As more and more nonprofit organizations are considering collaborating with others, many struggle with how to get the ball rolling. Organizations should start by analyzing the set of relationships that they maintain, understand their environment, determine their own “personality” in collaborative efforts, imagine the possibilities and then … get started!

**Develop a Relational Map**

It is important to not just think of your own organization’s survival in these times, but also consider the organizations that support the populations they serve and to consciously construct a relational map. A relational map categorizes individuals and organizations that are touched by your organization, assesses the quality of those relationships and includes notes related to the last contact with the individual or category as a whole. The categories should include funders, partners, organizations that you refer to, and those that refer to you, key community organizations, political leaders and others that may be relevant to your organization. Then, as changes in the environment impact your field, monitor that map to understand the effects on the listed organizations. The map should answer the following questions:

- Who are the organizations that refer clients to you?
- Who do you refer to for ancillary or supportive services?
- If your clients need housing supports, or basic needs supports, who is providing them?

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After developing your own relational map, identify the individuals/organizations with which you have strong, positive relationships and/or a common focus, client base or geographic area.

Understand Your Environment

It is also important to examine trends in the environment. Engage in discussions with individuals who may be aware of key trends affecting services, service delivery models, funding and changes in demographics. These individuals could be funders, a staff person at an industry association or an industry expert. These conversations will ensure that your assumptions about the environment are accurate as you consider collaborative opportunities. Your competitors are also an aspect of your environment. Key questions to answer are:

- Who are your competitors and what shape are they in?
- What are their plans…which programs will they close or cut back on? What funding streams are increasing? What funding streams are decreasing?

• If you have partnerships with other organizations, how are they doing? How are they being impacted by changes in the environment?

Your Collaboration “Personality”

Over the course of working on collaborative models for fifteen years, we have noticed that organizational leaders who seek collaboration fall into three distinct types. We call them (1) Peers; (2) Experts; and (3) Servant Leaders. Some organizational leaders hold true to type in every collaboration in which they participate; others are more strategic in choosing a psychological stance toward a particular opportunity. Just as there is no “wrong” personality type, there is no “wrong” negotiating style. Let’s look at each type:

Peers: these collaborative participants put a lot of faith in process. They believe that if the right process steps are followed and if their collaborative partners engage in the process with integrity, both a strong relationship and a solid, positive outcome will emerge. They are likely to insist on jointly developed ground rules for who will lead meetings, how decisions will be made, how problems will be addressed, how grievances will be handled, etc. They feel that clear guidelines and procedures help to avoid inefficient process—and having these discussions early helps potential partners learn about one another’s working styles and priorities.

Experts: these collaborative participants have a very clear idea of what they are trying to accomplish by participating in the collaboration. They do not always share what their true goals are, feeling that they can teach their partners over time and use their superior knowledge to influence how the relationship evolves. They are slower to commit to written agreements.

Continued on next page
and insist on strongly influencing the content of any agreements that do emerge. They tend to object to any constraining structures, such as ground rules or strict procedural rules, preferring to use their significant knowledge and ability to hold sway or lead the discussions.

Servant Leaders: these collaborative participants take a facilitative and supportive approach to relationship building. While they have goals, they see themselves as achieving those goals through influential relationships with other organizations that they have supported. They view organizational relationships as organic and evolving and define their role in reaction to what the other organizations involved do, say or want. Pursuing their mission occurs as opportunities arise within these relationships.

It is important to think through what your strategy is in each collaborative effort. Just as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator can help a team of individuals understand one another’s work styles; a discussion of basic approach to the collaborative process can help leaders become more aware of their own conscious or unconscious choices about their own underlying assumptions.

Collaborative Possibilities

Another component that strengthens these conversations is knowledge about the possibilities. There has never been a time where understanding what is possible has been more crucial. Nonprofit leaders must learn how to use models of collaboration and consolidation: formal agreements, joint ventures, management service organizations, networks, parent corporations and mergers. There are innumerable examples that can be researched and examined in the National Collaboration Database. Forging Nonprofit Alliances is also an excellent resource for understanding the variety of models and also includes frameworks and examples to support the collaborative process. It is up to you to build your understanding of the possibilities that are available to you.

Get Started!

What’s next? Here comes the coffee. Collaborative efforts can simply begin with a cup of coffee and a conversation with another nonprofit leader that you have identified as a possible partner. Key questions for your discussion may include:

- Where are our efforts to support our clients aligned?
- What are the impacts of the current environment on our clients?
- Are you interested in exploring ways that we can support one another?
- What is the status of your programs and funding?
- Who else may be interested in talking with us?

So give it a shot, consider the options, and reach out to a potential partner…what have you got to lose?

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