

How Do Leaders of Nonprofit Partnerships Foster Collaboration?

New research pinpoints four activities that make a partnership work.

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How do you choose someone to lead a partnership? A recent study makes clear that collaborative leaders have different capabilities and use different tools than traditional managers.¹ This research shows that nonprofit managers use four categories of activities to foster collaboration:

Category #1: Synthesis

The most important type of activity, emphasized most strongly by the collaborative leaders in our survey, is synthesis. Synthesis involves building relationships so that members of the collaboration can work together toward a common purpose.

Managing relationships goes hand in hand with working through the tougher issues of a collaboration. As one manager stated: “My management approach depends upon how big the rock in the road is, but the bigger rocks almost always seem to involve people and relationships, emotions, perceptions, and fear of change.”

Uncertainty brings an even greater need for synthesis. “Uncertainty means that it takes a much longer time to make collaborative decisions,” another manager notes. “We need to stop and pour energy into building relationships, respecting each other’s point of view, forging the fit. Much more effort has to be taken to get everyone on the same page. This has proven to be a gut wrenching process at times.”

Of the six activities included under synthesis in this research (see “Activities that Nurture Collaboration” on page 15), three activities were identified by collaborative leaders as most important:

(1) Managing diversity—activities aimed at preventing and working through conflicts caused by the variation in people’s interests, styles, attitudes, or behaviors.

(2) Building structure for the partnership—that is, establishing and integrating physical, communication, and information structures as well as building role, relational, and decision frameworks so that the partnership is a sustainable, effective, and functioning system.

(3) Recognizing contributions and achievements—ensuring that members, their organizations, and the broader community know that the network values their contributions. This appreciation reinforces and models what constructive contributions “look like” and what they can achieve.

Often the first two activities, in particular, merge into one evolving challenge, epitomizing the work of synthesis. For example, one leader described her newfound role when coming to lead a crisis-laden partnership as “taking control of the

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healing agenda, by getting people to work together, by using consensus to set priorities, by removing barriers, by changing and clarifying tasks and roles and by working through the daunting complexity . . . We are now ready to stop our primary focus on healing, but it has taken a full year to get to that point.”

Category #2: Framing

The second most important class of activities, according to collaborative leaders, is framing, or giving shape to the network’s purpose, thus providing “the glue that holds the network together.”²

The four framing activities most emphasized by collaborative leaders were:

(1) Building consensus as to the partnership’s purpose—helping members agree on the partnership’s direction and making sure each partner commits to it.

(2) Challenging assumptions and expectations—identifying and working through pre-formed opinions that inhibit attainment of the network’s purpose. Challenging assumptions can involve the leader in activities as diverse as researching and presenting facts; helping partners share information and learn from each other; and using the art of re-framing. One leader, for example, re-framed the plight of the “elderly homeless” to that of “grandparents and WWII veterans,” thereby enlarging community support for a partnership that focused on homeless issues.

(3) Fostering interest-based negotiation—promoting partner-to-partner discussion based on needs, concerns, pressures, and desires, rather than on positions. Collaborative leaders must help partners understand *why* certain things are important to particular partners. Such negotiations help participants understand problems, agree on options, and design action steps.

(4) Developing options—exploring possibilities by creating a variety of perspectives, potential directions, and choices to meet the interests of clients, partners, and the community.

Category #3: Activation

Collaborative leaders use activation activities to secure, manage, and integrate resources, stakeholders, and participants. Not just a phase at the start of the partnership, activation continues to be important throughout the partnership’s life cycle. The activation activities most emphasized by collaborative leaders in our survey were:

(1) Identifying stakeholders—finding and involving constituents whose expertise and resources are essential to the partnership.

(2) Identifying participants—bringing the right partners and participants into the network’s work at the right time.

(3) Deactivating—changing the partnership’s dynamics in a purposeful way by such measures as adding new members; re-arranging committee membership, structure, or roles; or finding win-win solutions when members choose to exit the partnership.

(4) Marshaling resources—building support and removing obstacles so that resources can be secured and managed. It is interesting that this activity was the least emphasized in this category. But perhaps it’s not so surprising, for, as interviewees noted, resource struggles are ongoing and never-ending but “not all-consuming” the way the human aspects of activation tend to be.

Category #4: Mobilizing

The least emphasized, but still significant, class of collaborative leadership activities are those directed toward external stakeholders and constituencies. Mobilizing activities build the credibility and support needed for the partnership to achieve its purpose. Two mobilizing activities were found to be of equal importance:

(1) Interpreting priorities, decisions, and results to those outside the partnership—re-framing agreements, actions, issues, results, conflicts, and even failures, so that they fit with stakeholders’ needs.

(2) Building external support for the work of the partnership—aligning with sponsors who can smooth the way to achieving the partnership’s purpose.

As one leader acknowledged, mobilization activities are often a “neglected afterthought,” taking second seat to internal relationships, processes, and tasks. However, other studies emphasize the importance of mobilizing external understanding of the partnership’s pressures and support for its intentions, priorities, and decisions.³

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Not Everyone Need Apply

This research suggests that leading a collaboration is not for the inexperienced or faint of heart. The collaborative leader needs a full management tool kit centered on competent use of synthesis, framing, activation, and mobilization activities.⁴

The study reveals that these activities occur and re-occur in an ongoing and often simultaneous manner, in varying combinations. Thus, while several categories of activities may be more strongly emphasized overall, collaborative leaders need to keep all their skills at the ready. There is never the luxury of being able to put aside any set of capabilities.

These results have implications not only for leaders involved in partnerships but also for those choosing someone to lead a collaboration. A singular set of skills—for instance a strong basis in resource development—doesn't guarantee success in leading a partnership. This research suggests that building and sustaining the partnership's purpose and managing its human side are key tests of a leader's capabilities. Ultimately, partnership leaders need many keys on their pianos to facilitate the relationships and results needed to serve communities and clients. ■

Footnotes

¹ Leaders of 42 nonprofit health and social service partnerships in Colorado were surveyed and interviewed, using a framework arising from the work of Agranoff and McGuire (see "References").

² See Agranoff and McGuire in "References."

³ See Macdonald in "References."

⁴ This research is a first step in providing evidence-based guidelines for partnership leaders. This is an important step but one that emphasizes the great need for more field-tested research to help develop leadership excellence.

References

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Activities that Nurture Collaboration

These categories and activities are arranged in order of importance, as emphasized by collaborative leaders:

Category #1: Synthesis

Activities:

- Managing diversity
- Building structure for the partnership
- Recognizing contributions and achievements
- Reducing complexity
- Creating communication linkages
- Promoting information search and feedback

Category #2: Framing

Activities:

- Building consensus as to the partnership's purpose
- Challenging assumptions and expectations
- Fostering interest-based negotiation
- Developing options
- Building consensus as to priorities

Category 3: Activation

Activities:

- Identifying stakeholders
- Identifying participants
- Deactivating
- Marshaling resources

Category 4: Mobilizing

Activities:

- Interpreting priorities & decisions to those outside the partnership
- Building external support