

SANKOFA FACT SHEET

March, 2001

No. 13

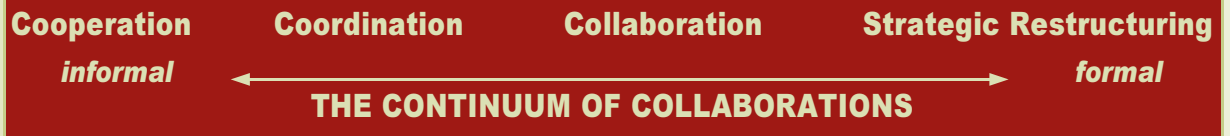
Collaborations

Collaborations vary by level of formality. They can range from two organizations informally making referrals to each other to agencies formally merging. While some collaborations concentrate on administrative functions, such as sharing back-office space or a database, others are program-oriented, such as blending services and programs or hiring a joint fundraiser.

The real reason to collaborate should be to better achieve your organization's goals. A collaboration should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. Some of the motivating factors that lie behind deciding to collaborate include tangible goals like strengthening and improving programs, increasing efficiency and effectiveness, and improving organizational skills. Less tangible reasons may include the desire to raise commitment, fellowship and potential for more effective problem-solving. Collaborations may also help develop a deeper understanding of specific issues; increase clout by attracting greater public attention; integrate programs and services that better serve complex needs. Organizations that already have common goals and mutual needs and interests may want to collaborate for economic reasons. On the less altruistic side of the coin, collaborations may address threats from the competition, specifically in response to those from the for-profit sector.

Some of the reasons why not to collaborate are when funders ask nonprofits to develop partnerships for the funders' own purposes. Conversely, a nonprofit seeking to collaborate solely to secure funding is a really bad reason. Collaborating should not be done just because "it's new, it sounds different, and everybody's doing it."

There are two basic models for collaborations. One, the democratic model where every organization at the table is equal, and two, the hierarchical model where there is a lead agency that takes responsibility for coordinating the other participants.



A collaboration could be between two groups or it could be between twenty. Similarly, those involved in a collaboration could be just the executive directors or it could be an organization's entire universe (staff, clients and funders). It all depends on the situation and how it is defined. Research by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation has revealed the following factors which influence collaboration. The items marked with an asterisk are the most important, for if a collaborative venture has these elements it is more likely to succeed.

Environment

There should be a history of collaboration or cooperation in the community. Collectively, the group should be seen as leaders in the community. The political and social climates should be favorable.

Purpose

First, the collaboration must have a unique and higher purpose. If any one of the organizations could achieve the collaboration on its own, it weakens the effort and begs the question, "Why bother?" There must be a shared vision that can be translated to common objectives and goals, and these goals and objectives must be concrete and attainable.

Characteristics

The skills, opinions, and characteristics of the individuals and the organizations need not be identical, but should be compatible. *There must be mutual respect, understanding, and trust among the members. *An appropriate cross-section of members, probably a mix of high-level or mid-level staffers, may help ensure success. Members view collaboration with an eye toward their own self-interest, so the outcome needs to be greater than the loss of turf.

Process and Structure

Members should have a sense of ownership in both the process and the outcome. Clear roles and policy guidelines need to exist. However, rigidity shouldn't rule: things should be flexible and adaptable. For example, create benchmarks, but review and revise if necessary.

Communication

*Open and frequent communication is crucial. Establish both formal and informal lines of communication.

Resources

*Sufficient funds are needed to help ensure the success of the venture. Many organizations underestimate the resources – financial and personal-wise – needed to undertake a collaboration, especially those required by the lead agency. Whether a collaboration is for a mission-driven or an administrative-based venture, it usually costs money to save money.

Source: Myers, D. J. (1998, September - October). Collaborations Ensuring a Fit With Your Partners and Your Plans. *New York Nonprofits*, 15.

For more information, call the technical assistance analyst at the Mississippi Urban Research Center, 1-866-578-6872 (JSU-MURC).

