

## **When Collaborations Go Bad** by Florence Green, Vice President, IdeaEncore Network

“Thou shalt collaborate!” Funny, I don’t remember that one on Moses’ tablets. Yet, *collaboration* has become a major buzzword among philanthropists and policymakers, a prescription for how today’s nonprofits should restructure themselves to meet new challenges and demands. The issues we face – sustainable growth, economic crisis, health care reform and environmental degradation, to name but a few – are interrelated. It makes *sense* for nonprofits to collaborate with each other, and with business and government as well.

Collaboration should create synergy, benefits that organizations wouldn’t get when working alone. It should be a way to find a richer, more comprehensive appreciation of the problem or a more effective solution. In the end, the purpose of collaboration is to transform how groups do their work together. Collaboration requires the maximum of both cooperation and assertiveness by all players. And, unless players experience measurable personal satisfaction and added organizational value from the collaboration process, it is not likely to succeed.

In fact, collaborative efforts that fail often demonstrate that sustaining collaboration is very hard work, and most of us really don’t know how to do it. (Not surprising when our society mostly recognizes the individual achievements of MVPs, while the team efforts that contribute to that individual achievement frequently go unheralded.) Worse still, groups are often unclear about what they are trying to *achieve* through collaboration.

Here we examine four of the most common underlying reasons collaborations fail.

### **When the Collaboration is Funder-Driven**

A few years ago, I worked with a West Coast city to redesign their grant-making process for youth programs. The intent was to develop a funding process that would facilitate and encourage greater collaboration among organizations serving young people. The city was not driven by a need to save money (a typical motivation of funder-driven collaboration), rather a citizens’ committee had proposed the idea of collaboration as a way to make programs more meaningful to young people. Despite several community meetings with youth service providers to explore ways youth programs might collaborate better, few meaningful proposals were generated.

Most of the proposals submitted involved reworked networking schemes; none addressed transforming the way youth groups had always done their work. When a few new players were awarded grants, several of the groups formerly funded went to city council members to complain that they had given their best to the city over the years and were now being treated badly. Turf protection and preoccupation over who would get what – a frequent killer of collaboration – overshadowed any efforts to find a common purpose.

Funders can be powerful partners in collaborative efforts. But participants must be sure that when funders call the meeting their financial or perceived influence does not hamper frank discussion about the purpose of the collaboration--otherwise, it will feel imposed and groups will participate because the funder called the meeting not because they want to collaborate. When that happens, groups usually cannot find a meaningful reason to work together.

Organizations often have difficulty getting past their initial suspicions about the funder's motives. Certainly, this doesn't *have* to happen, but it takes real maturity from the group and individuals involved to make a funder-driven collaboration work. Without nonprofit-based leadership to champion the idea of collaboration, it is difficult for most organizations to think beyond their own programming and staff needs, even when offered the opportunity.

### **When the Only Purpose is the Desire for Increased Income**

Several years ago three museums in the Midwest--children, art and general purpose museums--formed a partnership that consolidated their fundraising operations. But raising money together is rarely enough of a motivation to produce successful long-term collaborations. After 11 years of struggle, the organizations finally decided to deal with the thorny issues that kept them from working well together.

They found that the relationship was failing because the partners never felt that the money they got through collaboration was worth the effort to collaborate. Even more troubling, the organizational assessment I did for them revealed that staff members were spending about a quarter of their time discussing how the scheme was not working. Also each organization's board members (80 or so individuals) participating in the collaboration, but unfortunately, most acted in ways that promoted the narrow interests of their own organization, thus, defeating the original purpose of collaboration.

In hindsight the organizations felt they had not paid enough attention to three issues that continued to undo the collaboration: determining how the governing boards of each organization would participate, coordinating programming decisions, and determining how the community could be better served through the collaboration.

When the desire for more money is the driving force of the collaboration, partners will rarely be satisfied. They will frequently claim a proprietary obligation to protect "their" resources and funders.

### **When Approaches Fundamentally Differ**

The development and implementation of a compelling common purpose is often more difficult to do than one might think--even when you occupy the same ideological neighborhood. The vision of a "senior citizen program that protected and enhanced their quality of life" was the driving force behind a collaboration of several Southwestern nonprofits.

Unfortunately, program philosophies and visions were not discussed in depth before the organizations came together as a collaboration. Having similar missions and general philosophical orientation did not mean that players shared a common purpose. About half the group believed the best way to address the health problems of older adults was to move them into supported living arrangements; the other half believed the better response was helping the elders stay independent in their own homes.

Over the next several years, problems erupted continuously as the organizations tried to work together; eventually the collaboration self-destructed. As one executive director commented, "On paper it was wonderful, but there was not enough thinking about what we really wanted when we came together," with the result that when the groups came together, "we came together to fight."

Differences on the nature of the task and preferences for action were so deep the groups couldn't find a common purpose compelling enough to make collaboration worthwhile. Unfortunately this is not a rare example of failed collaboration.

### **Lack of Commitment - When Buy-in is Inadequate**

When invited to join local groups that had come together to explore the possibility of collaboration, you sometimes discover that many of those attending lack the authority to commit their organizations to decisions reached in the meeting. In other words, the group's representative is merely holding a place at the table for someone of higher status in the organization. When pressed, the level of commitment of those present is unclear. What does this do to your enthusiasm for collaboration?

Successful collaboration involves some degree of letting go of personal ego and the needs of individual organizations so that you and your organization can accomplish the larger agenda of the collaboration. It is essential that all players know what they and their organization are willing to invest, what they are willing to give up and what they simply cannot compromise on. Finding common ground can be very difficult, particularly when nonprofits hold that their customary way of working is their greatest asset or strength.

A wise person once observed that we may not always get what we pay for in this life, but we will certainly pay for whatever we get. Collaboration, like most relationships, demands an upfront investment of time, attention and enthusiasm to build and sustain it over time--all collaboration partners need assurance that commitment is both binding and reciprocal.

### **Final Word**

After his release from prison and election to the presidency of South Africa, Nelson Mandela stood before his countrymen and observed, "As we let our own light shine, we consciously give other people permission to do the same."

Successful collaborations occurs when people from diverse backgrounds share leadership, skills and insights, practice patience and flexibility, and, as Mandela said, let their own lights shine--and give others permission to do the same.

### **About the Author**

Florence Green is the Vice President of IdeaEncore Network. She has participated in countless collaborations and consulted for numerous collaborating organizations throughout the US.