Starting Small But Thinking Big About Collaboration?
THREE KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK UP FRONT

Earlier this month BoardSource, working in partnership with several leading nonprofits*, launched The Power of Possibility: Exploring Greater Impact through Strategic Partnerships. *The campaign highlights key starting points for organizations to begin thinking about how their efforts could be accelerated and amplified by working together through a strategic alliance or restructuring, but, even if it isn't the right moment for your organization to consider a more long-term or formal strategic partnership, there are smaller collaboration efforts that your organization can explore.*

Collaborating with the larger nonprofit community and other nonprofit leaders can have an immeasurable benefit for nonprofit organizations. Organizations that partner can amplify their voices on vital policy issues, learn new tactics from leaders dealing with the same challenges, and gain valuable feedback on how their organizations are perceived in the community they serve. This resource will help you identify the key questions to pose and answer at the very beginning of a collaborative effort.

A Note About Choosing A Partner:
A quick conversation with board and organizational leaders could probably generate dozens of organizations and stakeholders that would make worthwhile partners. The partner or partners you choose is heavily influenced by personal and professional relationships, the goals of the partnership, and a careful examination of shared values. The Power of Possibility campaign includes a **resource** that can help organizations work through the specific questions that an organization should ask when evaluating candidates for a collaboration partnership.

ANSWER THIS QUESTION: WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE?

Collaborative efforts can too often begin with a lot of enthusiasm and a fuzzy goal. These types of beginnings may eventually lead to useful results, but too often leave organizations feeling that precious time was wasted with little to show for it.

- Work with your partners to identify your overarching goal. For example, "Learn more about the ways our constituencies overlap so we can brainstorm holistic solutions to their challenges."

- Build measurable outcomes to deliver on that goal.

- Consider adding additional viewpoints to help refine your view of the problem. What have other nonprofits done in similar collaborations? What do your funders and stakeholders think about the issue?

In the field:
Acting on inspiration from an activity conducted by Independent Sector last year, the Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits convened nonprofit leaders from a variety of subsectors to reach consensus on three questions about the assets of the sector in the state, the actions they could take to address Oklahoma's challenges, and what the sector would need from the government to function effectively. The conversations led to the development of an open letter to state policymakers outlining the ways that the nonprofit sector and government can better partner for the good of the state.

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ANSWER THIS QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE BEST TACTICS TO MOVE FORWARD WITH OUR COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS?

Structure your activities in way that respects schedules and gives everyone the most possible time to achieve your objectives.

- Convening "town halls" may be a good way to get feedback from your stakeholders, but these are always advisory in nature. The decision-making process should be left to those entities that are directly involved in the collaboration.

- Sharing trainings with a similar nonprofit is great way to save costs and gain new perspectives, but don't assume that it will also create space for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing.

- Joint advocacy work is a great way for nonprofits to collaborate to improve the lives of constituents, but careful advance work is necessary to ensure message cohesion and agreement on the best course of action or policy proposal.

A note on social media outreach

When it comes to outreach to stakeholders and supporters, many small nonprofits rely on social media to share information, ask for support, and get feedback about their efforts. The positive aspects of social engagement include the ability to have informal communications directly with supporters to recruit advocates for policy change, identify new donors and volunteers, gain feedback on programs, and strengthen existing partnerships with other organizations by cross-promoting content. There are challenges to measuring the success of this kind of engagement, however. In a study of small nonprofits using social media tools for engagement, recently released by _Nonprofit Quarterly_, many organizations expressed frustration with an inability to identify whether or not fans of social media are active donors or volunteers. When dealing with advocacy, nonprofits struggled with "slacktivism," a challenged defined by the gap between online enthusiasm for a cause and offline efforts to do outreach on a particular issue.

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ANSWER THIS QUESTION: HOW WILL YOU PRIORITIZE YOUR COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS?

Before beginning any collaborative project, it's important to figure out where it will fit with your organizational priorities.

- Will this collaboration consume significant staff time or resources?

- How will you balance that against ongoing needs?

- Do you need to amend the budget or the operating plan to reflect the costs of these efforts?

- Do your partners or partner organization share your priority level? If not, how will you manage the difference?

In the field:
The Kentucky River Foothills Development Council, Inc. is so committed to their collaborative goals that they included them in their strategic plan. They associated their objectives with overarching results-oriented goals to help them measure the success of their efforts. This effort clearly indicates the value that the organization places on collaborative outreach and the successes they expect to reap as a result. That may not be the best approach for your organization, but it is critical that you determine how much time and talent you want to commit to any collaboration. Are your collaborative goals focused on knowledge-sharing between organizational leaders? This is obviously a goal that requires very little in the way of organizational commitment. Are you seeking a long-range partnership to advocate on shared policy goals? That's clearly an objective that will require some advance planning and strategic discussion.

The Bridgespan Group, LaPiana Consulting, The Lodestar Foundation, Lyda Hill, MAP for Nonprofits, and The Patterson Foundation, with additional support from the C.S. Mott Foundation and The Trusteee's Philanthropy Fund of Fidelity Charitable.

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