

Building Strategic Partnerships

OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES as community organizations have attempted to solve deep-seated problems they are sometimes shocked by the realization that they cannot do it alone. Further, as we know more about the challenges that face individuals and families, we know that they are interrelated and connected. When community organizations, governments, and businesses narrow their focuses, often the “big picture” gets lost, and efforts are fragmented. One agency works on teen pregnancy prevention, another works on homelessness, and still another works on job training. All these solutions are important and critically needed. However, addressing one problem in isolation—without addressing the overall context of the challenges—has limited impact. Human concerns require more than one solution and are too complicated to be addressed by one organization or agency. Module Six addresses the remedy for this community dilemma through strategic partnerships.

HOW PARTNERSHIPS WORK

Partnership is the cooperative relationship between two or more parties for the benefit of both or the greater good. In communities, partnerships are formed between individuals, organizations, and agencies that want to combine forces for a better result and have a notion that their own interests could be furthered by working with others. Partners can leverage time, money, personnel, etc., for a larger impact by joining with other people, agencies, or organizations. Ideally, partnerships are mutually beneficial to the participating organizations as well as the community as a whole.

DESIGNING A PARTNERSHIP

Partnership is a very attractive idea for communities, but unfortunately too few know how to create one or better still, how to keep it going. As a way of thinking about the creation of partnerships and the sustaining of them, there are two general types of partnerships to consider: usual and unusual. Both are equally hard to find and create; and both can provide enormous benefit to the participants.

USUAL PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships that by definition of the problem or issue being addressed have a natural affinity are what we think about first. This might be a partnership among childcare providers to

extend the hours of childcare available in one area of the community or a partnership among hospitals on emergency room service. These kinds of relationships, while not easy to create, are fairly straightforward in their composition. Another traditional approach to partnership is collaboration between organizations that work in the same general issue area. For example, this might include the basic-skills training organizations, the welfare-to-work agency, and the job-placement service in the community coordinating efforts so that program participants have a seamless and a tailored program for their needs and experiences. In other words, the partnership may allow the service providers to assist students in a more effective way if they work together in some fashion.

UNUSUAL PARTNERSHIPS

Relationships among organizations that at first glance do not share a common purpose or common goal require more creativity and thinking but often have even greater results. An example of an unusual partnership might be an environmental protection group and a youth agency. One has a goal of protecting the environment, and the other has the goal of positive youth development. Where's the match? The match comes when you ask a few questions. Does the environmental organization need volunteers for neighborhood and community clean up or testing of soil and water samples? Does the youth agency have young people who want meaningful internships or paid summer jobs that can contribute to the betterment of the community? If the answer is yes to both, then a partnership has been born. Unusual partnerships are created when organizations examine their larger interests and the larger interests of others and see the connections and synergy that could be created by working together.

JUST COMMON SENSE

Both of these approaches make a lot of sense. Why shouldn't we work together to solve problems? Wouldn't it be better if we took the best of what everybody had to offer and applied it toward the issue at hand? Unfortunately it is not easy to do. Building strategic partnerships means giving up some control, rethinking competition for funds, and most importantly, being willing to share the limelight on success and failure.

FORMING A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Partnerships begin with information sharing. The first step in surveying partnership possibilities is to know what others are doing and let them know what you are doing. In the fast-paced lives we lead, we often forget to tell our story or get the word out.

Module Six • Introduction

Second, partnerships require trust. Start slowly. Get to know and work with people and organizations in ways that are nonthreatening and where the stakes are small. Partnership is a building process. Third, confront the tough issues early. Do not assume that things will “just work out.” They won’t. It is important to address major concerns, such as money, responsibility and authority, or any other potentially prickly topics in the early stages. Surprise is not a good component of a new partnership.

Finally, think about your own work in the broadest possible terms. Are you running a school-to-work transition program or are you developing the community’s work force? Obviously you are doing both. Strategic partnerships allow organizations to frame their work and goals in ways that enhance their mission and results.

