

Collaboration Considers Individuals and Groups

Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director, San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation

One of the biggest barriers to forming successful collaborations between nonprofits is fear of the unknown. Will we be successful? How much of our work will change? Who will lose their jobs because of overlapping duties?

These questions are fundamentally about the individuals involved rather than the organizations. But because organizations are made up of people, the individual concerns must be addressed, including the question, "What's in it for me?"

I explored this question with Ed Cox, a Morro Bay-based executive coach of business owners and senior leaders.

"It is essential that everyone involved is allowed to ask their questions," Cox says. "They must express their concerns and fears before they will see the importance of collaborating, and their comments may contain important information that will help shape a stronger agreement."

At the heart of any collaborative effort is the desire to increase the impact of the organizations involved. This is accomplished by co-laboring in some way, such as sharing resources, programming jointly or merging operations, among other examples. These activities leverage scarce resources, thus allowing participating organizations to strengthen or expand services.

The process begins when enough common interests are identified, enabling a discussion about working together to begin. "Then the relationship must be cultivated," Cox says. "Everyone is responsible for its success. Nurturing the relationship continues to build trust that the process will lead to the most appropriate outcome."

Fostering an atmosphere of trust and safety is as important within organizations as it is between organizations, Cox says. Everyone must trust that what is being said and proposed is in the best interest of organizations' missions, and everyone must feel that their comments and concerns are being honored and respected.

Nascent collaborations seem to most frequently fall apart for either of two reasons: the process used to implement a collaborative effort is so loosely organized the participants drift away from what is new and uncomfortable; or the self-interest of the participants sabotages the process.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the governing board to keep everyone focused on the big picture.

"Governing boards must get beyond any individual's self-interest," Cox says. "The board must focus on mission, and mission supersedes any employee's interest."

Cox continues, "Board members, volunteers and staff are attracted to serving nonprofits for some reason," Cox says. "They want to have meaning, they want to give back or they want to help meet a community need. If they stay focused on these things, almost all other issues can be resolved."

"Ironically, strategic collaboration enhances the energy and vitality of the organization," he says. "The focus on mission and purpose is what nurtures people; a focus on budget and operations

drains them. Once people experience the benefits of good collaboration, they will likely seek more opportunities.”

Save the date: The 2009 Collaboration Forum will be held Oct. 23 in San Luis Obispo. This is an excellent opportunity for boards and staff to learn about how to effectively collaborate.