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This blog is for and about nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations and leaders.

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[Nonprofit Collaborative or Partnership Agreements:](#)

It is no secret that for nonprofits (and the communities and constituents served) the major buzzwords are collaboration and partnership. For some nonprofits it may mean the difference between survival and dissolution. Is it clear what groups mean when these words are used? For instance, does the “collaboration” discussed in an application for funds mean a referral system, or does it mean a letter saying “we support” each other or is there something more in depth? How should a joint-project be addressed to commit resources together to resolve a community or a customer problem? What about a joint proposal for a grant; how will that be handled; how will the decision of who is lead applicant be made?

It is useful to consider developing good faith partnership agreements detailing who the partners are, what each will provide and to whom. The parties should perform due diligence in developing the relationship. There can be no secrets. The agreement should have a mutual hold-harmless clause, responsibilities for insurance, maintaining each other's independence and stating a beginning and ending date. A part of the agreement may include an authorization of release of information between the agencies for customers to sign. The issues of grievance and disputes between the parties and the process for handling them need to be spelled out, such as who has final say on paying bills, arbitration and so on.

In addition there should be solid discussion and written statements about most or all of the A-Z considerations below. These need to be put on the table, discussed and resolved.

- A. Ethical issues – what are they for the partnership? Are there conflicting values or beliefs or corporate culture? Are there legally required ethical standards or professional standards? Is there a process for addressing these issues?
- B. Conflict of Interest – What are they and how may they be perceived? Are the parties prepared to put them out front for discussion and resolution, how are they handled by each organization
- C. Confidentiality- are there any issues of confidentiality; how will that be handled, will there be personnel and HIPAA issues?
- D. How will referrals between the partners be made? Will they be different from current arrangements? Are there customer, legal or ethical barriers?
- E. Are there new liability and insurance issues?
- F. How will you plan and begin to balance the usual day-to-day activities and the new partnership work, will programmatic mission, vision, values, culture, spirituality, experience, competency and priorities affect the partnership?
- G. How will leadership be determined? Will there be a plan for succession of leadership? How will leadership

develop in the partnership? This can be an excellent opportunity to develop new leadership in both or all organizations.

H. Entrepreneurial spirit -- nothing is "free" – What budgetary needs are there for planning the partnership and for maintaining it? What will be the costs, what are the full (hidden) costs? How will administration and fiscal responsibilities be approached? Is there a business plan for this venture?

I. What are the goals, objectives and outcomes and how are they measured within the partnership? Is there a different view among the partners about measurement, goals and objectives? Look at monitoring results; customer and funder satisfaction; how will you publicize results?

J. Is there agreement about the use of written work plans, job descriptions and supervisory relationships for community work and developing/maintaining the partnership?

K. How do you organize and sell the partnership to other management personnel, staff, boards, current funders, other groups in the community? Have there been scans of the staffing for the day-to-day activities and the proposed new activities?

L. What if you propose the idea of a partnership with your management personnel and your office staff and they are not ready or willing to accept it? How will that be addressed? How will you handle the issues before they arise? How will rumors be handled? How will disagreements be handled?

M. How will the ambiguity in partnerships for staff who are management in the middle and not part of the negotiations creating the partnership be addressed? You will need top and middle management as leadership in the community, as follower in the community, handling failure and managing the partnership

N. What are the plans to handle the division of planning, tasks and fiscal aspects and other implications of the partnership - Communication, communication, communication

O. Is the technology between the partners sufficient to produce necessary reports and for communication?

P. How will the partners face diversity in the partnership, diversity of boards, staff and customers?

Q. How will you avoid stakeholders looking at the partnership as a threat to certain segments of the community; has there been a community scan of not only need but also the perceptions that exist now and can occur later? What are the potential economic, social and political repercussions for this partnership?

R. Has there been an assessment of the community's readiness for the partnership, the value of local presence, co-location, job sharing and ubiquity -- how will the customers, their communities and nonprofit organizations roles evolve naturally and how will they change by the collaboration? How well do the leaders know the people and the demographics?

S. Is there agreement to viewing a continuum of services, involvement, tasks, roles, strategies, activities and feedback, feedback and feedback and evaluation

T. How will staffing issues in the partnership be developed – will there be an overriding concept about what is expected of staff; or expected of some staff; or a special unit; or no expectation at all for some staff – will there be joint staff meetings and planning sessions?

U. Will the partners seek grants and funding together and/or separately during the agreement, developing additional agreements and contracts between the parties on other issues?

V. How will training and orientation be developed for board and staff, management staff, fiscal personnel and support staff for partnering?

W. How and who will handle media and public relations during and the conclusion of the partnership; how will bad press be handled?

X. What steps will be taken to prepare the customers' communities and partners as advocates supporting the partnership, shared customers and customer education

Y. What are the opportunities for partnering – employment, job training, housing, health issues,; Medicaid or food stamps outreach, homelessness, youth and children, technical assistance, domestic violence, self-sufficiency issues for customers, technology infrastructure and innovation for the customer communities, access to services, AIDS/HIV, lead-based paint, elderly, diversity, cultural and language-based activities, gay and lesbian initiatives, housing, poverty, disability-related issues, rural or urban activities, the arts, school/education/parent/community issues, drug and alcohol addiction, unsafe working conditions, migrant workers, the interface of employment and welfare, plant closing, community development, environment and many others

Z. What is the anticipated future? What will the partnership leave with the community for their own use in the future? What are the partners open to consider in the future? How will control and spin-off, future collaboration, partnering and cooperation, possibility for merger or alliance be viewed – how will you know when it is “over and done”? What are the benchmarks for the future?

The written agreement needs the assistance of an attorney to avoid pitfalls before they will happen -- and they will happen. Each partner should seek its own attorney for review or creation of documents. I hope the considerations above will assist in that preparation. It is an exciting movement and there should be every incentive for all to want to do it again.

RESOURCES

Community Partnership Toolkit - <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/CustomPubs/CPtoolkit/CPToolkit/>

Why Is It Important to Develop a Community Partnership? - http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/cf_pages/partnerships.htm

Three community partnerships celebrated – <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/april29/community-partnership-awards-042909.html>

Community Partnership Initiative - <http://www.communitypartnership.us/>

Building Effective Community Partnerships - <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/resources/files/toolkit1final.pdf>

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