

**Framing Collaboration Exploration**

All nonprofits provide programs and services that promote their mission. As such, most collaborations between nonprofits are associated with the design, provision or financing of program services which is described as the Operations level of integration in our C.O.R.E Continuum. In many ways this is the level of integration that ultimately means the most for any me alliance between nonprofits because without success here nothing else matters.

Responsibility

Corporate

Operations

Economics

**Programs and Fund Raising**

Degree of Integration

While the vast majority of Community Action Agencies have developed and maintain a broad and diverse array of working relationships with local agencies and groups, in most instances these relationships focus on sharing information, space or referrals vs. the actual integration of services or functions. It is a more challenging level at which to create alliances because standards of professional practice may be customized to individual agencies; programmatic operations often have more visible brands (e.g., Head Start) than the sponsoring agency; program personnel may resist collaboration for fear of a loss of authority, identity and status and Board members may be fearful about a loss of organizational control and community identity.

Conversely, because opportunities for professional interaction are often limited, programmatic integration can be very appealing. One of the least recognized disadvantages of working in small to midsized nonprofit settings is that they can be tremendously isolating. Programmatic collaborations can help provide a bigger pool of colleagues with whom to interact and share learning and support.

As with all collaborations, programmatic alliances vary in the degree of integration they require. We will use four possible ways of effective programmatic collaboration to illustrate the principle. Each varies according to the degree of complexity as well as integration.

1. Shared Training
2. Joint Quality Standards
3. Joint Programming
4. Joint Fundraising.

**Shared Training**

Good managers know that over time the key to producing consistently high quality service is training. An unfortunate reality of budgetary politics in most organizations is that training budgets are the first to get cut. Like skimping on capital expenditures, the results of slashing training take a while to show up and are hard to quantify so they are often irresistible targets of budget cutting.

Still, training gets done. Often it is informal, ad hoc and self-initiated, but it happens. Conferences are one way to get key employees trained, as are specialty meetings and orientation sessions. A simple approach to program collaboration is to coordinate training programs. Similar to the low end economic strategy of sharing information about vendors, this tactic is largely one of comparing calendars and attempting to coordinate efforts so that both parties get maximum coverage out of whatever training does take place. Participants might even try appointing a staff member to attend a class and then teach an in-house session for all agencies’ staff that did not attend. More formal attempts would involve the active commitment of all parties to invite the other’s staff members to ongoing in-house training.

**Joint Quality Standards**

For a program alliance, the logic is to be so integrated programmatically that any one participant’s services reliably meets the same minimum standards of quality. Theoretically the adoption of shared program standards can guarantee an acceptable level of customer service availability, quality, accessibility and responsiveness no matter which provider is chosen. While some programs offered by CAAs and other nonprofit nonprofit agencies share common accreditation or regulatory standards (Head Start, Child Care, Behavioral Health) others rely principally on agency defined standards. Developing agreement on standards is essential to the development of joint programming.

**Joint Programming**

Program-only collaborations are among the most difficult kinds of collaborations to manage. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind when planning a programming alliance.

* Successful programmatic collaborations take time. Program collaborations often take a long time to launch because most programming is not standardized between organizations so collaboration has to start with a blank sheet.
* Trust underlies collaboration. It is worth repeating that participants need to develop understanding and respect for each other, and this cannot be willed into existence simply because a funding source presses their grantees into working together.
* Knowledge of your partner is essential. When two collaborating organizations know each other well, the relationship tends to work better.
* Flexibility is mandatory. It is not uncommon for one or both organizations to lose key staff people midway through an alliance. In fact, all alliances should expect personnel turnover. The decision to collaborate must be rooted in shared institutional interests rather that unique, personality-driven relationships.
* Mark the exit signs. Programmatic collaborations are usually time-limited. Anticipate your exit strategy before you enter.

Successful collaborations find a way to adapt to these and other unforeseen events. These simple lessons can be summed up in the following thought: good programmatic collaboration requires excellent planning, patience, and time.

**Joint Fund Raising**

Joint Fund Raising is a second cousin to joint programming. Often the impetus behind a decision to run programs collaboratively is driven by a common funding source. At other times, it may be more economical and higher profile to co-sponsor a large event with multiple beneficiaries with a simpatico cause. The necessary ingredients to joint fund raising parallels other alliances: trust and fairness. Be sure to agree upon the following at the onset:

* How will resources be allocated? There is no ‘right’ answer. It could be evenly distributed, based on organizational size, based on level of effort, need, or any number of factors.
* Who’s in charge? Determine who has ultimate authority and a fair process for decision-making.
* Who does the work? Make clear expectations about responsible parties and the level of effort required from participants.
* Who ‘owns’ the information? For your sake and for your donors, know how information will be sheltered or shared among the participating agencies.

Participants need to develop mutual trust and respect over an extended period, understand a great deal about the other, and be willing to be flexible. Only then can the technical skills usually associated with programming get the fertile soil they need to flourish.