



When fewer tax dollars per capita are available for public and social services, funders and civil society organizations need to meet the efficiency challenge through better collaboration. **BY BOB PURDY**

The Collaboration Imperative in a “Do More with Less” World

I’LL BET YOU’VE BEEN to one of those “government-should-fund-this” meetings. Hardworking citizens wring their hands, facing the imminent prospect of a valued social service organization shutting its doors for good. They wonder aloud why a key source of government funding has dried up. All enthusiastically agree to an intensified lobbying effort, and the meeting concludes with many in attendance emboldened with the notion that swift political intervention would save the day.

Meetings like this one play out every day in communities both large and small.

Shifting taxpayer sentiment has ushered in a “do more with less” era that has seen significant reductions per capita in many government services. Local governments are not immune to this trend and face increasing pressure from con-

stituents to hold the line on property taxes despite absorbing responsibilities formerly the domain of other orders of government.

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ernment funding of programs, yet they continue to expect the same or better services. Short of heroic efforts to increase voter turnout and point out the impact of voting behaviour, how can public expectations be met in this “do more with less” era?

Governments, as an alternative to cutting programs outright, have responded to the deficit-cutting years by seeking to deliver services through new or expanded civil society and private sector relationships. On some fronts this is

working well. On others where it's not, some key questions are surfacing. Does the "government should" perspective, for instance, severely limit consideration of options and place an undue reliance on political intervention? Perhaps, if only it could be that simple. But the story we started earlier—as an illustration based on real-world examples—runs much deeper and raises other questions.

A candid debriefing session at the local watering hole after the meeting reveals interesting dynamics. Competition with another social service agency had kyboshed an otherwise viable joint funding proposal. A multitude of social service organizations in the community were all vying for the same declining pool of volunteers. Both public and private funding organizations were facing a growing deluge of requests for support, but were finding it increasingly difficult to decide which initiatives to fund as there simply were too many groups trying to do the same things, seemingly at odds with each other. Finally it was disclosed that the executive director of the organization in crisis had recently left, burned out after several years of effort chasing a mixed bag of project grants each year, none of which could be used to pay the rent or build strategic relationships with others.

Does this story sound familiar? Rather than any one cause triggering this particular crisis, the story demonstrates that a number of interrelated factors are typically at play when social service and other civil society organizations face the

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challenge of government fiscal restraint. In my view, a critical success factor in facing this challenge is *whether people and the organizations they represent exhibit the attitude, commitment, and skills to work together.*

Popular terms these days, "collaboration" and "partnership building" are easy to say, but harder to do. To those accustomed to making unilateral decisions or viewing others doing similar work as competitors rather than potential partners, collaboration will be difficult. Even those who recognize the value of collaboration face obstacles. As a leader of a non-government organization recently pointed out to me, her organization "doesn't get paid to collaborate," given that all of its funding is strictly targeted toward delivering specific "single silo" outcomes on shoestring budgets. Still, the business case for collaboration is a compelling one, as organizations like the one I work for continue to

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demonstrate. I suggest below some ways to better support collaboration that could lead to a more satisfactory conclusion to our hypothetical story.

Collaboration clearly provides a means to leverage the core competencies and resources of more than one organization. It simply doesn't make sense when cash-strapped organizations

reinvent the wheel or stray outside their core competencies simply because they lacked the will or resources to explore whether a given societal need could be addressed through collaboration with others more qualified. Too often this approach results in needless competition, wasted resources, and conflict in cases of unilateral incursions into the legitimate mandates of others.

It also has the undesirable result of creating a well-founded impression of disunity to prospective funding agencies. Before launching new initiatives or seeking support for existing ones, civil society organizations could do more to place more emphasis on proactive reconnaissance and relationship building with others to uncover potential synergies and economies of scale.

There also is a need for more collaboration among funding organizations. It's not uncommon to see redundant funding programs in one

area, with a diversity of application criteria, each requiring in-kind contributions of volunteers, while other community needs remain unaddressed due to an absence of funding options. While it's encouraging to see some funding agencies now requiring applicants to secure partnerships before seeking support, collaboration among funding organizations stands to deliver a

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more comprehensive shared understanding of community needs, wiser use of limited social capital, more opportunities to leverage individual grants, and new ways to harmonize application requirements to ease the burden on applicants. It also has the potential to address the ongoing problem of

insufficient support for core operating costs of civil society organizations delivering services for the public good. Ironically, overlooking the need for core support—and the human infrastructure for collaboration that it delivers—can inadvertently reduce efficiency over the long haul, the exact opposite of what funding organizations intended to achieve in the first place.

In a nutshell, the spirit and best practices of collaboration can transform stories of scarcity and crisis to stories of abundance and commu-

nity well being. To those in civil society, don't let organizational self-interest trump smarter ways to fulfill your cause. To those providing funding, intensify your efforts to work with your peers to better understand needs, identify redundancies and gaps, and give recipients the enduring capacity they need to collaborate with each other and ultimately deliver more and better results.

Far from being a one meeting miracle, successful collaboration requires patience, a shared willingness to come together in good faith and let go of command-and-control approaches to decision-making, proactive engagement of key interests, respect for multiple perspectives, the commitment of all interests to deliver their

respective parts of agreed-upon solutions, and appropriate policy and financial support. In a variation of a lyric from the famous John Lennon tune, the challenges we are facing will ultimately prove less daunting if we all work just a little harder to *give collaboration a chance*. It's a critical imperative in a "do more with less" world. ■

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