

Pillar Nonprofit Network Research Report Collaborating for Community Impact Program A Challenge with Great Rewards

Overview

In launching its new *Collaborating for Community Impact* (CCI) Program funded through the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, Pillar Nonprofit Network hired its Community Collaboration Program Manager in early January, 2012. With a mandate to explore and document an inventory of existing collaborations in London, en route to researching successful case studies and defining best practices, the Program Manager facilitated 25 meetings with a spectrum of community stakeholders involved in various collaborations.

Based on that input, and as a means of expanding its research and digging deeper into the challenges, as well as the benefits, of community collaboration, Pillar hosted two Focus Groups in July of 2012. In each session, 10-12 community leaders representing 4-5 cross-sector collaborations were invited to come together to share their insights.

This CCI research report encompasses the learning gained through Pillar's community consultation. As a result, we have completed the Research Phase and Learning Phase of the Program, as outlined in the *Collaborating for Community Impact* Fact Sheet. Through its documented inventory and facilitated Focus Group discussions, Pillar was able to define best practices related to cross-sector collaboration, which will guide its implementation process of the CCI Program over the next two years.

Executive Summary

A key learning is that collaboration is not a natural process. It is decision initiated by a group of like-minded people, who strive to achieve a collective goal, which is only made possible through the cumulative impact of each party's contributions, working together.

The concept of collaboration has become a key feature in many spheres of social activity. Whether in research, art or business, the ability of individuals and groups to share a similar vision and pursue common goals, through a sharing of resources and knowledge, often yields great rewards. Similarly, collaboration has become an important tool in improving community and making positive social change.

In fact, community itself is a collaborative effort, whereby various segments band together to form a collective identity with mutual interests.

Yet, collaboration is also a challenging process for all those involved, steering many away from even considering it as an option. Some stakeholders argue that collaboration becomes even more challenging when involving cross-sector partners, where individuals and organizations from different sectors (public, private and nonprofit) strive to work together towards a unified goal.

Cross-sector collaborations must also deal with an added challenge of integrating different cultures, organizational objectives and languages. Despite such obstacles, our Focus Group participants note that cross-sector collaborations do bring together a rich variety of skills, strengths, knowledge and resources and enable organizations to accomplish unique objectives and greater goals.

And, although organizations approach community collaboration with a desire to do good work, it does not imply that the process is driven by generosity or altruism. All collaborations, for the sake of the parties involved, must be mutually beneficial. By their very nature, collaborations require a great deal of transparency and accountability to ensure the time, talent and treasure committed by each participant is well invested. Therefore, to be effective, collaborations must be win/win affairs that reward each of the participants in some capacity.

With a growing emphasis on collaboration, particularly in the realm of community development, learning when and how to collaborate is an important lesson for organizations across the sectors. Therefore, promoting and assisting more combined efforts among public, private and nonprofit organizations will lead towards a healthier, more vibrant community in The Forest City.

Drivers of Collaboration

Community collaborations are initiated by a variety of factors that can be either proactive or reactive:

Meet a Need

In many instances, collaborations are created to meet a need or solve a problem. They are often communicated by individuals or community groups directly affected by the issue; one that is too multifaceted to be resolved by a single agency. Therefore, a collaborative solution is required and may involve one or more public, nonprofit and private sector partners.

Lack of Resources

Collaborations are sometimes created to address a lack of resources; monetary, human or otherwise. In these instances, collaboration helps organizations share the burden and costs involved in delivering social services.

Reduce Duplication

Another related driver of collaboration is often the need to reduce duplication, where organizations sharing similar mandates are also requesting funds from the same source. In such cases, these organizations may choose to collaborate and more efficiently apply their capital and human resources to achieve a shared objective. As society continues to experience global recession, it is likely that funders, in particular government funders, will increasingly mandate nonprofit organizations to collaborate in order to share funding and deliver more streamlined service options.

Establish Credibility

Community collaboration is also prompted by the need to establish legitimacy and credibility. For example, private businesses and companies often use community involvement and charitable sponsorship to increase their public profile, while demonstrating a commitment to society. Companies with a long-term interest in the wellbeing of a community view these investments as good corporate social responsibility. Likewise, newly-established nonprofits may gain credibility and legitimacy by partnering with larger public, private or nonprofit organizations on collaborative projects. In both instances, these efforts raise the organization's profile in the community, and across the private, public and nonprofit sector.

A New Vision

Lastly, there are collaborations born through vision, either an individual or collective vision. These involve enhancing or improving an aspect of community life, reaching an ideal that may not be currently visible. Despite its seeming idealism, vision can become a powerful driver for community collaboration, particularly when led by charismatic individuals or groups capable of relating such ideas to the real world.

Key Factors in Forming a Collaborative

Experienced collaborators cite the following factors as key to success:

Trust

Trust defines a relationship, and relationships are the foundation of all successful cross-sector collaborations. So, unless trust exists among collaborators, there is little chance for even the most compelling vision to become reality. For this reason, stakeholders must be prepared to invest a significant amount of time and energy getting to know each other and establishing trust, as the first phase of collaboration.

Within the intimacy of our cross-sector Focus Groups, many participants recounted efforts to initiate collaborative relationships by extending open invitations to any person or group who might have an interest in being part of a discussion. These stakeholders have included leaders and frontline staff of service organizations, funders and donors, community groups, clients, and people and groups with knowledge, expertise, and experience in areas related to the specific collaboration being contemplated.

And, although community collaboration may be leveraged through the use of online technology platforms and other virtual communication channels, participants agreed the greatest resource for making connections will always be through personal connections and professional networks.

Meantime, whether meeting a potential collaborator in person or in cyberspace, first impressions are very important. When a diverse group of stakeholders sits around an actual table or comes together in a virtual space, potential collaborators want to be assured their partners are trustworthy, and have the desire, influence and resources to contribute meaningfully and effectively.

Equal Voice

At the same time, in order to move forward with a cross-sector collaboration, there is an immediate need to quickly confirm all potential partners have an equal voice, regardless of sector, individual titles, and the size, status or resources of their organization.

Shared Vision

We learned that in the early stages of collaboration, a group of partners wants to unite under a shared vision. To clearly define a shared vision, it is necessary to find and use common language. Notably, in cross-sector collaborations, the phrases, acronyms and jargon used in each sector (nonprofit, private, and public) differ significantly. As such, successful collaborators ensure a common understanding of the meanings of key words and the selection of language to best represent their project.

As a group works to articulate and record in writing its shared vision for collaboration, the individual stakeholders begin to uncover potential benefits, otherwise known as *What's In It For Me* (WIIFM). For some, there will be clear and direct benefits to the collaboration. In other instances, there will be indirect and intangible gains from the project results.

As the vision for the collaboration evolves, the WIIFM measurement for particular stakeholders may increase, decrease or shift, so the best results are yielded when collaborators agree to be honest and forthright about their interests.

Defined Process

We also learned that in order to gain continued support and participation of collaborators, it is essential to establish a process to move the project forward. While ambiguity surrounding the final outcome of the collaboration is often present, clarity of the collaboration process is key. To this end, experienced collaborators shared that defined roles and expectations of stakeholders are needed early on in the relationship. And, the characteristics of integrity, transparency, responsibility, and accountability are necessary for maintaining the trust of all collaborators.

Accountability Framework

To effectively function, one person or a small group of individuals must be accountable for the collaboration process, and ensure it continues to move ahead. This leader, or group of leaders, may have initiated the collaboration process or are representative of the diverse group of stakeholders, or possess particular resources (position, time, neutrality) or skill sets required to lead.

In addition to maintaining open channels of communication among diverse collaborators, the group members must also establish parameters to keep all external stakeholders informed and connected to the collaboration process. These external stakeholders may include Board members, organizational staff, clients, funders, donors, and the general public.

Group Norms

With a shared vision prepared, a collaboration process adopted, and an accountability framework in place, collaborators are encouraged to next identify group norms or standards of behaviour. This may include simple practices, like preparing agendas and recording minutes and action items arising from stakeholder meetings.

It is also important to discuss in advance how conflicts will be resolved within the group, the manner in which the group will invite another party into the discussions or ask a current stakeholder to exit the project, and how succession planning will be undertaken beyond the participation of current individual stakeholders.

With the significant work required to create a shared vision, bring the right people together, establish relationships of trust, and define a plan and roles, one might assume that collaborators are safe to move forward to the next stages of the process. But, according to the lived experience reported from various cross-sector collaborations, our Focus Group participants confirmed that successful collaboration requires continuous revisiting of these cornerstone items.

Collaboration processes often go on for months, and in that time, many factors can influence the project. Change is never easy. The experience of losing something - even in anticipation of gaining something better - can foster a spectrum of emotions related to grief.

Therefore, a group of collaborators must act with courage and empathy to identify and manage these circumstances.

The Collaboration Journey

Like all relationships, a collaboration will evolve over time. Transitions, changes in course, and endings are all to be expected, whether a collaborative process lasts for a period of months or many years.

Through their collective experiences gained while sharing in several collaborations, our Focus Group participants encourage *new* cross-sector collaboratives to prepare for the following factors.

Pain vs. Gain

Time and resources come in limited quantities. People and organizations must continually assess how they choose to invest them. It is possible over a period of time for an organization or a person to find the collective vision for the collaboration no longer aligns with their mission, strategy or needs. Differences regarding organizational direction, leadership, key personnel changes, and shifting strategic priorities can cause some collaborators to exit a project.

Founder's Syndrome

The pioneers of any collaboration are almost always the most passionate about the shared vision, because they are the initial drivers. These individuals invest countless hours of time and energy recruiting, leading, initiating and supporting relationships. In fact, an individual or small group of founding partners may find their personal identities and professional legacies become synonymous with the initiative, which can lead to Founder's Syndrome.

While a founder's passion increases commitment, trust and credibility in the early stages of collaboration, it can be difficult to foresee and plan the survival of a collaboration beyond its founders. Also, an organization or collaboration may outgrow the original vision, making it challenging for founders to continue with the initiative.

Veering from the Vision

To move a collaboration beyond the start-up phase, resources are required, and new collaborations promising to deliver broad community results in a new manner are often strong candidates for funding by foundations and granting organizations. Still, many funders have key focus areas or guidelines defining the types of projects that will be funded, so it is possible to find alignment between a collaborative project and a granting body. However, successful collaborators warn - any collaboration tempts disaster if it veers from its vision in order to meet a specific funder's mandate, as a means of securing funding. Since the shared vision is the cornerstone of the collaboration, it must always be upheld.

50-50 Partnership vs. Win-Win Perspective

Collaborations differ from partnerships because they do not function with an objective of a 50-50 split of accountabilities, responsibilities, and rewards. Instead, a collaboration is defined by a “win-win” approach, where all stakeholders see a positive impact, as a result of their participation.

Successful collaborators recognize their different resources, capacities and influence are best shared and leveraged in order to realize their shared vision. Together, they desire to bridge a gap or fill a community need, which they know cannot be accomplished independently, acknowledging no *one* sector holds either the key to success or the solution to a complex social issue.

The Solution

A well-established foundation that includes systems that support evolving relationships (see Part II), will positively aid the evolutions of a collaboration. While transitions and conclusions of meaningful and impactful experiences can be difficult, mutually designed and agreed upon processes related to conflict resolution, ending or exiting a collaboration and sustaining a collaboration beyond original participants, will provide a process framework for moving forward and will reduce the hardship experienced by all parties.

Varied Sizes, Shapes and Solutions in Collaborations

Collaborations come in many different shapes and how they function can be significantly altered due to variations in size, composition and nature. For example, a collaboration that includes more than a dozen organizational stakeholders will have different challenges to one that involves only three or four organizations.

Yet, regardless of size, all collaborations require strong communication and relationship-building skills to ensure everyone is on the same page. And, the larger a collaboration is the more time and energy must be spent on these communication components because of the reality of time and space required to liaise with the many stakeholders.

The composition and nature of a collaboration often work hand in hand, where the function is shaped by its unique parts. For instance, collaborations that are largely comprised of nonprofit groups behave and function differently to those that involve a number of private firms or public sector partners. However, the precise role played by each stakeholder can significantly alter how two similar collaborations function, even if they have comparable compositions.

As an example, some private firms are passive while others are hands-on, which may impact how each shapes its collaboration. And, since relationships are integral to the success of collaboration, one must also consider varying cultures and natures of organizations and individuals, and their impact on how relationships are formed and maintained.

By acknowledging all of these defining factors that shape the nature and functionality of a collaboration, it is evident there are few “one-size-fits-all” strategies and best practices. As such, new collaborations are encouraged to consider the following factors.

Inclusive vs. Exclusive

As cited earlier, collaborations are not natural and require an intentional effort by the stakeholders to build relationships on the basis of a common vision. But, should those promoting collaboration seek to maximize participation through inclusion or be more exclusive in inviting others to the table? There are advantages and disadvantages to each.

Being inclusive can garner a larger group of individuals and organizations, which may help share the load, secure more funding and possibly expand on initial targets and ideas central to the collaboration. However, dealing with a larger group can also dilute or mutate the original mission. Furthermore, as noted, successful collaborations are based on handling relationships and the more parts there are to a collaboration, the more time must be invested to nurture relationships. And, this task can prove exhausting.

Other collaborators report being more cautious and selective in their approach to forming collaborations; even exclusive. It is an approach that allows only those individuals and organizations that share a distinct common goal and understanding, and can contribute something valuable and essential to the project, to become part of the collaboration.

However, exclusive endeavours may be viewed as a threat to those left out of the loop, particularly organizations in the same area or service. Therefore, experienced community collaborators note that it is important to keep those “outside” a collaboration informed of the initiative’s goals and intentions, attempting to relieve their fears of being engulfed.

Pacing Collaboration

As collaborations are progressive ventures, pacing is a vital component. According to our Focus Group participants, there are two distinct approaches - with the answer dependent on the nature, size and composition of the specific collaboration.

Due to the importance placed on creating a strong foundation, some collaborators advocate for a slow and steady approach. In particular, when establishing cross-sector collaboration, a slower pace may be required to enable diverse stakeholders to gain a common understanding of each other and their ultimate shared goal.

However, other collaborators note slow progress may often be interpreted as a lack of progress. Such sentiments can be contagious, and transform into other sentiments that threaten the building blocks of collaboration - relationships. Slow progress may also entrench existing attitudes or resistance, and further damage the collaboration.

So, to avoid these problems, most collaborators advocate faster action, particularly when ideas are popular and well supported, thereby taking advantage of windows of opportunity. Still, if there is a lack of consensus, steps that are too fast could alienate stakeholders and lead to allegations of recklessness.

Facilitators: To have or not to have

Facilitators play a positive role in helping collaborations accomplish their goals. Facilitators offer an objective outside perspective, a useful tool in driving progress and breaking deadlocks between stakeholders. They can reduce pressure on collaboration leaders and invest more time and effort into maintaining internal relations. Facilitators can also provide balance within collaborations, preserving parity among participants of varying size and resource.

Still, there is debate among participants, on how much power facilitators should hold. Advocates for more power cite they will be able to move things along, with the power to break stagnation caused by internal disagreements. Yet, widespread power could enable outside facilitators to change the nature and objective of collaboration, undermining the interests of vested stakeholders.

Another drawback is the costs associated with hiring facilitators. Consequently, many nonprofits have chosen to leverage existing natural ties or third party relationships to form and maintain connections with public and private sector collaborators. This does place greater responsibility and strain on the parties involved, but is simultaneously accepted as part of the collaborative process; a collective goal that carries collective demands and risks.

Impact and Risk of Collaboration

Participating in a collaboration will convey a legacy on the organizations and people involved, whether the vision is realized or not. Those involved in the collaboration will invest hours of time thinking, planning, researching, relationship-building, meeting, and communicating about the project.

When a collaborative relationship is established on the foundation of trust, then legal agreements and frameworks can be negotiated and created with relative ease. Yet, in the absence of trust, no legal agreement will be far-reaching enough.

Depending on the vision for collaboration, a certain amount of due diligence is required. If the end result is an amalgamation of two entities or the acquisition of an organization, reviewing financial statements, legal documents, policies, and agreements is of key importance.

Also, research shows the most difficult challenge, when two or more organizations are collaborating for a strategic alliance, is the amalgamation of Collective Agreements and compensation plans. Once disclosure between organizations is done, it cannot be undone.

In addition to nurturing the relationships of the collaborators, organizational leaders must be aware of the impact people and parties potentially have on their success.

For nonprofit leaders, the education, support and commitment of their Boards of Directors are essential to managing challenges within the collaboration process. Organizational senior leadership teams are an important voice to and for the employees of a business and organization. And, consistent and authentic support is required in thought, word and deed, particularly when implementing change throughout the collaboration process.

Also, *informed* external parties who have an interest in either a successful or unsuccessful collaboration are less likely to thwart collaboration attempts. The external parties may include funders, competitors, clients and other stakeholders.

Meantime, in a collaboration, unilateral decisions do not exist. Organizational leaders, who anticipate the realization of their vision for collaboration, often take a forward-thinking management approach. Specifically, they appreciate that the decisions they make today have potential to impact their organization and all fellow collaborators in the future.

Consulting with various collaborators on organizational activities definitely increases the span of time required to respond to inquiries and opportunities. Therefore, organizational leaders accustomed to making decisions and acting independently, may find it difficult to adjust to this new collaborative leadership style.

Conclusion

Through Pillar's community consultation related to its first year of the *Collaborating for Community Impact* Program, it has confirmed that collaboration is indeed - not a natural process. It is a conscious decision by like-minded individuals and organizations to come together to pursue a goal that is *greater* than the sum of their individual efforts.

It is for this very reason that despite the challenges associated with collaboration, many collaborators view it as a process well worth pursuing, particularly when it involves various types of organizations, each with its own unique strengths and assets.

Collaborations may be initiated to fulfill a need or solve a problem. They themselves can function as a solution to address a lack of resources or as a means to streamline operations. Collaborations are also born of individual or organizational vision seeking to enhance a community's quality of life.

Relationships are the building blocks of collaboration, meaning the rules of social interaction, such as trust and honesty, are key to establishing, maintaining and strengthening the collaboration.

Through our Pillar research, we have confirmed that collaboration works best with people you know, like and trust.

Moreover, any successful collaboration must be built on a strong foundation that requires a common goal, careful planning, an understanding of roles, and creation of processes. Still, while these tenets are essential for any collaboration's success, some rules and lessons are not quite uniform.

As such, an agreed-upon framework - built on a strong foundation - allows stakeholders to understand their shared goal and respective role within the collaboration. The framework helps to plan ahead and put in place mechanisms to address various challenges the collaboration is likely to face in the future.

In the end, collaborations take on many shapes and are various sizes, which affect their nature and function. Considering these diverse outcomes, it is evident there are few "one-size-fits-all" solutions.

Yet, as demonstrated at Pillar's *Community Collaboration Forum* hosted at the London Convention Centre in September, Londoners across the private, public and nonprofit sectors do want to collaborate to make this great city even better.

And, appreciating that collaboration begets collaboration, Pillar is confident its *Collaborating for Community Impact* Program will continue to resonate in the coming years, as it strives to enhance the lives of London's diverse community through cross-sector collaboration.

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