

Communiversality: “A Conversation about Collaboration”

09/22/09 Session Summary

Prepared by: Melanie Schmidt, Timpano Consulting

Overview & Commentary

Engaging in collaborative thinking or pursuing a collaborative arrangement can be particularly challenging in the nonprofit sector. Typically, underfunded at the outset for matters of administration and pushed to meet greater demands with fewer resources, nonprofits often naturally develop a survivalist mindset and a protectionist perspective. The market motivations and the luxury of resources that drive and frame collaboration in the private sector are different, as are the regulatory or political motivations and the luxury of patience and process that fuel collaboration in the public sector.

The conversations at the September 22 event emerged as an opportunity for individuals involved with the nonprofit community to discover the diverse perspectives on this increasingly common topic. Through the conversations, participants learned that while it was quick to come to consensus on the issues at hand, there was also a common experience in not knowing where to start or where to turn for the direction or resources needed to make headway.

While expressed separately, the combined comments from individual participants that Madison offered an ideal environment for collaboration and that the discussions at the event were reminiscent of those in 2006 fuel the value of intentional action and collaborative progress on the issues identified by interested community members.

Event Scenario

On Tuesday, September 22, 2009, about 80 people gathered in the AT&T Lounge of the Pyle Center at the invitation of the UW Center for Nonprofits as part of its Communiversality Series. The purpose of the gathering was an interactive conversation about what collaboration means in this community. Participants included nonprofit staff, Board members, funders, academic thought leaders and students.

The session was facilitated by Melanie Schmidt, who provided context on collaborative thinking and reported on feedback from people who had received the event invitation and chosen to answer the brief, pre-event survey. Among survey respondents, the most common word association when hearing the term “collaboration” was “working together.” Event participants expressed deeper interest in the concept of collaboration being viewed along a larger and more robust continuum that allowed for greater flexibility and adaptability to the unique circumstances and needs of different organizations.

Eight table discussions ensued to unearth issues of concern and excitement around the prospect of collaboration as well as to discover some of the obstacles and opportunities for moving the concept of collaboration forward, specifically within the Madison area community. The themes and details shared at and from the tables reflect the research and findings that have emerged at the national level, yet the discovery revealed that there is a thirst for clearer understanding within the context of individual circumstances.

Discussion Details

The following aspects of collaborative thinking were identified as exciting among the group:

- Greater access to and greater strength through combined resources & information
- Opportunity to build relationships
- Potential for expanded impact – possibility of meeting needs more efficiently & effectively
- The ‘possibilities’

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Discussion Details (continued)

The following aspects emerged as areas of concern:

- Attaining and maintaining a balance of power & of voice
- Hidden agendas or underlying intentions – knowing true motivations
- Lack of a plan and/or process – hard to know where to start
- Lack of accountability and ownership
- Loss – of identity, of quality, etc.
- Real or perceived turf issues

Each person was asked to reflect upon what they would need from their individual perspective to get behind the concept of collaboration. They then talked among the tables and did group reporting of needs, which included:

- A framework and process within which to work
- Active Board support
- An openness to collaboration
- Appropriate and appropriated resources
- Clarity of motivation and convergence of priorities
- Comfort level with some ambiguity
- Compelling case toward high-gain outcomes
- Energy & time
- Neutral facilitator
- Open communication at all levels
- Shared understanding of roles, leadership, decision-making and responsibilities – of all
- Trust

Participants were asked to discern what get's in the way of collaborative exploration as part of a table discussion and then to identify what would need to happen in order to advance collaborative thinking in our community.

While there was some crossover, the majority of the tables distilled different essentials:

- Compelling Case that has a well-defined need, is clearly communicated, builds from data to articulate a high impact and captures achievable outcomes.
- Culture with informal dialogue, open communication, self-awareness on the part of participants and ground rules or guidelines for actions.
- Strong Leadership that balances egos, remains objective and works in the interests of the group from a standard platform and in consideration of others.
- Memorandum of Understanding in writing with flexibility for a quarterly review and assessment.
- Transparency in which all parties provide full disclosure on needs & limitations.
- Trust involving knowledge of self and of others, open communication and compromise.
- Shared vision/compelling reason to collaborate determined by revisiting mission in relation to current needs & challenges, being flexible to your environment, and a commitment to shared decision making. All with the intention of addressing or avoiding paralysis.

After reflection, the group was asked to offer why collaboration was so hard ...

- Emotions, ego, fear
- Need for large output of upfront time, energy & money for later and long-term reward
- Need to embrace others – dependency
- No time to build relationships
- There is a loser (e.g., of power or status)

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Additional Participant Insights

At the conclusion of the scheduled event, participants were asked to capture what struck them as a result of the conversations. Following are some of the verbatim responses:

- A big continuum of collaboration possibilities
- All of the ideas shared today also apply to other sectors
- Be prepared to be flexible
- Collaboration depends on leader and trust
- Collaboration is hard. Many well-meaning people get stuck and don't succeed.
- Collaboration is not always the answer
- Collaboration is viewed apart from strategic thinking/planning
- Comment about nonprofits moving away from their mission in order to collaborate
- Eagerness to collaborate among those present
- Everyone says they want to collaborate but few are willing to take the lead
- How much this conversation mirrored the research done in 2006
- I was struck by the vast differences of opinions on collaborations and the various fears that people face on collaborations based on their experiences with nonprofits.
- I wasn't really thinking about how this session would also help me think about how everyone at my table also had problems collaborating within our own organizations; perhaps a first step
- It was not at all hard for us to come to consensus about the issues involved
- It's about change management
- Most organizations/people realize the need and benefits of collaboration but fear it
- Need for clarity and transparency in initial and continuing communications
- No one ever (rarely) takes responsibility for dropping the ball on collaboration
- Nonprofits don't trust each other
- That all organizations struggle with communicating with many different groups
- That there must be insight and agreement on items/ideas to be successful in collaboration
- The hard part of collaboration is understanding each others' motives
- The idea that people are afraid of partnerships. People fear collaboration.
- The importance of the alignment of values
- The need for trust, communication and leadership as a prerequisite for collaboration
- The questions that we answered as a group could be useful for organizations that are involved in a collaboration
- There are many aspects of collaboration

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Additional Participant Insights (continued)

At the conclusion of the event, participants were also asked to share one thing they might do to advance collaborative thinking within their spheres. Following are some of the verbatim responses:

- Achieve clarity in any group, not limited to collaborative efforts
- Ask more questions and push for clarity before supporting collaborations
- Ask the difficult questions, without fear
- Be clearer on expectations
- Be more observant about real barriers to specific collaborations
- Being clear about our mission and purpose in order to reach out to other organizations in collaborative efforts
- Better articulate internally when and why we collaborate
- Block off a weekly timeslot to reach out in community
- Create guidelines/suggestions sheet for my organization to review before we enter into collaborations
- Designate an hour to clarify organizational goals so they can be shared with potential collaborator
- Draft memorandum of understanding for every collaboration at the outset
- Encourage more conversations on this topic throughout the community
- Find ways to facilitate the discussion in positive, non-threatening ways
- Get to know about another nonprofit every couple of months to help put our roles in perspective
- Have the courage to ask the tough questions
- Help others connect the dots
- I could set up an informal interview with a local nonprofit that has experienced a collaboration and ask about their views on the success or failure of that venture
- I've got to be more open, let go of my ego
- Identify the goals of my organization, engage in the community and commit to their goals
- Incorporate elements of the proceedings in projects
- Keep the dialogue going. Challenge people to not fear
- Know my box better before I try to jump out of it
- Make sure to get basic agreements (and refinements) in writing
- More conversations with partners
- Organize a team to address a problem/issue
- Steer conversations about collaboration to focus on goals and clarity on those goals
- Study the continuum of collaboration to think about how to identify different kinds of collaboration
- Work to be more transparent

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Pre-Event Survey Highlights

The pre-event survey was initiated as a way to gauge the interests and concerns of invited participants. The majority of respondents were nonprofit staff (50%) and Board (17%) with additional perspective from funders (3%), volunteers (7%), community members (10%) and students/instructors (13%).

Respondents were asked how important they believed collaboration was to the successful implementation of a nonprofit's organizational goals:

- Not at all Important – 0%
- Somewhat Important – 7%
- Important – 3%
- Very Important – 40%
- Essential – 50%

Respondents answered "What do you believe gets in the way of successful collaboration?" as follows:

- A sense of competition rather than a shared sense of working together to assist constituents
- Concern that one group will siphon off possible benefits
- Distrust
- Duplication of services, competition for resources, lack of training, lack of resources to devote to new projects, tendency to keep doing what they've always done
- Erroneous fear that collaboration is giving away power or control, thus diminishing our own abilities, when, in reality, collaboration can bring synergy, innovation, sustainability, and personal development.
- Feelings that the needs of one's own organization must come first
- Fighting for scarce resources
- Imprecise or unfocused efforts at collaboration that devolve into wastes of time and efforts
- Individual agendas. Fear of changing how business is done. Fear that the reorganized effort may lose jobs for people or "the original mission" of one of the groups.
- Lack of comfort with processes, tools and models to support collaborations throughout lifespans
- Lack of time/resources to devote to the critical task of relationship building
- Many could probably use some training on how to more effectively collaborate
- Miscommunication
- Myopic concerns with one's own position, contribution and perspective. Protecting territory.
- Not clearly defined mission; confusion between means and ends; fear of disclosing vulnerabilities
- Not enough resources (staff time) to conceptualize who to collaborate with or the staff time to hobnob with others in the nonprofit community that often brings about the stray comment or opportunity that leads to conceiving of profitable collaborations.
- Not having the right people at the table.
- People's agendas or the inability to see the greater good
- Perhaps not enough exposure among the various non-profits of what their respective purposes are, and thus they are without a clear indication of how they could compliment one another.
- Personalities; egos; actual or perceived loss of control; lack of ability to know how to collaborate in meaningful way that is supported with well established systems and processes; dissimilar organizational culture, skills and level of commitment.
- Personnel issues and not a clear focus of the board of directors.
- Time management
- Time, money, energy, priorities
- Unrealistic expectations, unclear direction within and among collaborators, and ego

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Pre-Event Survey Highlights (continued)

Respondents typed the following "additional comments about collaboration in our community":

- A focus on the larger picture.
- Collaborations cannot be forced, but should be encouraged based on a history of successful cooperative work between two organizations.
- I am relatively new to Madison so I am unfamiliar with the types of collaborations that have been the most successful in getting funding
- It feels like collaboration is getting to be a requirement for the nonprofit sector yet we don't hold the same standard for the business and government sectors? Why?
- It seems like we are all just flying by the seat of our pants, and no one has the time to sit down and work out the framework for really successful collaborations. They seem to just happen by chance, not necessarily as a result of strategic thinking.
- Let's do it!
- Most people think it's a great idea but may not really understand what meaningful collaboration is and how it can be done well.
- No one would say they are against collaboration, would they? But many individuals see it in an extremely limited way. Surprisingly, there are people in human services who don't actually trust other professional points of view and don't want to actually invest time in building new professional relationships. In short, it takes energy and vision to want to build new connections for the good of our clients. It is rare to see this in Madison, even though everyone says they do it and that it is important.
- So much talking, too little tangible results
- There are a number of organizations that seem to be doing very, very similar work in this community that are all struggling to stay solvent. Collaborative strategies seem to be an imperative for the future of their service base. This is a very important conversation.
- There is resistance to real collaboration.
- We have strong collaborations but how to keep them evolving and thinking about new ideas and approaches.
- We talk the talk but we don't walk the walk.
- When power/prestige/resources are uneven between collaborating partners, the task is even more challenging.
- You cannot force it or "encourage" it, but you can support it. Also, collaboration comes in all shapes and forms - just because it doesn't take the shape funders expect to see doesn't mean it isn't collaboration. Also, funders are just as guilty of not collaborating. The pot should not be calling the kettle black . . .

Moving the Conversation Forward

Individual and organizational interest and desire is critical for collaborative success. Yet, the conversation combined with the data and the national findings might suggest that greater success in our community may spring from approaching collaborative exploration in a new way. Perhaps a cross-perspective, multi-institutional approach could advance a framework for understanding and opportunity among nonprofit staffs and Boards. For instance, developing a 'collaboration collaborative' that frames and provides sequenced training sessions on related processes; convenes forums for open-book examination of collaborative endeavors; assets expertise among the unique facets facing nonprofits; etc. Or, perhaps working from a shared platform of collaborative options to propose and support efforts.

Questions

Questions about the session or this summary may be directed to Melanie Schmidt:

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