

# How to Partner for Success



Work to protect the differences that are important to your partner.

The Central Florida YMCA has partnered with many groups. Here are lessons they and other successful nonprofit partners have learned.

Nonprofits are increasingly partnering with each other as well as with businesses and government agencies. Collaboration brings added assets to an organization, letting it accomplish far more than it could alone. Here are suggestions from nonprofit leaders who have created successful partnerships:

**1. Know your partner.** Choose your partner wisely, and know why both of you are collaborating. Understand what drives your partner, and develop an appreciation

## Choose your partner wisely.

of your partner's goals. Learn what's in it for them, as well as what's in it for you. The more you get to know each other, the more likely you'll both be to reach your goals.

**2. Acknowledge the differences.** How do your organization's values, measures, problem-solving styles, and decision-making approaches differ from those of your partner? Work to protect the differences that are important to your partner.

**3. Be sure the basics are in place.** As Russell M. Linden notes in *Working across Boundaries*

(Jossey-Bass, [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)), certain elements are essential: The partners must have a shared purpose they care about but can't accomplish on their own. They must both be prepared to contribute something to achieve that purpose. And there must be a champion — someone who has clout and is willing to make the collaboration a high priority.

**4. Manage the culture.** Your organization's culture establishes how things are done and which beliefs can't be compromised. Even two similar nonprofits can have very different cultures. Talk with employees about your organization's culture, and find out

which aspects of the culture are most important to them. For instance, they may consider flexible working hours and weekly meetings to be crucial parts of the culture. Be explicit with your partner about your culture. Make clear which parts you may be willing to compromise and which are inviolate. Get to know your partner's culture and how well it meshes with yours. Be sure you and your partner have clear expectations about how much cultural change is

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acceptable to you both.

**5. Plan together.** Be certain that both organizations are involved in planning for the future. Get people's

input, and draw up a joint list of ground rules. Seek consensus on goals and ways to measure progress and success.

**6. Work on communication.**

Partners must communicate openly and honestly to build the trust necessary for effective collaboration. Don't assume that your meaning is clear, especially at the beginning of a partnership. Take time to follow up, receive feedback, and clarify your message if necessary. Spell out expectations,

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## A Model for Collaboration

The Central Florida YMCA ([www.centralfloridaymca.org](http://www.centralfloridaymca.org)) has formed successful partnerships with more than a dozen companies, school systems, and foundations, allowing it to impact 200,000 people, provide \$5.2 million in financial assistance, and maintain a rich mix of programs and services in neighborhoods throughout the region. Here are examples of alliances it has achieved, using a model which ensures that all partners benefit.

- **Lake Nona Family Center:** The Central Florida YMCA, City of Orlando, Lake Nona Property Holdings, Inc., Orlando Regional Healthcare Systems, and Orange County Public Schools came together to combine \$12.3 million in capital and land resources to build an elementary school and a YMCA within a community center. This collaboration was one of 11 projects to win recognition through the Urban Land Institute's Award of Excellence, based on innovation in land usage and design.

- **Central Florida YMCA Family Centers at the Walt Disney World Resort:** The Central Florida YMCA and Walt Disney World Resort teamed up to launch a child care and education solution for workers at the area's largest employer. The YMCA is responsible for the management, staffing, programming, and operation of the centers and covered the construction costs. Walt Disney World has contributed \$4.5 million over five years for operational expenses. The new family centers will help develop and enhance family and work life and build a strong sense of community.

- **Center for Health & Wellness and Peggy & Philip B. Crosby Wellness Center:** In an alliance

between the Winter Park Health Foundation (WPHF) and the Central Florida YMCA, the YMCA became responsible for operations of the WPHF's \$10 million wellness centers. The WPHF invests in strategic partnerships designed to address major health and wellness issues for youth and access to healthcare for everyone.

- **Middle School Programs:** The Central Florida YMCA, Orange County Government, Orange County Public Schools, and the Boys and Girls Club partnered to provide teens with values-oriented, meaningful activities during the time when they are most at risk. Orange County gave the Boys and Girls Club and the YMCA \$2.7 million to develop after-school enrichment programs in all Orange County middle schools. The YMCA provides 11 of the county's 21 middle schools with after-school programs. Because of these partnerships, the Central Florida YMCA now can provide more than 5,000 students with fun, safe after-school programs and summer day camps at no cost to their families.

- **Osceola County Family Center:** The Central Florida YMCA joined with the Osceola County Board of Commissioners, City of Kissimmee, Osceola County Public Schools, Dr. Phillips Charities, Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation, Walt Disney World Co., and Osceola County residents to redesign their YMCA to better meet their community's needs. The governmental partners provided more than \$1.9 million, the foundation partners contributed more than \$600,000, and the local community contributed money as well. ■



and keep everyone in the loop. Discuss misunderstandings as soon as they occur. Report progress and share information freely. Every so often, check that everyone is happy with the way things are going, and explore any concerns that people raise. Listen carefully to what is said — and what's left unsaid.

**7. Remember that collaboration is a means to an end.** It's not an end in itself. Help people focus on what they will gain from the partnership. Make sure everyone understands why cooperating is in their best interest.

**8. Have patience.** It takes time to develop a relationship, plan a partnership, build trust, and carry out the plan. It may take even longer to experience the benefits. Be willing to take it slow, and have faith that the rewards will be worth the wait. ■

### Resources

Bush, Richard, "Collaboration and Leadership: Secrets of Success," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 1.

Sturm, Paul, "Seven Rules of Successful Collaboration," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 2.

Tanzer, Ben, "A Collaboration Checklist: Ten Questions for Success," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 1.

*These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Strategic Alliances ([www.snpo.org/li](http://www.snpo.org/li)).*

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## What's Your Culture?

**Y**our organization's culture will have a major effect on the success of any collaboration you undertake. To pinpoint your culture, take this quiz, and give it to others in your organization. Compare and discuss your answers.

Before you embark on a collaboration, ask your partnering organization to answer these questions, too. These responses will clarify changes you'll need to make in one or both organizations if your partnership is to succeed.

- **What does your organization stand for**, and what does it aim to do?
- **What behaviors are encouraged** in your organization? What sorts of behaviors are discouraged or forbidden?
- **What are your organization's major strengths** and weaknesses?
- **What five words** define your organization's character?
- **How would you describe the style of dress** that's expected in your organization?
- **What is most important to you** about your organization?
- **What values** does your organization espouse? Are those espoused values different from the organization's real values — the ones that guide employees' conduct? What are the bone-deep values that people in the organization must never flout?
- **What basic assumptions** guide the work of your organization's employees?
- **How flexible are the rules** in your organization? Which rules can be broken, and which can't?
- **What rituals, symbols, slogans, heroes, and stories** motivate and inspire people in your organization?
- **What themes** describe the nature of the work your organization does?
- **Who has the greatest effect** on your organization's goals?
- **What are your organization's most critical issues** and potential crises?
- **How would you describe the management style** of your organization's leader?
- **Which past event** has had the greatest effect on your organization?
- **What is the one thing** that you would never want your organization to change?

-adapted from "Using Your Organization's Culture to Build Productivity & Reputation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 6, [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members)