

## **“Collaborating for Success - Evaluation for Collaborations”**

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Dr. Steve Mayberg, long-time director of California’s state mental health program, recently gave me a “Dustin Hoffman moment,” as happened in *The Graduate* when Hoffman’s character was given the magic word “plastics” by a man at a cocktail party. Mayberg’s magic word was “incentives” - he argues that effective collaborations in the nonprofit community require identifying and responding to both individual and organizational incentives. That is, “what will both organizations and individuals in the community get out of participating in these activities ... and how can these incentives be delivered effectively?” The larger cause of improving services or creating community change isn’t enough; more direct incentives such as individual or organizational visibility and recognition are needed.

The related question about effectiveness is, “how do we measure the effectiveness of these community collaborations?” Most collaborations aren’t evaluated, but increasingly funders and communities are requiring this, and in fact proven success is another good incentive to motivate people to participate in collaborations.

After more than 30 years doing the work of facilitating change, using behavioral science approaches, I know I don’t have the entire answer to either question. But I’d like to spend some time with you today, just as I did at this conference several years ago when the topic was nonprofit capacity building, talking with you about collaborations and their evaluations, and then learning from you when you report back from your discussion groups.

The place to begin is to focus with laser-like precision on how to define or diagnose what we’re about here. I’ll start by telling a story I read recently in *Fortune*, about an extraordinary repair job that began in a similar way. Last December, the NASA folks monitoring the Galileo space probe 500 million miles away orbiting Jupiter discovered that it could no longer relay to Earth the big chunks of data it was sent to collect. The fix-it assignment fell to Greg Lavanas, an engineer at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena. His detective work to fix this problem half a billion miles away is an extraordinarily good model of problem diagnosis leading to effective problem solving.

Lavanas started by getting the probe to report on electrical functions inside the data-sending tape recorder that seemed to be the source of the problem. He took apart a duplicate recorder in his lab to try to figure out what the problem was. Here’s where it gets interesting: he knew that in November the probe had passed through a high-radiation region on its way to one of the Jovian moons. Radiation can damage equipment, and the Galileo mission had been extended by two years, so perhaps the radiation it was built to withstand had been exceeded. Further mulling over data sent by the probe, he developed the hypothesis that the problem was in a circuitboard that controls the tape motion. Lavanas later recalled: “I looked at the recorder and asked: What’s going to die because of radiation in a machine that was working perfectly before?”

The suspect turned out to be an LED that provides light for an optical encoder that's involved in making the tape move. He talked to radiation experts at JPL, who said that when LEDs are damaged by radiation you can partially fix them by annealing, that is, running current through them for some hours. This could be done from 500 million miles away by giving an appropriate instruction to Galileo, and sure enough, when he did this, he fixed the problem! Finding this solution on earth for a problem in deep space took creativity and focus, but once the problem was clearly identified, the solution emerged - not for a complete fix, but for enough remedy to enable the mission to continue.

And of course we had similar problem-solving activities just recently with our two new "friends" on Mars. In what my colleague Alex Norman and I will be discussing here, the laser-like focus will be on the problem of how nonprofits can effectively collaborate, and on the problem of how to evaluate whether the collaborations actually make a difference.

### **Collaboration**

First, let me define what I mean by partnership and collaboration, two of the great rubber words of behavioral and management science! These two terms as we see them are essentially equivalent - they involve more or less formal structures, some temporary and some permanent, which bring together a group of organizations in a community to implement a new program, to change something that already exists, or to address a specific problem or crisis. They involve the sharing of goals, activities, responsibilities and resources.

Partnerships are not without their problems. Former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders put it humorously, but pointedly, in an address to the Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Symposium several years ago: "Collaboration has been defined as an unnatural act between non-consenting adults. We all say we want to collaborate, but what we really mean is that we want to continue doing things as we have always done them while others change to fit what we are doing."

The risks of partnership were put even more directly by Woody Allen, in his book *Without Feathers*: "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, but the lamb won't get much sleep."

These definitions, both humorous and serious, help us to focus on the human challenges and the reasons why top-notch creativity is needed to do different kinds of partnerships right:

Our research over the last 10 years on this subject has showed that there are eight key elements of successful collaborations:

- 1 - Systematic planning, leading to objectives and activities that partnership members can support.
- 2 - Addressing psychological challenges, such as power differences or resistances based on previous bad experiences with other collaborations - including early "due diligence" about the mutuality of interests among the partners
- 3 - Clearly identifying the strong core idea at the heart of the collaboration
- 4 - Finding the needed financial and human resources to be successful

5 - Incorporating strategies learned from other successful collaborations, and mistakes made or false paths taken.

6 - Encouraging the collaboration to evolve and maintain responsiveness to community environment

7 - Continuing “due diligence” in looking at costs and benefits of collaboration over the long haul.

8 - Planning ahead for sustainability at the outset, including creation of a revenue model to provide financial support beyond initial funding.

There are some reasons to be cautious about collaborations, according to our research:

1 - Not all collaborations work, and the science about their effectiveness is still limited. Our Institute’s book, *Evaluating Community Collaboration*, is a step forward in addressing that gap, helping nonprofits, communities and funders to measure the impact of a collaboration, both to improve it and to justify investments in it.

2 - Not all problems can be solved by collaborations - so sometimes the right decision is *not* to partner. If this is the accurate outcome of a “due diligence” process, that is a good thing!

3 - People are tired of the rather limited success of some collaborations, and of the resources they take up despite this poor payoff (endless meetings without any noticeable results, for instance). They come to any new collaboration burdened by negative experiences they’ve had with them in the past. In some cases, there is also a real phenomenon of “collaboration fatigue” - people complain about spending half their lives in meetings for one collaboration or another, and are thus resistant to getting involved in a new one, no matter how important it seems.

4 - Collaborations can sometimes be a tactic for delaying action or obscuring responsibility so that change doesn’t happen - but no one individual or organization can be blamed for this outcome.

### **Evaluation of Collaborations**

To document the successes and challenges, and to understand them so that the collaborations of today as well as the collaborations of tomorrow can be improved, evaluation is needed. In *Evaluating Community Collaborations* some strategies are outlined for use by nonprofits, funders and communities to evaluate both for program improvement and to document outcomes.

Evaluation will not solve all of these problems or shortcomings of collaborations, of course; nor can the accumulation of evaluation knowledge provide secure paths by which a community or a funder can determine in advance whether a collaboration is the right step to take on the road to systems change. But evaluation can play a role in the accumulation of both scientific knowledge and wisdom about how collaborations contribute to systems change.

The approaches to evaluation we discuss in the book involve collecting data to address five key questions:

1. Was the community in fact mobilized through the collaboration?
2. What changes in the community resulted from the collaboration?
3. Is there a change in reported individual behavior of target audiences?
4. Is there a change in reported behavior of the community as a whole?
5. Is there a change in the quality-of-life or functioning of the community overall?

To help collaborations, funders and communities conduct evaluations that help answer these questions, the book covers five main topics, each of which is addressed by a chapter:

- C multicultural dimensions of collaborations and how to deal with them
- C human dynamics associated with evaluation of collaborations and how to handle them
- C instruments and other resources for evaluating collaborations, including an appendix of worksheets more than a dozen worksheets for driving evaluation
- C approaches to interpreting results of collaborative evaluations, and to evaluating the whole community's involvement with a collaboration
- C evaluating collaborations in a specific subject, youth violence prevention at the community level - in our Institute, we've been evaluating national youth violence and mental health service projects with collaboration elements over the last five years

The approaches to evaluation we talk about in the book are also driven by what's called "empowerment evaluation," that is, evaluation strategy that begins with the notion that people in a program or a community need to join with the evaluators in framing the evaluation strategy; they need to be its co-architects and to feel "empowered" by the evaluation rather than suspicious about it. We caution evaluators of collaborations to be very careful about this step, because without it even the best-designed evaluation can fail, if nothing else, because of the "subtle sabotage of withheld enthusiasm."

But there is one other caution here. Not all collaborations should survive. Funders in particular have been reluctant to look at or share their failure experiences so this is a tricky subject to consider - few funders have been as brave as the Annie Casey Foundation was with its major initiative whose problems were chronicled in its report, *The Path of Most Resistance*.

So this is hard work, but it is hopeful work, and a larger perspective helps. As George Washington University's Peter Vaill famously put it, "we're all living in permanent white water." But Charles Paulus at the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina, whose hobby is river-rafting, says that Vaill's metaphor is just a starting place for designing change interventions.

He talks, for instance, about how experienced river rafters "read the river." White water, it turns out, is not random, it is chaotic, with deeper patterns that are meaningful if you have a trained eye. Good river rafting depends on learning how to recognize these patterns, and understanding their effects on rafts. This is just one final example of how drilling down into the patterns of complexity faced in operating and evaluating community collaborations is essential - going beyond the direct relationship to the underlying complexities and contradictions.