GPA Article:

The Art of Partnerships

Many invitations for grant proposals require community partnerships to show a funding source the strength of support a proposed grant program has in the community. A strong partnership base can also bolster a proposal because partnering organizations can bring in skill sets the lead applicant may lack.

Creating or enhancing a partnership network takes skill and creativity—or art. As professionals assigned the task of developing fund-worthy grant proposals, we are tasked with developing or enhancing a network. Complicating our assignment may be dealing with "lone wolf" organizations, past partnership failure or community intrigue.

What helps create a partnership network or improve dysfunctional networks? Here are some strategies:

- Keep things black and white- When partners know what is expected and the value they can receive from the program, the better the understanding and involvement.
- Maintain communications- Create a realistic and responsive communications system. When everyone is on the same page and has confidence in what is being shared, uncertainty and mistrust evaporates.
- Deal with the past- As grant professionals, the focus is crafting the best proposal and moving forward. This approach creates issues when a past experience among partners wasn’t positive and impacts the current proposal. Schedule an intervention early in the process where goals/objectives of the current program are presented and past issues are discussed. When scheduling the intervention, stress the outcome expected--moving forward and leaving the past behind.
- Work and move on- Work with partners and overcome past difference. If the differences can’t be resolved, move on. I address this process early in the development phase. If the partner is required in the grant proposal and won’t join, a shift in direction can be made.
- Build a bigger pool- I’ve worked with organizations having worked with the same limited partners. Look to broaden and introduce new partners into the grant proposals. These new partners may provide greater expertise and sustainable strength. Think outside the box and diversify the partnership mix.

There is no tried and true formula to create and maintain partnership networks. It is an art requiring patience, communication, and persistence. A strong partnership network is a true masterpiece and can attract rave reviews from the community and funders.