



The Dark Side of Collaboration

Is collaboration your best tactic for the future, or is there a better way?

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

Nonprofits have long embraced collaboration—or at least the symbolic ideal of collaboration. People in the nonprofit sector like to think of themselves as collaborating, not competing. Greedy corporations compete. Altruistic nonprofits collaborate.

But is collaboration indeed the best tactic for the future? Let's take a closer look.

Collaboration Has Its Drawbacks.

Here are some of the problems with collaborating:

1. Collaborations aren't very agile. When you can't make decisions quickly, you lose valuable opportunities—a serious liability in a fast-paced, fast-forward future.

2. Collaborations are time-consuming. As frequently practiced, collaborations require meetings, meetings, and more meetings. There are meetings to iron out what skills and attributes each partner brings to the table, meetings to politely tussle over turf issues, meetings to decide who does what, meetings to complain about collaboration “partners” that never come to the meetings!

3. And don't forget process, process, and process! Managers who come from the business sector are driven to distraction by the way nonprofits over-emphasize the process of collaboration. They often compare it to Nero fiddling while Rome burns.

4. Collaboration is based on consensus building. Work products based on consensus are rarely visionary or evolutionary. The usual result is a deal-based arrangement among collaborators. Seldom is it an actual change in service delivery. Without that transformational shift, you can't truly build for the future.

Competition Isn't a Naughty Word.

The best strategy for the future isn't collaboration as it is currently practiced but competitive intelligence—knowing what other nonprofit organizations are doing. This task is

becoming easier as technology gives us access to vast amounts of hard data on nonprofit effectiveness. Funders have computerized a great deal of outcome-measurement information, gathered from grantee reports. The National Center for Charitable Statistics is also digitizing nonprofit data and making it widely available. (See “Nonprofit Databases Herald New Frontier” on page 8.) Here are a few ways this information can be useful to you in the future:

1. Improve your management practices by comparing your effectiveness with that of other nonprofit organizations. Outcome data can be your clearest signal that your strategies aren't working as well as those of other nonprofit managers.

2. Be aware of other organizations' capabilities in your mission area. Such knowledge is imperative for you to avoid duplicating services and provide more efficient referrals between organizations.

3. Emulate effective practices to make your organization more attractive to funders. In the future, the idea of nonprofits collaborating to seek a grant may no longer make sense. Instead, funders may choose a group of nonprofits on the basis of their

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track records. Rather than partnering with your usual cronies, you may find yourself drafted into the most dynamic assemblage of enterprising organizations you've ever imagined. That's the good part—if you can keep up with the rest. The bad part is that you may lose your chance to be part of this dynamic group if you don't apply diligent measurement practices. The emerging funding competition will favor results-oriented and results-producing nonprofits.

4. Discover what gives other nonprofits the leading edge in their mission area. See if you can replicate or adapt what they're doing. Reinventing the wheel is a sinfully inefficient activity in an information-rich future.

5. See if other organizations are doing what you do—better than you do it. If so, you may need to bail out of that service area. Far too many nonprofits fold up an ineffective program only when they can no longer attract funding for it. The best community stewardship for the future is to admit that something isn't working, cut the losses to yourselves and your funders, and get busy creating something dynamic that does work!

6. Identify ineffective organizations. Consider approaching their funding sources on behalf of your own, more energetic effort.

7. Use your intelligence-gathering capability to tweak your core programs or services to be the best-in-class. You may need to undergo some serious futuring exercises to discover approaching trends. You may also need to put some authentic anticipatory strategy in your strategic planning.

8. Learn to be truly competitive. Competitive intelligence is of no use unless you understand that it *is* a competition. Rather than bemoan the fact, remember that the beneficiaries of this competition are the people

your organization was founded to serve. Competition and outcome management's clear appropriateness in the nonprofit sector is to help drive out inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Like you, your fellow nonprofits will benefit by evolving clearer missions and more robust, competent, and truly collaborative methods of fulfilling those missions. That evolution, in turn, benefits the co-evolving futures of everyone in your profession and in your community.

Evolve for the Future.

We've seen the problems with collaboration—at least as most nonprofits think of it today. But we've also glimpsed the potential for a new kind of collaboration. Here are some ways, at the overall organizational level, to collaborate for the future:

1. Determine your niche. Be the best at that one thing. In the future, it will be virtually impossible for one nonprofit to be a multi-service success. The future of multi-service operations will be a well-orchestrated collaboration of fittingly-niched organizations.

2. Avoid duplication of effort and meet people's needs by having better systems of referral and outsourcing. Collaborating in this sense means avoiding redundancy by keeping in touch with other organizations, getting out of each other's way, and sticking to your area of strength.

3. Share outcome data with staff at all levels so they know what their peers are doing, how they're doing it, and if it works. Coupled with other computer-aided communication, your staff will soon get to know the movers and shakers at their operational level in other organizations. Thus, it may soon be staff members who propose an inter-organizational collaborative effort. Are you ready to share that sort of power with your staff and also with other organiza-

tions' staff members? If your answer is no, be prepared for them to keep their team together to go for it themselves. Don't be surprised if some of these hot-shots start their own organization to compete with yours. Be ready for other executives to hire your best and brightest away from you because you didn't recognize the potential of this self-collaborative team and they did. ■

Selected References

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).



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