

# Building Partnerships

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## 1. Why is this important?

Partnerships are an increasingly important part of neighborhood work. Good partnerships can help neighborhood associations implement their neighborhood action plans; help secure funding; improve visibility and promotion of the organization's work; help recruit more volunteers and broader leadership, and more. Partnerships can take the form of simple cooperative ventures with other neighborhood associations to complex collaborations involving a dozen partners.

At the same time, partnerships can have a strong influence on your organization. Partnerships can put a heavy toll on organization's resources on the one hand, while significantly increasing the organization's impact or access to other resources. Partnerships can become such an important element of an organization's work that it may even change its mission and work to better work within the partnership. Some partnerships may eventually even lead to mergers of organizations.

In Minneapolis, neighborhood associations have collaborated with the local school district and park board to build innovative multi-jurisdictional buildings that served as schools, park shelters and community centers. Neighborhoods have joined together and collaborated with business associations and the City of Minneapolis to implement ambitious streetscape projects. One Minneapolis neighborhood association collaborated with the Minneapolis Police Department, youth groups and a housing agency to tackle a persistent neighborhood-wide problem with cruising, drug dealing, and prostitution. A small group of neighborhoods collaborated on a series of initiatives to combat crime, including development of an innovative "restorative justice" program that now reaches city-wide.

## 2. Before You Start: Know Your Mission!

Does your organization have a Mission Statement? Do you know what it is? It is not only a key guide for your Board, it communicates to the outside world what your organization is about. The Mission Statement should be the starting point of every action your organization takes.

- Make sure everyone in your organization is clear on the Mission and Purpose of your organization. Knowing your mission statement can help provide and maintain focus for your

organization's work and direction, so that you can concentrate energy and resources as effectively as possible.

- Take every opportunity to publicize and promote your mission statement. Place it in newsletters, letterhead, and business cards, pass it out at meetings, print it on poster board and display it in your office and at meetings.
- When evaluating new projects, or reviewing ongoing proposals, the first question should always be: "how does this support our mission and purpose?"
- Regularly review, and, when necessary, revise your mission statement. An organization's mission statement should not be cast in stone. Many factors, internal and external, may influence the relevance of your mission statement: Times change; the environment changes; your organization changes. It may even be possible that you achieve your mission!

### **3. Be clear on your expectations.**

It is important that you know ahead of time what you want to get out of a partnership, and are clear on what you outcomes you want to achieve and how you want to be involved in the project. Think about what benefits you can get from the partnership. Also, you should have a sense of how you want the community to be involved.

- Know what you bring to the table. Often, the most visible asset you bring to the table neighborhood support for projects, volunteer power, or special knowledge about the neighborhoods needs and intent. Your ability to inform, influence, and mobilize residents, stakeholders and key decision makers can also be an asset.
- Know what your partner brings to the table. You probably are seeking partners because they can bring something to the table that you don't. Most commonly, this is expertise on an issue, but may also include additional funding, access to other decision-making bodies, special equipment, etc.
- Know what the exchange is. Every partnership is explicitly or implicitly about an exchange, for example, you exchange money for services.
- Understand the benefits and consequences of partnerships. You can gain a lot from an effective partnership. For example, a partnership of neighborhood groups working on a common project can help build the capacity of all of the organizations to a greater degree than if they worked individually. However, when working in a partnership, you may give up some decision-making power or control (for example, hiring a contractor means giving up control on how management of a project is carried out).
- Understand the duration of partnerships. No partnership should be expected to last forever. In some cases the duration of a partnership may be defined in terms of the time necessary to complete the project. However, some partnerships do not have a clear beginning or end. A partnership should not outlive its usefulness for your organization, and you should always be prepared to let go.

- There are different levels and intensities of partnership ranging from simple cooperative efforts to more engaged collaboration<sup>1</sup>. Know in advance how deeply engaged you want to be in any partnership. More involved partnerships will require greater resources and attention of your organization.

#### **4. Document and clarify**

- Get it in writing. Follow up any verbal agreements with a letter that states your understanding of the agreement, and ask for a response in writing. This can help avoid any misunderstandings down the road, and provide direction for those who follow in your footsteps.
- Identify the roles of the partners, including any commitments to staff time, funding, or other resources. Make sure that your potential partner has the capacity to fulfill their commitments.
- Be clear on the expected outcomes. Have measurable results and clear timetables whenever possible. Partners may (and often do) have different expectations for outcomes. For example, if you hire a consultant to do door-knocking (a partnership), your expectations may be to have 250 houses reached, 50 new members, 10 new volunteers. The consultant's expected outcomes will be a partial payment up front, a partial payment after 125 doors, and a final payment at the end of the project.
- Who will be responsible for measuring outcomes, and how will they be reported to each of the partners?
- If the partnership is expected to be ongoing, identify how partners will sustain the partnership. For example, when staff or leadership turnover occurs, how will new staff or volunteers learn about the partnership? Will they receive an orientation on the partnership, or will it be part of their job description?
- Make sure any partnership agreements work for your organization. This is particularly important when working with a for-profit entity, or with a nonprofit that is significantly different from your own (significantly larger, for instance). The interests of a small nonprofit organization when working with more sophisticated business ventures or larger nonprofit entities.

#### **5. Regularly evaluate the partnership**

Partnerships evolve and change over time. A partnership that starts out strong can fall apart for any number of reasons: when there is turnover of key staff or leadership in one of the partners; when the environment changes; when one or more partners lose funding; etc. On the other

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<sup>1</sup> See Fieldstone Alliance “Four Keys to Collaboration Success” at [http://www.fieldstonealliance.org/client/articles/Article-4\\_Key\\_Collab\\_Success.cfm](http://www.fieldstonealliance.org/client/articles/Article-4_Key_Collab_Success.cfm)

hand, highly successful partnership can grow and become more complex. As they grow, they demand more resources (such as volunteer or staff time, funding, etc.) from partner organizations.

- Evaluation starts before even entering a partnership. Don't be afraid to walk away from a potential partnership if you are uncomfortable with the terms or potential outcomes.
- Internally evaluate the partnership on a regular basis to make sure it continues to meet your organization's needs. The partnership as a whole should also regularly evaluate its work to make sure it is meeting the mutual needs of partners.
- Maintain good communications between partners to make sure goals are being met.

## 6. Resources!

Resource and URL	Notes
<b>BoardSource</b> <a href="http://www.boardsource.org/">http://www.boardsource.org/</a>	An online resource for nonprofit boards, including numerous publications.
<b>Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative</b> <a href="http://www.dsni.org/">http://www.dsni.org/</a>	Despite being one of the poorest neighborhoods of Boston, the Dudley Street neighborhood experienced an amazing renaissance starting with a resident based planning process.
<b>Fieldstone Alliance</b> <a href="http://www.fieldstonealliance.org">http://www.fieldstonealliance.org</a>	Fieldstone's website has online articles covering issues such as managing conflict, community development, finances, collaboration, change, and more (click on "free resources").
<b>Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program</b> <a href="http://www.nrp.org">http://www.nrp.org</a>	Check out the new NRP web site, with new resources, including virtual project tours, training manuals, and other resources.

### Some reading materials:

- Burns, J.M. (1978), *Leadership*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Chait, R.P., Ryan, W.P., and Taylor, B.E. (2005). *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*. BoardSource. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Krile, J.F. (2006), *Community Leadership Handbook: Framing Ideas, Building Relationships, and Mobilizing Resources*, Fieldstone Alliance Publishing Center.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000), *Bowling Alone*, New York: Touchstone.
- Putnam R.D., Leonardi, R. & Nanetti, R.Y. (1993), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press