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Making Nonprofit Partnerships Effective

While nonprofit partnerships can be effective, they can also be extremely challenging.

"Overall, nonprofits are still uncomfortable even having a conversation about partnering," says Peter York, director of evaluations with the TCC Group. "If you've never partnered before, there's a part of you that sees a great opportunity — and another part that's worried about getting burned."

Nonprofit partnerships often come through one of two routes:

- Through a meeting of the minds between each group's CEOs and boards.
- By having the collaboration thrust upon them by funders.

Both examples have their benefits and drawbacks.

Partnerships where CEOs or board members recognize a mutual need are often backed by organizational enthusiasm and strong mission goals.

"These collaborations are deeper," says Donna Stone Buchanan, president of Junior Achievement of Georgia. "If a funder tells you to do it, the passion and excitement will last only as long as the dollars do. The minute the funder moves on, the collaboration can fall apart."

Instead, Buchanan and her board focus on making contacts in her community that may lead to strong partnerships.

A 2001 Southern Illinois University study revealed that, along with committed, strong board leadership, the key to successful nonprofit collaboration is the interpersonal connections between organizations and their communities. Buchanan sits on six boards. Many of her board members also sit on multiple boards and have strong community ties with organizations such as rotary clubs.

Other experts insist that funder-generated nonprofit collaborations add an important level of accountability.

"If there is strong leadership on both parties' boards and they can both let go of the ego ownership issue — who gets credit for what — they can make it work," York says. "But, in reality, we know it doesn't happen that way often enough. That's when some kind of imposed accountability is helpful."

Two recent studies have shown that most nonprofit partnerships go off without a hitch if the board is actively involved in the planning and maintenance of the partnership. The studies — one by Southern Illinois, the other by a collection of researchers including TCC's York — agreed on several key components to a successful partnership.

They include:

- Board and CEO leadership that believes strongly in the partnership and acts to strengthen it.
- The boards approve clearly stated outcomes, roles, responsibilities, and resource allocations.
- Multiple forms of communication that keep all stakeholders in the loop.
- Ongoing face-to-face contact to build trust and familiarity.
- A flexible mindset that understands mistakes will be made and plans may change.
- An arrangement for canceling the agreement if the partnership is clearly not working.
- Early evidence of success that is shared among both organizations to assure everyone that the collaboration is on the right track.

Adapted from "It Takes Two" by John DiConsiglio in the August/September 2004 edition of *Board Member*, Volume 13, Issue 5.