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Collaboration: Promises and Pitfalls

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# Collaboration: Promises and Pitfalls



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*Economic Development Clinic and teaches a transactional drafting course. In the Clinic, Dana and her students represent both nonprofit organizations and small business entrepreneurs on a range of transactional matters including structuring and formation, operational issues, contract drafting and review, loan document review, regulatory compliance issues, and real estate matters. Prior to her current position, she worked as an associate at Lewis, Rice & Fingersh and as a law clerk for the Honorable E. Richard Webber in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri.*

Simply put, collaboration refers to two or more organizations coming together to accomplish a specific goal. It is helpful to think of collaboration as a spectrum: Collaborations range from informal arrangements (e.g., a committee, a task force, a joint initiative, information sharing, joint purchasing arrangements, co-locating arrangements, or program coordination) to more formal arrangements (e.g., the creation of a new entity).

Common reasons for collaborations include

- greater access to certain funding or grant streams;
- access to the expertise of the collaborating organization;
- an ability to increase the human resources that can be devoted to an event or cause;
- access to an established infrastructure or positive reputation; and
- an ability to accomplish more than the organization would otherwise be able to accomplish.

Collaborations tend to work best among participating organizations that

understand and trust each other and that have closely aligned missions, goals, and core values.

While there may be benefits to collaborating, it is essential to recognize that collaboration is rarely cost-free. For example, logistical and relational issues in the collaboration can eat up significant time and other resources (including money and reputation). Or, the potential collaborative partner may be one who does not “play well” with others, frustrating the effort at every major step along the way. Additionally, the collaborating organization may turn out to have less expertise or fewer resources than originally perceived. Moreover, if the potential benefit of the collaboration is unclear—or if the collaboration is simply an end in itself (and not a means to an end)—these downsides are likely to be magnified.

The Community Builders Network of Metro St. Louis (CBN) is facilitating collaboration among CDCs in St. Louis. Among other activities, CBN provides logistical support for potential collaborations. Such support includes arranging and facilitating meetings, generating problem-solving options when a collaborative group gets “stuck,” and compiling and distributing meeting minutes. CBN also makes mini-grants available to help collaborative groups pay for professional assistance (e.g., technical support, funding identification support) related to the group’s common goals.

CBN has worked to facilitate relationships among three small nonprofits working in a particular disadvantaged neighborhood in St. Louis city. All three organizations have very small staffs and find it difficult to devote any time to thinking about or otherwise exploring potential collaborative opportunities. At the same time, the organizations’ missions have some degree of overlap, and they believe that they share similar desires and goals for the neighborhood. After some preliminary discussions facilitated by CBN, it was clear that all three organizations recognized the neighborhood’s

need for:

- strategic commercial development and increased employment opportunities;
- increased and coordinated residential real estate development;
- greater attention to neighborhood clean-up and beautification projects; and
- more coordination among nonprofits serving the neighborhood to take advantage of opportunities for coordinated programming.

Each organization recognized that its limited resources do not allow it to respond to these needs on its own on the kind of scale needed to make a lasting impact in the neighborhood. The three CDCs decided that the next logical step was to explore whether there may be ways of working together to address these commonly shared concerns. With logistical support from CBN, these organizations have been meeting on a regular basis for just this purpose.

The early stage planning meetings among the three organizations might or might not have led to on-the-ground-collaboration. In the early stage meetings, the CDCs simply committed to exploring collaboration possibilities in a strategic and organized way. After significant discussion, the CDCs have determined that some level of collaboration makes sense and are now working to memorialize their agreement in a memorandum of understanding to set out the roles and responsibilities of each organization. Each CDC intends to remain a separately incorporated entity under the control of its own board of directors.

This potential collaboration brings with it the possibility of the three CDCs

making a much larger total community impact than what any of the organizations could accomplish on its own. In addition, the collaboration could give the organizations access to new funding streams. Importantly, this example illustrates that, while collaboration is not cost-free, collaboration can sometimes be less “costly” when some of the logistical and relational costs are borne by another person or entity (e.g., an organization such as CBN).

The following resources provide more in-depth explanations of the information presented in this op-ed and may be useful to both community-based nonprofits and the lawyers advising them:

- Foundation Center’s Nonprofit Collaboration Resources:  
<http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/collaboration/;jsessionid=KR V5FZ4ZYE VWZLAQBQ4CGXD5AAAACI2F>
- Managing Collaboration Risks:  
[https://www.niac.org/AMSCentral/ResourceDocuments.cfm?var\\_PageAction=View&var\\_ID=63](https://www.niac.org/AMSCentral/ResourceDocuments.cfm?var_PageAction=View&var_ID=63)
- Cautions:  
[http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/the\\_reality\\_underneath\\_the\\_buzz\\_of\\_partnerships/](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/the_reality_underneath_the_buzz_of_partnerships/)
- Frameworks:  
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ocs/partnerships.pdf>
- MOUs:  
<http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/library/enews/2007/enews052307.htm>
- Collaborative Checklist of Questions to Consider:  
<http://dongriesmannsnonprofitblog.blogspot.com/2009/05/nonprofit->

[collaborative-or-partnership.html](#)

*Articles in "From the Field" represent the opinions of the author only and do not represent the views of the Community Builders Network of Metro St. Louis or the University of Missouri- St. Louis.*

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