

The Many Faces of Collaboration

Contributed by Patricia Gomez, Legal & Organizational Nonprofit Consultant

In these stressful funding times there is much talk about collaborating: it's the only way to survive, or better yet, to thrive. But what is this thing called collaboration? Depending upon who you talk to or what you read it's a whole host of things. Who's right?

Collaboration, also referred to as forming 'strategic alliances', is better thought of as a continuum of strategies. At his workshop in San Luis Obispo last year, Andy Robinson described it this way: "On one end of the spectrum is independence and on the other end is merger. In between the two are gradients of working together."

Informal sharing of information or resources is a form of collaborating. Many organizations in SLO do this often, such as maintaining resource lists and referring clients or patrons to other providers. Joint purchasing is another example, increasing purchasing power that no single organization would have in soliciting goods or services.

Moving down the continuum, the best way to tackle a project may be a more structured partnership, which may require that each organization change the way it operates. Two examples are joint ventures and coalitions. The former often refers to a one-time partnership usually between two organizations, with assumed shared responsibility of the success or failure of the project. Coalitions, of which SLO has many successful examples, bring several organizations together on a project. Both of these permit the organizations involved to retain their independence.

At the far end of the spectrum, a collaboration may see the birth of a new organization. This could be through the dissolution of the existing groups and formation of a new entity, or one group could dissolve while the other expands through the transfer of assets, liabilities and programs.

ACT for Youth, a collaboration of New York schools and agencies that conducts research and training for youth development programs, describes the continuum similarly:

Networking: Exchanging information for mutual benefit. This is easy to do; it requires low initial level of trust, limited time availability and no sharing of turf.

Coordinating: Exchanging information and altering program activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose. Requires more organizational involvement than networking, a higher level of trust and some access to one another's turf.

Cooperating: Exchanging information, altering activities and sharing resources for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose. Increased organizational commitment, may involve written agreements, and shared resources can involve human, financial and technical contributions. Requires a substantial amount of time, high level of trust and significant sharing of turf.

Collaborating: Exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and enhancing each other's capacity for mutual benefit and to achieve a common goal. The qualitative difference to cooperating is that organizations and

individuals are willing to learn from each other to become better at what they do. Collaborating means that organizations share risks, responsibilities and rewards. It requires a substantial time commitment, very high level of trust, and sharing turf.

Integrating: Completely merging two organizations in regards to client operations as well as administrative structure.

So when should your organization collaborate? And with whom? And where along the spectrum? Each of these strategies can be appropriate for particular circumstances, which will bring with them various barriers and opportunities. Look for future Collaboration 2009 “Learn It” articles to learn more about those barriers and how to know if your agency is ready to grab one of those opportunities.