# Building Successful Collaborations:
## Ten Principles of Sustainable Partnerships

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An initiative of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, in partnership with The National Center on Family Homelessness, National Alliance to End Homelessness and ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families.

The non-profit world is just as susceptible to trends and fads as any other social or economic sector. Some of these trends bring the opportunity for meaningful change. Recognizing the sector's reduced financial resources at a time of expanding service demands, its supporters – including providers, funders and other key stakeholders – are encouraging collaboration.

The primary assumptions underlying this perspective are that collaborations help to break down service silos, increase efficiencies, and leverage dollars across participating agencies. Agencies may choose to collaborate for a variety of reasons, including to respond to specific funding opportunities or to provide additional services to their clients. While collaborations are exceptionally attractive on a theoretical basis, there are numerous obstacles to their successful implementation and even more to their long-term sustainability. When appropriately planned and implemented, a collaboration can have a significant impact on clients, partnering agencies and the overall community.

This brief is intended to give service providers who are contemplating collaborations the knowledge and tools they need to create robust, sustainable partnerships that benefit their communities as well as each participating agency. We hope that the ten principles will provide practical guideposts for organizations that are considering or planning collaborative partnerships. Further, organizations that have already embarked on this work, and have encountered one or more of the challenges described in this brief, may find the suggestions helpful.

In 2006, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation created *Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children (the "Initiative")* – a multi-site, multi-year demonstration program to improve the housing, health and development of homeless young families. The *Initiative* included four local program sites, each featuring partnerships among multiple agencies:

- **Family Assertive Community Treatment (FACT):** Chicago, IL

- **Hope & Home:** Pomona, CA

- **STRong: Strengthening Our New Generation:** Minneapolis, MN

- **Strengthening Young Families:** Antelope Valley, CA

One goal of the *Initiative* was to learn whether or not service providers working together could not only provide high quality care to clients but also improve service delivery systems. Each of the four sites was required to develop cross-agency and cross-system partnerships in order to test some of these concepts. This brief draws upon lessons learned from this *Initiative*.

## 1. Partnerships need to support the individual agency as well as the collaboration.

Prior to initiating a collaborative relationship, agencies need to evaluate the purpose of the partnership and understand how it will enhance their own agency goals and objectives. To ensure success, it is critical that each agency engage in an internal assessment to determine how the partnership will support their mission, what they can reasonably bring to the table, and what their true capacity is for the project. They also need to determine what form of collaboration – from informal cooperative agreements to fully-integrated partnerships requiring specific policies and governance structures – would be best for their organization.

If the collaboration is to be considered a true partnership, it is critical that the shared program is a priority for all the partner agencies. Given the stretched budgets and understaffing of many non-profit agencies today, it is important to ensure that all partners are on-board and committed to the project's collaborative goals. A collaboration is likely to fail if one partner is focused on the project outcomes, while the other participants are not primarily concerned.

## 2. Evaluate (honestly) your motives for partnering.

Collaborations – particularly those that are intended to be long-term – are sufficiently challenging, and require enough resources, so that prospective partners need to be completely candid with each other, and with themselves, about their motives for participation. Both the initiating agency and its invited partners need to be sure that they are entering this arrangement because it offers opportunities for improved or expanded programming, staff learning and development, and increased organizational capacity.

Collaborations work best when they evolve directly from the partnering agencies' complementary areas of expertise. Agencies that agree to work together solely because the collaboration will provide much-needed, short-term funding, or because they hope to take advantage of the partnering organizations' resources, may be disappointed with the relationship. Collaborations are seldom a quick fix for anything. In an era of scarce resources, agencies will need to be exceptionally disciplined when weighing these questions prior to agreeing to partner.

## 3. It's a partnership, but it still needs a leader.

In their (laudable) efforts to be fair and to ensure that all parties feel represented, collaborating agencies often go to great lengths to maintain multi-agency management teams, or co-leads, to oversee the project. This team management structure has some significant internal advantages, in that participant agencies can be confident that their priorities will be heard throughout the development and ongoing operation of the program. However, the team management option is less desirable for the collaboration's external stakeholders, principally funders, clients, agencies participating through referrals, and other interested parties.

Throughout the life of the collaboration, one person should be selected from the management team to act as the project's external representative. If the project is intended to span multiple years, it may make sense to rotate this position among the leadership team to distribute the burden of this extra role. It should be understood that this leader is not an independent manager, but rather represents the interests of the project's leadership team. If the participating agencies can agree to a leader prior to project launch, and put the proper mechanisms in place for teamwork and consensus-based decision-making, everyone – funders, staff, clients and other key stakeholders – will benefit.

## 4. Choose partners (and services) carefully.

When two or more agencies are contemplating a collaboration, project planners tend to think in expansive terms – *what programs or services might we provide, and which agencies could we invite to participate*? Asking these big, sky-is-the-limit questions up front is an essential part of building an innovative partnership. But planners also need to avoid a "kitchen-sink" approach to programming, in which partners keep being added, and every possible service for a given population or client base ends up being considered essential to the collaboration.

When those planning the collaboration begin to think beyond the services offered by their own institution, it's tempting to create a large corral. *We don't have that service, but Agency X does, so let's involve them*! Offering a much-expanded array of services to clients who need them is a worthy goal, as long as those involved in the initial planning are aware that the structural complexities and challenges of collaboration increase exponentially every time a partner is added. Deciding which services will be provided directly, and which will be offered only through referrals, is an important early step in building a collaboration.

As the collaboration evolves, and participating agencies refine their service models, it may make sense to add (or remove) certain program options. But these modifications should occur only after robust consideration of their potential impacts on program participants, those staffing the collaboration, funders, and other stakeholders. Simply because a given service provider isn't a formal part of the partnership, doesn't mean the agency can't be involved. Collaborating agencies should feel free to have a "big tent" full of stakeholders, as long as the specific roles of the collaborating partners are consistent and well-defined.

*"Collaboration added a richness to the services we provided to the families we served."*

Merilla Scott, Executive Team Leader
*Hope & Home*

When selecting partners, it is also important to remember that one is partnering with an agency, not an individual. Occasionally, the impetus for a collaboration will emerge out of a strong personal relationship, or the desire for the specific expertise that a particular person possesses. Partnerships based on personal relationships, or where one person is the "linchpin" of the arrangement, may fall apart if that person leaves the organization, or is promoted or re-assigned. Further, when the relationship does not go as expected, opportunities to change gears and/or restructure the partnership may be limited. Therefore, it's critical to recognize and contemplate the value-add of the overall organization, not just one person's capacity.

## 5. Be prepared to provide extra supervision for staff while also allowing them as much autonomy as possible

Once participating agencies are signed on and program parameters are determined, it is essential that all direct service and management staff understand their roles and the boundaries between these various roles. Because all collaborations are, by their very nature, experimental, project leaders may feel the urge to be more involved in the project's day-to-day functioning than they are in their own agency's routine operations. This kind of intense involvement will, over time, discourage innovation and accountability – qualities

essential to a vibrant and nimble partnership. Given authority over the service areas that they know best, and encouraged to expand their own knowledge and skills by working closely with staff from the partnering agencies, team members can and will rise to the challenges that collaborations present. Thus, successful collaborations not only benefit clients; they can also provide agency teams with opportunities for deeper staff engagement and professional growth.

## 6. Anticipate and address differences in the partners' respective organizational cultures.

At the beginning of a collaborative process, many of the differences between the participating agencies will be apparent. Policies and procedures, service delivery models, and even hours and pay scales for staff will need to be considered, and possibly adjusted, in order to create an environment in which the collaboration can thrive. While these obvious discrepancies will require the project leadership's time and attention to resolve, it is perhaps even more important to pay attention to the subtle cultural differences between the partners. Problems that arise because of cultural schisms between participant agencies can be challenging to identify – particularly in the early stages – and, therefore, hard to correct.

What do we mean by "culture," within an organization? Organizational culture encompasses the shared attitudes, values, and beliefs of its members, and thus the collective identity it presents to the outside world. For example, organizations express their values partly through the service-delivery models that they choose, such as a strength-based approach to client care. Agencies whose values dictate significantly different approaches to client care are unlikely to collaborate successfully. In addition, the project leaders must anticipate that there will likely be other cultural disconnects between their participating agencies. If project leadership accepts the likelihood of

these differences and is on the lookout for them, they can be addressed before the problems escalate enough to damage the collaboration.

Let's consider an example in which two agencies serving homeless families are contemplating a collaboration. Although they have similar missions, and the services they provide to clients are complementary, the two agencies could not, in actuality, be more different. Agency X has a formal organizational structure, with rigid hierarchical reporting structures, layers of documentation required for every project, and an extremely risk-averse staff. Agency Y has a more laissez-faire reporting structure, limited management involvement, and a more independent staffing model.

Would it be impossible for these two agencies to collaborate successfully? Not necessarily, but the cultural differences outlined here would need to be accounted for in the project's earliest stages. "Accounted for" is more about mutual recognition of and respect for differences in organizational culture, rather than any attempt to convert one participant to another's way of thinking. Over time, organizational cultures have proven exceptionally resistant to change and it is not the role or purpose of a collaboration to dig deeply into, or reconfigure, the participating agencies' core operations. Participants merely need to be aware that their partners are operating from a vastly different set of core values and assumptions and plan accordingly.

## 7. Communicate in every direction – up, down, and sideways – more than seems necessary.

Given all the challenges outlined above, it should be obvious that working collaborations require extensive communication, within and between the partnering agencies, as well as with external stakeholders, particularly as they get underway.

Despite the best planning in the world, collaborative efforts will invariably encounter the unexpected, and the communications network to address those unanticipated challenges and opportunities must already be in place and in regular use.

Colleagues from partnering organizations should meet as often as they do with their own, internal teams. These cross-agency project groups can discuss successes, challenges and proposed program modifications. In addition, these project groups will assist in the furtherance of mutual respect and appreciation for each other's skills and expertise. In every phase of a collaboration, what isn't working is at least as important as what is, and staff will only feel free to bring those challenges forward if an open, supportive environment exists for discussion.

At the leadership level, those responsible for inter- and intra-agency communication must set an example for all those involved in the project. Making time for essential meetings, encouraging open discussions, and communicating a consistent story to outside stakeholders will bring essential cohesion to these fragile structures.

*"Our partnership shared similar relationship-focused, strengths-based philosophies. Relationship modeling started with the leadership team and filtered down to the direct service staff working with families"*

Kay Tellinghuisen, Project Director
*STRong: Strengthening Our New Generation*

## 8. Plan for evaluation from the start.

With both public and private funders emphasizing outcome-based contracts, evaluation is a key component of any project, especially a collaborative one. It is critical that an evaluation – both of the service outcomes and the collaboration itself – be created at the project's onset. It is important that these measures are linked to, but distinct from, existing outcome frameworks the participating agencies already have in place. By creating a goal statement and a set of outcomes that are specific to the collaboration, participants acknowledge the extent to which every collaboration is a classroom in itself, for their clients, and for other project stakeholders. This tacit understanding should encourage innovation and creativity, as it provides a well-defined framework within which to measure progress. Keep in mind that a failed partnership is not a failure, but rather a one-of-a-kind learning opportunity for an agency, its partners, and the broader field.

At the beginning of a collaborative process, when all the parties are anxious to delve into the work, project staff may become frustrated with the time it takes to develop a shared Theory of Change, and its concomitant outcomes. Establishing the guidelines for data collection and analysis will also be a multi-step process that requires buy-in from all partners. At this point, agencies need to identify if their data collection systems, commitment to evaluation and outcome measurements are compatible and, if not, to address these challenges upfront. While this may not feel to all participants like the "real" work of the collaboration, it is a critical building block for the process. Collaborations that are launched without these pieces in place will have a much harder time developing, and agreeing to, a Theory of Change and its linked outcome measures, once the work is underway.

## 9. A facilitator can be helpful and may be essential.

While using an independent facilitator is not always critical to the success of a collaboration, there are certain circumstances under which the presence of a non-partisan guide may make sense. In the early stages of the collaboration, particularly if there are more than two agencies involved, or if the collaboration itself is large and complex, a neutral outsider can help participants sort out the thorny issues of leadership and authority. A skilled facilitator will also be sensitive to the potential cultural disconnects outlined above and will help create a non-threatening environment in which these sensitive topics can be discussed safely.

An experienced facilitator can help manage expectations, both for those concerned that the new partnership will increase their workload, and also for those who are overly optimistic about what the collaboration might achieve. Project and agency leaders should think carefully about their respective teams' skills sets and experience with collaborations before deciding whether or not to engage a facilitator at the outset or at key points and/or milestones throughout the duration of a collaboration.

A facilitator can also be helpful if the partnership begins to show signs of distress or instability. When communication (and therefore trust) is partly compromised, a neutral "outsider" who has been vested with some degree of authority by the project's leadership, may be able to guide the collaboration into a more positive and productive direction.

Facilitators may be most useful in situations of conflict. If, for example, the partners feel the need to make a mid-course correction, by eliminating certain project staff, or minimizing or even eliminating an entire agency's participation, outside assistance may be essential. In the presence of a good facilitator, these hard conversations will still be difficult, but the facilitator will at the very least be able to maintain a

professional and respectful atmosphere and minimize the participants' over-personalization of a business discussion. However, a facilitator should never be used in a manner that ends up "blindsiding" any individual or partner. The parameters and focus of the meeting should be clear to all participants well in advance of these discussions.

Even the most skilled facilitator will fail, however, if project participants are not convinced of the value of the overall collaborative effort. Building that vision and keeping it alive for the staff, is the work of leadership, not the consultant.

## 10. Be alert for the early warning signs of a failing partnership.

There's no denying that collaborative work is exceptionally difficult and that project leaders should plan for a certain amount of frustration and disappointment. Leaders launching a new collaboration can be virtually guaranteed that it will take longer to get services in place than anticipated, that at least some clients will have a negative reaction to one or more of the service offerings, that addressing differing agency administrative policies will be cumbersome and time-consuming, and that the whole effort will be more expensive than planned.

These are the "known unknowns" of any collaboration, and agencies can use these facts to prepare themselves for the challenging start-up phase. Building as much time as possible into the planning phase will allow for most of these hurdles to be addressed while, at the same time, the staff teams are getting to know each other and building resilient bonds.

As the project matures, other challenges may emerge that threaten the stability of the project. When team leaders sense that trust among the cross-agency teams has eroded, that staff members have lost patience with the extra processes required by the

collaboration, or, most importantly, that the clients are not being adequately served, it is time to intervene. Leadership must be alert to the difference between a brief "venting" session among staff, at the end of a long and stressful week, and the chronic frustrations and mistrust that will arise when the collaboration just isn't functioning as it should. The first example requires no intervention from the leaders; the second requires a focused examination of what is going wrong and why.

Although staff members within an agency may, on occasion, work out these problems for themselves, it is extremely challenging for those involved in multi-agency collaborations to do so. The risk in conflict situations is very high, and because the collaboration is seldom considered a permanent arrangement, staff may decide to simply "wait out" the problem, rather than take steps to solve it. For all of these reasons, leaders should be sensitive to the earliest signs of trouble, and take quick steps to resolve it.

## Conclusion

It is a given that the non-profit sector, and social service providers in particular, struggle to meet all the needs of their clients and fulfill their missions. It is a testimony to the dedication and creativity of those involved in this work that we are continually in search of innovation and new ways of working. Much of what we already provide to clients and their communities is already top-notch and proven to be effective, but the sector's best leaders are still open to new opportunities that will improve their operations and help them meet their organizations' long-term goals.

It is also a given that collaborations, done right, can result in better services for clients, as well as increase knowledge-sharing, creativity, and overall efficiencies within the service sector. In communities large and small across the country, non-profits are collaborating

successfully with local and state governments, with academia, with business, and most of all with each other. While we are still in the early days of these trends, and much research remains to be done about which models produce the most impact, there is broad understanding and acceptance that collaborations are here to stay and that it is in our interest to become skilled at creating and maintaining these new partnerships.

This document is intended as a practical handbook, for non-profit organizations that are, or plan to be, involved in a collaboration. Collaborative projects are occasionally challenging, but also contain tremendous potential, both for service delivery and as broader learning opportunities for the sector as a whole.

*Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children* is generating knowledge on improving the housing, health and development of young homeless and at-risk young mothers and their children.

*Building Successful Collaborations: Ten Principles of Successful Collaborations* was written by Catherine Brown, President, Integrative Solutions and Debra Medeiros, Director of Programs, The National Center on Family Homelessness. This brief is a product of The National Center on Family Homelessness on behalf of the *Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children* Coordinating Center, which is a partnership of The National Center on Family Homelessness, National Alliance to End Homelessness and ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families. The Coordinating Center provides technical assistance to program sites, conducts cross-site process and outcome evaluations and develops a range of application products from the demonstration sites.

*Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children* is an *Initiative* of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.
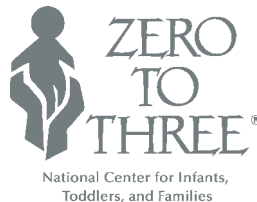
For more information on this *Initiative*, please contact The National Center on Family Homelessness at 200 Reservoir Street, Needham, MA; (617) 964-3834 or at www.familyhomelessness.org.

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