



Building and Maintaining a Partnership

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By:
Briana Zemora
&
Justin Goetz

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www.ocdweb.sc.egov.usda.gov

CD Technotes

- ❖ Would you like to improve your information exchange with other organizations?
- ❖ Do different organizations in your community provide duplicate services?
- ❖ Would you like to pool resources with other organizations for large-scale projects?
- ❖ Do you need help keeping an existing partnership going?

If so, you may want to consider forming new partnerships and/or using the following tips for maintaining a more effective partnership.

What is a Partnership?

Partnerships allow organizations to cooperate and coordinate with each other to reach common goals while still maintaining their autonomy. A partnership can exist between at least two government entities or within the private sector between both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. The purpose of partnerships is to eliminate duplication of work among agencies and organizations and coordinate the resources available to them. Each respective agent can bring certain beneficial qualities to the partnership (including relationships with target populations, production capacity, research and development) that might not otherwise be available to them individually.

Partnerships come in all sizes and shapes: formal and informal; with 2 or 20 members; for special projects or broad cooperation; and with regular weekly meetings or infrequent meetings. You can adapt a partnership to meet the particular needs, interests, and constraints of your organizations.

Why Build Partnerships?

- Certain projects are not possible without partnerships.
- They can improve service delivery in or to your community.
- Participating organizations can gain credibility and increased visibility.
- Partnerships can open lines of communication among constituent organizations and build a shared network between partners.
- Certain projects require multiple expertise that might not be possessed by one organization.

How To Build an Effective Partnership

Approaching prospective partners: This very first step is often the most awkward and difficult for an organization to accomplish. Once you have decided that a particular organization shares similar interests and complementing qualities with your own, you may want to ask its leadership to permit you to sit in on a few of their meetings or provide you with pertinent literature. The more "low visibility" research you can perform before you make the offer of partnership, the more certain you will be that the offer is acceptable to both organizations.

Identify common goals: The second order of business is for partners to reach an understanding as to the shared goals of the partnership. This can be as formal or informal of a process as the parties agree upon. Regardless of the approach taken, listing the goals of the partnership in writing might ensure that no confusion or conflict arises. Moreover, by coming together and firming up the goals of the partnership, this activity helps reinforce and define the reasons behind creating the partnership. This helps to build confidence among partners and generate new ideas to accomplish these goals.

Create strategies to achieve shared goals: Once the over-arching goals of the partnership are established, partners need to devise strategies to achieve these goals together. Regardless of the role taken by partners, strategies should require input and action by all partners.

Develop a “Partnership Agreement”: Partners can write an agreement through formal means (like a contract) or by as informal a manner as a simple discussion. Regardless, it is important for the new partnership to define which partners have which roles in carrying out their strategies, even if these roles are shared. Roles for each partner must be within the capabilities and, ideally, the expertise of each partner. The rights of each party to make decisions for the partnership should be stated clearly. The creation of a more formal partnership would entail defining voting rights—either allotted equally among members or unequally based upon contribution.

Create a Partnership “Liaison” or “Leader”: Regardless of the size, resources, or formality of your partnership, it makes sense to place a party in charge of overseeing operations and holding together the partnership. This can take the form of an outside, neutral figure that is employed or volunteers for the task or is the largest partner.

How To Maintain a Partnership

Frequent and effective communication: Solid communication is a necessary component in maintaining a partnership. Use strategies that encourage productive interaction during group meetings. Arrange weekly conversations at a set time—whether over the telephone or in person—to regularly renew your strategies and professional

relationship. Encourage all participants in meetings to communicate their problems and comments. For example, you could use facilitators to make your meetings run more efficiently.

Function as mentors towards each other: Use the opportunity to find a mentor in the other organization. Learn of the values, experiences and skills that could be offered. This is also an opportunity for you to provide knowledge to someone by serving as a mentor too.

Honesty: As with any working environment, honesty is a must. No secrets should be kept or information withheld that has any bearing on the partnership. Such disingenuousness will undermine and potentially cripple a partnership.

Be willing to compromise: Do not expect to have everything your way. You should be willing to compromise on some issues. This indicates to the other partners that you are sincere and not in the partnership to take advantage of other partners.

Be sensitive: Consider the feelings of others when giving suggestions and constructive criticism. Be careful how you word things and the tone of voice you use when speaking with others. The same applies to written communication. Another agency may not have the same working style as yours.

Confront problems immediately: When conflict arises, deal with it as soon as possible. If the problem cannot be resolved among the partners, seek mediation through a local leader agreed upon by all partners. The sooner an issue is addressed, the less likely it will turn into a much larger and difficult problem later.

Strong personal commitment: The executive and program staff of the partnering organizations should have a strong commitment to making the partnership work and in accomplishing its goals.

Additional Resources

- US Dept. of Education – Steps to Building Local Partnerships (in Education)
http://www.ed.gov/Family/agbts/steps_part.html
- National Housing Institute – Nonprofit Partnerships With Corporations
<http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/130/fundraising.html>
- Florida State University – “Local Government Partnerships”
http://consensus.fsu.edu/PDF_Reports/FCCMA_2003_Report.pdf