

# Collaboration in a Changing Context

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## Overview

Exhilarating, exciting, and promising – daunting, complex, and messy. These are just some of the many words, both good and bad, that come to mind when one thinks about partnerships and collaboration. This paper explores partnerships and collaboration from a foundation lens as philanthropy seeks to work together in new collaborative ways with each other, nonprofits/grantees, and additional partners across sectors in a rapidly changing context and landscape.

It is framed around the general question of, ***“In looking ahead, what do foundations need to be thinking about (aware of) as they engage in and support partnership efforts?”*** This includes outlining various approaches and types of collaboratives that involve foundations, the unique and often challenging roles that foundations can play in such efforts, and the related complexities and nuances in the success (and failure) of meaningful partnerships. Along with highlights gleaned from relevant reports and articles, this paper also weaves in responses to the above question from the firsthand perspective of several foundation staff and nonprofit leaders in Michigan.

## It’s all about relationships

*Wedding bells fill the Northern Hemisphere air for this season's happy couples. Among the newlyweds armed with pre-nuptial agreements are numerous (entities) starting strategic alliances, joint ventures, and focused collaboratives. ...Alliances and partnerships resemble modern marriages: separate careers, individual checkbooks, sometimes different names, but they need to work out the operational overlap around household and offspring... (Kanter, 2010)*

Based on her decades of helping major companies and other organizations extract value from their strategic alliances and failures, Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter has discovered that relationships between them begin, grow, and develop – or fail – in ways similar to relationships between people. Kanter (1994) stated:

**No two relationships travel the same path, but successful alliances generally unfold in five overlapping phases.** In the first – courtship – two entities meet, are attracted, and discover their compatibility. During the second – engagement – they draw up plans and close the deal. In phase three, the newly partnered entities, like couples setting up housekeeping, discover they have different ideas about how the initiative should operate. In phase four, the partners devise mechanisms for bridging those differences and develop techniques for getting along. And in phase five, as old-marrieds, each entity discovers that it has changed internally as a result of its accommodation to the ongoing collaboration. (p. 98)

*Now more than ever, as Michigan experiences especially lean times, partnerships between the public, private and nonprofit sector - as well as within sectors - are critical. Any initiative or project that has the hope of long-term sustainability must involve a broad base of support.*

***A leader is critical to continue to move projects or initiatives along, but it is the band which follows that makes the music. And not unlike a band, each player and diverse perspectives and expertise are critical for true harmony. – Foundation program officer***

## The changing context

The need for strategic and nimble collaboration – built on strong relationships – is becoming increasingly critical for foundations. In the new report, *What's Next for Philanthropy: Acting Bigger and Adapting Better in a Networked World*, Fulton, Kasper, & Kibbe (2010) indicate:

An intimidating range of forces – globalization, shifting sectoral roles, economic crisis, and ubiquitous connective technologies, to name just a few – are changing both what philanthropy is called upon to do and how donors and foundations will accomplish their work in the future....

**The new context requires that funders adjust to the ways in which their actions are connected to others' actions** in a dynamic interplay with external events, in order to have a greater impact, faster. The most innovative funders in the future will do more than operate as effective, independent institutions... Given the scale and social complexity of the challenges they face, **funders will increasingly look to other actors, both in philanthropy and across sectors**, to activate sufficient resources to make sustainable progress on issues of shared concern.

## Collaboration approaches

Just as no two marriages are alike, collaborations that involve foundations in some way – as a partner, supporter, or blend of both – vary in a myriad of ways. To help unpack and better understand the distinctions, the following sections explore: 1) funder collaboratives, 2) nonprofit/grantee collaboratives, and 3) hybrids involving multiple sectors.

### A. *Funder collaboratives*

Foundations are increasingly considering funder collaboratives as a way to learn together, distribute risks, and aim for larger goals. **These joint ventures, however, also come with challenges** in establishing ground rules, sharing control, and aligning with the specific interests and needs of one's own foundation. One of the most useful overviews of the range of strategies, challenges and benefits related to funder collaboration is, *Moving Ideas and Money: Issues and Opportunities in Funder Funding Collaboration*, by Ralph Hamilton, co-director of the Program on Philanthropy and Community Change at the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children.

Based on the funder collaborations studied, Hamilton (2002) found that the number and range is much larger than initially anticipated; that they appear to be more idiosyncratic and eclectic than assumed; and many have grown organically out of a particular context, among a particular set of relationships, and in response to a particular set of opportunities. **They appear to exist across a wide range of fields, supported by a spectrum of institutional funders, and display a variety of purposes and approaches.** Some are focused around a specific geography, others are aimed at a particular level of change agent, while still others are targeted toward specific issues or solutions. Even the actual degree and nature of "collaboration" (traditionally understood as intensive and shared work together) varies enormously, both across and within collaborations.

Furthermore, he noted that some collaborations require funders to be deeply involved in ongoing discussions, problem solving, decision-making, and even hands-on operation; others primarily emphasize the financial contribution and expect less personal time and involvement from funders; while still others have multiple levels of participation within the same

collaboration. Hamilton outlines the following typology as one way to organize thinking about funding collaborations across philanthropy, emphasizing that few of these mechanisms are purely one thing. Rather than a linear continuum, the types below might best be described as **occupying distinctive niches within a larger ecology** of philanthropic approaches and tools.

### **Information exchange**

To provide ongoing venues for funders to exchange information, discuss common interests, and learn about a broad set of issues of common relevance. It is also a place where funders connect with each other, and establish webs of relationship that are important in their work.

### **Co-learning**

To facilitate funders' ongoing engagement and exploration around a defined issue or problem, usually with a goal of developing a common frame of understanding and intellectual resources, a shared approach and agenda, and/or positioning an issue differently in the foundation world. They also often assist participants in identifying emerging issues and strategic opportunities.

### **Strategic alignment – informal**

Typically combine the ambitions of co-learning around a tightly defined issue, framing, geography or solution, with an expressed interest in informally aligning different foundations' resources around a shared strategy. This approach is also used to bring diverse groups of public and private funders together to develop common solutions.

### **Strategic alignment – formal**

This is more selective in membership and more formal in governance and giving expectations, but nonetheless maintains the lean administrative structure and the emphasis on aligning funds rather than pooling or administering them.

### **Pooled funding**

Creating a funding pool from multiple funding sources in order to re-grant for a geographic area, to a particular sector, or around a specific suite of issues. The money is typically granted to, held by, and re-granted by a collaborative entity.

### **The River Partnership**

#### *Tapping a blend of approaches*

To wrestle with the issue of what a collaborative of community foundations located throughout the ten-state Mississippi River Corridor region might look like, but more importantly if there was even enough need and interest in a partnership at all, The Funders' Network (TFN) for Smart Growth and Livable Communities **held an exploratory meeting** with potential community foundation participants in 2005.

This included looking at three existing models ranging in purpose from networking to coordination to collaboration and **using these as a springboard** for discussion to help inform the creation of The River Partnership in 2006.

TFN plays a central role in staffing the Partnership and providing services and support (e.g., meetings, communications tools, technical assistance, and small-grant resource pool). One of the most striking features of the Partnership's impact thus far is the extent to which **participating community foundations have found the right entry points and issue frames** to engage their respective communities in a conversation about the River's environmental, economic, and cultural importance to the local area.

According to Carson (2009), **it is in this convening role that the true value of the Partnership obtains**. "We typically undervalue the power of a forum. There are very few trusted environments for community foundations to talk," said Pam Coaxum, board president of the Greater East St. Louis Community Fund. "The River Partnership has created an environment for learning. Yet, three years in, these relationships and on-the-ground projects are just taking root. They will only grow stronger with time, tending, and continued commitment."

### Joint ventures

Operates particular projects rather than serving as a regranting entity. Usually arise to fill a perceived void in policy and/or practice, to raise the profile of an issue, or to develop new ideas. Often are inter-disciplinary in orientation or cross other kinds of sectoral boundaries.

### Hybrid networks

This is the most eclectic. These collaborations either combine elements of the above and/or introduce new elements in the mix. They can be focused at the local level or the national level, devoted to a place or an issue, and may have varied constellations of foundations, NGOs, and/or individuals as their members.

Across types, Hamilton notes that **one important factor to keep in mind is the individual program officer**. Most collaborations originate and are dependent upon the interest, relationships and commitment of a particular program officer or a small group of program officers. Regardless of the compelling logics for pursuing different opportunities in different ways, progress is likely to depend on individual program officers willing to commit the time and take the lead. He also offers the following elements of success, as well as challenges and cautions.

### Elements in success

- **Clear values, goals and methods** –The operating style of a collaboration may be more important to its success than the actual structure. Collaborations need to take the time to clarify their core values and goals early on, while recognizing the importance of establishing common agreement among the partners about the basis for decisions, how decisions are to be made, and how the operating side is to function. The processes for doing this vary.
- **Relationships, trust and accountability** – The strength of personal bonds among funders working in collaboration is viewed as a crucial factor in success.
- **Equal voice** – Membership requirements for collaboratives cover the spectrum but once at the table, all collaborative participants must have an equal voice and standing in order to create a genuine level of exchange and mutuality.
- **Candor about self-interest and authority** –The best collaborations meet individual participants' self-interests, as well as the needs of the group as a whole. It helps for individual funders to be honest with

### ***Building on the groundwork***

*With the economic downturn, we funders have been encouraging our grantees to collaborate more than ever to conserve resources and expand services. **I think if we are asking our grantees to do it we should be collaborating as well!** In our small area, grantees submit the same request to most of us funders anyway. We already have a great network in place to discuss local projects, but we are looking forward to collaborating on our first joint funding project.*

*This has been a great process with foundation staff and boards giving the go ahead to work together on a funding package. Of course each individual foundation board will have the final say on what will be granted, but the funders will stand as one and give a huge vote of financial and community support for this project. We think this will be groundbreaking and also help us leverage funding from other outside sources. – Foundation program officer*

themselves and others about their baseline interests, and that masking significant motivations or needs often leads to frustration and conflict later.

- **Communication** – Collaborative structures establish new needs for inter-group (and often intra-group) communication, and this places unusual demands on partners and staff to maintain clear, concise and constant flows of information. Although the approaches used are diverse, it requires a degree of deliberateness in planning and execution that is challenging.

### Challenges and cautions

Just as collaboration offers a rich array of possibilities for funders, so it also raises a host of cautions. Sometimes collaboration is the best means to achieve a particular outcome, and sometimes it is not. Thus at one level, **the challenge for philanthropy is to become better at deciding when and how to collaborate.** Despite their enormous potential to produce a range of useful outcomes for philanthropy, collaborations also can have considerable limitations and these need to be considered more fully.

- **Time value and opportunity cost** – The process of collaboration itself is extremely time consuming and often inefficient.
- **Skewing the field** - There is “an exquisite line” between creating more coordination in a field, on the one hand, and so dominating a field with one particular approach that support for other approaches on the margin dries up. A collaboration can “freeze out” a field as easily as energize one.
- **Nationals and locals** – Local communities almost always have a variety of different agendas playing out at a variety of different levels. It is important that national funders do not intervene with their own “precooked” strategy as they collaborate with local funders.
- **Consensus and innovation** – There are mixed opinions about the degree of innovation that collaboration can truly generate. What is clear is that data and systematic analysis about what funder collaborations can and cannot do well is lacking.
- **Change over time** – Some collaboratives are formed around a narrow goal and later find that goal too constricting or find that the context of their issue has substantially changed over the course of their existence. Still others have accomplished their initial objective and want to build on and reshape it to take a different challenge.
- **Sustainability, life expectancy and exit strategy** - When trying to build a new field of endeavor, having a long-term, stable and continuous funding collaboration can be an important success factor by providing stability and predictability. Yet because the tenure of funders is unpredictable and the institutional attention span is short, some collaborators suggest they face a conundrum. To address this issue, some collaborators emphasize the rotation of leadership and the systematic inculcation of new program officers as high priorities in their collaboratives.

## Asking the right questions

GrantCraft (2009) outlines key questions for foundations to ask and answer at the start of a funder collaborative that are essential for good relations and success later on, for example:

- **Purpose**  
Are we interested in advancing an issue, a field, a strategy, or something else? On what level will we focus? What are our short-term and long-term goals?
- **Operations**  
What type of collaborative do we want? A learning network? Strategic alignment? A pooled fund? Should we hire full- or part-time staff or an intermediary to coordinate the work? Consultants?
- **Membership**  
Should we limit the size of the membership or involve as many funders as possible? Who will be eligible to participate? Is a financial commitment required?
- **Governance**  
Do we want to rely on a chairperson or steering committee to handle responsibilities? Will others be involved?; how? How will we make decisions?
- **Grants and Resources**  
Will grants be awarded? Will we offer other supports? Will the collaborative itself undertake strategic activities?
- **Evaluation**  
How will we evaluate the effort? What measures can we agree on? Will non-funders play a role?
- **Termination**  
What is our exit strategy? How will we know we're ready to end the collaborative or move it to a new home?

### Supporting Nonprofit Collaboration

The Lodestar Foundation has made nonprofit collaboration a foundation strategy since its inception ten years ago (Butzen, 2008). According to its president, Lois Savage, they have learned that **the most durable collaborations are initiated from the ground-up**, not top-down, and that while investment in this strategy is risk capital – not all collaborations will survive – there are good lessons to be learned from each project.

In 2008, Lodestar initiated a national award, The Collaboration Prize, to identify and showcase models of collaboration among nonprofit organizations (with the winner receiving \$250,000) as a means to uncover successful collaboration models and blueprints to inform and educate the sector. The nominations that were received (over 600) uncovered a rich treasure trove of information.

According to Savage, “I think the response to the prize shows that there is more of this going on than we realize. Second, collaboration is not easy – it takes time, utilizes already scarce resources, needs leadership, and requires resolving numerous challenges. Third, while the business world has voluminous scholarship on mergers and other restructuring models, there is no counterpart body of knowledge in the nonprofit sector, so models, blueprints, and guidance are extremely limited. Fourth, there is no secure network or marketplace (no “dating service”) where nonprofits can meet prospective partners or otherwise discuss collaboration issues with each other. Finally, almost no funding is available to assist nonprofits in facilitating the collaboration process.”

Savage thinks there are several ways the philanthropic community can create an environment that encourages nonprofit collaboration:

- 1) Provide funds for convening, on an ongoing basis, nonprofits working in the same area;
- 2) Provide technical assistance grants to nonprofits exploring a collaboration option;
- 3) Sponsor workshops that can provide nonprofits with tools to facilitate collaboration; support programs that bring funders, government, and nonprofits together to focus on cooperatively addressing difficult community issues.

**B. Nonprofit/grantee partnerships**

Just as funder collaboratives take on many different forms, **nonprofit/grantee partnerships also have vast variety in form and approach** – and these can look quite different than funder collaboratives.

To help in better understanding nonprofit collaboration, a set of models emerged out of the Lodestar Foundation’s Collaborative Prize national awards program (see sidebar). This includes eight models of nonprofit collaboration, each with its own conditions, challenges and benefits (ASU, 2009). It was discovered that such **collaboration does not fit neatly into simple categories** but suggests a much broader array of potential arrangements. The models include:

**Model 1: Fully integrated merger**

When two or more organizations combine their operations and missions into a single organization

**Model 2: Partially-integrated merger**

A combination of organizations that does not result in the total loss of brand for the collaborators (the individual characters of the merged organizations are maintained in some way).

**Model 3: Joint program office**

Two complementary organizations that separately maintain their various program offices (requires no new programs or organizational structures)

**What Do Foundations Need to Be Thinking About?**

*A foundation initiative director shares: it’s important that a collaboration is **truly collaborative** — that is, that it reflects shared objectives, roles and responsibilities. If it functions effectively, the group gets the benefit of the skills, resources and thinking of each of the partners, and the enterprise is that much stronger for collaborative nature.*

***Foundations, particularly place-based foundations, are in a unique position** to encourage that kind of institutional relationship. Foundations have ways of bringing people and institutions together, either enticing them with grant support or working with the members of the partnership through the “convening” role that often only foundations can play, to create the collaborative relationship.*

*But it’s not easy, not for the members of the collaborative and not for the foundations. From the members’ standpoint, the question is often how the collaborative will best serve their institutional needs. **The challenge becomes how to ensure that each organization can see themselves and their role in the collaborative.***

*From the foundations’ position, the challenge is two-fold. The first is the initial relationship itself. **It’s critical for the foundation to be able to find an appropriate “point of entry” into the relationship.** In many cases, the foundation is viewed as a trusted partner, and the relationship builds on that. In others, the foundation is the principal supporter of many of the institutions, and programs, and the collaborative becomes a way for the foundation to maximize investment while building up the strength of the partner organizations.*

***A second challenge is what kind of “influence” the foundation should have in the partnership.** There are numerous examples of foundations that, either because of their influence through their grant programs, or because of a position they may have staked out in a community, become the dominant voice in an institutional relationship. And, because of that dominance, the “partnership” is never fully realized. A foundation needs to appreciate at what points it should step in as an active partner; and where it needs to step back and let the partnership take center stage.*

*For all of the concerns above, though, when done right, collaborative relationships have an impact far beyond the resources of the partner organizations; and with the cautions noted, should be pursued at every opportunity where it’s appropriate.*

#### **Model 4: Joint partnership with affiliated programming**

Two or more organizations join their operations for programming or delivery of services. Development of shared projects by multiple nonprofits is perhaps the most common type of joint partnership.

#### **Model 5: Joint partnership for issue advocacy**

Well-suited for joint interests – but the short-term or periodic nature of issue advocacy may not require of a new, permanent organizations – instead, collaborators lend leaders and staff to joint committees as needed.

#### **Model 6: Joint partnership with the birth of a new formal organization**

These fall within a wide range. One or the more well-known examples is a model where two or more organizations determine that their joint programming is best implemented by formed a separate, independent organization.

#### **Model 7: Joint administrative office and back office operations**

Efficiencies are achieved through shared administrative office and personnel, including financial and human resources management, and information technology. Another approach is to contract administrative functions to a separate organization whose sole job is to provide “back office” support for other organizations.

#### **Model 8: Confederation**

Includes an umbrella organization that provides services, coordination and other support to its constituent parts (the United States is one well-known model).

According to this analysis (ASU, 2009), it was learned that whether collaborations are birthed by board, entrepreneurial staff, or well-meaning foundation officers, that **there are some incredibly creative collaborations going on across the country** – and underscore that people are building what works best for their situations, and that sometimes this includes hybrid models that draw on the best features of the best examples.

#### **Ensuring meaningful engagement**

Foundations are in a unique position to help ensure that nonprofit/grantee collaborations include **meaningful engagement** at the front-end and throughout, particularly that recognizes and respect the differences in cultures, values, and experiences of those involved. Even those groups who are seemingly like-minded may not have a basic understanding of each other, and there can be underlying power dynamics and tensions at play.

*Our organization and another are convening an internal conversation about how to develop a grant proposal partnership for an emerging project. We have trusting relationships and friendships between the two organizations, **yet we don't really know the strength and weaknesses of the other – we speculate from the onset.** (Foundations can) help facilitate the discovery and subsequent partnership negotiations between two agencies. Nonprofits that share similar end goals and missions may recognize a partnership is in their best interest, yet harbor resistance because of ownership issues, board of director performance pressures or feeling that one side is "getting more" than the other. – Nonprofit leader*

*Foundations can play a pivotal role facilitating the genesis of new partnerships by addressing fears, identifying strength and weaknesses and helping with leadership and capacity building to ensure a successful partnership. Also, general operating funds are always an issue with a single nonprofit – never have enough. **A partnership between two nonprofits seems to exacerbate the issue.** Foundations could help explore how to develop the financial side of the partnership especially if one nonprofit is much larger than the other in terms of size and revenue.*  
– Nonprofit leader

**An important foundation role can entail serving as matchmakers and conveners** of individuals or organizations which otherwise might not come together around a common table in a way that allows them to explore common challenges and opportunities, while ensuring accountability and building organizational capacity.

*Foundations, with their deep experience working with grantees, are uniquely positioned to help nonprofits identify and form relationships with potential nonprofit partners whose missions and strengths compliment each other's organizational development – call it “organizational match-making.” **In our unstable economy, foundations can encourage partnerships with an eye toward increasing cooperation among nonprofits for shared support and funding, and provide more money for general operating funds without diminishing on-going or existing program support.***  
– Nonprofit leader

*The philanthropic community in the future must concern itself more with accountability among grant recipients, and encourage greater sustainability for nonprofits. This could include **a shift from project-based investments to capacity building, as a way to create stronger nonprofits who can in the future do more because of philanthropic investments.** Michigan's contracting economy is affecting the nonprofit world like never before, and investments into the infrastructure of these organizations will leverage more power, more productivity, and more positive change in the future.* – Nonprofit leader

Throughout the process, particularly at the initial stages, it is critical that genuine ownership be built among the partners. Participating groups need to have a voice in the approach, rather than it being solely funder influenced or defined. As such, **foundations need to be careful not to overstep** and not insist on an unhealthy structure or framework.

*For foundations in particular, **the onus is on us to really mine projects and make sure partnerships are true and deep,** and not simply a loose arrangement that will collapse under pressure. Partnerships not only often offer economies of scale, but can more creatively address an issue. These take time, and often the best examples are ones that have developed over time. Foundations should also be careful not to force unhealthy partnerships and be willing to put up the “venture” capital to support their formation. There is a certain amount and type of philanthropy that is – and should be – dedicated to higher risk ventures.* – Foundation program officer

***This is a hot button issue.** The groups working together should be able to determine the decision-making structure that best works for pursuing their goal. **Foundations should not rigidly dictate the structure** to the groups participating especially if it forces an additional objective that only some of the participants have agreed to pursue. Foundations can help by ensuring that smaller or less experienced participants should have meaningful (if not equal) say in the governance of the collaboration - this may include targeted funding. – Nonprofit leader*

On a related note, although it can be difficult given the inherent power dynamic between foundations and grantees, both benefit when they **seek to establish a relationship that allows for shared learning and open dialogue** – ultimately helping the foundation to develop its expertise and be more well-informed as it works to support nonprofit/grantee collaborations.

***I think foundations might be more successful with partnership funding if they did more upfront work** meeting with nonprofit leaders and gaining first-hand insight. Then, once they've done a thorough job with this information gathering, they can play a more active role in facilitating the partnerships. I frankly think it can be more efficient when the foundation acts as a broker, **as long as they know what they are talking about!** - Nonprofit leader*

*In our work, we regularly partner with other nonprofit groups to achieve results. Of course, there are significant organizational and program development costs involved in forging effective nonprofit partnerships. We greatly appreciate foundation assistance in this phase, both through funding and direct participation. **But we worry a bit that foundations don't always have a clear understanding of the existing capacities of nonprofit organizations and the roles they play.** As a result, we may be missing some opportunities to leverage available capacities and expertise. – Nonprofit leader*

### **C. Multi-sector collaborations**

Foundations, nonprofits/grantees, and the public and private sectors are increasingly finding new ways to work together to achieve their goals. Collaborative initiatives that engage a broader table of partners are emerging, with relationships and partnerships increasingly moving from the traditional to deeper more strategic alliances.

Given that the partners in such collaborations come from various interests, as foundations become engaged in such alliances it's important to keep in mind that **basic ideas and definitions about partnerships and collaborations can mean different things to different groups and interests.** For example, whereas foundations and nonprofits tend to view the term “partnership” more informally and use the term partnership somewhat interchangeably with collaboration, coalition, alliance, etc., the private and public sectors traditionally perceive the term partnership more formally, often entailing a contractual agreement and based on a specified “3P” (Public Private Partnership) structure.

To address this, it can especially important that perceptions and expectations are put on the table from the onset. **Foundations can help ensure a more level playing field among those involved**, especially smaller organizations whose voice may not be heard.

*Partnerships are absolutely essential and foundations are right to require organizations to work together in most instances. The challenge before us all is to require (and fund) the critical planning and evaluation pieces to ensure that partners' expectations are clearly articulated and measured. This will include particular emphasis on the smaller agencies in a partnership. "Partnership" connotes shared tasks, risks and rewards. **Thus care needs to be taken to assure that smaller organizations do not simply evolve to the position of "junior partner" or "being taken over" in spite of the best of intentions.** – Nonprofit leader*

### **Bridging fields of interest**

In working with multi-sector collaborations, **Foundations can also help to bridge gaps between fields of interest** and help promote even a basic – and ultimately deeper – understanding of other. This is especially key as the private sector and nonprofits increasingly seek new ways to try and balance reaching social goals with the need to make a profit (*see sidebar*).

In addition, **fundors can provide essential and ongoing support for the collaboration process**, which can be complicated and time consuming. The Grand Vision serves as a useful example. Ironically, the origins of this highly collaborative, citizen-led effort arose from conflict about a proposed highway bypass and bridge around Traverse City. Community leaders came together in search of more collaborative solution to addressing the region's growth pains.

For more than two years, a highly diverse group of 34 leaders representing local and state government, business, environmental interests, social services worked by consensus to develop an initial work plan - leading to a two-year planning and implementation project and the launch of the Grand Vision with over 100 partnering organizations.

Marsha Smith, executive director of the Rotary Charities of Traverse City has been keenly involved in supporting the Grand Vision process in multiple ways, from convening

### **Collaborating for a call to action**

From climate change to health care systems, The Rockefeller Foundation has brokered partnerships and nurtured innovation around the world. Looking to send a call to action to the design industry, The Rockefeller Foundation partnered with IDEO, a design consultancy firm, to engage in its Initiative on *Accelerating Innovation for Development*, and as a **pilot study for connecting design firms to the social sector** (IDEO, 2010).

Early in this 2008 program, IDEO discovered a **complex set of challenges facing both industries**: The social sector was unfamiliar with the practices and protocol of the design industry, while many design firms balance the desire to work in the social sector with the need to be profitable.

To unpack and understand these challenges, IDEO participated in 143 stakeholder interviews representing different funders, implementers, thinkers, consultants, and design firms. These conversations led the team to develop nine design principles for design firms working in the social sector and 28 unique modes of engagement for design firms to experiment.

The final result was the production of two books, which were launched at a symposium of design for social impact, hosted at the Rockefeller Foundation. *Design for Social Impact: A How-To Guide* summarizes IDEO's learnings and *Design for Social Impact: Workbook* helps design firms as they build a portfolio of social impact projects.

partners in its earliest days to currently overseeing its CORE Working Group. Smith and program officer Becky Ewing share these thoughts on investing in the collaboration process:

*If we as funders want to support projects and programs that respond to community need; make the best use of limited resources; will make a difference in our communities; and will still be viable after our funding is gone, then **we have to invest upfront in the process.** None of these goals will be achieved unless the essential groundwork of gathering input, building trust and establishing ground rules is completed. It takes time and money to do these things and that is not going to come from business or government. **Only organized philanthropy is going to provide the funds to build the solid foundation that is necessary for collaborations and community change.***

**Collaborating is hard work** – It takes hours and hours of meetings, trust building, organizational frameworks, shared values, decision-making processes, and information sharing. Add a public input component and the complexity multiplies exponentially. But this is how we learn, build ownership, create solutions that are inclusive, build momentum, engender trust and create lasting change. **The outcomes can be truly remarkable: efficiencies gained, resources gleaned, lessons learned.** It is in the process these dreams become reality. Funding the process is key. Providing neutral facilitation is important. Being present as a partner is confirming. **It's messy, but without the process, there is no ownership.** Implementation is hindered. True collaborations don't grow. Lasting change doesn't happen. It is in the process of collaborating that real things happen in the field.

As multi-sector partnerships involving foundations take further shape, there will be much to learn and consider as this changing collaboration landscape emerges with a rich variety of approaches and lessons, with new technologies having implications for the ways in which groups partner and relate (*see sidebar*).

### **Bringing it all together**

In sum, as one reflects on the various approaches, roles and elements of meaningful collaboration – and all of the complexities and nuances involved - it can be helpful to keep in mind the following **15 steps for successful strategic alliances** (and marriages) offered by Kanter (2010):

1. Be open to romance, but court carefully.
2. Know yourself. Build your strengths.
3. Seek compatibility in values.
4. Treat the 'extended family' respectfully.
5. Put the lawyers in their place. (Leader-to-leader relationships are important)

### **New Technologies – New Partners**

New technologies are affecting the ways in which people and groups are connecting and collaborating – and this has been a decade of quick-fire innovation. This rapid change in communication approaches from a top-down and one-to-many approach to many-to-many digital technologies are fostering participatory user behaviors, including collaboration. Some partners will be individuals, but many will be institutions (Clark, 2009).

So the way in which foundations think about partnerships – and those who they traditionally define and engage with as partners – is rapidly changing and important to think about – as evidenced by the number of foundations now using social networking tools to share updates and attract “friends.”

**Yet, this movement is more than about social media and the computer**, as there are many people around the world who will never have access to a computer. But many think it is conceivable that one day almost everyone will have mobile phones (smart phones) that allow them to communicate with others. Amid all this technology, however, **most agree that face-to-face communication is still important.**

6. Vow to work together until business conditions do us part.
7. But don't count on the contract. (Formal agreements can't anticipate everything)
8. So keep communicating, face-to-face.
9. Spread involvement. Create more ties for more people.
10. Build organizational bridges - structures.
11. Respect differences.
12. Teach partners. Learn from partners.
13. Be prepared to change yourself.
14. Help everyone win.
15. Get closer, change course, or exit gracefully.

To ensure that your partnerships are effective, apply these principles at every stage of the relationship. Then toast the benefits of happy marriages!

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