MAY 2020

Strategic Nonprofit Leadership Series

Catching Lightning in a Bottle:

Structuring, Sustaining, and Reaping ROI from Strategic Partnerships through Negotiation, Cooperation, and Collaboration

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Introduction

The nonprofit or social sector is a force for good, from feeding hungry children, to protecting single species to entire ecosystems, to finding cures to diseases, to rebuilding neighborhoods, to creating safe routes to parks and schools, to developing character in America's youth, and to opening hearts and minds towards individuals with intellectual disabilities.

This article will focus on structuring and sustaining strategic partnerships, as a tool to successfully plan, implement, and evaluate impactfully measurable programs, services, events, products, research initiatives, and advocacy efforts for the individuals who the organization chooses to serve. This article will discuss the transactional function of strategic partnerships between organizations, yet the relational function of individuals charged with activating a partnership across a designated timeline (Schaumleffel, 2014a).

Lots of "do-gooders" want to "own their own nonprofit," often times because they cannot or will not "play nice in the sandbox" with others, which makes them a terribly poor candidate for effectively cooperating, collaborating, or participating in a partnership with anyone or with any other organization (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Some of these nonprofit founders have self-identified a need that they think someone "less fortunate" needs or they think they can make someone else's life better with or without their consent (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). What they tend to do is want to make others more like themselves. In general, a community probably doesn't need another new nonprofit organization, especially when the energy to start a new nonprofit organization could be expended on working to improve an existing and even struggling organization through strategic partnerships or even a strategic merger (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

In 20 years, from 2000 to 2020, the number of nonprofit corporations has almost doubled from 1 million to almost 2 million across the United States. About half of these organizations have gross revenues less than $100,000, which means they have almost no paid staff. With the proliferation of new nonprofit organizations, there is great competition for competent board members, generous donors, capable volunteers, and a talented and prepared workforce (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Seemingly, there is way too much duplication, and even triplication, of services in the same community, and, unfortunately, often, the services are really not all that effective at achieving the mission and meeting the needs of those individuals they choose to serve (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

All in all, there are a lot of nonprofit organizations that struggle (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). They struggle to pay the bills (Schaumleffel, Smith, & O'Dell, 2004). They struggle to survive. They struggle to plan (Bryson, 2004; Schaumleffel, 2003, 2019b; Schaumleffel, Bodey, & Martin, 2008; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). They struggle to implement their strategies. They struggle to understand how to make an impact on those they choose to serve (Salmon & Schaumleffel, 2017; Schaumleffel, 2017e; Schaumleffel, Dingle, Ortale, & Salmon, 2017; Schaumleffel & Doyle, 2013). They struggle to measure the impact they make on their mission and on meeting those in need (Bodey & Schaumleffel, 2009; Salmon & Schaumleffel, 2017; Schaumleffel, 2007b, 2008, 2014f, 2017e, 2018b, 2019f, 2020c; Schaumleffel, Davis, Bowman, Brinegar, & Vinson, 2012; Schaumleffel, Dingle, Ortale, & Salmon, 2017; Schaumleffel & Doyle, 2013; Schaumleffel & Salmon, 2007). They struggle to evaluate their effectiveness (Bodey & Schaumleffel, 2009; Salmon & Schaumleffel, 2017; Schaumleffel, 2007b, 2008, 2014f, 2017e, 2018b, 2019f, 2020c; Schaumleffel, Davis, Bowman, Brinegar, & Vinson, 2012; Schaumleffel, Dingle, Ortale, & Salmon, 2017; Schaumleffel & Doyle, 2013; Schaumleffel & Salmon, 2007).

Having the perspective that there are a lot of nonprofit organizations that struggle with finding competent board members, ensuring organizational sustainability, optimizing daily operations, maintaining mission-focus, and making a measurable impact, I have spent over thirty years on the front lines; in the trenches; in administration; on leadership teams, boards, and committees; and in part-time and full-time staff and volunteer roles that range from volunteering at vacation Bible schools to America Red Cross blood drives, from teaching swimming at the YMCA to serving as a voting member of the Board of Directors of the Okaw Valley Council of the Boy Scouts of America at 16 years old; from founding a nonprofit in my 20's to serving as a professor, researcher, and nonprofit consultant into my 40's, all while trying to help make nonprofit organizations more sustainable and more impactful (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

Throughout these thirty plus years, I've developed a nonprofit leadership philosophy that has become my mantra for my students and my consulting clients, which was triggered by a simple statement made by Jatrice Martel Gaiter, Executive Vice President of External Affairs for Volunteers of America, during her keynote address at the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance – Alliance Management

Institute in Kansas City in January 2018 (Schaumleffel, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e). I heard Ms. Gaiter say “culture always trumps strategy!” As I mentioned in my article for 501(c)Services, “Ms. Gaiter said something that really struck a chord with me” (Schaumleffel, 2019d).

In a recent article and webinar series for 501(c)Services, I shared my advanced nonprofit administrative and leadership mantra, or what many colleagues and clients have called my “pracademic approach,” as it has become my diagnostic riddle for identifying problems that need solutions in individual nonprofit organizations (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). I first shared my mantra publicly in 2018 on Twitter (DrivenStrategic, 2018); first shared it verbally in 2019 in Park City, Utah with the Board of Directors of the 501(c)Agencies Trust (Schaumleffel, 2019e); and first published it formally in an article on strategies for nonprofit succession planning for 501(c)Services (Schaumleffel, 2019d):

> *"Culture trumps strategy; strategy drives structure; structure requires resources; resources accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes; outcomes effectuate mission; mission begets vision!”*

Next, I repeat here, what I shared with the clients of 501(c)Services:

> “Most nonprofit consulting comes down to accurately diagnosing an organization’s areas for improvement. Rarely to never does it make sense to invest in programmatic changes to fix a strategy issue, nor does it make sense to implement a structure solution when you have a culture issue. It surely doesn’t make sense to focus on objectives, outputs, or outcomes when you have a resource issue” (Schaumleffel, 2019d).

My nonprofit mantra captures the essence of the philosophy that this article on strategic partnerships is based upon all while maintaining a spirit of cooperation and collaboration (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). This mantra has caramelized into my current diagnostic process for providing consultation to nonprofit organizations related to problem-solving and decision-making in the areas of strategic planning, strategic partnerships, governance, volunteer engagement, human resource management and development including succession planning, communication, public relations, marketing, program development and evaluation, among other areas of nonprofit operations.

Throughout this article, you will hear reference back to *"culture trumps strategy,"* meaning a toxic organizational culture will thwart the successional implementation of a logical and rational strategy; while a healthy organizational culture can facilitate the successful implementation of a data-driven, evidenced-based strategy outlined in an organization's strategic plan (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e).

Much of the article will focus on *"strategy drives structure"* meaning the strategy defined in an organization's strategic plan must define and/or redefine the structure of the organization, particularly in the structure of the organization's budget; the agency's organizational chart that visualizes board, committee, staff and volunteer roles and relationships; and the structure of any current or future partnerships (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a).

The final component of this article will highlight that *"structure requires resources,"* which clearly indicates that the structure of any strategic partnership requires resources, as outlined in the partnership's MOU (DrivenStrategic, 2018, Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). Resources and assets come in many forms, including equipment, supplies, buildings, land, facility space, insurance, money, staff, and volunteers (Drabczyk & Schaumleffel, 2006; Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2015, 2016c, 2017a; Schaumleffel, Dingle, Ortale, & Salmon, 2017; Schaumleffel & Drabczyk, 2006; Schaumleffel & Ortale, 2016). Just like volunteers are not free, neither are partnerships (Drabczyk & Schaumleffel, 2006; Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & Drabczyk, 2006; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

So far, we know, *"culture trumps strategy; strategy drives structure; and structure requires resources,"* but it is the *"resources [that] accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes"* (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). Most importantly, it is the staff and volunteer resources, or what I call mission-focused human resources with their physical and emotional bandwidth that "*accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes,"* which makes it critically important for your staff and volunteers to decide strategically on how to use their time in a way that maximizes mission impact and minimizes burnout and turnover (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a).

This article concludes by exploring the role of the individuals (i.e., the mission-focused human resources) that represent each organization in a partnership and their relationship-building and decision-making skills when attempting to activate, maintain, and enhance a partnership into the realm of strategic or deactivate a partnership into the realm of non-strategic or even into dissolution (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2015, 2016c, 2017a, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e; Schaumleffel, Mott, Harms, & St. Jean, 2014). Staff and volunteer resources cannot activate, maintain, and enhance strategic partnerships without time, money, and physical and emotional bandwidth, and in turn cannot accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes that are aligned with an organization’s vision, mission, core values, strategic plan, and needs assessment data. (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014).

Driving Strategically: Strategy Drives Structure of a Partnership

In theory, strategic partnerships can be an essential driver to superior growth, outreach, and impact, which can enhance the reach of your mission, no matter your organization's size, staffing, or budget, all while maintaining your organization's individuality and culture (Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011). However, partnerships are only powerful, mission-focused, mission impactful, strategic partnerships, if the relationship is structured effectively (Schaumleffel, 2011, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). "*Strategy drives structure!*" (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a).

"*Strategy drives structure*" means the strategy defined in an organization's strategic plan must define and/or redefine the structure of any current or future partnerships (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). In essence, an organization must use their current vision, mission, core values, and strategic plan, which should be based in recent, reliable and valid primary or secondary needs assessment data, to define or redefine the nature of their association or disassociation with other organizations as partners, as well as guide the negotiation process in establishing, extending, updating, or dissolving a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between one or more other organizations (Schaumleffel, 2011, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

Basically, strategic partnerships, if structured effectively, and activated by the right individuals, can clearly achieve SMART objectives, strategic outputs, and short-term outcomes that are aligned with an organization's mission, outlined in the organization's strategic plan, and/or defined in the organization's program logic model(s) or assessment plan(s) (Schaumleffel, 2014c, 2016b, 2017a, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Dingle, Ortale, & Salmon, 2017; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). Nonprofit organizations use programs, services, events, products, research initiatives, and advocacy efforts to engage with those they choose to serve to meet their needs and to make a measurable impact on their mission statement (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Few think of a strategic partnership as a tool to successfully plan, implement, and evaluate impactfully measurable programs, services, events, products, research initiatives, and advocacy efforts (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

The success or effectiveness of a partnership is entirely contingent upon the structure of the partnership; the individuals representing each partner organization tasked with activating and monitoring the partnership; and the working relationship between the individuals (Schaumleffel, 2014a; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011). The benefits and downfalls of partnerships are many. However, if you create and experience a strategic partnership, you will have maximized the benefits and minimized the downfalls (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011). Some certain benefits to a strategic partnership include opportunities for: developing skills, networking, synergy, information sharing, accessing more resources, resource pooling, benefiting from economies of scale, enhancing visibility, facilitating cooperative marketing, better accessing desired target population, increasing expertise, and attaining desired outcomes (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011). Oftentimes, strategic partnerships increase in-kind donations and lower the amount of financial resources needed to fund a joint project (Schaumleffel, Smith, & O'Dell, 2004; Schaumleffel, Wilder, Doyle, 2011).

On the flipside, if you managed to create and experience a nonstrategic partnership, you will have minimized the benefits and maximized the downfalls (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011). Some certain downfalls to a nonstrategic partnership include opportunities for: losing autonomy, reducing your organization's visibility, experiencing a lack of project direction, ineffective compromising that derails to middle-ground tendencies, being taken advantage of or even sabotaged, expending scarce resources, your investment (including your time) outweighing the return, experiencing emotionally immature behavior or even toxic behaviors of others, experiencing stolen credit or recognition, experiencing misaligned missions, experiencing turf issues, and experiencing a long-standing history of conflict between organizations even though the individuals have changed over the years (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011). And, it is important to remember in both strategic and nonstrategic partnerships, there can be unequal workload, unequal contributions, and unequal power (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018).

Nonprofit organizations, if they are to effectively use partnerships, collaboration, and cooperation as tools to make an impact on their mission, then they must truly understand the needs of those they choose to serve; live and breathe a mission-focused, actionable strategic plan on a daily basis; and understand that partnerships must be mutually-beneficial with measurable return on investment (ROI) for all partners if they are to be a strategic partnership, a strategic collaboration, or strategic cooperation (Schaumleffel, 2010b, 2012a, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2015, 2017a, 2017c, 2018b, 2019b, 2019d, 2019f, 2020a, 2020c; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014).

A strategic partnership is a mutually-beneficial and reciprocal relationship between organizations, and the individuals that represent each organization, that are simultaneously mission-focused, financially responsible, and based on each organization's needs assessment data with measurable return on investment (ROI) identified and aligned with each organizational partners' goals, SMART objectives, strategic outputs, and short- and long-term outcomes as identified in their strategic plans and then written into a memorandum of understanding (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Kish, Santucci, Schaumleffel, Weir, & McCormick, 2018; Miklozek, Schaumleffel, Lattimer, Sterling, Phillips-Sabla, & Games, 2019; Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002; Smith, Schaumleffel, & Herrmann, 2002; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016). A strategic partnership is a personal and professional relationship between the individuals that represent each organization (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Kish, Santucci, Schaumleffel, Weir, & McCormick, 2018; Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel & Saunders, in review; Schaumleffel & Weyand, 2007; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011), yet it is transactional between the partnering organizations (Schaumleffel, 2014a).

Strategic partnerships must be transactional first, as there must be return on investment tied to your organization's strategic plan, however, an excellent strategic partnership can also be transformative at the same time (Miklozek, Schaumleffel, Lattimer, Sterling, Phillips-Sabla, & Games, 2019; Schaumleffel, 2014a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). Nonprofit organizations may seek out, form, and receive ROI from strategic partnerships with one or more partners coming from the private, public, and/or nonprofit sectors (Kish, Santucci, Schaumleffel, Weir, & McCormick, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014).

Entering into a partnership, if it is to bring good ROI and to be a strategic partnership, requires negotiation that openly and honestly discusses and clearly identifies partner needs; roles and responsibilities; financial, risk, and liability considerations; and resources to be contributed by each partner in the MOU and on what timeline (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

Then, strategic partnerships are activated by each partner actively playing their role, and vigorously meeting their responsibilities by the deadlines specified in the MOU's project timeline (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). By a strategic partner meeting their responsibilities by the deadlines specified in the MOU's project timeline, they are in turn meeting the needs of their strategic partners and ensuring their strategic partners receive the ROI desired by and important to their partner or partners (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014). Each partner should not only actively play their role, and vigorously meet their responsibilities, but they should also earnestly assist the other partners in meeting their responsibilities (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Strategic partnerships are about collaboration, and maybe consensus, but certainly not, in any shape or form, about compromise, nor about democracy (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Collaboration, in its purest form in the nonprofit context, is one organization helping another organization get what they want or need, and that organization reciprocating in helping its partner get what they want or need (Miklozek & Schaumleffel, 2009; Nemenoff, Schaumleffel, & Gass, 2012; Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2014b, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Compromise is simply an easy way to put a Band-Aid on a deeper issue among partners that results in no one organization getting what they really fully need out of the partnership in terms of ROI (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014). Democracy, in the form of voting, when there are three or more organizations in a partnership is simply a way to not face the deeper issues at all, and it almost always results in 33% to 49.9% of the voting partners feeling left out, upset, angry, and disenfranchised (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Disenfranchised individuals representing a partner organization will likely consider, or even act upon the dissolution clause in the MOU, or will simply shirk their roles and responsibilities as they feel their investment of resources in the partnership will not result in the ROI that they signed up for at the time of partnership inception (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

A secret to strategic partnerships is that each partner doesn't have to want or need the same things (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a)! Strategic partnership may focus on a single project that produces the same ROI for each partner, or a single project may produce different ROI for each partner (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011).

As the partnering organizations implement the MOU during the project timeline, the partners should regularly (i.e., usually weekly or monthly) monitor progress on tasks or projects through a formative partnership evaluation process as outlined in the MOU (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). Weekly or monthly monitoring of the partnership's health and progress on tasks or projects often takes the form of scheduled standing meetings in person or online using Zoom or a similar software. Daily monitoring of the partnership's health and progress on tasks or projects, or at least sporadic monitoring as needed between scheduled standing meetings, takes place usually through other forms of communication, such as text messages, e-mail messages, or even the occasional quick phone call. Efficient and effective project managers who serve as the main project contact for each partnering organizations should manage the tasks identified in the MOU using a cloud-based project management software, such as Asana, Basecamp, or Monday.com (Schaumleffel, 2017c, 2017d, 2020c). Designating a mutually-agreed upon project management software in the MOU allows main project contacts and all other partnership team members to monitor and manage the work of the partnership as agreed upon in the MOU on a daily basis (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2017c, 2017d, 2018a, 2020b, 2020c; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

Likewise, as the project timeline comes to a conclusion, the partnering organizations must summatively evaluate the success or failure of the partnership at the end of the project period (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). The summative evaluation process is usually a partnership ending debriefing session where successes, failures, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, outputs, outcomes, and ROI for each partner are openly discussed and reflected upon during the timeline specified in the MOU (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). Usually, if a partnership advances all of the way through the specified project timeline in the MOU to the summative evaluation of the partnership meeting, feelings of each partnership team member are mostly positive

(Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). Success and positive feelings usually lead to a discussion of future strategic partnerships among the partnering organizations, as well as goal-setting and decision-making related to necessary changes to the operation of a future partnership that should be specifically reflected in the next MOU (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2018a, 2020b). The summative evaluation of the partnership usually takes place at a moderately private location, such as a restaurant, coffee shop, or one of the partner's offices or conference rooms. Typically, feelings are positive making the summative evaluation of the partnership meeting a bit of a celebration!

Throughout a strategic partnership during the formative and summative partnership evaluation processes, each partner organization must firmly hold the other strategic partners accountable to the terms and conditions outlined in the MOU, and should enthusiastically reap the return on investment of the strategic partnership (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). If the partnership, during or after implementation proves to be successful, hence strategic, then the success of reaping ROI to accomplish part(s) of your strategic plan by using a partnership as a strategy should be celebrated internally, and sometimes externally through public relations strategies (Schaumleffel & Tialdo, 2006). However, if the partnership proves during or after implementation to be unsuccessful, hence nonstrategic, then you and your organization should consider the option to dissolve the partnership as outlined in the MOU (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

The most effective and most strategic partnerships, as defined by partners reaping measurable ROI identified in the MOU and aligned with each organizational partners' vision, mission, goals, SMART objectives, strategic outputs, and short- and long-term outcomes as identified in their strategic plans, as well as characterized by positive relationships among partnership members, a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, effective conflict resolution, and low to no incidents of dissolution are partnerships that have well-written, detailed MOUs that are effectively monitored and evaluated by project contacts who have strong social and emotional learning skills (Bodey & Schaumleffel, 2009; CASEL, 2017; Drabczyk & Schaumleffel, 2006; Nickerson, Schaumleffel, & Doyle, 2015; Ramsey & Schaumleffel, 2006; Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel, 2003, 2007a, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012a, 2014a, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017b; 2018a, 2020b;

Schaumleffel & Blackford, 2007; Schaumleffel, Bodey, & Martin, 2008; Schaumleffel & Crockett, 2006; Schaumleffel, Davis, Bowman, Brinegar, & Vinson, 2012; Schaumleffel & Drabczyk, 2006; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel, Malaby, & Frank, 2010; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; Schaumleffel, Melind, & Martin, 2010; Schaumleffel & Saunders, in review; Schaumleffel, Smith, & O'Dell, 2004; Schaumleffel & Weyand, 2007; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002; Smith, Schaumleffel, & Herrmann, 2002; Snively, 2007; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

Creating a strategic partnership in many ways is like making a good hire in that the hard human resources work done on the front-end of the process in terms of effective employee recruitment, screening, and supervision pays dividends in terms of employee performance and retention (Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e). Similarly, like employee recruitment and screening, partner recruitment and screening is essentially accomplished in the strategic partnership process described above as codified in a MOU (Schaumleffel, 2017a).

Structuring, monitoring, and evaluating strategic partnerships paired with a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, and a high dose of social and emotional learning, can be a tremendously effective approach to staying mission-focused and financially responsible all while meeting the needs of those your organization chooses to serve and while making a measurable impact on problems that matter to people, to communities, and to society (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2020a). Strategic partnerships can be the force that "moves the needle" for your organization, which really means accomplishing SMART objectives, producing strategic outputs, and achieving short- and long-term outcomes as articulated in the MOU and in your organization's strategic plan (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). There are thousands of examples where strategic partnerships went right and made a difference. Unfortunately, partnerships, much less strategic partnerships, are not that easy. There are also thousands and thousands of examples where partnerships went wrong and were a waste of valuable resources, which most nonprofit organizations cannot afford (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

Partnerships not tied to a current, actionable strategic plan, and ultimately not tied to reliable and valid needs assessment data, are nonstrategic partnerships (Kish, Santucci, Schaumleffel, Weir, & McCormick, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2012a, 2012b, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). Typically, nonprofit organizations that do not conduct strategic planning regularly, manage strategically daily, or enter into strategic partnership conventionally are functioning from a state of reactive management (Bryson, 2004; Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Kish, Santucci, Schaumleffel, Weir, & McCormick, 2018; Miklozek, Schaumleffel, Lattimer, Sterling, Phillips-Sabla, & Games, 2019; Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017c, 2017d, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019f, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002; Smith, Schaumleffel, & Herrmann, 2002; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016). "*Strategy drives structure!*" (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a).

One of the glaring beacons of good that strobes from the nonprofit sector, in general, is its spirit of doing good, doing right, sharing with others, and togetherness. We witnessed this among nonprofit organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, this altruistic spirit, this somewhat youthful naivety, left unbridled and unsaddled, can be the downfall of the sector, or at least individual organizations, in terms of organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Nonprofit organizations must channel their altruistic spirit by driving their energy into strategic planning and strategic management, and when it makes sense for the organization, into strategic partnerships using MOUs (Bryson, 2004; Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2018a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019f, 2020b, 2020c; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, Smith, & O'Dell, 2004; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

There are plenty of worthy causes. There is plenty of good that needs to be done. There is plenty of bad in our world that will take hundreds, or even thousands, of years to eliminate. But, nonprofit organizations, can't be everything to everyone all of the time, and they can't go off and fight every battle. Nonprofit leaders need to know their organization's "lane" (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014)! Nonprofit organizations also need to stay in their "lane" as they steward and deploy the valuable resources that have been entrusted to them.

Not knowing your lane, and blindly joining every association, partnership, taskforce, committee, consortium, cooperative, collaborative, and coordinating council is the downfall of many organizations, and the root of burnout for many nonprofit executives, board members, and volunteers (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a).

Driving Strategically: Assessing Needs & Strategic Planning to Identify and Stay in Your Lane

Previously, I shared that a lot of nonprofit organizations struggle with finding competent board members, ensuring organizational sustainability, optimizing daily operations, maintaining mission-focus, making a measurable impact, assessing needs, and strategic planning (Bryson, 2004; Schaumleffel, 2003, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019b; Schaumleffel, Bodey, & Martin, 2008; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). All nonprofit organizations have a mission statement (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). Some layer their mission with an ultimate goal in the form of a vision statement. Others add a purpose statement, core values, goals, objectives, outputs, outcomes, strategies, and/or tactics that culminate in a strategic plan (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014).

Most nonprofit organizations struggle to differentiate between a vision statement and a mission statement, which is problematic when developing a strategy or even a strategic plan for the organization (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). They tend to have two mission statements or two vision statements or two v'mission statements that basically say the same thing with different words (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). A v'mission statement is a statement that is part vision statement and part mission statement (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

Rarely do organizations have a vision and a mission statement written correctly that cascades correctly in a way that guides strategic planning and strategic management in any sort of actionable way (Bryson, 2004; Schaumleffel 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2017c, 2017d, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019f, 2020c; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009). Nonprofit leaders tend to struggle with the vision being "the why" and the mission statement being "the how." Basically, nonprofit organizations really struggle with the basics of strategic planning, especially missing the key point that their vision and mission should be based on secondary and primary needs assessment data from the target population that they choose to serve (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014).

With or without a vision statement, with or without a strategic plan, most nonprofit organizations start as programs (i.e., infancy and childhood) that grow into haphazard organizations (i.e., adolescence) and then transition into competently managed and led operations (i.e., adulthood), if they survive. Many organization never make it out of adolescence as they struggle to find competent board members that can raise enough money to hire a talented and prepared nonprofit workforce that can facilitate maturation of the organization into adulthood and into an effective strategic partner. Consequently, as nonprofit organizations struggle with assessing needs and strategic planning, they also struggle with strategic decision-making to identify and stay in their lane (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014).

So, how does a nonprofit identify and stay in their lane? They need a competent and engaged board of directors that understands and executes their roles as a group, and as individuals, and that thoroughly understands assessing needs, strategic planning, strategic management and decision-making (i.e., the execution of the strategic plan), as well as understands the role of how partnering can be a strategy that helps them move the needle on their organization's mission and vison in a measurable way (Bryson, 2004; Ingram, 2015; Schaumleffel, 2003, 2012a, 2012b, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2017a, 2018a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019f, 2020b, 2020c; Schaumleffel, Bodey, & Martin, 2008; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

Regularly assessing needs, strategic planning, and strategic management identify your organization's lane (Bryson, 2004; Kish, Santucci, Schaumleffel, Weir, & McCormick, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2003, 2012a, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2017a, 2018a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019f, 2020b, 2020c; Schaumleffel, Bodey, & Martin, 2008; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

Nonprofit organizations must use their current vision, mission, core values, and strategic planning process, which should be based in recent, reliable and valid primary or secondary needs assessment data, to identify their lane by articulating SMART objectives, strategic outputs, and short- and long-term outcomes (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). The ROI that your organization desires from a strategic partnership should first be identified in your organization's strategic plan in the form of SMART objectives, strategic outputs, and short- and long-term outcomes, then one or more of the objectives, outputs, and/or outcomes should be transplanted into the MOU from your strategic plan as the ROI that you need from a partnership for it to be a strategic partnership (Schaumleffel, 2011, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2018a, 2020b;

Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

Strategic planning, when done well, clearly "identifies the lane" that the organization should be in, while strategic management "keeps you in your lane" (Bryson, 2004; Kish, Santucci, Schaumleffel, Weir, & McCormick, 2018; Schaumleffel 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2017c, 2017d, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019f, 2020c; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014).

When you systematically identify and stay in your lane, your organization is driving strategically (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Your strategic plan, if done well and based on reliable and valid needs assessment data that clearly identifies SMART objectives, strategic outputs, and short-term outcomes, should guide strategic management (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). A central function of strategic management is strategic decision-making (Bryson, 2014; Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). The key to making partnerships strategic partnerships is for nonprofit leaders to use strategic decision-making when determining whether or not they should seek out or agree to join a partnership (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Miklozek, Schaumleffel, Lattimer, Sterling, Phillips-Sabla, & Games, 2019; Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2017a, 2018a, 2020a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002; Smith, Schaumleffel, & Herrmann, 2002; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

Deciding Strategically: When Nonprofit Leaders Can't Say No and Go from Busy to Burnout

So far, we know, *"culture trumps strategy; strategy drives structure; and structure requires resources,"* but it is the *"resources [that] accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes"* (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). Most importantly, it is the staff and volunteer resources, or what I call mission-focused human resources, with their physical and emotional bandwidth, that "*accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes,"* which makes it critically important for your staff and volunteers to decide strategically on how to use their time in a way that maximizes mission impact and minimizes burnout and turnover (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). Not knowing your lane, and blindly joining every association, partnership, taskforce, committee, consortium, cooperative, collaborative, and coordinating council is the downfall of many organizations, and the root of burnout for many nonprofit leaders (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a). In partnerships, organizations and individual leaders can fail or burnout.

Remember, partnerships are between organizations and strategic partnerships are a transactional arrangement between organizations (Schaumleffel, 2014a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). But, partnerships are initiated, activated, monitored, and managed through the rational or irrational decision-making of one or two key individuals representing each partnering organization (i.e., Main Project Contact) (Flowers & Schaumleffel, 2018; Miklozek, Schaumleffel, Lattimer, Sterling, Phillips-Sabla, & Games, 2019; Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2017a, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002; Smith, Schaumleffel, & Herrmann, 2002; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016). So, in essence, an organizational partnership is really individual relationships based on trust, honesty, respect, punctuality, follow-through, collegiality, civility, ethical and rational decision-making, and a strong belief in the partnership's potential (BoardSource, 2010; Kruger, Harms, & Schaumleffel, 2014; Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel & Weyand, 2007; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011; Snively, 2007; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015).

Project contacts must also have a high level of social and emotional development, which includes: integrity; dependability; flexibility; the ability to manage emotions; effective verbal, written, and electronic communication skills;

an appropriate level of transparency and candidness; effective reasoning and rationality; effective conflict resolution skills; discipline; initiative; purpose-direction; grit; resilience; respect; kindness; and empathy (CASEL, 2017; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle; Snively, 2007).

Nonprofit organizations enter into partnerships, but in reality it is the individuals who represent each individual organization and their relationships with the individuals who represent the other organizations that make or break strategic and nonstrategic partnerships. Individuals must be able to establish, maintain, and enhance strong interpersonal relationships with others inside the organization and with individuals who represent other organizations. When partnerships go bad, and organizations have historically-long conflict, it is often because of interpersonal conflict between one person from each organization, and overtime the conflict between individuals becomes institutionalized conflict between organizations, even long after the individuals in conflict have departed each organization.

Creating and entering into a strategic partnership takes trust and respect, some faith, and good negotiation skills (BoardSource, 2010; Bodey & Schaumleffel, 2010; Nickerson, Schaumleffel, & Doyle, 2015; Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel, 2003, 2011, 2014a, 2016a, 2016b, 2017b, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel, Malaby, & Frank, 2010; Schaumleffel & Weyand, 2007; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). In general, nonprofit leaders often are not of the personality type, nor possess the worldview that makes them good strategic negotiators for transactional partnerships that focus on reaping ROI (Schaumleffel, Kaufman, Bechtel, Hoesman, Halleck, Buse, Wilder, Hiland, & Ruark, 2010). Typically, this part of the partnering process makes many nonprofit folks uncomfortable, so they rush through the process and end up with a nonstrategic partnership that often squanders a tremendous amount of resources, including valuable time, and ends badly (Schaumleffel, Kaufman, Bechtel, Hoesman, Halleck, Buse, Wilder, Hiland, & Ruark, 2010).

Proactively, and successfully, activating a strategic partnership requires each individual that serves as the representative of each organization (i.e., the Project Contacts) to follow through having not overcommitted themselves or their organizations in the MOU (Schaumleffel, 2016b, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). The theme here is to under commit and over deliver throughout a partnership from start to finish.

Staff and volunteers cannot activate, maintain, and enhance strategic partnerships without time, money, and physical and emotional bandwidth, and in turn cannot accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes that are aligned with their organization's vision, mission, core values, strategic plan, and needs assessment data. (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). Individuals who lead and manage nonprofit organizations must make strategic decisions to accomplish the strategic priorities as outlined in their organization's strategic plan. As previously mentioned, *resources accomplish objectives, produce outputs, and achieve outcomes* (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). The leading resource in nonprofit organizations are the people – staff, volunteers, board members. Staff and volunteers have to make strategic decisions about how to accomplish objectives, produce outputs, and achieve outcomes (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). Sometimes it makes sense to enter into a partnership, sometime is does not.

Strategic decision-making by nonprofit leaders is critical to maintaining mission-focus and managing burnout (Schaumleffel, 2020a). As I recently told Ronald McDonald House Charities of Central Indiana, Inc.'s Volunteer Engagement Audit Team, the Community Theatre of Terre Haute's Strategic Planning Committee, Video Game Palooza, Inc.'s Board of Directors, and Special Olympics Indiana's Motor Activity Training Program Taskforce, "Every single decision made by a nonprofit leader, board member, committee member, staff member, or volunteer always needs: 1) to be mission-focused; 2) to be financially responsible; 3) to meet a need or needs of some or all of those individuals you choose to serve; and 4) to establish, maintain, or enhance a healthy organizational culture" (Schaumleffel, 2020a). Nonprofit leaders should consider using my prism for strategic decision-making to determine if entering into a partnership is strategic or nonstrategic (Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2020a).

A partnership is an investment of time, resources, money, and physical and emotional bandwidth (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2019a). Nonprofit leaders need to be acutely aware of the "hidden" cost of staff time invested in partnerships (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). When a nonprofit organization invests in a partnership, one must recognize that another task or initiative of the organization had to be shelved, or set on the backburner, while other initiatives had to be divested of (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

For some of you, it may seem callous, but the only reason to create a partnership is to reap ROI. Real ROI is mission-focused and financially-responsible, as well as meets the needs of those you choose to serve and contributes to a healthy organizational culture. If you're making nonstrategic decisions to enter your organization into nonstrategic partnerships, you are wasting resources, and quite frankly, committing dereliction of your fiduciary duty to steward the resources entrusted to you and your organization.

It's great to give back or pay it forward, but if a partnership is a strategic partnership, then there has to be something in it for the organization you represent as a staff member, board member, or volunteer. Altruism is fine, but if a partnership is going to be a strategic partnership, then you have to think about altruism as altruism with a purpose and that purpose is ROI for your organization (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

Reaping ROI doesn't have to be nasty or negative or feel sleazy or be at the expense of some other organization or cause personal relationships to sour. Starting a conversation about ROI, negotiating ROI into an MOU, and holding partners accountable to ensuring your organization's ROI is not nonprofit, do-gooder blasphemy! In fact, excellent strategic partnerships allow you to reap ROI for your organization while simultaneously helping your partners reap ROI for their organization, which is a win-win, mutually-beneficial relationship (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

All in all, reaping ROI for your organization through partnerships is just plain, good 'ole fashioned strategic decision-making and strategic nonprofit leadership (or what the academic types call normative) (Schaumleffel, 2011, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

It's much too easy to partner for partners sake (Schaumleffel, Kaufman, Bechtel, Hoesman, Halleck, Buse, Wilder, Hiland, & Ruark, 2010). This interagency meeting…that consortium….another coordinating council. If your staff is not careful, they will die a slow death by attending partnership meetings! Meetings, meetings, meetings. Busy, busy, busy! We all know the seemingly professional meeting attender!

Busy does not mean impactful, especially when the busyness takes your organization out of your lane (Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019e, 2020a)! At some point your staff have to be in their offices doing the work of your organization's strategic plan that meets the needs of the people your organization has chosen to serve by measurably moving the needle for your organization, and not out attending every partnership meeting in town doing the work of other organizations (Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). Busy does not mean impactful, yet busy does lead to burnout (Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a)!

To protect your organization's resources, your staff has to know what the prize is and then keep their eye on it (Bryson, 2004; Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel, 2014c; Schaumleffel & Doyle, 2013; Schaumleffel, Malaby, & Frank, 2010; Schaumleffel & Martin, 2009). They need to work smart and hard, and need to learn to say no, or at least not right now (Schaumleffel, 2019b). Saying no helps manage your staff member's burnout by keeping their workload manageable and aligned with the organizations strategic plan, as well as preserves your organization resources (Schaumleffel, 2019b). Keeping your staff's workload manageable is critical to managing work-life integration and limiting employee turnover, as well as enhancing succession planning (Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e).

Agencies that thrive on busy for busy's sake, especially those erroneously using busy as a measure of successful, as well as agencies that claim they are giving back or paying it forward by participating in every Johnny-come-lately-partnership and supposedly don't need anything in return are either downright unorganized with no strategic plan with no identified SMART objectives, strategic outputs, or short-term outcomes that tie to their staff members' position descriptions or their staff supervision is poor in monitoring how direct reports' time is spent as it relates to achieving the organization's key performance indicators (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b).

More than likely, if their organization does have a current strategic plan, their staff position descriptions were likely never re-written to align staff roles with the new strategic plan (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019b, 2019d). And, it is even more likely that the staff are not being evaluated regularly related to the use of their staff time to effectively achieve the SMART objectives, strategic outputs, or short-term outcomes as articulated in the current strategic plan (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019b, 2019d). Or, the staff are just asleep at the wheel and don't understand the cost of staff time to their employer (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019b, 2019d). Or, they're just really bad at negotiating or do not have the gumption to speak up for the needs of the organization that's paying their salary in return for what they are bringing to the table for their nonstrategic partners (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019b).

Strategic partnerships need to be based on a strategic plan, and entering into a partnership takes strategic decision-making on the part of the individual nonprofit leader (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019c, 2019e). Do I or don't I busy myself with this partnership opportunity (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019c, 2019e)? Do I RSVP for this meeting or not? How should I spend my staff time? What is the most efficient and effective way for me to spend my staff time to make the biggest impact on our mission (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019c, 2019e)? Staff don't always have the tools to make the best decisions on how to spend their staff time, which makes prioritization difficult (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019c, 2019e). Nonprofit leaders tend to struggle with strategic living, because they struggle making strategic decisions about how to spend their time based on the strategic plan and MOU for a strategic partnership, which tends to lead to individuals who are hyper-busy, marginally impactful, and well done in the burnout category (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019c, 2019e).

Nonprofit types don't always know why they attend all the meetings that they do (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019c, 2019e). Often, busy makes them feel important or impactful or both (Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019a, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e). Other times, they simply don't want to be left out (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a). And, other times, it is just downright chic to pretend you have no agenda for your agency when entering into a partnership, and when in reality you do, or should, for that matter (Schaumleffel, Kaufman, Bechtel, Hoesman, Halleck, Buse, Wilder, Hiland, & Ruark, 2010). Quite frankly, sometimes, I find those individuals claiming to join partnerships to just give back or pay it forward and supposedly don't need anything in return to be dishonest, disrespectful, disingenuous, and usually manipulative (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

For me, I am not good at honeymooning, nor am I good at reading minds. If I am going to enter into a partnership, it has to be a strategic partnership, meaning the partnership has to be a tool that enthusiastically allows me to bring return on investment back to my organization (Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014). I have to get for giving. Sounds cold, but business is business, and my business is my organization's mission statement. My commitment to a partnership has to lead to me contributing to the success of my agency (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

For me, laying my cards on the table, and sharing what I need out of a partnership for it to be worthwhile is my style. My transparency and candidness are often my greatest strengths, and oftentimes my greatest weaknesses. Honest to a fault like Popeye, "I yam what I yam, an' tha's all I yam!" But, there is no hidden agenda and no second guessing my intention for a partnership when the ROI that I need to reap is open and honestly negotiated into a MOU (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

In my experience, when individuals are honest and transparent about what they need out of a partnership for it to be a strategic partnership for their organization and worth their organization's while in terms of return on investment of the staff time to participate, you can catch lightning in a bottle, especially if all parties concerned can shorten the honeymoon and lay their cards on the table – honestly outlining their agenda (Nickerson, Schaumleffel, & Doyle, 2015; Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel, 2003, 2010b, 2011, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Bodey, & Martin, 2008; Schaumleffel, Davis, Bowman, Brinegar, & Vinson, 2012; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel & Saunders, in review; Schaumleffel & Weyand, 2007; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002; Smith, Schaumleffel, & Herrmann, 2002; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016).

If the proposed partnership is not a seemingly worthwhile strategic partnership then respectfully decline the offer to participate and channel your time on more mission-focused activities (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a). Do not be afraid to practice Warren Buffett's famous advice, "Really successful people say no to almost everything."

So, when nonprofit leaders make nonstrategic decisions about the use of their time, nonstrategic partnerships are often the result (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019b). Nonstrategic partnerships are a poor use of time and resources (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019b)! When partnerships are entered into in an intentional way with ROI pre-tied to your organization's current strategic plan by establishing an MOU, then it is a strategic partnerships (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014).

Conclusion

This article focused on structuring and sustaining strategic partnerships as a tool to successfully plan, implement, and evaluate impactfully measurable programs, services, events, products, research initiatives, and advocacy efforts for the individuals who the organization chooses to serve. Remember "*culture always trumps strategy*," but "*strategy drives structure*" (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a). Nonprofit leaders must use strategy to structure partnerships if the partnership will be strategic and produce the desired return on investment for your organization (Schaumleffel, 2014a, 2016b, 2016c, 2018a, 2020b; Schaumleffel, Harms, Mott, & St. Jean, 2014; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014; Schaumleffel, McElwain, & Mott, 2014; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015, 2016). Strategy must be grounded in reliable and valid data that identifies the needs of your organization's target population, and then organized and prioritized into a dynamic and actionable strategic plan (Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a).

Next, this article discussed the transactional function of strategic partnerships between organizations, yet the relational function of individuals charged with activating a partnership across a designated timeline (Kruger, Harms, & Schaumleffel, 2014; Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel, 2014a; Schaumleffel & Weyand, 2007; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011; VanSickle & Schaumleffel, 2015). Following the advice offered in this article will better prepare you and better position your organization to be an effective strategic partner, as well as better prepare your board members, committee members, staff members, and volunteers to be effective representatives of your organization in the lifecycle of strategic partnerships.

Staff and volunteers cannot activate, maintain, and enhance strategic partnerships without time, money, and physical and emotional bandwidth, and in turn cannot accomplish SMART objectives, produce strategic outputs, and achieve short- and long-outcomes that are aligned with an organization's vision, mission, core values, strategic plan, and needs assessment data. (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2014d, 2014e, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a; Schaumleffel & McElwain, 2014). Staff and volunteers need to be given the time and space to ensure a partnership is a strategic partnership for their organization.

Some organizations may find themselves in a situation where they need to create strategic partnerships for organizational survival (Saunders & Schaumleffel, 2012; Schaumleffel, Bodey, & Martin, 2008; Schaumleffel, Wilder, & Doyle, 2011). Other organizations that have aligned missions and target populations sometimes experience hyper-strategic partnerships that may even lead to a permanent and legal merger of the two organizations. A corporate merger is the most systemic manifestation of a strategic partnership.

All in all, the secret to structuring, sustaining, and reaping ROI from a strategic partnership is driving strategically and deciding strategically. Driving strategically is recognizing *culture will always trump strategy*. Driving strategically is having an actionable strategic plan based on needs assessment data that will guide the negotiation process. Driving strategically is using the *strategic plan to drive the structure* of a partnership as written in an MOU with ROI clearly identified for your organization. Driving strategically is cooperating and collaborating in your day-to-day interactions with the other individuals in the partnership to ensure they too reap ROI for their organization. Deciding strategically is making strategic decisions about how nonprofit leaders commit and use their time. In short, staff members can look at strategic partnership as a means to an end. An end being the accomplishment of a goal, SMART objective, strategic output, and/or short-term outcome from the organization's strategic plan.

Now, say it with me (DrivenStrategic, 2018; Schaumleffel, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2020a):

> *"Culture trumps strategy; strategy drives structure; structure requires resources; resources accomplish objectives, produce outputs, & achieve outcomes; outcomes effectuate mission; mission begets vision!"*

As you decide strategically whether or not to enter your organization into a partnership, ensure your decision is mission-focused; financially responsible; meets a need or needs of some or all of those individuals you choose to serve; and establishes, maintains, or enhances a healthy organizational culture" (Schaumleffel, 2020a).

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ABOUT US

Driven Strategic LLC specializes in consulting for nonprofit & public organizations; parks & recreation; park foundations & friends groups; youth & human services; and university engagement. Driven Strategic LLC's team of consultants specialize in the areas of creating new nonprofit organizations, fundraising & grant proposal writing, strategic planning, board development & governance, staff training, volunteer engagement, youth development, and mission-focused program development & evaluation.

Driven Strategic LLC operates with a high-level of organizational-efficacy, which is our ability to produce desired results for our clients. Driven Strategic LLC's model for creating the right team of experts is a nimble, organic model of bringing in mostly doctorally-trained experts on a project-by-project, task-by-task basis from our dynamic network of professionals and educators.

Driven Strategic LLC, located in Terre Haute, Indiana, is a small company owned and operated by Dr. Nathan A. Schaumleffel. Dr. Schaumleffel and his team of innovative problem-solvers and experts hold PhDs and have scores of years of hands-on professional experience in their fields.

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