

# Collaborate or Die

by Terrie Temkin

Is your board focused on how to make your organization stronger, more visible, and a magnet for attracting funds? Today that may be the kiss of death.

The days of being organization-centric are over. It's become clear that no organization—regardless of how wonderful—can solve our most persistent and pernicious problems, such as food insufficiency, homelessness, joblessness, disease, and functional illiteracy.

Yet, every year more people feel they have *the* answer. The IRS grants exempt status to approximately 182 new nonprofits *a day!* Even if the will and the energy existed to have all of the roughly 1.5 million charitable nonprofits running full tilt toward mission accomplishment, today's economy could not support them all.

Donors have, through necessity and reason, become more selective. Fewer are content with contributing to the achievement of small incremental steps. Fewer still will continue donating out of loyalty, or worse...habit. What they are telling us with their money—and volunteer time—is that they want to see the level of community impact jump dramatically.

And such significant community impact is possible, according to the extensive “collective impact” work of FSG (formerly Foundation Strategy Group) as written up in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in 2011 and 2012 and the results of a yearlong study released at the end of 2011 by Bridgespan for the White House Council for Community Solutions. But, it requires long-term, cross-sector collaborations designed specifically to involve not only multiple nonprofits, but also philanthropists, government entities, educational institutions, businesses, and constituents. All must have a voice and a commitment to working together. The entities may have different missions, but they must all share a common vision. In addition, they must all be dedicated to using data to drive mutual decision-making and staying in conversation.

## Actions the board can take

So what does this mean for your board? I suggest it:

- View its job as making the choices that will determine the future it desires for the communities it serves. This, by the way, is the definition of governance.
- Work outside the boardroom, engaging members of the community to discover what the needs really are. The board shouldn't just rely on what your executive director or program directors tell it. Research has shown that their perceptions are often out of synch with the community's.
- Set up systems for gathering information that can contribute to better choice-making.
- Create a vision that pictures how the *community*—not your organization—will be better off as a result of your work. The bolder the vision, the more likely you will see significant impact. Avoid the tendency to play it safe in order to “more easily sell it to the community.”

## At a glance

The days of “going it alone” are over. Among the actions a board can take to ensure mission success with persistent social problems:

- Collect information from community constituents
- Craft a bold vision focused on community betterment, not your organization
- Know your assets and know where you need help
- Look across sectors for partners to help you achieve that vision
- Establish collaboration policies
- Use due diligence and court new partners whom you can trust

Donors and funders are investing in organizations with bold vision and collaborative cultures. Join the trend if you wish to achieve your vision and mission—and continue to be attractive to your core supporters.

- Determine what action steps it will take to reach that vision, the assets that will be required and which of those steps the organization has the knowledge, skills and resources to handle.
- Create an asset list. Include intellectual, financial, space, equipment, programs, materials, brand, mission, and other assets. Indicate which assets you have in sufficient quantities to share and those you need to find elsewhere if you are to achieve your vision.
- Look at the steps that require other expertise or resources and consider who or what other organizations might serve as partners in the march toward the vision. Think across sectors.
- Court your potential partners. Yes, court. And take your time. You want to ensure a shared vision and shared values. There will be many times when on behalf of the organization the board will have to entrust the project to your partners, so it will need to feel confidence and trust in them.
- Set policies for collaboration.
- Be prepared to sublimate the needs of your organization for the good of the community impact you are striving to achieve.

### Don't get left out in the cold

You'd rather stay the course? Go it alone? You may *really* have to go it alone if donors follow the lead of the Buffett Family Foundation. Executive director Howard Buffett announced recently that the Foundation will no longer be donating to independent organizations, regardless of how compelling a case. As he told *Fast Company*, "Emotion is not fungible, so to measure success through the emotional feeling we get from doing something is not an effective way of measuring."

Instead, the Foundation will look at solving large problems—food sufficiency is the first. Buffett expects to reach unparalleled success by adopting his grandfather Warren's famous strategy of investing in the brightest people he can find in the field to look at the issue from all different directions. He's basing his choices on the degree of impact that's already been accomplished by each actor, a willingness to work with others and a commitment to cost savings. The chosen participants will work together as a coordinated system to make a difference at a level far above whatever's been achieved before.

Buffett expects that not only will the process succeed, but that other donors will soon follow suit, and put their money behind similar collaborative efforts. When that happens—and given the dramatic results reported by FSG, the White House Council for Community Solutions and others, this is a "when," not "if" situation—those organizations that have not jumped on the bandwagon will be left in the dust to wither and die.

Join in the collaboration conversation at:

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