

CHAPTER I: BUILDING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Introduction

Strategic partnerships with other organizations can be vital to the success of your organization's goals and initiatives. Partnerships with other organizations have the potential to concentrate the community's focus on a particular problem, create alliances among organizations that might not normally work together, and keep the community's approach to issues consistent. Most importantly, partners can advocate for your organization's goals while contributing their own contacts, skills, talents and assets, allowing your organization to broaden its impact while accessing new audiences.

Recognizing the importance of partnerships is not difficult, but understanding how to build those partnerships is critical. Partnerships with other organizations take time and effort, but if managed well, they can help your organization achieve its goals more effectively and with fewer resources. Remember, when forming partnerships your organization should strive for quality, not quantity. Not all partnerships result in accrued benefits for your organization or your clients. Partnerships should be formed strategically, based on the value the partnership brings to your organization and your clients. Working with organizations that do not have a mission or values that complement your own does not typically bring added value to your organization.

This chapter provides information to bolster your organization's understanding of the diverse types of partnerships. It also provides guidance on how to identify potential partner organizations, negotiate and build strategic partnerships, and maintain these partnerships in a way that is mutually beneficial to both parties. The tools and resources provided with this chapter will supply your organization with worksheets, assessment tools, and examples to facilitate your partnership building process.

The case study at the end of the chapter centers on a community based program that seeks to provide training and education to teenage mothers, with the goals of helping them obtain a high school diploma and preventing or delaying a second pregnancy. While the program was making a positive impact on the community, the presence of a nationwide recession was threatening the program's funding. The case study details the use of the tools in this chapter in forming a strategic partnership to pool resources, develop and use political clout to push their agenda, and create long-term community-level change that would lead to a decrease in teenage pregnancy.

At-a-Glance

This chapter provides information on how to:

- *Bolster your organization's understanding of the diverse types of partnerships*
- *Identify potential partner organizations, negotiate and build strategic partnerships*
- *Maintain these partnerships in a way that is mutually beneficial to both parties*

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Defining Strategic Partnerships

Definition

The term **partnership** and related terms such as *collaboration*, *coalition*, *network*, *task group*, *work group*, *cooperation* and others, are used to describe a wide variety of relationships and structures. For purposes of this Toolkit, partnership refers to a group of organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal. That goal could be as narrow as obtaining funding for a specific intervention, or as broad as trying to improve the overall quality of life for pregnant and parenting adolescents in the community. Likewise, the organizations involved might be drawn from a narrow area of interest, or might include representation from every segment of the community.ⁱ

Key Term: Partnership

A group of organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal

A partnership is strategic when it provides your organization with the means and methods for advancing your mission. Strategic partnerships can later develop into stakeholder groups that can leverage greater influence in reaching elected officials and policymakers. Civic leaders, policymakers and other key influencers tend to have priorities that organizations can leverage to underscore the urgency of improving programs and services to adolescents including:

- Improving access to education to foster economic development and work skills;
- Enhancing public safety by preventing crime and reducing risk behaviors; and
- Encouraging civic engagement and service to a new generation.ⁱⁱ

Types of Partnerships

Partnerships may consist of loose associations in which member organizations work for a short time to achieve a specific goal. In contrast, they can be long-term, and may even become organizations in themselves, with governing bodies, particular community responsibilities, funding, and permanence. Partnerships may draw from a community, a region, a state, or even the nation as a whole. Regardless of their size and structure, they exist to create and/or support efforts to reach a particular set of goals.ⁱⁱⁱ Some common types of partnerships are:

- **Community-based:** Look to organizations working alongside you on the front lines of your community. Local nonprofits may find that your values fit well with theirs, even if you are offering different types of services.
- **Government-based:** Local governmental institutions may also be an excellent partner organization to explore. In particular, schools and educational institutions may be excellent partners and provide access to the populations your organization serves. State-wide [Departments of Health and Education] partnerships are also important because of their data repositories.
- **Faith-based:** If their mission aligns with yours, partner with local religious institutions. Places of worship are often regarded as important resources for a community, and have diverse congregations with various skills.

Purpose of Forming Partnerships

There are a number of reasons why developing a partnership with other organizations might be beneficial. In general terms, partnerships can concentrate the community's focus on a particular problem, create alliances among those who might not normally work together, and keep the community's approach to issues consistent. Some more specific reasons for forming a partnership might be:

- *To bring about more effective and efficient delivery of programs and eliminate any unnecessary duplication of effort.* Gathering all the organizations involved in a particular issue can result in a more cohesive and comprehensive intervention. Rather than duplicating efforts, organizations can split up or coordinate responsibilities in ways that afford more participants access to programs and allow for a greater range of services.
- *To pool resources.* Many of organizations together may have the resources to accomplish a task that none of them could have accomplished independently. In general, organizations form partnerships to do just that - accomplish together what they cannot do alone.
- *To increase communication among groups and break down stereotypes.* Bringing together organizations from many sectors of the community can create alliances where there was little contact before. Working together toward common goals can help organizations break down barriers and misperceptions, and enable them to trust one another.
- *To build networks and friendships.* Partnerships result in social benefits for staff, volunteers and clients in that people can form networks and friendships through involvement with the organization.
- *To revitalize wilting energies of members of groups who are trying to do too much alone.* A partnership can help to bolster efforts around an issue. For organizations who have worked too long in a vacuum, the addition of other hands to the task can be a tremendous source of new energy and hope.
- *To plan and launch community-wide initiatives on a variety of issues.* In addition to addressing immediately pressing issues or promoting or providing services, partnerships can serve to unify efforts around long-term campaigns.
- *To develop and use political clout to gain services or other benefits for the community.* A unified community partnership can advocate more effectively than a number of disparate organizations working alone. In addition, a wide-ranging partnership can bring to bear pressure from all sectors of the community, and wield a large amount of power.
- *To create long-term, permanent social change.* Real change usually takes place over a period of time through the process of individuals gaining trust, sharing ideas, and getting past their preconceptions in order to understand the real issues underlying community needs. A partnership, with its structure of cooperation among diverse groups and its problem-solving focus, can ease and accelerate the process of change in a community.
- *To obtain or provide services.* It may take a partnership - either initially or over the long term - to design, obtain funding for, and/or run a needed intervention in the community.^{iv}

The Partnership Continuum

Partnerships can range from informal, minimal work between two organizations to very formal, contractual arrangements with the exchange of funds. There is sometimes an evolution with specific partners that grows into an active relationship of exchange and support.

The continuum of steps that results in a partnership often starts with coordination, progresses to cooperation and collaboration, and ultimately results in partnerships. Each and every step is important and worth pursuing. Your organization will likely work with organizations in each stage of the continuum outlined below, but you will not necessarily work through all steps in the continuum to form a partnership with every organization you develop a relationship with.



Some of your efforts toward developing partnerships with other organizations will only progress through a couple of stages and result in cooperation among the organizations; whereas, others might result in a full partnership.

Coordination

At this level, organizations learn about the services and clients served by the other organizations. They also learn about each organization's motivation for participating in a partnership. There is a lot of organizational independence. Self-interests and resources are defined. Coordination may include an exchange of information and materials.

Cooperation

Cooperation among organizations brings increased understanding of target audiences and motivations to participate in a partnership. There might be a minimal agreement, and the organizations may still be defining their roles and contribution. There is usually a greater appreciation of resources and skills that the partnership can bring. Joint strategies start to emerge.

Collaboration

With collaboration, there is increased recognition of the values of each organization, trust, respect, a clear understanding of the benefits for each partner, and innovative ideas are presented to meet a common problem. There can be challenges, but they are usually well worth the effort to benefit a group of clients or the community. At this stage, organizations are able to work together on a specific project to reach clients, provide

education, or develop a marketing campaign. Often organizations in collaborative relationships start to put plans in writing.

Partnership

In a partnership, there is a high level of trust and communication. Roles and responsibilities of each organization are well-defined and developed. There is a feeling of “us.” There might be shared space and staff, shared authority and decision making, and plans and agreements are in writing. Overall, there is a vision. Challenges continue especially in the area of funding streams and support. ⁱⁱⁱ

It is important to note that the continuum process may sometimes be cyclical due to changes in the nature, type and extent of the partnership. For example, partnerships with school districts often require modification due to changing personnel at all levels and locations, as well as social and political factors influencing decision-making of administrators.

Building and Implementing Partnerships

Readiness for Partnering and Identifying Prospective Partners

The first step in pursuing a strategic partnership is to know your own organization's strengths and weaknesses. This will help you determine the type of partnership that will be the most beneficial. Once these have been identified, involve your staff in narrowing down a list of organizations within your community that may fill your needs (compliment your strengths and address your weaknesses). Aids such as the *Organizational Readiness Assessment* on page 17 and the *Barriers and Challenges to Partnerships* tool on page 18 in the Tools and Resources section can serve as a helpful guide for assessing your organizational readiness, defining your organization's goals, and identifying prospective partners.

Do not ignore the strengths of your organization. A partnership is a two-way street, and you have valuable resources to offer. Because you have a deep understanding of an adolescent's needs, your organization's greatest asset is the ability to help these adolescents deal with the challenging situation they find themselves in, and you bring these strengths to the partnership.

The first step in pursuing a strategic partnership is to know your own organization's strengths and weaknesses.

Before entering into a partnership, give some consideration to how you will evaluate the effectiveness of such a relationship in the future. Knowing what success will look like before you start will help you know when you achieve it. It is important to assess potential partnerships at the beginning to ensure that you will work well together and that you are striving for the same goal. The tool *Evaluating Potential Partners* on page 19 can guide your organization through this analysis.

Negotiating a Partnership Agreement

Partnership negotiations should be oriented toward finding solutions or dealing with problems in a mutually beneficial way. Principled negotiation is founded on finding solutions for mutual gain.

To ensure that organizations get what they need from a partnership, partners must come to the negotiation table with a sincere interest in working together and drawing from one another's strengths. Your organization should clearly articulate what they can bring to the partnership, as well as understand what potential partners offer. The *Collaborative Practices Inventory* on page 21 in the Tools and Resources is designed to help individuals or groups who are involved or about to be involved in collaborative efforts understand their practices and behaviors when working with others.

Principled negotiation is founded on finding solutions for mutual gain

Negotiation is a skill that must be practiced. The following guidance can help advance partnership negotiations and produce desired results:

- 1. Honor the relationship.** The negotiation process involves partners you may work with over many years. If, in addition to the process of negotiating, your priorities include developing the relationship with your partners—for example, developing honest communication and trust—it can be easier to know when bending on a particular point may yield short-term gains but long-term costs.
- 2. Create a negotiation environment that encourages innovation.** Partners expand partnership options by engaging in brainstorming techniques and thinking "outside the box." If partners can respond to new ideas and be open to the unexpected, they will find unlimited opportunities to take a fresh look at their practices and beliefs about serving their clients.
- 3. Be realistic and fair.** Partners are more likely to follow up on their commitments and less likely to circumvent the negotiation process if they feel the agreement is fair. Sometimes a neutral, external facilitator can help to ensure that the negotiations are realistic and fair to all. Partners should *always* consult with their programs' legal and financial advisors before finalizing an agreement.
- 4. Recognize that each partnership is unique.** Each partnership needs to be structured to meet the needs of the organizations involved. Although you may know of an interesting and successful partnership in a nearby community, the partnership you are designing need not be the same.
- 5. Engage in active listening.** Focus on what others say, both on their actual words and the underlying meaning. This will help you understand the interests upon which agreement can be based. When your response makes it clear that you have really been listening, your partners, too, may be more prepared to listen. Active listening can produce better, more long-lasting relationships.
- 6. Know your bottom line.** We all enter negotiations knowing what we ideally want. Thinking through alternatives to the ideal outcome, however, allows you to understand your points of flexibility. Be clear about fallback positions and their consequences *before* you start to negotiate. Also, evaluate your partners' options beforehand. In negotiation, it is important to think several moves in advance and anticipate your partners' needs.
- 7. Know the difference between "positions" and "interests."** When you focus on your organization's motivation for partnering and your potential partners' motivation, then you are looking at *interests*. When you get bogged down in achieving a particular goal, then you are distracted by *positions*. Interests form the building blocks of lasting agreements.
- 8. Come prepared to commit resources.** Any request to take on greater responsibility must be accompanied by an offer of resources. Approach this issue with an earnest commitment to supporting the goals and the needed change. Resources can take the form of funding, staff, materials, supplies,

transportation, and facilities, often in combination. An adequate commitment of funds and other resources demonstrates your commitment to, and full support of the partnership.

9. **Take a fresh look at practices and standards.** Use the negotiation process to address areas that need improvement, such as increased outreach activities and staff development activities. Challenge yourself to examine existing practice: Is this truly the practice that needs to be adopted by all, or is there a new way to meet standards? Set short-term, realistic goals, yet keep sight of where the partnership needs to be.

10. **Allow sufficient time for partners to work out details.** Remember that the negotiation process is not a one-time meeting that results in a partnership agreement. Partners often need several meetings to develop an agreement that reflects everyone's needs and capacities and provides sufficient detail to ensure success and enhanced services. ^v

Partnership agreements should be put in writing, and reviewed annually. The agreement should contain sufficient detail to guide the partnership and serve as a mechanism by which partners assess the fulfillment of their commitments and contributions. As a legal document, the agreement protects all partners' best interests. Many partnership agreements also include an addendum that describes how the partnership conducts business. This addendum might specify who does what, when, how, with whom, and for what purpose. It may also contain specific outcome goals and a plan to measure achievement.

Partnership agreements should be put in writing, and reviewed annually

The *Developing a Partnership Agreement* tool on page 25 in the Tools and Resources can serve as a guide for organizations to assist them in developing a comprehensive agreement that clearly addresses each partner's roles and responsibilities and many of the elements needed for the partnership to run smoothly. Included is a list of specifics that partners might include in a written agreement. While agreements can and should be reviewed and revised over time, a strong agreement forged early in the partnership lays the foundation for a strong and sustainable partnership.

Implementing and Maintaining Partnerships

Key steps to implementing a partnership include:

1. Identify and engage the stakeholders.

2. Establish personal relationships, and begin to build trust.

3. Clarify the goals and objectives each partner wants to accomplish.

4. Choose and implement a partnership that is mutually beneficial.

5. Establish governance, procedures, ground rules, and decision-making structure.

When the right organizational partners are identified and established, start building the relationship slowly. A good idea would be to start working on small projects together instead of jumping into the big ones. These can be scaled over time once each organization understands its role. As noted in the partnership continuum described previously, collaborative relationships are the building blocks for the vast majority of partnerships. Organizations should strive to establish these collaborative relationships before they are needed and maintain these relationships, even if they are not immediately actionable.

One way to grow a relationship between partners is to involve them, where appropriate, in the culture of your organization. Help them understand what you have learned about the issues surrounding adolescent pregnancy and parenting and why your organization does the things it does. This may include client meetings or internal strategy meetings. Turn the tables and attend some of their meetings, as well. By understanding how each organization operates, you will foster a mutual understanding of the challenges each face.

Elements of Successful Partnerships

In summary, successful partnerships germinate from these common seeds:

A Shared Purpose

Carefully consider the compatibility of the purpose and goals of the partnering organizations, the value-added by partnering and expectations around each organization's participation. Make these clear in the partnership. Examine how each organization defines the partnership. Discuss your professional ethics. Developing a partnership is not unlike developing a personal relationship. Choose your partner with forethought and mutual understanding.

Flexibility and Willingness to Collaborate

Once partnership participants have been identified, it is important that the process be transparent reflecting the nature of the partnering organizations, appreciating the structures already in place and the development of new structures the partnership may require. The following efforts will help in creating any necessary new structures:

- Staff members need to be aware of their own organizational systems, management structures and work styles. By understanding their own organization, they are better able to help themselves and their partners appreciate and understand the value and expertise they bring to the partnership.
- Organizational charts, mission statements, job descriptions and other materials should be exchanged between partnering organizations, allowing all organizations to better understand each other's' goals and objectives, as well as the time and effort that goes into each other's jobs.
- A broadly defined structure often works best, providing guidance while permitting partners to make periodic adjustments, assess effectiveness, and allow for creativity and learning. Periodically review the partnership in relationship to where it's headed and what it will take to get there.

Complementary Strengths

All partners are accountable, and it is necessary to award equal opportunity and participation for all involved. Holding a preliminary information-sharing meeting for all participating staff is recommended. Expectations, roles and responsibilities, and available resources should be clarified and put in writing.

Agreed Upon Boundaries

Thinking through and negotiating differing work styles, organizations and management structures can be challenges faced by organizations attempting collaboration. A simple, written memorandum of understanding (MOU) may be helpful in articulating a partnership agreement.

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