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**More Than Common Ground: Leveraging Partnerships
to Resource Your Cause**

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Abstract

Grantors, non-profit organizations, and the people they serve increasingly require partnerships and collaborations. Partnerships, if done well, strengthen program design, proposal development, and grant-writing effectiveness. They create opportunities for increased impact, access to more funding, and enhanced learning that amplify organizational competencies. However, partnerships may also entail vision and culture clashes that threaten to erode the benefits of bringing organizations together. Each day, Tierra del Sol Foundation's 150 partners help 674 individuals with moderate to severe developmental disabilities go to college, get jobs, and live more meaningful lives. By employing strategies like choosing the right partners, projects, processes, and positions, Tierra advances its mission while bringing additional value to partners. This article examines the need for partnerships in the current philanthropic landscape. It then identifies research- and experience-based strategies to ensure partnerships offer services that connect organizations with the needs of their communities and funders.

Introduction

Eight families founded the Tierra del Sol Foundation in 1971 to create an alternative to institutionalization for their children with developmental disabilities. Tierra helped prove people with developmental disabilities can thrive and contribute as valued members of their families and communities -- ending an era of dehumanizing institutionalization for thousands of local men and women. Today, Tierra remains focused on empowering individuals with developmental disabilities in realizing their greatest human potentials, becoming independent within their families and communities, and playing meaningful roles in society. Partnerships are vital to achieving this mission.

Since 2006, the percentage of people Tierra serves in non-segregated, community-based post-secondary education, volunteer, or employment settings has shifted from 25% to 95%. However, partnership-based organizational cultures are built upon more than just the services provided. Rather, partnerships must also permeate fundraising strategies.

Tierra is one of a growing number of organizations focusing on the benefits of partnerships. According to her study of San Diego-based foundations, Stringfield (2013) concluded that all 11 interviewees were adamant about the importance of partnerships. For example, one respondent stated, “Organizations really have to start partnering instead of trying to do it all. I think that [partnering] is a much more efficient model in a lot of cases” (p. 97). Stringfield posits, “As non-profits face challenges in securing monetary resources, partnering with other non-profits to leverage strengths and resources is not only very important to funders, but also may serve to provide a greater impact across the community” (p. 97).

Current industry trends support this concept. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* recently identified four top trends in grantmaking in the United States. Two of these trends hinge on partnerships between nonprofit organizations by: (1) encouraging struggling nonprofits to partner with stronger ones; and (2) identifying cross-agency partnerships before approaching funders (Gose & Donovan, 2014).

It is no longer sufficient to do good work in isolation. Conversely, partnerships enhance the process of proposal development by: (1) producing a valuable product in an efficient manner; and (2) providing new learning opportunities across partnering organizations (Bhavsar & Ahn, 2013). Significantly, larger numbers of funders are now expecting grant seekers to engage in strategic partnerships. When successful, they result in increased resources, impacts, and program sustainability that support organizational missions.

Impact Investing: Advancing Partnerships in Today’s Philanthropic Landscape

In an April 2013 speech, Peter Robertson (2013), Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the World Affairs Council of Northern California, lauded his audience of funders by declaring, “You share a commitment to making social impact bigger, better and faster and to looking at the most effective ways to make a difference. You look to collaborate and to learn from and connect with one another” (p. 1). Impact investing has gained a large following with grantmakers. Significantly, the focal point has shifted from outputs and activities to outcomes and scalability. As a result, these concepts are inextricably linked with collaboration.

Partnerships are beneficial to both the program and proposal development processes. For instance, through its network of 150 partners, Tierra regularly learns about new perspectives and viewpoints on industry trends and best practices. By design, Tierra’s expansive network forces partners to evaluate their own actions, plans, beliefs and assumptions based on the annual feedback they provide. Partners not only heighten their own skills but also utilize one another’s strengths to collectively address problems beyond their individual areas of expertise.

When there is a clear value proposition from a partnership, funding prospects will also increase. The first set of new prospects typically includes foundations and corporate giving programs that require partnerships for funding consideration. Another set of new prospects mirrors the focus area(s) of the partnering organization(s). For example, if a college partners with a human services provider to enhance post-secondary educational

outcomes for a disadvantaged population group, both human services and education funders are identified. Additionally, partnerships serve to increase ongoing awareness of funding opportunities as they emerge. According to D'Agostino (2013), local, statewide, and national organizations can help “create a collaborative network of support and information that can potentially lead to broadened knowledge of funding sources to sustain or enhance their services” (p. 250).

Leveraging Partnerships to Advance Each Organization's Priorities

Positive outcomes typically result from partnerships that are structured with intentionality. Through collaborations, distinct organizations come together, but with unique visions, priorities, and cultures. If ignored, these cultural differences cloud expectations and weaken project outcomes. Consequently, grant professionals may facilitate mutually-beneficial collaborations by employing strategies to ensure their partnerships include the right partners, projects, processes, and positions.

1. *The Right Partners* - Develop partnerships with organizations that complement your mission. Jim Collins' seminal classic, *Good to Great*, advances the concept of “First Who, Then What” (Collins, 2001, p. 41). This work emphasizes the importance of identifying people and organizations that make good partners before finalizing the direction of a project and the specific roles involved. Thus, organizations should enhance their fundraising readiness for future proposal development opportunities by creating a network of partners that work together to advance common goals.
2. *The Right Projects* - Identify projects that can be executed and funded given opportunities that meet with each partner's unique competencies and interests. When a funding opportunity presents itself that might be enhanced through partnerships, such as a joint grant proposal, first identify the unique value proposition that the partnership fulfills. Partnerships are necessary only when each organization brings a unique value to the table that enhances project outcomes. This value might be a specific expertise, skill, audience, or resource. Given the partners' strengths, determine what project(s) best align with the needs of the collaborating organizations and the requirements of the grant.
3. *The Right Processes* - Outline key elements of the project and proposal development process. Keep in mind that “partnership” is a broad term that brings to mind different meanings for each party. Therefore, develop and define collaborative processes during the early stages of any partnership to increase efficiencies and reduce frustrations. Anticipate and answer questions such as: How will success be evaluated? Is the partnership time limited? Who is responsible for writing? Will one partner have editorial control? Will the completed proposal be sent to a specific prospect, or will it be transmitted to any that come up? How soon must evaluation occur, and what assessment methods should be used? How and when will grant funds, once received, be shared with partners?

4. *The Right Positions* - Define roles and responsibilities for each partner. As the outline of project and process details develops, natural questions will arise regarding the responsibilities of each partner. In most, though not all cases, one organization or principal investigator becomes the primary applicant, with collaborating organizations noted as partners, collaborators, or sub-contractors.

After defining partners, projects, processes, and positions, confirm that each player shares the same understanding of the partnership at hand. Create formal and/or informal agreements that outline the key elements of the partnership using a method that matches each organization's culture. Options include but are not limited to: memorandums of understanding (MOUs), support letters, approval of meeting minutes, or a simple handshake for partnerships in the neophyte stage of development. Grant application guidelines, however, frequently require written agreements of various types from partnering organizations. Thus, consider these legal requirements as well.

Conclusion

In today's philanthropic landscape, partnerships and collaborations are necessary when connecting non-profit organizations' needs with available resources. Through pre-planning and intentionality in partnership development, non-profits gain the perspectives, feedback, and resources necessary to enhance their impacts in the community. As a result, non-profits will see their missions advance in a more effective and efficient manner.

Biographical Information

Jennifer Hurst, MA, is Manager of Corporate and Foundation Relations for Tierra del Sol Foundation in Sunland, CA. She joined Tierra in 2010 to manage a federal grant focused on partnership development. Ms. Hurst holds an M.A. in Organizational Leadership with highest honors. She has served as an officer for the Grant Professionals Association's Greater Los Angeles Chapter and on the communications committee of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Los Angeles Chapter. Contact Ms. Hurst at jhurst@tierradelsol.org.

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