

Pool Resources for Success

To make your next project more efficient, why not find a partner? Here are eight steps to a successful alliance.

By DIRK REMLEY

Once looked on with suspicion, pooling resources has become increasingly common as nonprofit learn how effective it can be. The result of pooling resources (also called cooperative competition, competitive cooperation, strategic alliance building, and joint sponsorship) is an alliance between two nonprofits working toward the same short-term goals.

While a merger is a marriage, an alliance is a temporal affair. Each organization in an alliance maintains its own identity and attributes. But both have common objectives, which they can reach better together than alone.

Pooling resources can do far more than save money; it can raise nonprofits' visibility, increase their effectiveness, and gain support for their cause. In Ohio, for example, Lake Erie College hooked up with Lakeland Community College to hold a summer hostel program. One goal of the joint program was to increase people's awareness of both campuses.

Likewise, the Cleveland Museum of Art collaborated with the Western Reserve Historical society and the Natural History museum, all located in Cleveland's Wade Park Oval, to develop an event called "Parade the Circle." This annual summer event increases the visibility of all three arts organizations in Cleveland and surrounding communities.

Here are the steps to planning a successful alliance with another nonprofit organization:

1. Start Small.

If this is your first alliance, it's a good idea to start with something modest and finite. Perhaps you can team up with another organization to offer a special event or workshop. If the fit is good, you can then plan further alliances.

Also, it will probably work best to choose only one other partner for your first alliance. After you have more experience, you may want to pool resources with two or more organizations at a time.

2. Identify Potential Partners.

When you decide to pool resources with another group, your inclination may be to pick an organization you already know well. But don't choose too hastily. Before rushing into an

alliance, brainstorm a list of possible partners. Include those who don't already support you but whose missions are compatible with yours.

The longer your list, the better your chance of finding the best possible partner. Of course, some organizations may say 'no thanks' when you ask them if they'd like to pool resources with you. But you may also find collaborators where you least expect.

Strive for healing and forgiveness. And don't forget humor.

It is best to avoid a relationship with a direct competitor--an organization very similar to yours. A relationship between an art museum and a natural history museum, for example, would probably be more pleasant than one involving two art museums serving the same area.

3. Develop a Purpose Statement.

Create a statement of purpose, explaining why your organization wants to form the alliance. The reason may be to increase visibility by holding a special event, to market a product jointly, or to increase volunteerism.

Identify Your Partnership Assets

Before you start looking for a partner, identify the resources you bring to the table in negotiating relationships. Consider the following:

Name Recognition: Does your nonprofit offer a partner the credibility, legitimacy, or reputation associated with your name?

Issue Identification: Is your nonprofit exclusively associated with an issue—such as affordable housing, tax reform, unemployment, or economic development—that is a natural fit with the needs and interests of prospective partners?

Access: Do you offer access to key opinion leaders, elected or appointed officials, policy-makers, or community leaders who others need to know?

Endorsement: Is your organization recognized to the extent that your name associated with a product or idea confers legitimacy upon it?

Membership: Does your membership hold appeal? Is your membership a target market for corporations or other community agencies?

Once you're aware of your assets, identify what prospective partners might need. Then show them how you can work together.

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Ask the potential partners on your list if they are interested in joining the project with you. Explain the project clearly enough that they know what to expect, yet broadly enough that they can bring their own visions and needs to the alliance.

Ask each interested organization to prepare a statement of purpose, telling what it hopes to gain from the alliance. Because each partner will remain separate in the long run, this statement must define the purpose in terms of the individual organization.

To choose your partner, you'll want to select the organization whose statement of purpose is closest to yours. The adage "opposites attract" does not apply here: it could lead to failure. The more your purpose is in harmony with your partner's, the more fruitful the alliance will be.

4. Jointly Establish Short-Term Goals.

Next, work with your partner to develop joint goals for the alliance. Create measurable, concrete goals, such as "to draw 500 people to our event." That way, you can easily gauge your results after the event and tell if you've been successful.

Also be sure that your goals are attainable. Perhaps you hope for 500 people at your event, but only 300 are likely to attend. If you plan for wishes rather than realistic goals, you'll waste time, energy, and money.

5. Be Sensitive to Each Other's Long-Term Goals.

While you and your partner should develop short-term goals jointly, your long-term goals may differ. Your organization's long-term goal may be to gain new members, for example, while your partner's may be to increase public knowledge about its mission.

Though you don't develop them jointly, you and your partner should be aware of each other's long-range goals. You each need to respect the independence and goals of the other.

6. Identify Responsibilities.

Clearly outline each partner's responsibilities, in writing. Your organization, for example, may have the job of securing a location for the event, while your partner may be responsible for recruiting volunteers. Each of you may want to host a specific activity, but it's important that you work together in coordinating the project.

Decide, too, what resources each partner will contribute. Resources can be money, staff, technology, training, information, or contacts. It's not necessary indeed, it's impossible--for resources to be equally matched. The point of pooling resources is not for each partner to

contribute the identical amounts but to put all resources to better use. If both partners contribute what they can, both will benefit.

7. Define How to Resolve Conflicts.

You can't anticipate everything that may go wrong, but you can take precautions. One way to do so is to form a small committee of people drawn from both organizations. This committee can oversee the alliance's operation.

Simply having such a committee in place will reduce conflicts. It will give people from both organizations a place to be heard. Even so, some conflicts are bound to occur. When they do, the committee can act as referee. (See 'Tips for Resolving Conflict with Your Nonprofit Partner' on page 44)

8. Build on Success.

Once you find how useful it is to pool resources with another organization, you will want to move on to build other alliances. With each, your planning will be better, and things will go more smoothly.

Any nonprofit can find areas in which pooling resources makes sense. The benefits of such an alliance go far beyond hosting successful events. The real bonus is replacing the specter of competition with the spirit of collaboration.

Joint efforts will help not only your organization and your partner's but the entire nonprofit sector. Showing cooperation results in good public relations for all nonprofits.

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*Starred publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information contact the Society at 800-424-7367

Tips for Resolving Conflict with Your Nonprofit Partner

- Remember that conflict is inevitable and usually positive, Lack of conflict means issues are buried. Expect conflict, and use it to solidify your partnership.
- Respect differences in organizational culture, mission, and vision between you and your partner.
- Revisit the destination, Ask, "If we want to achieve these results, what must we do about this conflict?"
- Look for underlying issues, such as the fear of losing control or being overshadowed by the other partner.
- Keep everyone focused on consensus.
- Remind both partners of their purpose statements and short-term goals.
- Use good communication skills. (See, for example, Lauer in "Selected References.")
- Be sure both partners have revealed their true self-interests in the alliance. Sometimes conflict arises out of hidden agendas.
- Separate the conflict from the concepts of right and wrong. Such separation will keep people from personalizing the issues, since some view conflict as a threat to long-held beliefs.
- When meeting with your partner, concentrate on your common, short-term results.
- Give everyone a chance to be heard.
- Check to be sure that you are respecting people's personal preferences, such as favored meeting times, preferred styles of communication, and the like.
- Openly claim the power you bring to the relationship, and watch for conflicts that arise from the use of power. If people don't view power as positive (moving things forward), they can use their power negatively (to hold things back).
- Emphasize the communal benefits of the partnership.
- If your conflict resolution committee cannot handle the problem, seek an outside arbitrator.
- Realize that you may not—and perhaps should not—resolve some conflicts. Sometimes the best you can do is agree to disagree.
- Don't let conflict destroy your relationship. Ideally, you will want to form other alliances with your partner after this one is finished. So strive for healing and forgiveness. And don't forget humor.

Adapted from *Collaboration Handbook* (see "Selected References")

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