

Reflections On Partnerships

Why are partnerships important?

In times of increasing accountability, partnerships are viewed as a way to maximize effectiveness and efficiency, while maximizing the use of resources. For some, it appears that the move to partnership has been “laid on” by external forces. Yet partnerships, when they are well-planned and created within a spirit of goodwill, can result in new ways of working and new programs/services, and rejuvenate partnering agencies/organizations.

How do you create partnerships?

Start early. Developing a partnership is really about building a relationship. It is unwise to contact an agency or organization to secure a letter confirming a partnership just a few hours or days before you submit a proposal for funding. Remember, if you have listed this party as a partner in a proposal for funding, you need to honour this commitment. So, it’s important that the conditions of the partnership are clearly understood by both parties.

Determine why you want to partner. The most frequent reason for finding a partner is to secure resources for a program or project. Like any relationship, both parties need to benefit. Consider very carefully what benefits this partnership will bring to your agency/organization and what benefits the partnering agency/organization will achieve. The best way to determine the value of this potential partnership is to have a discussion with each other.

Determine benefits and costs. In the not-for-profit sector, it is often challenging to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the programs and/or services we provide. In valuing a partnership, it is important to realistically assess the benefits of the partnership, the costs in dollars and time, and any potential negative consequences of partnering.

Put it in writing. We need more than a letter of support from our partners. It is extremely important that there is clear documentation of the scope and conditions of the partnership.

This includes considerations such as:

- the nature and scope of the partnership
- the resources provided by each partner
- the resources accessed by each partner
- supervision of staff members and reporting relationships
- the criteria by which the success of the partnership will be measured
- how conflict or differing opinions will be resolved
- under what conditions and by what process can the partnership be terminated
- the liability and risk assumed by each partner

Get commitment at all levels. Partnership discussions typically start between two individuals. It may be two front-line workers, two program managers or two executive directors. Usually there is an established relationship between these two people that provides “fertile ground” to start discussions about working together. It is important to engage those staff members whose work would be affected by a partnership in the discussions. The “buy-in” to the partnership needs to exist at all levels of the agency/organization, including the board of directors.

How do you build and maintain partnerships?

Continuous communication. Partnerships, like any relationships, need continuous “care and feeding.” Invite your partners to your agency’s/organization’s celebrations and special events. Make sure that they receive a copy of your annual report, newsletter and other publications.

Hold regular meetings to review the progress of the project/program in which you are partners. Meet twice a year to discuss future plans and possible new ventures.

Balance passion and patience. Working effectively in partnership takes more time than working alone. Two critical elements of an effective partnership, trust and respect, take both

time and patience. Premature signing of a partnership agreement may lead to an early demise of the venture.

Keep each other updated. It is important that partners advise each other of changes in the agency/organization that may affect the partnership. Where possible, take a proactive approach to planning for the impact of changes such as new leadership, funding cutbacks, altered strategic directions and staffing changes, so as to minimize potentially adverse effects on the program/project as well as the partnership.

Stay connected. Organizational partnerships, like personal relationships, experience ebbs and flows. Once the joint work of a partnership is completed, it is easy to neglect the partnership.

The 80/20 rule of sales—that 80 percent of your business comes from 20 percent of your customers—is also true of partnerships. Continuing to foster the partnership can lead to new initiatives, valuable information exchanges and new partnerships.

What are the challenges in partnerships?

Looking to performance. For some, the thrill of partnership lies in the pursuit and securing of a partner. While the development of a partnership requires substantial time, energy and resources, implementing a partnership, and following up on it, may require even more.

Create an implementation plan for a partnership, including outcomes and performance measures, to support continuous improvement. An efficiency-driven focus will lead agencies/organizations to review their partnerships from a cost-benefit perspective. Costs of a partnership may initially exceed the benefits. Regular review is necessary to identify the point at which a partnership offers diminishing returns.

It is equally important to assess the value of a partnership in terms of effectiveness, and this requires an assessment of the intermediate outcomes of the partnership. Long-term outcomes will be the truest measure of the success of the partnership.

Maintaining independence. Agencies/organizations that are partnering for one initiative may find themselves competing for resources for other projects/programs. It is not expected that partnering organizations will be “joined at the hip.” Rather, it is important to be open and to communicate about those situations where partnering agencies/organizations may be competing for funding or other resources.

Developing new partnerships. Agencies/organizations that are partners on one project or program may be in competition for resources for other initiatives. Openness about such situations will sustain the trust that is essential to a successful partnership.

In the end, partnerships are about relationships. As people join and depart from organizations, it is critical that relationships are continually developed and maintained. If efforts are not directed into these relationships, you may find that your partner has followed a former colleague or employee to another organization.

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This article was written by Wendy M. Doughty, PhD; 2006

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