



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

It's a Good Idea to Collaborate

By Barry VanderKelen

The 2008 Collaboration Forum, an annual meeting to share best practices in the nonprofit world and to learn new skills, is set for March 27 and 28. It is a wonderful opportunity to get involved or grow in your confidence as a nonprofit volunteer or staff member. All events at this year's forum, "Nurturing Our Nonprofits," will be at Cal Poly's University Union.

Find out more at

www.collaborationslo.org.

Andy Robinson, a nationally known consultant to nonprofit groups for 27 years, will be the keynote speaker on March 27. A resident of Plainfield, Vt., Robinson travels throughout the U. S. and Canada helping small nonprofit organizations become more effective.

His focus is on organizations that have budgets less than \$500,000. Most of the nonprofit organizations in our county fit into this category. Robinson has also written four books, including "Big Gifts for Small Groups" (Emerson & Church Publishers, 2007) and "Great Boards for

Small Groups" (Emerson & Church Publishers, 2006).

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Robinson by telephone.

Q: How do you define collaboration?

A: Organizations with separate identities but a common purpose finding ways to work together.

There are various degrees of working together. On one end of the spectrum is independence, and on the other end is merger. In between the two are gradients of working together.

Q: What is the essential element for a collaboration to be successful?

A: We underestimate the time it takes to collaborate. Potential partners need to get to know one another and find ways to permit collaboration. This is a cost of collaboration people don't fully anticipate.

Q: It seems collaboration is an ideal. Why don't more nonprofit groups do it?

A: People's intentions are good, but sometimes things get in the way. Some barriers to collaborating are perceived lack of time to explore collaborating; the commitment to the original vision of the

nonprofit group; and sense that the need is so great multiple organizations are necessary. Ultimately, though, everyone involved must be committed to making the collaboration work, or it won't be successful.

Q: Is collaboration a strategy for existing nonprofit groups to adapt to changing community needs?

A: Yes. There are too many duplicative nonprofit groups in the world. We have to find ways to permit collaboration. If someone has an idea for a new service, it's better that he or she finds a home for that idea in an existing nonprofit group instead of starting a new one.

Q: But this means nonprofit groups need to be open to new ideas.

A: That's right. The power of vision and strength of purpose gets in the way of finding partnerships. Nonprofit groups have to look beyond their immediate work to see how collaborating can serve more community needs. If we are in service to our own purpose, we will fail.

In addition to his keynote address, Robinson will also present a workshop March 28. My next column will continue the conversation I had with him.

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Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@slocf.org.