

All About Collaboration

Sam Frank, Synthesis Partnership

It could be argued that collaboration is the quintessential characteristic of the nonprofit sector. Once I focused on the topic of collaboration as this quarter's Critical Issue, I realized how much collaboration was at the core of all the others as well:

Collaboration among individuals:

- CI #1 Why Plan?
- CI #2 The Secret Life of Surveys
- CI #4 On Boards
- CI #5 The Structure of Planning
- CI #7 On Mission
- CI #14 Managing Change

Collaboration across functional areas:

- CI #6 Financial Modeling
- CI #8 The Measure of Success
- CI #9 Brand Identity
- CI #11 Integrated Planning
- CI #12 Business Planning
- CI #15 Strategic Action Plans

Collaboration with service providers:

- CI #10 Mind your RFPs & Qs
- CI #13 Facility Planning

Most of our previous discussions have focused on collaboration within the organization, but this time we're expanding the frame to include collaborations between organizations as well.

Collaboration between nonprofits

Unlike internal collaboration, collaboration with other organizations is not necessarily a fundamental requirement in every organization every day. But in one form or another it has become increasingly common.

With increases in technological and regulatory complexity, donor and consumer expectations, financial and time pressure, and competition for attention, collaboration can be an effective approach to expanding the reach of programs and services, making them more efficient and effective, getting support for them.

Collaboration can take many forms. In recent years there has been a lot of talk in the funding community about reducing overhead expenses of nonprofits by

eliminating redundancies. Quite often this is intended to mean mergers. Setting aside the question in any given case of whether a merger really makes as much sense on close inspection as it does as an outside idea, there are at least two major hurdles for mergers: it is very difficult to get executive directors and boards interested in pursuing them (for all kinds of reasons), and once a merger is consummated, the operational, strategic and cultural integration is often unsuccessful (also for all kinds of reasons).

A much easier way to reduce wasted efforts and resources is some more modest form of collaboration. Nonprofits can work together to extend their reach and increase their effectiveness in serving their mission at a number of different levels:

At the most basic level, separate organizations providing services for the same population may be able to serve their missions more effectively by **coordination**. This can be a matter of simply sharing calendars—soup kitchens serving meals on different days or times, organizations avoiding scheduling conflicts for fundraising events, independent schools consulting on snow days.

[continued on next page]

Planning for yourself?

We'll collaborate with you, offering as much (or as little) guidance as you need. Use our experience to assure your success. Contact Sam Frank to discuss the possibilities. 617 340 9991 sbf@synthesispartnership.com



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Beyond an arms-length scheduling relationship, organizations may be able to find common ground for **cooperation**. Performing arts groups or venues can jointly host a festival. Social service agencies can discuss and agree on the array of services they provide—differentiating services, geographies or populations. And similar organizations can gain valuable insights by pooling a wide variety of data in benchmarking consortia.

At the next level, nonprofits **collaborate** to achieve a goal that neither is capable of alone. Some advocacy organizations routinely form coalitions to integrate strategy in publicity, lobbying, or other action. Cultural organizations come together to create joint exhibitions and performances on a timely theme.

When a collaboration seems like a good long-term idea, organizations may enter into a more formal **joint venture** arrangement. This degree of integration shares some of the potential pitfalls of a merger, however, and should be examined very carefully before entering into contractual arrangements. One example from our work of a joint venture is a consortium of about 20 small organizations that joined forces to form a collective museum. This was an inspiring idea that turned out to be much more difficult to realize than any of the participating organizations realized. The fundamental missing element, developing a structure of trust, is described in “Trusting in Us”.

Resources for collaboration

In the spirit of collaboration, I’ve structured this e-letter as a collection of resources from multiple sources:

- “Use the Power of Meetings to Create a Culture of Collaboration,” a look at getting more out of the ways that we already spend our time., by Deborah Pruitt of Group Alchemy Consulting.
- “Trusting in Us,” an introduction to knowledge networks by Kate Pugh, of Align Consulting, in collaboration with me.
- “You+You+You=Partnership Program,” a resource list on non-profit partnerships assembled by Sophie Parker, of Sophie Parker & Associates LLC, in collaboration with the listserv of the Boston Facilitators Roundtable.
- Collaboration resources from the archive of Nonprofit Webinars and IdeaEncore, both services of GoodDoneGreat.

Use the Power of Meetings to Create a Culture of Collaboration

Deborah Pruitt, Ph.D., Group Alchemy Consulting

When you want to create more powerful collaboration, one of the quickest ways is through your regular meetings. The fact is that the true significance of meetings is rarely understood or developed. Most people think of meetings as situations for sharing information and getting things done. That is true, but they are much more than that.

Culture and Collaboration

Every time you meet together you create and recreate your group’s culture. And your culture is what determines what is possible in your organization.

Culture is the word we use for the network of relationships, ideas, beliefs, and behaviors that inevitably develop between people as they interact together. This includes the knowledge we hold for how we should behave, what we can expect from others, and how to define and pursue our interests and goals. In essence, the culture in your group serves as a template for how people choose their actions.

Power of Meetings

All cultures have rituals. Rituals are key events where people learn, experience, and enact the values and beliefs of their culture. For organizational cultures, the most prominent and meaningful ritual is usually the group meeting.

You may not be meeting with the stated intention to recreate your culture—but that’s exactly what is happening every time you meet. This is because how the meeting unfolds expresses the values and beliefs in the group.

For instance, when you make a decision to expand a particular program, you are acting on your values. If that decision is made with everyone’s involvement and input, then you are also supporting your value for collaboration. Similarly, when your meeting is based on open discussion of different ideas and leads to an inclusive conclusion, then you are supporting collaboration. When a decision is made unilaterally then you are supporting a hierarchical culture. Or if your meetings tend to be dominated by a few people and the ideas of those few prevail, then you are accepting that as part of the culture of your group and not developing the possibilities of collaboration.

Do your meetings support collaboration?

These questions can help you evaluate your culture. These apply to every meeting, whether just two people or two hundred.

- Do you achieve results in your meetings worthy of the investment of time?
- Do your meetings progress efficiently without getting bogged down in diversions or grand-standing?
- Does everyone leave your meetings with a clear understanding of decisions reached and fully committed to executing them?

- Do you engage different ideas and viewpoints in a positive manner—even when working through difficulties or conflict?
- Do people leave your meetings feeling energized and committed to the outcomes?

If you answered yes to most of these questions then you are probably using your meetings effectively. However, if any of your answers were no, then you have a substantial opportunity to shift your culture to one of much greater collaboration. Start with these steps.

1. **Make a commitment** to mastering collaboration. Have a conversation in your group about the importance of meetings for your culture and together make a commitment to holding powerful meetings. Invite everyone to take responsibility for the success of every meeting.
2. **Conduct a thorough evaluation** of your meetings so you know exactly where your best opportunities for improvement lie. Make sure that everyone gets to weigh in on assessing how engaging your meetings are and how efficiently you are drawing together the talents and expertise in your group. That’s collaboration!
3. **Create practices** that structure your meetings around your mission. Make sure that what you are doing in your meetings truly reflects your core values. For example, take the time to plan your meetings well with a clear purpose and agenda items that are tied to *specific outcomes*. Commit to learning new facilitation techniques and create expert facilitators in your group. Follow up after meetings to make sure that outcomes are delivered.

Meetings are great levers of change in your organization when you give them the attention worthy of important rituals. Because of the power of ritual to reinforce values and attitudes, attention to creating great meetings is a truly priceless way to inspire people to be more collaborative in everything they do.

Deborah Pruitt, Ph.D., anthropologist and founder of [Group Alchemy Consulting](#), is the author of Group Alchemy: The Six Elements of Highly Successful Collaboration. For more specific ideas about how to develop your meetings into engines of collaboration and success go to <http://www.groupalchemy.net> and get a complimentary copy of “Meeting Alchemy:™ Five Habits for Meetings That Produce Results.”

Trusting in Us

Kate Pugh, Align Consulting with Sam Frank, Synthesis Partnership

In the 1980s and 1990s many nonprofits realized that they couldn’t go it alone. Donors increasingly expected their recipients to increase efficiency, reduce redundancy, and not “reinvent the wheel.” At the same time, the Internet added to the volume and complexity of what we needed to know. In response we tried partnerships, but that approach proved somewhat inflexible. Then, in the 2000s and 2010s,

nonprofits added a new model: the community of practice or knowledge network, or “network,” for short.

What’s different with the network is members’ voluntary participation and relative autonomy. Through the network’s diversity and decentralization, we’ve started to see more reach to constituencies that are connected by only “weak ties,” greater ability to scale and spread ideas, more agile program coordination, and ultimately more impact on the greater good.

Research conducted by Kate Pugh and Larry Prusak for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation identified five distinct behaviors of members in a functioning network: 1. Articulating common objectives 2. Claiming a cohesive identity 3. Connecting generously out to their personal networks 4. Voluntarily using a working “platform” 5. Collaborating in a way that sacrifices individual goals for the common good

These behaviors appear to come from a drive to economize on resources, feel connection and pursue a common purpose. That drive is a sense of mutuality—a shared identity and a shared sense of fate.

However, we learned that mutuality and shared fate, no matter how compelling, do not produce the functioning network behaviors on an ongoing basis. Members can get weary or distracted. And even the common purpose can appear fuzzy as the environment shifts around us. For a network to use those functional behaviors sustainably it must succeed in *igniting and renewing the flame of trust*.

To develop trust, network leaders must set into motion a powerful feedback loop of members’ realizing network benefits, coming to trust in the network, acting out the five behaviors listed above, and realizing more benefits.

Trust is certainly not a new topic for nonprofit leaders. Many have spent decades looking at how to build a brand or a profile that is trustworthy. Rob Cross, in *The Hidden Power of Social Networks* (2004), lists eloquently the profile of individual trustworthiness: 1. Act with discretion 2. Match words and deeds 3. Communicate often and well 4. Establish shared vision, language 5. Highlight knowledge boundaries 6. Know when to step out of your role 7. Give away something of value 8. Help people refine unclear ideas 9. Make decisions fair and transparent 10. Hold people accountable for trustworthy behavior

But what about trustworthiness for the network? How do you build trustworthiness in a collective? Can a group be transparent, self-aware, and accountable to the point that one could safely assume that success will come from it? In a recent webinar poll ([Nonprofit Webinars](#), March 28, 2012), participants had doubts. Trust and collaboration were the most deficient network behaviors:

<i>Which of these behaviors is lagging in your knowledge network?</i>	
Commonly agreed goals and objectives	28%
Connectivity (reaching beyond the network)	38%
Using a working platform	44%
Cohesiveness	50%
Collaboration and trust	53%

With the individual, trust comes through evidence of success, practice and association with success. Likewise, with groups, trust emanates from experience (evidence). And, where evidence is lacking or impractical, trust comes from signals. In the Gates research we found that both evidence and signals were embedded into the design and maintenance of successful networks.

Network design dimensions translate into trust signals and trust factors:

Let’s take two examples, the Ohio-based Strive Network and a New England-based museum consortium:

Strive

The Strive Education Network, which has been commended by John Kania and Mark Kramer (FSG Social Impact Advisors) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, focused on bringing best practice education policy and practice to the Cincinnati area by uniting what had become competitive factions of investment in a troubling education sector. They sought to reduce waste and persistent mismatches in investments, and the confusion and resentment that ensued.

Strive generated trust among members—policy makers, teachers, parents, students, donors, civil servants, school volunteers. They did this through a clarity of purpose, shared theory of student learning, clarity of network member roles, clarity of metrics, and the courage to convene even competitive members into collaborations. Most visibly, they adopted “platform” resources, like tools, calendars, agendas and policies for engaging as a network, and members proudly displayed Strive logos in their materials to show their participation in Strive and their commitment to its values. (The Strive model is now available to launch or improve educational networks all over the United States.)

Museum Consortium

A consortium of almost 20 independent historical and cultural organizations came together to present the multicultural story of a community. The project began with two issues: small museums’ lack of mainstream audiences, and costs associated with redundancy of administrative functions among them.

The conversation quickly moved beyond sharing space to the appeal of telling many histories side-by-side to an audience immersed in a combined historical experience.

The consortium had initially organized itself in an intentionally loose and flexible structure suited to an embryonic venture that needed to remain nimble as it explored the nature of what it wanted to become and achieve. Yet with the imminent approach of substantial exhibit costs, major construction commitments, a broadening capital campaign and significant increase in staffing levels, there were compelling needs for structural changes in governance and management.

When presented with a proposal for productive collaboration, including policies, procedures and separation of fiduciary from programmatic responsibilities (based on successes and failures elsewhere), the board, made up of one representative from each of the member organizations, would not agree to give up any of their independence or prerogatives. Having not prepared for the realities of actually working together by building trust into the consortium design, they were not able to collaborate effectively to realize their dreams. They hadn’t invested in the proxies to build cohesiveness, they hadn’t built a meaningful expectation of sharing resources, they hadn’t started with a transparent process and measurable results, and they hadn’t adopted “platform” resources, like tools, agendas and policies.

Conclusion

The strategy / structure / tactics network design dimensions are all fundamental to success. Yet even with careful design, there is no guarantee of a virtuous cycle of engagement, commitment, and outcomes without intentional strategic thinking, including conscious, deliberate creation of trust. The trust factors—proxies, persistence and performance—may very well be the best compass for network leaders. Attention to trust appears to be the burning flame of Strive Network, and possibly the most crucial failure of the museum consortium.

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Strive Network	Museum Consortium
Proxies	
Shared vision and leadership model	Charismatic leader; assumed shared vision
Efforts to include all stakeholders, including donors	Asymmetry of capabilities not addressed
Published objectives, by sector	Governance model not mapped to capabilities
Persistence	
Transparent operating model	Resistance to focus on the operating model
Regular meetings, content shared online	Lack of platform resources (tools, agendas, policies)
Respectful tone in communications	
Performance	
Metrics routine, published	No firm metrics established

You + You + You = Partnership Program

Sophie Parker, of [Sophie Parker & Associates LLC](#), was invited by the Massachusetts Cultural Council to give a talk in support of its [Adams Arts program](#), which gives funding for programs that create jobs and income, revitalize downtowns, and draw cultural tourists. Adams-funded projects leverage the assets of the creative sector—artists, cultural organizations, and arts-related businesses—to generate economic activity. She has worked with a number of the Adams Arts grantees, mostly in situations where the glow of successful partnerships had worn off, and the group had been in conflict and maybe stuck in a place of indecision—should we go forward, and if so how? Should we disband, and if so, how can we do that responsibly? The challenge for the talk was to come up with a set of resources for a widely diverse group of potential and current “informal” partnerships, from groups that already had funding and those that were brand new to the field.

Sophie used the listserv of the [Boston Facilitators Roundtable](#) as a collaboration tool to gather resources on developing and maintaining sustainable partnerships. She asked this group of over 600 facilitators, organizational development consultants, and business coaches, “What resources for developing partnerships would you recommend?” Some of the resources address public engagement; some are oriented towards creating partnerships in a business context, and some towards nonprofit endeavors, as well as public/private partnerships.

Sophie Parker (Sophie Parker and Associates, <http://www.sophieparker.com/>) helps executives and managers in complex organizations tackle changes in the workplace.

For live links to the resources on this page, go to the web version of this e-letter: <http://bit.ly/critical16>

Free resources

- [15 Steps for Successful Strategic Alliances \(and Marriages\)](#), Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Harvard Business Review blog, 2010. Unlike full-blown mergers, in which two really do become one because one company disappears, alliances and partnerships resemble modern marriages: separate careers, individual checkbooks, sometimes different names, but the need to work out the operational overlap around household and offspring. This post offers a guide to ensuring success as every stage of the relationship.
- [Collective Impact](#), John Kania and Mark Kramer, The Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011, notes that large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated intervention of individual organizations.
- [How to Create Successful Partnerships—a Review of the Literature](#), Valerie Wildridge, Sue Childs, Lynette Cawthra, and Bruce Madge, Health Information and Libraries Journal, 21, 2004, concentrates on literature that can provide guidance for people planning to set up a partnership, or re-evaluating an existing partnership. Sections include: definition of partnership, types of partnership, partnership initiatives, drivers, critical success factors, barriers, benefits, the process of partnership, and evaluation and assessment tools.
- [Meeting the Collaborative Challenge Workbook](#), The Drucker Foundation, Jossey-Bass, 2002, focuses on developing strategic alliances between nonprofit organizations and business, noting that the challenges our society faces cannot be met by any one organization or sector alone. Effective collaboration with other nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses is an imperative.
- [Resource Guide on Public Engagement](#), The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, 2010, offers resources to help people understand and build skills in dialogue, deliberation and public engagement, along with underlying principles, frameworks and examples.

Non-free resources

- [Fieldstone Alliance Nonprofit Guide to Forming Alliances: Working Together to Achieve Mutual Goals](#), Linda Hoskins and Emil Angelou, 2005, \$30, focuses on the benefits of minimizing complexity in planning and implementing alliances.
- [Working Together: A Toolkit for Cooperative Efforts, Networks and Coalitions](#), Institute for Conservation Leadership, \$35, shares ideas, models, and practices to help coalitions or cooperative efforts avoid reinventing the wheel, evade common pitfalls, and travel well.
- [The Strategic Partnering Pocketbook](#), Tony Lendrum, McGraw Hill, 2004, \$20, uses diagrams, cartoons, check sheets, and public and private sector mini case studies to explain the principles, concepts and practices behind partnerships and alliances.
- [The Partnering Solution](#), William R. & Jean S. Ronco, Career Press, 2005, \$17, shows employees and managers how to work together, with strategies and tools.
- [The Partnering Intelligence Fieldbook](#), Stephen M. Dent & Sandra M. Naiman, Brealey Publishing, 2002, \$40, offers tools, techniques, and skill-building exercises for increasing partnering intelligence in a business environment.