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My mind rarely strays from partnership issues this spring. In addition to supporting three merger projects, I was just invited to join others in discussing national partnership guidelines for a large federal human services department. I was asked to participate as a "process" consultant and am both honored and challenged by the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I'll be sharing more about this in future newsletters -- it's an exciting time.

It's also time to review what I've learned (and wish I'd learned earlier) about partnerships. What exactly makes them work or fail? This issue of Project Pointers addresses these lessons.

Creating Effective Partnerships - What Helps

Readiness

Partnerships are most likely to succeed when the organizations are strong. When the various entities work from positions of strength, they bring energy, focus and an openness to change. Too often, troubled nonprofits regard a possible partnership as an opportunity to be saved. Signs of readiness include current and practical strategic and succession plans, financial stability and a solid infrastructure for all systems. In addition, well prepared nonprofits have conducted a thorough analysis of mission fit for all programs. Simply, they perform at a high level of awareness and competence. If one partner is vibrant and others are imploding, success is unlikely.

Board Engagement

Board support always sounds good. But when the board automatically approves proposed partnership explorations without conducting its own serious analysis, problems begin. In some cases, developing criteria and a shared philosophy around partnerships may be helpful, especially for large nonprofits with many collaborators and contracts. If the proposed partnership is expected to result in an outcome as impactful as a merger, the board must enthusiastically drive the process and pace of the work. Too often, the employees are so far ahead of the board that communication problems and duplicate work can result.

Process

As individuals and members of professional communities, we feel the tension between spontaneity and structure. Even those of us who are intentional planners chafe at meaningless or excessive constraints. Partnership explorations do require more structure than many of our nonprofit efforts. If the process is presented and used as a tool in *developing relationships*, participants can embrace the structure with security. They must also help create the process. When leaders announce the process instead of joining board and staff in creating one, resentments can linger for years.

Time Investment

This is a tough one because partnership initiatives are usually layered on top of participants' existing job duties. Exploring new ways of working and coming together is *very* time consuming. If multiple board members and staff are involved, collective distractions can float through the buildings and result in missed deadlines and opportunities, tension between departments and burnout. One thing that helps is a realistic discussion about the consequences before potential partners are even approached. Can some other project be delayed for six months? Can a key participant shift a few duties to someone who will not be so involved? Can the organization sustain one more huge resource drain? The answers to these questions should be part of a probability statement.

"Partner" People

During the past six months, I've participated in a particularly rewarding merger project. Two smart, sensitive executive directors applied their exceptional emotional health and maturity to create a textbook process. As a result, representatives from both organizations did great work. This effort came in contrast to a handful of other projects in which egos and boundary issues drained too much of the group's energy. In one case, a disgruntled participant derailed

the entire project. Being the first person to listen can set the stage for true conversation, a challenge when one ego fills the room.

Partnership discussions, by definition, involve a certain loss of control. Whether the loss feels large or small, how feelings are expressed and handled usually predicts success. In general, people who tend to be flexible, fair and patient are more comfortable and effective in collaborative work.

Common Sense

Standards and credentials drive our nonprofit work. Whether we are preparing for an accreditation site visit or adopting a new philosophy around shared leadership, most of our planning rests on a theoretical platform. Partnerships also involve discussions about values, assumptions and theory. As the process moves along, however, real life kicks in. A partnership is at heart a concrete, practical union that incorporates doable practices that actually work. Groups that spend endless hours discussing theoretical models often ignore the day-to-day lessons that staff and volunteers successfully apply. Common sense can be an underappreciated quality when building a cohesive group. The facilitator, whether internal or external, can build this trait into the work by avoiding jargon, seeking clarification and continually asking how something can be implemented and evaluated.

Fun - or at Least Pleasant

OK, we know that this is difficult, serious work. But are you *enjoying* it? Do you look forward to being with the folks from the other organizations? Has the group developed its own jokes and language? If partnership meetings are filled with good will and humor, participants will usually evolve into a comfortable group of colleagues who can define and deliver success.

I am still deeply moved when groups set aside egos and familiar routines to create something new. When partners work in good faith to deliver and sustain excellent services to clients, they serve as a collaborative model for our community.

I will continue to discuss partnership success in the next edition of Project Pointers. Until then, happy Summer to all,



Client Spotlight

Two of the busiest leaders in the area are Tracey Collins of Cincinnati Area Senior Services and Jane Herms of the Family Nurturing Center. In addition to their agency commitments, both tackle many roles in the community. For example, Jane recently served as the president of Leadership Council Human Services Executives and Tracey is the current president.

Family Nurturing Center (FNC)

Recently I had the pleasure of attending Family Nurturing Center's open house for their new Cincinnati facility. The Center provides facilitated visitation services, parenting groups, parent coaching and sexual abuse prevention services at their Cincinnati location. I was struck by the warm and welcoming environment, the staff members who exuded professionalism and passion for their work, and the breadth and depth of their services to children and families. If you missed the open house but would like to learn more about their services in Kentucky and Ohio, visit their website at www.familynurture.org, or call 859-525-3200 to arrange a personal tour.

Cincinnati Area Senior Services (CASS)

It has been a privilege to observe the expansion of CASS services during the last few years. As they age, seniors want to remain in their own homes, independent, active and surrounded by what is familiar. Cincinnati Area Senior Services provides the supportive services that make independence possible for seniors throughout Hamilton and Warren Counties. CASS is the area's largest provider of Meals-on-Wheels and last year delivered over 350,000 meals. They also recently introduced Savory Selects, which gives seniors a choice of 31 entrees. And CASS buses provide almost 50,000 trips per year. The organization also operates a senior center in Over-the-Rhine as well as social work case management for seniors all over their service area. CASS does deliver what seniors need. Learn more about this organization by checking its website www.cassdelivers.org.

Workshop Announcements

Project Management Workshop

Marta's popular Successful Project Management workshop will be offered on

Tuesday, December 4, 2012 - 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

at The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati

3805 Edwards Road, Suite 500, Cincinnati, OH 45209

Register online at: [Workshop Registration](#)

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