

Developing Collaborative Efforts

By: Gary Bernstein

Collaboration is one of those buzzwords that can refer to a lot of different things. A permanent merger between two organizations is perhaps the most intense example, but collaboration also includes simpler efforts such as short-term joint programming. Successful collaboration brings two or more organizations together to work in synergy, in an effort that is "more than the sum of its parts." That is, if both organizations worked apart, both would serve customers (internal or external) and produce some solutions/outcomes, but not as many and as well as if both organizations worked together. With a joint venture, there's an economy of scale, or sharing of resources, that lowers costs and focuses more resources on serving customers. Producing programs, marketing, dealing with boards, and raising money are similar challenges for every nonprofit. Consolidating these functions across two or more organizations can lead to a better quality product as well as lowering costs.

In the past few years, many nonprofit organizations have been forced to eliminate some of their programs. Cuts in central funding have become severe. Corporate, foundation, and business support is often provided on the condition that nonprofits become leaner and more business oriented.

For any program to be truly successful, the planning committee should explore the idea of collaboration with other like-minded organizations. This includes not only organizations with

which you have formal partnerships, but also less formal collaborations and relationships with other service agencies in your community. Providing outstanding service is challenging, so by developing collaborative efforts can possibly develop new interagency relationships and expand the resource and support base for the long-term sustainability of your agency programs.

According to Joe Tolan, CEO and President of the Metro United Way in Louisville, Kentucky, “Increasingly, funders will expect evidence of collaboration as they make grant decisions for the simple reason that collective impact is almost always greater than individual impact”. (Tolan, 2014)

A successful collaborative effort among two or more agencies or program departments calls for a certain equality and mutual respect for each other in the relationship. Nonprofits that are open to developing collaborative efforts may grow more sustainable relationships that leverage, strengthen and amplify the unique assets of both organizations. Herein is another example of why agency staff must have the people skills in developing positive relationships with staff from other organizations.

No nonprofit organization can long survive and succeed in advancing its mission while living independent of other nonprofits. Nonprofits gain information, political power, and personal and professional support from and in concert with other nonprofits. Thus, close working relationships, partnerships, and even joint ventures between nonprofit organizations are a fairly natural occurrence. (La Piana, 1997)

By developing a mindset and a willingness to work with other nonprofits on a collaborative effort could prove to be a solid way to obtain corporate funding and support.

A collaboration of nonprofit agencies with a clear and aligned mission might be more interesting to potential funders of your project or program. Funders often are frustrated when they see overlapping programs, service gaps, turf battles, and a lack of coordination among agencies. That is why funding organizations have begun to encourage, and in some cases to demand, closer collaboration between nonprofit organizations in return for new or continued funding.

“Nonprofit leaders need to think expansively and not just in the delivery of service. There needs to be an efficiency of service in the backroom office operations as well. This needs to happen without the nonprofit leader giving up one’s independence or autonomy. Specifically, a nonprofit leader should focus on his core business in providing outstanding programs and service to one’s constituents rather than in areas such as printing and information technology”. (Tolan, 2014)

JCC’s & YMCA’s can create a competitive advantage when they seek to differentiate themselves from their competition. Best practice dictates to develop products, services and partnerships that are unique and that stand-out from the competition. Developing a partnership with a like-minded nonprofit might be an opportunity to do just that, to create something unique for your agency.

A program or service is greatly enhanced by the combined efforts of two nonprofits with complementary strengths. These kinds of collaborative efforts can be easily adapted within any sports and fitness department. Partnerships with local hospitals and cardiac rehabilitation

programs make a perfect match with the nonprofits onsite exercise, fitness and wellness programs. Meeting and often exceeding the needs of your agency's special and diverse populations can be accomplished by partnering with the Arthritis Foundation or a similar like-minded agency by offering warm water activities in your indoor therapy pool. Grant makers are very interested in funding these types of collaborative efforts, especially when warm water therapy pools are so attractive and in high demand.

Due to the leadership and urging of Gheens Foundation Executive Director Carl Thomas, many compatible Louisville based nonprofit organizations have come together to partner with each other. On one occasion, when it was evident in the local community that contributions toward arts programs were declining, Thomas encouraged and pushed three distinct and separate agencies to come together and share not only space, but share financial, development and clerical staff as well.

It is interesting to note that according to Carl Thomas; even the foundation staffs of five Louisville-based funding organizations join together regularly and act as a team on a variety of projects that focuses on things that unite the community rather than what separates them.

Thomas says that it is great to get the grantors in one room together without any planned agenda talking and brainstorming ways nonprofit agencies can better work together with the purpose of improving the condition of the community. (Thomas, 2014)

Another example expressed by Joe Tolan, "Wouldn't it be great if we could have a sports minded agency like the YMCA or a Jewish Community Center partner with a nonprofit that has

no elements of sport activity in their program offerings. This would prove to be a fertile ground for a potential collaboration”. A case in point would be a preschool program for visually impaired children teaming up with the JCC or an equestrian center working hand in hand with an agency that provides services to children with autism and their families”. (Tolan, 2014)

In conclusion, based on a recent study by Recreation Management magazine, nearly 99% of the survey respondents (YMCA’s, YWCA’s, JCC’s, and Boys and Girls Clubs) reported that they form partnerships with others outside of their organization. The most common partnerships most nonprofits made were with local schools, health care and medical facilities and local businesses.

Gary Bernstein currently serves as President of Bernstein Group & Associates, LLC, a consulting firm helping nonprofits thrive. Gary Bernstein is the Editor-in-Chief of a 2015 textbook titled, *The Principles of Sports Marketing* with Sagamore Publishers. Most recently, his new 2016 book with Sentia Publishers available for purchase soon is titled, *Nonprofit Recreation and Sport Organizations: Principles and Practices in Leadership and Management*. For more information, contact Gary Bernstein at 757-667-0293 or gary@bernsteingroupandassociates.com.