



Collaborations in the Nonprofit World

On April 14, FPWA held its annual conference at the New York University's Kimmel Center. Attended by some 200 member agency representatives, this year's theme was collaboration. FPWA chose this theme to highlight the successes and challenges that not-for-profits face when partnering with other organizations.

Collaborations are widely encouraged today for both economic and logistical reasons. But the degree to which they are productive depends on many variables, including shared understanding of both parties' expectations; clearly defined roles and responsibilities; the organization and administration of the collaboration; and the degree to which everyone is equipped for the challenges and opportunities that working together brings.

Rather than present a "typical" panel discussion, featuring lengthy presentations by a few speakers followed by questions from the audience, we wanted to try something different this year. So we asked SEED (Stretch, Enliven, Ennoble, Discover), a non-profit coaching firm whose specialty is unleashing the power in collaboration (www.seedimpact.org), to help plan and moderate the forum. Our aim was to practice collaboration in a way that would actively engage everyone in attendance and reveal insights regarding "what works" and "what would work better" to make collaboration more doable and powerful.

Below is a summary of the conference and some of the collective knowledge revealed through the process.

Conference Structure

Seven "catalyst presenters" opened the dialogue and presented their experiences with collaborations and partnerships.

Catalysts presenters included:

- Rev. Lezlie Austin-Kennedy, *Forestdale* - Secular community based organization with faith-based agencies
- Carol Ban, *Isabella Geriatric Center* - Multi-sector/profession/generational service delivery, neighborhood-rooted
- Ronna Brown, *Philanthropy NY* - Collaboration among philanthropists and funders
- Judith Kahan, *Center Against Domestic Violence* - Issue-based, same sector partnering among advocates--membership organizations and coalitions
- Ruth-Ellen Simmonds, *One Stop Senior Services* - Operational resource-sharing
- Seep Varma, *NY Therapeutic Communities* - On-site community-based service provider with government

Denice Williams, *Department of Youth and Community Development* - Mandated government and non-profit
We then transitioned to small group discussions designed to ensure that everyone was heard and that the content of the discussions was captured. The conference design meant that we did not get to hear as much as we might appreciate from any one person. The opportunities to speak were tightly timed, beginning with the catalyst speakers. However, in return for limited speaking time, we gained the opportunity to engage more than 200 voices. The design encouraged participants to contribute in ways that revealed rich community wisdom in just two hours!

Capturing Community Knowledge

At the end of the conversation period, a 30-minute report-out was facilitated so that everyone could catch a glimpse at what was emerging in the full community. Some of the collective wisdom about collaborations that emerged is below.

Challenges:

- Political turf issues and reluctance to release power
- Unclear/unreasonable expectations from the beginning
- Lack of written documentation of collaboration terms
- Lack of openness to new ideas and resistance to change
- Unfocused goals
- Clash of goals and organizational cultures
- Lack of leadership or decision-making structure, too many people with their hands in the pot
- Lack of funding and resources
- Lack of commitment by partners
- Lack of respect for differences among partners
- Lack of accountability by some or all partners; failure to follow up
- Unclear roles
- Unstructured, non-strategic, unreliable communication
- Inequitable resource allocation
- Unrealistic, non-existent planning
- Poor time management
- Vague and/or difficult-to-measure outcomes
- Failure to celebrate successes
- Insufficient joint training, support, practice
- Lack of recognition that power and culture are seen differently from the outside
- Mission drift

For each of these challenges, participants reflected and shared insights on what would enhance outcomes. Here is a brief summary of insights offered by the catalyst speakers.

To improve collaboration, we need:

- Shared commitment to a vision, goals and outcomes that are larger than any one organization's agenda;
- Courage to step away from a relationship that is not working;
- Curiosity. We need to carry a curious attitude and maintain openness to explore emergent possibilities.
- Anticipatory, visionary thinking. We need to plan ahead, beyond arbitrary time limits (including anticipating future funding needs and opportunities to sustain collaboration).
- The understanding and support of funders;

- Objective measurements of success. We need to effectively tell the story and expand supports to continue.

Many more participant suggestions for improving collaboration concurred with the key elements to successful collaboration. *These twelve success factors offer clear antidotes to the challenges:*

1. Trust and respect
2. Effective communication
3. Commitment and motivation
4. Functionality
5. Resources
6. Goals
7. Leadership
8. Balance
9. Benefits
10. Chemistry
11. Risk
12. Broad participation

[Click here to see the full list of elements identified by those in the room.](#)

While there are many pitfalls in putting together a successful collaboration or partnership, they often yield results far beyond what an organization can do on its own. In the face of economic uncertainty and increased pressure for organizations to demonstrate successful outcomes, collaborations and partnerships are becoming even more essential, and often are required, to achieve your agency's goals.

For additional information about the conference or about collaboration, contact [Bonda Lee Cunningham](#), ph. (212) 801-1324.

Additional Resources

- [Board Talking Points: Collaborations](#), Lawyers Alliance for New York
- Building Successful Collaborations: [A Legal Guide for Nonprofits](#), Lawyers Alliance for New York
- Collaboration: [What Makes It Work, 2nd Edition](#) A review of research literature on factors influencing successful collaborations. The Wilder Foundation
- [Mergers and Strategic Alliances for New York Not-For-Profit Corporations](#), Lawyers Alliance for New York
- [Strategic Alliances: 8 Questions to Ask](#), The Nonprofit Times
- The Strategic Alliance Fund Lessons Learned. Report on a collaboration of 21 funders and the organizational collaborations it funded from 1995-99. (e-mail [Bonda Lee-Cunningham](#) for an electronic copy)
- The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, [Assessing your collaboration's strengths and weaknesses](#). Fieldstone Alliance