elephant in the middle of the room that nobody wanted to acknowledge. He noted that, while foundations were increasingly making collaboration among grantees a requirement for funding, they seemed to have a hard time doing it themselves.

That comment stuck with me over the years as I became more familiar with foundation programs and strategies. It resonated as we at GIH tried our hand at fostering greater collaboration among foundations and between foundations and government, as well as assisting grantmakers in developing or supporting community partnerships to improve health.

The terms *collaboration* and *partnership* have become so overused that they have moved from couture to off-the-rack status. And that's too bad, because we run the risk of organizations paying lip service to the concept, programs masquerading as collaboratives, and diminished value being placed on the benefits that can be realized through the true hard work of collaboration.

In the spirit of turning the microscope on ourselves, GIH decided to focus its 2001 annual meeting on the theme of collaboration. The goal was to dig beneath the rhetoric and examine foundation efforts to work together, to solve problems collectively, and to forge relationships with a broad range of organizations in order to improve people's health.

WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

There actually is little about the value and challenges of collaboration that grantmakers don't already know, that all of us don't intuitively understand from our own lives. Marriage, family, friendship, how we work, and the ways we play involve us in collaborative activities every day. We teach our children,

as we were taught, key elements of collaboration: trust, sharing, listening, teamwork, finding satisfaction in the accomplishments of the group rather than being singled out for credit. So why is it so hard to carry these concepts and practices into the work of philanthropy and community action?

Having a common understanding of what we mean by collaboration seemed to be a good place to start, so I first looked to see how others define the term. The list is intriguing. The Latin root for the word is *com laborare*, or "to work together." A more legalistic definition paints collaboration as close cooperation among parties having specified joint rights and responsibilities. One of my favorite characterizations is Suzanne Morse's "community amoxicillin" – or, in other words, "panacea" – of the 1990s (Morse 1996). She also views collaboration as simply "thinking and acting differently," something that may be a key element in successful partnerships. Then there is the darker definition: Cooperating with or willingly assisting the enemy. (Those who have had a frustrating experience putting the concept to work may agree!) But the description that probably best captures the essence of collaboration is this: the sharing of resources, responsibilities, and risks to achieve a common purpose (Himmelman 1995).

What's clear is that no single definition can convey the range and texture of the relationships involved in collaboration. They fall along a continuum that encompasses the exchange of information for mutual benefit, sharing risks and responsibilities, and ultimately ceding individual control to achieve a common purpose – collaboration in its most complete and fundamental sense (Isaacs and Rodgers 2001).

Adopting collaboration as a strategy or core value assumes that a foundation has explored some fundamental questions. Why collaborate? What makes a collaboration successful? What works against it? In looking for answers to these basic but critical questions, I found considerable agreement among both

observers of and practitioners in the field. Their conclusions share some common themes.

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

Let's start with *Why collaborate?* If it's so tough, why do it? First and foremost, working with others often accomplishes more than going it alone. Tackling complex social problems with multiple causes calls for a mix of skills, resources, and actions that generally cannot be found in a single organization.

Collaboration can help grantmakers and those on the front lines increase or better use their resources. It enables funders to spread the risk associated with supporting controversial or cutting-edge programs. Collaboration can reinforce the commitment of different parties to remain involved over the long term, even when the going gets rough. And it can be a tangible expression of a foundation's mission and values.

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

The particulars of any successful collaboration will differ, but there seem to be some prerequisites. The most fundamental of these is trust, built upon mutual respect and honest communication. A successful collaboration also requires shared vision, goals, and a commitment to make it work. While the structure and governance of the collaborative must be clearly defined, the partners must also be open to new relationships and ideas. In both good times and bad, it is essential to have open lines of communication and a clear process to resolve conflicts in order to keep the collaboration alive.

Additionally, collaborators must share risks, responsibilities, rewards, and resources – financial or otherwise. There must be clear expectations and clear outcomes specified for the collaborative. All parties must put substance before ego. And, perhaps above all, patience is clearly a virtue.

PITFALLS

What are the biggest stumbling blocks to successful collaboration? Turf seems to be at the top of everybody's list, followed by concerns over who is going to get the credit if the effort is successful.

Cultural tensions, conflicts of interest, and lack of understanding of the differences in the way each partner's organization functions can cause a collaboration to break down. Lack of leadership impedes progress, causes confusion and frustration, and leaves the group rudderless in the stormy seas that it may be facing.

Collaboration also consumes considerable time, energy, and resources. If foundations do not reward the effort required to build effective relationships, the staff will end up putting their energies elsewhere. An unrealistic time frame for success can also be a recipe for disappointment and failure. And, when key players depart, the resilience and the commitment of the rest of the group will be tested.

Lastly, collaboration is more invention than theory. It can be messy, with considerable ambiguity. Grantmakers come to philanthropy with different backgrounds, experiences, and personalities, and some just may not feel comfortable in that context.

A MEMORABLE ANALOGY

In an essay about five years ago, Morse argued that, "collaboration, like jazz, was an American art form that evolved from a less formal attitude to a formal set of steps and procedures." She went on to quote from an interview in *American Heritage* in which Wynton Marsalis described the musical and nonmusical attributes of jazz, creating a most memorable analogy.

Like jazz, collaboration calls for "the willingness to play with a theme or concept," an openness to cooperation and feedback, or as Marsalis put it, "learning to make room." To be effective, collaborators, like jazz musicians, must be able to "reconcile differences even when they're opposites." And they must learn to have "dialogue with integrity."

Collaboration, like jazz, has elements of the blues, "an optimism that's not naive, [that] accepts tragedy and moves forward." It also shares with swing the need for "constant coordination, but in an environment that's difficult enough to challenge your equilibrium." Collaboration is like collective improvisation, requiring "communal spontaneity and invention." And it calls for syncopation, asking its players to "always [be] prepared to do the unexpected, always [be] ready to find your equilibrium."

Finding that equilibrium is the task growing numbers of grantmakers face as they embrace the concept of collaboration and then begin the hard work of making it a reality. With practice and experience, we can all hope to bring new harmony to philanthropy's efforts to improve the nation's health.

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