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IN THIS ISSUE:

Don't Wait Until Your House Is Burning
Chief Development Officers Can Play a Role
Partnerships, Collaborations & Mergers - Not So Different
Key Success Factors
What the Successful Partner Should Consider
The Potential Pitfalls to Remember

We often overlook partnerships and collaborations as an effective way to stretch an agency's resources and leverage its assets. In our experience, agencies working together can frequently accomplish more than by working separately. It is more important than ever to think creatively about how you can serve your clients right now and continue to provide quality services over time.

Collaborations can be a powerful tool. You may be able to fulfill your mission to greater effect and use a potent strategy to help you realize your goals. Instead of building a new program or upgrading your internal facilities management staff, it may be more resource-efficient to find a partner who already does it well.

Don't Wait Until Your House Is Burning

Don't wait until the house is about to go up in flames, and the agency is in fiscal distress to consider partnering. At that point, you may no longer be an attractive suitor to anyone but yourself. Don't limit partnerships to an isolated, one-time event. Once integrated into an agency's ongoing strategic thinking, the board and senior management will become more attuned to the possible partnership opportunities "out there".

In this issue among other points, we will identify 6 key factors that we've observed in successful collaborations and what individual players did or considered to make themselves better partners. We'll also highlight some typical obstacles that derailed, or almost derailed, other partnership attempts.

Chief Development Officers Can Play a Role

Chief Fund Development Officers (CFDOs) are uniquely positioned to see potential opportunities. They are a key member of the executive management team, but externally focused with many relationships outside the agency. A development exec has a deep understanding of the organization, its programs, assets and strategic goals, and also the environment in which it must operate. He or she knows which agencies provide similar services; which orgs compete for funding; what service providers have the strongest reputations and who are known to be collaborators and innovators. Like CEOs, CFDOs look for external trends that may impact their organizations and work closely with their boards on strategic issues. If predisposed, they may identify potential partnership opportunities earlier than most of their colleagues.

Partnerships, Collaborations & Mergers - Not So Different

We tend to view collaborations, partnerships and mergers as part of a continuum, which share similar features. All have the same success factors; all must overcome similar obstacles; and all follow a comparable development path.

At one end of the collaboration continuum several players come together to produce a workshop -- relatively straightforward, without too many moving parts, like a date over a cup of coffee.

At the other end of the spectrum several agencies want to integrate their programs and provide a more comprehensive set of services for their overlapping populations. Naturally, this type of partnership involves much more commitment and a deeper, longer-term relationship. Each party must give up significant autonomy for an extended period of time, more like a marriage.

Time and autonomy are the underlying factors. Both vary according to the type of partnering relationship. What changes are the amount of control a partner keeps or gives up and the duration of the relationship itself - its anticipated life span.

Key Success Factors

To get a new partnership off the ground requires a strong leader with a clear vision, in essence a champion. But what are other critical success factors? Frankly they're not that different from what any healthy relationship requires.

We've found the following 6 attributes in successful partnerships:

1. Clear, documented goals to understand
 - a. What you want to accomplish by working together;
 - b. Whether these goals are mutually shared across all the parties; and
 - c. How the partnership furthers your agency's own goals and strategies.
2. Clear expectations for each partner, including
 - a. Well defined roles and responsibilities;
 - b. A recognition and appreciation for the unique capabilities and strengths each party brings to the table and a plan for how to use them; and
 - c. Confirmation of each party's level of commitment, and what they expect from one another.
3. Realistic outcomes that are trackable and measurable with timeframes - all documented.
4. An understanding of the opportunities that arise from the partnership and a mutually-agreed upon strategy to realize them.
5. An understanding of constraints, associated with the partnership, and a mutually-agreed upon strategy to mitigate them.

And last but certainly not least a **dual** focus both on the partnership's work and the partners' relationship - in essence the "care and feeding" of the partnership, itself.

What the Successful Partner Should Consider

What does a successful partner need to remember to increase the probability of a successful collaboration? We've found that they:

- Work with partners that they trust;
- Have an appetite for change and uncertainty;
- Take time to plan upfront;
- Communicate early and often; and
- Remember most collaboration efforts are ultimately about the client - and their ability to provide quality services and programs over time.

The Potential Pitfalls to Remember

We've observed recurring obstacles that can often be avoided with a bit of forethought, like:

- Inadequate commitment, whether management, staff, or board level,
- Insufficient resources - time, money, management,
- Wrong people on the team - like any change project you need input and buy-in and people who actually have decision-making ability,
- Incomplete due diligence - for e.g., you find out too late that your partner has a history of innovative ideas that have never been realized; or that your service partner is scheduled to provide critical back office services at the same time it launches its major accounting and reporting system upgrade, and
- Poor cultural fit - you pride yourself on having a flexible, entrepreneurial environment but your new partner is much more institutional and process-driven. The way you each make decisions may be radically different.

More importantly, start looking for opportunities to partner. Think of it as another way to leverage existing resources or attract more. You may achieve greater impact, sustain quality services and serve your clients and communities better over time.

We Want Your Knowledge! Let us know what you are doing to increase your impact, whether your grant-making, program effectiveness, leadership or organization's productivity. Your insights can help strengthen the sector.

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Ever Wonder Why You Sit in the Same Place?

According to researchers, people seem to sit in the same place time after time because it eliminates the need to "re-negotiate" their seating arrangements with others. In fact in one study by Marco Costa of the University of Bologna (Italy), students confined themselves to less than 3% of the available seating area. And who says that people aren't territorial?

Source: *Territorial Behavior in Public Settings*

Decision-Making Really Lags in the Typical Organization

Researchers, Marcia W. Blenko, Michael C. Mankins and Paul Rogers, determined that the average organization has the potential to more than double its ability to determine and carry out key decisions. Using a decision-effectiveness scale of 0 to 100, the best institutions score a 71 on average, but most organizations score a mere 28.

Source: *Decide & Deliver: 5 Steps to Breakthrough Performance in Your Organization*



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