



Collaboration offers a myriad of benefits

By Barry VanderKelen

Nonprofits do not innovate more because, in my opinion, they lack the confidence that something new will strengthen the organization. After all, consultants warn that organizations suffer “death by opportunity.”

Put another way, if a juggler attempts to juggle too many balls, he will end up dropping all of them.

Collaborating can make nonprofits more efficient and effective. The motivation to collaborate heightens as resources become scarce.

But is there reason to collaborate when the organization is already strong?

Today I present collaboration from a different perspective: collaboration as a capacity-building activity.

The core mission

A mission is at the core of all nonprofit work — it is what gives focus to the organization’s work. Too narrow a focus, however, limits the ability of an organization to envision a different and better way to accomplish its goals. Innovation, professor Mattei Dogan argues, occurs in the intersections of organizations and not in their cores.

It is only natural that organizations want to protect their boundaries that help contain their work. Nonprofits are advised to

avoid “mission creep,” or being pulled away from their central purpose. So how can a nonprofit stay true to its mission and explore innovation that might cause it to alter its boundaries?

Confidence will increase as the organization invests in its internal capacity to conduct its work.

The core essentials

Alfred Vernis, Maria Iglesias, Beariz Sanz and Angel Saz-Carranza, in their book, “Nonprofit Organizations: Challenges and Collaborations,” state that an organization must focus on accountability, governance and nurturing of human resources in order to build its internal capacity.

These three things must be well established internally and must then be applied to any collaboration. Remaining accountable to

one’s constituencies is as essential as being accountable to collaborating partners; establishing clear expectations will help achieve this balance. Clarifying the scope of the collaborative project is vital so that participants know the goals and their roles.

Finally, when organizations collaborate, staff and volunteers may take on new roles and conduct their work differently; there must be appropriate training and reward systems in place if everyone is to

succeed. An organization can develop fruitful collaborations only when these competencies are strong, according to these authors.

A confident organization will be able to negotiate effectively the limits of a collaborative relationship, thus allowing it to leverage its resources to accomplish more.

By remaining true to its primary purpose, honoring its commitments to partners, and enabling all participants to succeed, a nonprofit can fulfill more of its mission in collaboration with others than it could by acting alone.

Collaboration Summit set for Sept. 19 in SLO

The Collaboration Summit on Sept. 19 at the Veterans Memorial Building in San Luis Obispo will feature Jean Ross, executive director of the California Budget Project (www.cbp.org).

The California Budget Project is highly respected for its independent fiscal and policy analysis. Offering perspectives on the state of the county will be the Jim Patterson, chairman of the county Board of Supervisors, Supervisor Katcho Achadjian and David Edge, the county’s chief administrative officer.

More information is available at www.collaborationslo.org.

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-

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