Fostering Strategic Community Partnerships

by Lisa Scott Lehman and Michele D. Holleran

Heather Altman[1], project director of Community Connections for Carol Woods Retirement Community in Chapel Hill, N.C., says with confidence and passion, "We do not exist for just who is on our campus. Our mission is not to solely be here for the residents within our walls. There is a strong commitment to be a part of the community."

Is this philosophy a part of your organization's culture? Has your board engaged in strategic discussion about your role as a nonprofit in the community at large?

To be successful in today's environment, regardless of whether a for-profit or not-for-profit entity, small or large, organizations must foster solid partnerships among other strong establishments and fully leverage those benefits. As recently noted by one not-for-profit senior living provider, "We used to have this biased mentality that we could do everything on our own and didn't really need the 'outside' community. We are self-sustaining, so why did we need anyone else?" This insular culture is shortsighted and will inevitably leave the organization playing catch-up.

Partnerships can be formal or informal, with each arrangement providing its own set of pros and cons. Not-for-profit organizations are uniquely positioned to take advantage of what these relationships have to offer. Community-level partnerships demonstrate a commitment to social accountability, allow for economies of scale, facilitate innovative ways to deliver services or products, and can offer nontraditional revenue sources.

The Rationale for Exploring Local Partnerships

- Successful demonstration of **social accountability** is vital to retaining tax-exempt status.

- **Health care reform** calls for increasing exploration of bundled health care systems and payments.

- Partnerships produce **alternative business models** and thereby additional revenue streams.

- Increasingly **grant funds and other monies** are given only to collaborations and partnerships.

- Having key networks and partners in the community allows organizations to keep their "ears to the ground" and strengthen **strategic plans and opportunities for growth**.

- Community involvement provides additional opportunities to ensure **a strong image and brand** in the community.

Think "Out of the Box" for Prospective Partners

Many organizations have not asked, "Who would be on our full list of prospective partners?" Would it simply be traditional health care partners such as the hospital, home health agency, and so on? Yes, these organizations are important, but don't limit the scope just to these obvious partners. Be sure to include in that inventory the faith-based community, schools, area businesses, local government, and other not-for-profits such as foundations or the United Way. Perhaps there is opportunity to partner with local churches to provide meals on wheels, or the United Way might have an established caregiver network that aligns with organizational goals. Without a doubt, the opportunity for organizations to establish a presence among this group of partners is great.

Getting Started

Begin in-house with discussions among the leadership team, board of directors and other internal stakeholders. As pointed out by researcher Kay Eilbert[2], "Enabling organizations from multiple sectors to participate in partnerships requires change from the status quo." Change to the status quo leads to political implications and paradigm shifts, which must be acknowledged and fully processed within the organization. Does the organization have systems and policies that are inherent barriers to partnerships? Has there been previous success or failure in this regard? Why? Why not?

Internal dialogue is recommended to produce an inventory of the potential partners in your area. Once a list is established, ask, "How strong is the current relationship compared to how strong the organization would like it

to be?" This approach can be used in conjunction with increased awareness of partnerships already in place. For example, it is not uncommon for a city or county to have a partnership devoted to healthy communities. For a number of years now, not-for-profit hospitals and public health agencies have been establishing these mostly volunteer coalitions. These organizations go by various names – Lancaster Health Improvement Partnership, Healthy Hartford Coalition, Manchester County Partners for Progress, and so on. Your inventory of potential partners may well include organizations and agencies that are already active members of such local partnerships.

After prospective partners are clarified, their interest level in being a prospective partner must be gauged. Remember, organizations want to partner with other strong organizations. Is there certainty that these prospective partners perceive your organization to be strong, solid and progressive?

In addition to fostering one-to-one relationships and joining existing partnerships, consider establishing an area coalition. Carol Woods Retirement Community initiated a coalition based on needs identified through a county-wide master planning process. Since 2008, Carol Woods has been the convener of a local partnership, funded by a grant from the Duke Endowment that focuses on hospital-to-home transitions for seniors. The monthly Community Connections workgroups typically draw 75 partners or more. Director Heather Altman attributes the partnership's success to having the right people involved, grant monies to support a clear, focused purpose, and passionate champions who are appropriately balanced between task orientation and the big picture.

Keys to Success

In his book, *The Collaboration Challenge: How Nonprofits and Businesses Succeed Through Strategic Alliances*, James Austin[3] outlines what he calls the seven "C's" for strategic collaborations. These fundamental elements contribute greatly to the success of community partnerships.

1. A **Connection** is established based on purpose that engages people.

2. There is **Clarity** of purpose.

3. There is **Congruence** across each organization's mission, strategy and values.

4. The relationship **Creates value**.

5. Effective **Communication** is developed and maintained among all parties involved.

6. Alliances are viewed as a dynamic relationship involving a process of **Continuous learning**.

7. The partnership is based on a long-term **Commitment** involving deep relationships.

The Role of Community Needs Assessment

An evaluation of community strategic planning models is worthwhile. Community Partnerships for Older Adults, a national program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, suggests a five-step strategic planning process for convening partners to focus on the needs of older adults (www.partnershipsforolderadults.org). The five steps include: Getting Started; A Shared Vision; Information Gathering; Priorities & Planning; and Measuring Impact.

It is critical that whatever partnership you pursue, there must be an unmet need to be filled. Are the specific needs of area seniors clear? Is the answer driven by intuition or sound research? This stage of planning is an opportune time to work within existing community partnerships. Chances are good that these coalitions are regularly measuring community needs and gaps in services, and are exploring ways to address unmet needs.

The Bottom Line

For sustained success, a business model that is intertwined with community partners needs to be a standard way of doing business and part of the organization's culture. Partnering as a strategy must be valued by board, management, staff, and residents/clients alike. It is helpful for each organization to have an internal champion to be the keeper of the culture – a key connector in the community who has a critical eye and the savvy to know opportunity when he or she sees it.

Every organization is in a different place in growing its partnership network and living the culture. Each organization needs to know where it is and where it wants to go. Trustees and managers cannot be afraid to ask the hard questions and walk through them, not around them, to advance the organization's vision, mission and values.

References

[1]Heather Altman, Project Director. Community Connections Project. Carol Woods Retirement Community, Chapel Hill, N.C.

[2]Kay W. Eilbert. *A Community Health Partnership Model: Using Organizational Theory to Strengthen Public Health Practice. School of Public Health and Health Services*, The George Washington University, 2003.

[3]James E. Austin. *The Collaboration Challenge: How Nonprofits and Businesses Succeed Through Strategic Alliances.* Jossey-Bass, 2000.

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