

EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS IN PHILANTHROPY
MAY, 2022

Introduction

Despite a general desire to see more nonprofit organizations work together, there is no shortage of collaboration in the nonprofit sector. The idea is often championed by external influencers as a means to streamline expenses and expand impact. However, success varies depending on the goals, leadership and support invested in a healthy collaboration.

Appetite to collaborate

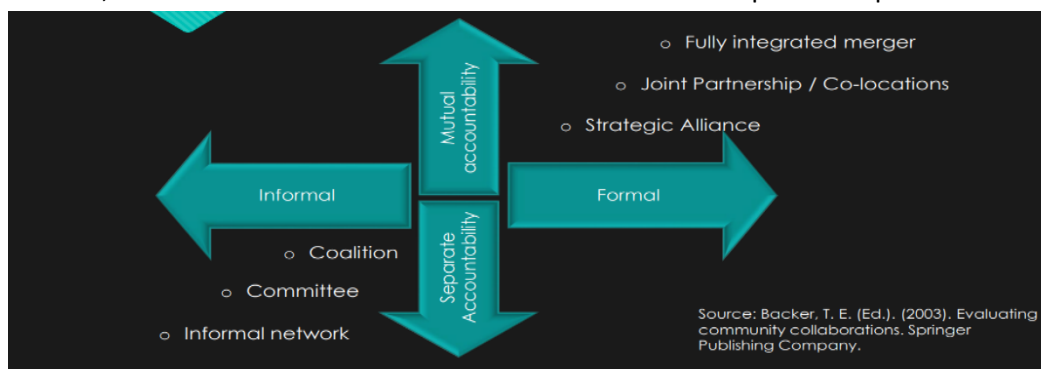
According to the “Making Sense of Nonprofit Collaborations” report from Bridgespan, 91 percent of survey respondents [those operating in the social sector] were engaged in some form of collaboration and at least 75 percent of nonprofit leaders and grantmakers viewed collaborations across the board as largely successful.¹ Philanthropists are supportive of this idea, as well. Since the Great Recession of 2008, funders such as [Fidelity Charitable's Collaboration Fund](#) and [Lodestar Foundation's Collaboration Prize](#) have expanded to create collaboration opportunities aimed to generate more efficient operations and/or greater scale of positive social change.

While the willingness exist, effective and strategic collaboration is harder to achieve. The most common obstacles to building sustained partnerships cited in the Bridgespan report by nonprofit leaders were:

- Lack of funder support for collaboration.
- The difficulty of finding the right partner: Nonprofits rate this as their highest barrier.
- The downside of well-intentioned funder influence when partnering doesn't make sense.¹

Partnerships vary

Partnerships within the sector come in many forms for many reasons. The Institute for Community Health and Wellbeing offered this graphic to demonstrate the many ways organizations are collaborating.² As you can see, models such as mergers, co-locations, strategic alliances, coalitions, joint committee work, and informal networks all fall under the umbrella of “partnerships”.



¹ Bridgespan Group, [Making Sense of Nonprofit Collaborations | Bridgespan](#)

¹ Bridgespan Group, [Making Sense of Nonprofit Collaborations | Bridgespan](#)

² CSUN: [Nonprofit Partnerships: Strategies that Work \(csun.edu\)](#), slide 10

Why team up?

In the Forbes article “Why Teaming Up Can Make Sense”, the author outlines the following benefits to nonprofit collaboration.

- Operational expense savings: Both organizations saved money through joint purchasing, transportation, facility rental, joint staff training and IT.
- Enhance programs: By teaming, both organizations were able to provide a continuum of care from birth through school years for the children they serve.
- More efficient outreach: piggy back on each other’s network and expand the sphere of influence.
- Expand the value proposition: Both organizations were able to expand their offerings without increasing their budget.³

Successful collaboration examples

The following are a few examples of successful collaborations in the sector. Coalition building can streamline fundraising and resources. An example includes:

Many students from Boulder, Colorado’s low-income families do not have the school supplies they need when they start school each fall. In fact, the need was so clear that several organizations solicited funds for supplies every year, and new organizations sprang up amid the fragmentation. Impact on Education, Extras for Education, the Sister Carmen Community Center, and Foothills United Way knew there had to be a better way. There was: they founded a joint program called Crayons to Calculators, aimed at developing one program that served all students in need of supplies, without gaps or duplication of effort. Now, Boulder County social services and area school districts have one organization to go to when they identify students in need. In its third year of operation, Crayons to Calculators provided a backpack filled with school supplies to every student in the Boulder Valley School District who needed help. One partner serves as the fiduciary agent for Crayons to Calculators, and each partner designates an employee who serves on an oversight committee. Through affiliated programming, both fundraising and service delivery are streamlined and simplified.⁴

A simpler collaboration model is the sharing of back-office resources. An example includes:

In 2003, a number of agencies committed to helping children in foster care in Texas get adopted approached the Austin Community Foundation with an idea. They were seeking new ways to collaborate so they could more effectively advance the goals they shared. The foundation granted seed funding to start the Adoption Coalition of Texas and provides continuing support for its work by handling all the coalition’s administrative and back-office functions. In the last

³ Forbes Magazine, [Nonprofit Collaborations: Why Teaming Up Can Make Sense \(forbes.com\)](https://www.forbes.com)

⁴ Arizona State University Lodestar Center, [coll_models_report-2009.pdf \(asu.edu\)](https://lodestar.asu.edu), Page 5

decade, the coalition has become the central unified voice for adoption in the state. Among the results, there has been a 70 percent increase in adoptions over five years.⁵

Joint programming collaboration is among the most common model. Examples include:

In 2005, World Vision International (WVI) wanted to provide HIV-education and patient advocacy in countries that were slow to recognize the pandemic. They sought out organizations with proven-programs in this field. AIDS Bureau of South Africa was offering an effective program called, Channels of Hope (COH). WVI licensed this program and became an implementer in 90 countries. The collaboration helped WVI create impact more quickly by borrowing from an already tested and proven program in a relevant culture, saving years of wasted time and money trying to create a unique program.⁶

Street Business School (SBS) created a similar model in that it offers its proven entrepreneurial education program for women living below the poverty line to other organizations interested in learning the program and customizing it for their local community. More than 160 NGOs have partnered to become SBS implementing partners in 26 countries, to date, including the world's largest non-governmental organization, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC).⁷

For many more examples of effective collaborations, Lodestar Foundation has created [The Collaboration Hub](#), a database of more than 600 nonprofit partnership examples. For example, one could filter according to religion and/or economic development to see how partnerships have served faith-based organizations working to create poverty relief. There are so many options, that the database enables the searcher to filter the collaborations among one of the following helpful categories:

- purchase goods or services together
- share (co-locate) or better utilize space
- combine marketing efforts
- share development (fundraising) activities
- form a new organization to deliver a program or provide administrative services
- share planning or delivery of programs or services
- form a confederation
- merge - resulting in one integrated organization
- merge - resulting in an affiliate or subsidiary relationship
- share staff
- share staff training¹

⁵ Arizona State University Lodestar Center, [coll_models_report-2009.pdf \(asu.edu\)](#), Page 25

⁶ Bridgespan Group, [Making Sense of Nonprofit Collaborations | Bridgespan](#)

⁷ [Leadership Training: Support Women Entrepreneurs Globally | Street Business School](#)

Tips to create a successful partnership

According to [Collective impact](#), the key tenets of effective collaboration include:

- Start with a common agenda.
- Establish shared measurement.
- Foster mutually reinforced activities.
- Continuous communication and reporting.
- Has a backbone – meaning a team to align and coordinate the project/group.⁸

The best partnerships are those that are implementer-led, funder supported, with pre-established goals, humility, and a shared commitment to achieve a mutually agreed upon mission greater than one’s own organization.

Grants for Effective Organizations (GEO) asked funders and nonprofits how funders can best support collaborative capacity in nonprofit organizations. The following were among the top answers:

- Help make connections, but don’t force them.
- Offer core support and flexible, long-term funding to grantees.
- Provide necessary resources to support and enable collaboration.⁹

Conclusion

“If funders truly want to spur their grantees to align efforts, they will need to take a hard look at their core grantmaking practices and assess the degree to which they are encouraging a go-it-alone mindset,” says one respondent from GEO.¹⁰ While there is an appetite among nonprofit organizations to learn more from one another and to explore streamlining programs and operations, funders have the unique ability to raise the subject, convene thought leaders and nonprofit organizations, support the research and be willing to take the risk with an exploratory gift.

Additionally, nonprofits are encouraged to ask for this kind of support and be willing to invest in exploring the options with other value-aligned implementing partners. If a collaboration makes sense, it is the implementer’s responsibility to approach it with clear goals, humility, monitoring and staff support to achieve its greatest possible outcomes.

Collaboration is one of the clearest opportunities to innovate within the sector in order to maximize impact. However, it takes generous hearts, humble spirits and dutiful management to create the best possible partnerships imaginable.

⁸ [What Is Collective Impact - Collective Impact Forum](#)

⁹ Grants for Effective Organizations (GEO), [Working-Better-Together-GEO-2013.pdf \(michiganfoundations.org\)](#)

¹⁰ Grants for Effective Organizations (GEO), [Working-Better-Together-GEO-2013.pdf \(michiganfoundations.org\)](#)