

COLLABORATION REVISITED

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The purpose of this essay is to revisit Collaboration—a topic I explored in two previous *CultureWork* articles (Torrell, 2009, 2011). Evident in those pieces was that my own experience in administrative collaboration brought many benefits and an increasing number of challenges. In years since, what has not changed is the siren call, especially from funders, holding out collaboration as the answer to every nonprofit's problems. My own thinking has evolved to believe this is a dangerous myth. Remember in Greek mythology, the Sirens lured nearby sailors with enchanting music to shipwreck on the rocky shores of their island—the siren call an enticing appeal of something alluring but potentially dangerous. Especially for small and midsized nonprofits, I have seen time-and-again benefits exaggerated and challenges overlooked. For this reason, I offer several current thoughts:

Time

You go into Collaboration thinking of efficiencies and possibilities. In reality, they often require a significant investment of both time and money over a long time to become successful. Do you have excess capacity to devote to this effort? What benefits might there be in staying light and unencumbered?

Money

It's essential to know the true financial status of both (all) organizations. Look at the following carefully:

- Balance sheet – especially unrestricted net assets

- Audits from past 3-5 years: in balance or out of balance & for how long?

- Current statement of activities (budget vs. actual) and Treasurer's Reports

What is their understanding of their current financial situation and how does that align with the reality you see? Be very cautious in getting involved with a financially unbalanced or unstable organization unless all cards are on the table and there is a clear plan to manage. Funders often urge collaboration hardest when groups are in trouble. It can be a smart way to leverage investments and build capacity, but this is not a given. Assess benefits from pursuing this effort vs. time, energy, effort, and funding which could be used to strategically strengthen your own individual organization. This “opportunity cost” is essential to consider with time and resources finite.

Other considerations

One of the greatest benefits of collaboration can be creation of a ‘brain trust’, a diverse group of staff and board members who can bring expanded intelligence, experience, and perspective to the table. At the same time, there is significant risk in tying your destiny and reputation to another organization; and, a persistent reality is that groups trend towards the lowest functioning member or entity. Something almost always missed is that collaborative capacity should be thought of as the product (not the sum or average) of the underlying entities (Adner, 2012). If you join with a group that’s lower functioning (let’s say working at .60% capacity compared with your own .85%), multiply these two numbers. Almost certainly, you will not be brought closer to 100% or even stay at 85% with this collaboration. You will now be starting at 55%, suggesting each might

have had a better chance of succeeding independently.

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Optional Image:

Buzzword Bingo: Collaboration = To work with others

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