

WORKING BETTER TOGETHER: BUILDING NONPROFIT COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

Collective action is an effective way for nonprofits to increase their impact, but key capacities are needed to enable these types of partnerships to thrive. This publication offers insights on the core capacities nonprofits need to collaborate and how funders can help.

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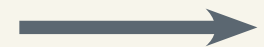
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INTRODUCTION

The problems at the heart of the nonprofit sector's work rarely lend themselves to easy answers. In areas ranging from education and environmental protection to social services reform and civil rights, achieving real and lasting impact often means changing complex and dynamic systems. No single organization can succeed in this work on its own. Many nonprofit leaders understand this and are making collective action a hallmark of their work.

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WORKING TOGETHER BEATS WORKING ALONE.

- ▶▶ [Arts for LA](#) is working to build capacity across a diverse set of partner organizations in Los Angeles, Calif., to strengthen support for arts programs in local schools and neighborhoods.
- ▶▶ Canada's [Alberta Ecotrust](#) provides a forum for industry and environmental interests to come together, build relationships and advance their shared goal of making the province of Alberta "a stronger, more sustainable place to live, work and play."
- ▶▶ With seed funding and continuing support from the [Austin Community Foundation](#), a group of local agencies formed the [Adoption Coalition of Texas](#), which has helped boost adoptions from foster care in the state by 70 percent in five years.

The success of these organizations (whose stories we share later in this publication) shows that when it comes to achieving progress on difficult issues, working together beats working alone. When people reach across the lines that too often divide organizations and sectors, they tap into new ideas and new resources and create new partnerships that can help them achieve their goals.

BUT THIS KIND OF COOPERATION REMAINS ALL TOO RARE ACROSS THE NONPROFIT SECTOR.

As much as funders would like to see more strategic collaboration among their grantees and other organizations, the reality for many nonprofits is that they simply do not have the time or the resources to do collective work. Each organization must seek its own funding, develop its own plans for sustainability, create its own niche and brand, and essentially compete with other organizations for funding and recognition. In addition, the predominance of small, program-restricted, one-year grants requires nonprofit leaders to stay focused on meeting their organizations' day-to-day and year-to-year needs. This can prevent them from taking a broader view and thinking more strategically about opportunities to partner with others for greater impact.

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“The reality of the current funding system for nonprofits is that these organizations find themselves competing against the very organizations with whom they might collaborate,” according to Carol Thompson Cole, president and CEO of [Venture Philanthropy Partners](#). “To consider teaming up with a competitor requires a whole new way of thinking and behaving. It requires developing trust, which takes time, and additional organizational capacity, and time and capacity are as scarce to nonprofit leaders as capital.”¹

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Participants in a series of nonprofit listening sessions held by GEO in 2013 on the topic of capacity building framed the challenges facing their organizations in starker terms. One nonprofit executive said, “We don’t have capacity or time on a day-to-day basis to think about capacity. I think about big-picture things on weekends, but I’m struggling with that right now.” Another nonprofit leader noted, “We are a modestly mature organization, and we have a hard time figuring out how to get resources to help staff think beyond the day-to-day.”

1. Carol Thompson Cole, “Towards a New Kind of Collaboration: A Networked Approach to Social Change,” Venture Philanthropy Partners, 2010. Available at <http://www.vpppartners.org/learning/papers-and-perspectives/presidents-perspective/towards-new-kind-collaboration-%E2%80%93-networked-a>.

FUNDERS CAN PLAY A KEY ROLE IN FOSTERING COLLABORATION.

If funders truly want to spur their grantees to align efforts, they will need to take a hard look at their core grantmaking practices and assess the degree to which they are encouraging a go-it-alone mindset. Funders also should consider something else: how to help grantees develop the skills, the mindset and the work habits that enable people and organizations to collaborate effectively.

Nonprofits need time and space to explore the power of collective action to advance their missions, foster new connections, and build and grow partnerships. They need organizational “slack” so they can join with others to identify and work toward commonly held goals. They need board and staff leaders who can share power and responsibility, who are skilled at building relationships, and who are adept at “systems thinking” so they can see the big picture.

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Supporting grantees to develop these capacities requires a shift in how funders think about their role in encouraging nonprofit cooperation. This publication is intended to help grantmakers make this shift. In the following pages, we:

- ▶▶ explore the capacities needed for nonprofit organizations to be collaborative,
- ▶▶ show funders how they can help support the ability of grantees to align and work together, and
- ▶▶ profile highly collaborative nonprofits and grantmakers that are supporting aligned work among their grantees.

Fay Hanleybrown, managing director of [FSG](#), shared:

“Funders should support nonprofits to take the time and energy to look beyond their organization’s walls, to learn what other players are doing, how it relates to their work, and what they can potentially do together to advance the goals they share.”

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THE CORE CAPACITIES OF COLLABORATIVE NONPROFITS

GEO's interviews and research for this publication turned up a few key capacities that support and enable collective action among nonprofit organizations:

- ▶▶ Strong leadership and an open mindset
- ▶▶ The ability to share power and responsibility
- ▶▶ Adaptability and flexibility
- ▶▶ Strong connectivity and relationship building

STRONG LEADERSHIP AND AN OPEN MINDSET

“We help people grow food.” It is a simple tagline, but it speaks volumes about the approach that the [Southside Community Land Trust](#) brings to the work of increasing access to locally produced, affordable and healthy food for the people of Greater Providence, R.I. Since it was established in the 1980s, the trust has built a network of 43 community gardens and farms that provide opportunities for commercial agriculture, community participation and public education for people of all ages. Each year, the trust seeks to add more gardens and farms to the network. The trust also was instrumental in creating the [Rhode Island Food Policy Council](#), a coalition of diverse stakeholders committed to advancing state and local policies that support local agriculture and a healthier food system “from plant to plate.” “We operate with a network ethic in everything we do. The idea is to create opportunities for other people and organizations to make this a shared cause,” Executive Director Margaret DeVos said.

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Organizations that build and sustain successful partnerships and networks know that it takes time and hard work. Their staff and board leaders start from the premise that aligning with others is essential to achieving their organizations' missions. They study the ecosystems they are a part of to see who is doing what, where their organizations fit in and where there are opportunities for aligned actions.

Leaders of these organizations also set out to build organizational cultures that encourage and reward the outreach and relationship building that lead to successful partnerships. Rather than waiting for people to come to them, leaders and staff get out of their offices to find potential partners and grow the organizations' networks. They also spend a significant amount of time managing collaborative activities and partnerships, based on the understanding that their organizations will be successful to the extent that their partnerships are successful.

"One of the capacities critical for successful collaborative work is a network mindset at all levels of the organization, so people are always testing out new ways to share power and responsibility," said Rafael López, formerly associate director of talent and leadership development at the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

"Often collaborations are seen through the eyes of the top leader, but it's a constellation of remarkable people, not seen publicly or appointed, that makes it work and tick."

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ABILITY TO SHARE POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

[RE-AMP](#) is a network of more than 160 nonprofits and foundations across eight Midwestern states working in concert to reduce the pollution that contributes to global warming. Member organizations provide the staff for RE-AMP and elect a steering committee that guides the network's policy development, fundraising and other activities. Members also collaborate in five working groups charged with developing plans for fundraising and action on issues ranging from clean energy to transportation. Among RE-AMP's recent achievements: stopping two coal plants proposed for South Dakota and Ohio and successfully advocating for energy efficiency standards and updated building codes in several states. According to RE-AMP Coordinator Jeremy Emmi, these successes stem from members' ability to put aside any organizational pet causes that might jeopardize collective goals and projects. "Part of the RE-AMP agreement was to not work against each other when individual partners have goals for which there may not be consensus and, when appropriate, to convene a network discussion to help find common ground," he said.

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Working effectively in partnerships takes humility. Partners need to recognize that in joining a collaborative effort, they will likely be making a trade: less control and power for a higher level of impact. Organizational “turfiness” can become a hindrance to successful collaborative work. As a result, participants often have to look beyond the specific objectives of their own organizations toward bigger goals related to their missions.

This can make it hard to sustain collaborations, as participants inevitably feel pressure from their organizations to bend collective work so it is more in line with their own priorities. To overcome these challenges participants need negotiating skills, the ability to compromise and see the big picture, the ability to share credit and control, and openness to criticism and change.²

In addition, collaborative work requires participants to step forward and tend to the interests of the broader group. This means they need to approach the work with an understanding of how to create and sustain the conditions for collective thinking and action. Professional facilitators can help, but participants need their own skills in areas ranging from managing multistakeholder decision making and designing effective group processes (including good meeting agendas) to listening. Members of a collaborative also need to understand the key roles that support a collaborative’s ability to succeed, and to identify the right people to fill them. These roles include coordinators, process designers, conveners, facilitators, network weavers, data curators and more.

2. For more on the mindset shifts required for effective collaboration, see *Cracking the Network Code: Four Principles for Grantmakers* (Washington, D.C.: GEO, 2013). Available at www.geofunders.org.

ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

The Los Angeles area is known around the world as a hub for the arts and creativity. But government budget cuts and high levels of economic disparity across the region mean that the arts and arts education are not getting the support they need in many places. Enter [Arts for LA](#), a nonprofit that helps build consensus in the arts community on broad policy priorities and strengthens the capacity of local artists and arts organizations to be better advocates for themselves. For example, when the Los Angeles City Administrative Officer recommended cutting the Department of Cultural Affairs budget in 2011, Arts for LA mobilized an electronic letter-writing campaign urging the city council to maintain the funding. After then-Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa released a statement opposing the CAO's recommendation and urging the city council to retain level funding for the department, Arts for LA quickly mobilized its network to thank the mayor for his support. In less than 48 hours, the mayor and city council received more than 300 electronic letters, all with a positive message thanking them for supporting arts and culture. "Our leadership and staff need to be opportunistic and nimble, so when an issue arises we can move quickly to mobilize the network we've been building for the last seven years," Executive Director Danielle Brazell said.

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Adaptability and flexibility are especially important in collective work because it is hard to predict how broad-based partnerships will evolve. Issue priorities may shift as new partners come on board, and participants may decide to change the nature and focus of their collective work based on external events, or simply because an earlier approach was not achieving the intended results.

All this means that organizations and individuals involved in collaborative initiatives need to approach the work with a high level of “adaptive capacity,” defined by [TCC Group](#) as “the ability to monitor, assess, respond to, and stimulate internal and external changes.”³ In other words, the key to success in collective action is evaluating how the work is going on a steady basis, and then using that data and information to change course as needed.

While individual organizations often have a fairly solid (and stable) understanding of their mission and desired outcomes, the same is not always true in collaborative work. Keeping people at the table and making sure the partnership is getting good results takes skills that many participants may not already possess.

“Underlying successful collaborations is a different kind of logic. It’s not about knowing and expertise; it’s about helping things emerge and responding successfully to change,” said Curtis Ogden, senior associate at the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#). “It is also about taking the long view and understanding that collaborative work delivers its own unique returns in the form of stronger connections, increased trust and more robust networks. These, in turn, can create lasting changes in a community over time.”

3. Peter York, “The Sustainability Formula,” TCC Group, 2009, 2. Available at <http://tccgrp.com/pdfs/SustainabilityFormula.pdf>.

STRONG CONNECTIVITY AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

As a partnership founded in 1991 between the corporate sector and the environmental community, Canada's [Alberta Ecotrust](#) spends time breaking down barriers to collaboration and mutual understanding. Alberta Ecotrust partners, in recognition of their shared goal of protecting the environment, created and continue to develop a successful model for cross-sector collaboration, which includes a fund to support grassroots environmental projects. The element of trust was the cornerstone of the partnership from the beginning, and decisions today are driven by consensus. Executive Director Pat Letizia said, "Our partners assume the best in each other and find a way to capture common values, and this attitude has influenced how the sectors work together on many issues." In Alberta, environmental nonprofits and industry representatives participate together in multistakeholder events. It is not uncommon for industry members to sit on the boards of environmental organizations, or for watershed or land-use planning councils to be made up of representatives from local business, industry, government, nongovernmental organizations and community members. "Our network is large and multisectoral so, as a collaborative leader we can be a conduit to others including funders," Letizia said.

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Strong relationships are an essential element of effective cooperation among individuals and organizations. But strong relationships do not appear at the snap of a finger. They take time to develop. And, while it is hard to predict exactly how and when an organization's leaders and staff will make connections that ultimately evolve into productive partnerships beyond their walls, those connections are more likely to happen in certain organizations — those that are externally focused in their work and that support employees as they reach out to others and build relationships, even with others who approach the work with differing opinions and priorities.

In today's nonprofit sector, it is often a luxury for an organization and its people to have the flexibility to build these kinds of connections and to engage in the conversations and the outreach needed to explore and establish new partnerships. Arts for LA's Danielle Brazell explained:

“Relationship building takes a tremendous amount of time, especially with communities that may already be stretched.”

Creating a highly connected, outward-facing organization requires specific skills and capacities (including the capacity to work effectively with others), but it also takes organizational slack. To the extent that an organization's board and staff have the time and the freedom to build and sustain productive relationships with others, the organization will be more successful in its collective work.

APPROACHES FOR FUNDERS

We asked funders and nonprofits how grantmakers can best support collaborative capacity in nonprofit organizations. The following were among the top answers:

- ▶▶ Help make connections, but don't force them
- ▶▶ Offer core support and flexible, long-term funding to grantees
- ▶▶ Provide necessary resources to support and enable collaboration

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HELP MAKE CONNECTIONS, BUT DON'T FORCE THEM

Collaborative efforts work best when they are organic — in other words, when the partners can come together, explore areas of common interest, and make their own decisions about the structure and focus of their collective work. But grantmakers are not entirely powerless when it comes to making these kinds of connections happen.

“What a funder can do is create an environment that maximizes the opportunities for nonprofits to get together and develop relationships of trust that lead to collaboration.”

“What a funder can do is create an environment that maximizes the opportunities for nonprofits to get together and develop relationships of trust that lead to collaboration,” said Lois Savage, president of the [Lodestar Foundation](#), which has offered a Collaboration Prize to nonprofits across the country that work together to achieve greater impact. Prize recipients are included in a database of models of collaboration that is now housed at the Foundation Center, available at <http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/collaboration>.

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Caroline Hotaling, former program officer at the [Ms. Foundation for Women](#), said her organization plays a “gardening role” in fostering grantee collaborations. “We encourage self-elected collaboration; we have never forced groups to be in collaboration and then funded it,” she said.

Funders can play this role because they often have a unique vantage point. Based on their interactions with current and prospective grantees and other partners, grantmakers have the opportunity to see the full scope of what is happening on a given issue in a given place, who is doing what, and where there might be opportunities for nonprofits and other organizations to work in partnership.

Funders can do any of a number of things to help spur new connections among nonprofits and other partners. Examples include providing office space to community nonprofits for collaborative meetings and events, providing staff with training in facilitation skills and other support to help them become more effective as conveners and network weavers, and hosting convenings where nonprofits can come together to discuss important issues in their mission areas and build the relationships they need to move the work forward.⁴

4. For more information on the grantmaker’s role, see *Great Power, Great Responsibility: Grantmakers’ Role as Conveners* (Washington, D.C.: GEO, 2013). Available at www.geofunders.org.

“Sometimes it’s great just to get people in the same room. That in-person time is so valuable,” Hotaling said. Nonprofit organizations rarely have the resources or the time to organize these meetings and get-togethers on their own. According to a [Monitor Institute](#) report:

“One of the best uses of a funder’s unique positioning is to enable groups to come together when the costs would be otherwise prohibitive.”⁵

One caution is that funders often are tempted to join in these conversations among nonprofits or to steer the conversation toward the funder’s priority interests. A better approach is to play a connecting and convening role but to leave the nonprofits in the driver’s seat when it comes to exploring common interests and possible collaborative activities. Another caution is to pay careful attention to the desired outcomes of the meeting, in order to avoid meeting just for the sake of meeting.

Judging from some of the comments in GEO’s nonprofit listening sessions, nonprofits see the role of convener as a positive one for funders to play. One nonprofit executive director said, “If funders could understand the continuum of organizations addressing similar services and how those organizations link together ... they could connect me with other organizations so we could collaborate.” Another executive director said:

“Funders could facilitate more collaboration if they would introduce us to each other, as we’re all trying to do more with less.”

5. “Moving Ideas into Action: Reflecting on Three Years of Building Network Effectiveness at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation,” Monitor Institute, 2013, 19.

One funder that has been able to foster connections among grantees is the [Barr Foundation](#) in Boston. Every few years since 2005, the foundation has selected 12 exemplary local leaders for a fellowship that is designed to strengthen their individual leadership and their relationships with one another. Since its launch, the program has created a diverse network of local leaders who draw on these relationships to break down barriers between their organizations and work together toward common goals that emerge organically from groups of fellows. “We increasingly depend on boundary crossers like the Barr Fellows to overcome cultural, racial, gender, class and generational divisions to deal with the complex issues facing cities,” said Pat Brandes, former executive director of the foundation. She added that the foundation sees its role as “fostering opportunities (and sometimes disruptions) for fellows and setting the table but not the agenda for collective action.” In addition to organizing a three-month sabbatical, which begins with a collective learning journey to the global South (for example, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Brazil or Haiti), Barr gathers fellows for semiannual overnight retreats. The foundation also organizes periodic gatherings of all fellows, past and present, to continually strengthen the peer network. With these efforts, the foundation is building connections across the city without dictating how those connections should play out.

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OFFER CORE SUPPORT AND FLEXIBLE, LONG-TERM FUNDING TO GRANTEEES

Many grantmakers understand the importance of flexible and multiyear funding for nonprofits when it comes to supporting them in their efforts to achieve organizational goals. The same kind of funding can be equally important in helping nonprofits collaborate. Having the conversations and building the relationships that can lead to collective action are not things that can be accounted for in a one-year program budget.

“For nonprofit leaders, it’s hard enough to escape the day-to-day stresses of running their organizations’ internal operations,” said Valerie Lies, president and CEO of the [Donors Forum](#).

“Organizations and their leaders need flexibility — and discretionary funds — so they can take the time and devote the necessary resources to building external connections and exploring potential partnerships.”

Discretionary funding and general operating support also can help ensure that nonprofits and their partners have the flexibility to make their collaborative efforts more nimble — able to adapt their work in response to new data and information, lessons learned about what is and is not working, and changes in the external environment. In addition, nonprofits can use this funding to support their staff and leaders as they develop some of the capacities for collaboration explored earlier in this publication, through coaching and other forms of leadership development support. Last but not least, when funders provide steady “core” funding to organizations participating in aligned work, it can reduce competition among collaborative members for year-to-year project dollars and help speed the process of trust building.

Grantmakers also should remember that achieving real results can take time. Recruiting and organizing a core group of partners to collaborate is just the first step. It can take years for a coalition’s efforts to begin to bear fruit and result in real change, and collective initiatives inevitably progress in fits and starts. To the extent that grantmakers provide patient support over a number of years, their investments can deliver enormous returns.

Many participants in GEO's nonprofit listening sessions emphasized the importance of long-term support for capacity building. One nonprofit leader said:

"We're dealing with complex societal issues, and if there's a leadership change or staff turnover, it's a long-term issue. Capacity building can't be just that we'll fund you to do this for a year and then you're good."

In 2003, a number of agencies committed to helping children in foster care in Texas get adopted approached the [Austin Community Foundation](#) with an idea. They were seeking new ways to collaborate so they could more effectively advance the goals they shared. The foundation granted seed funding to start the [Adoption Coalition of Texas](#) and provides continuing support for its work by handling all the coalition's administrative and back-office functions. In the last decade, the coalition has become the central unified voice for adoption in the state. Among the results, there has been a 70 percent increase in adoptions over five years. In 2011, the coalition was named winner of the Lodestar Foundation's Collaboration Prize, a national award presented to nonprofits that collaborate effectively to achieve greater impact. The success of the coalition is due in large part to the long-term support it has received from the Austin Community Foundation, as well as the grantmaker's belief that collaborations, like nonprofits, will be more successful if they have flexible support for their core operations.

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PROVIDE NECESSARY RESOURCES TO SUPPORT AND ENABLE COLLABORATION

Collective action does not happen without support. Like anything else a nonprofit organization does, its collaborative work requires specific and timely resources. Staff of the collaborating organizations need time and space to plan their aligned efforts, and the partnership needs resources for shared measurement and reporting systems, communications, technology, research, convening activities, and more.

Grantmakers that want to see their grantees collaborate more extensively must take the next step and provide the resources these organizations need to engage in successful collaborations. F. Scott McCown, executive director of the [Center for Public Policy Priorities](#) in Texas, which engages in coalition building and other activities to build a better future for children in the state, said:

“If you want to fund collaboration, you’ve got to put money into the cost of collaboration — how do we talk to each other, how do we meet, how do we effectively work together?”

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Grantmakers can provide critical support for the logistics and operations of partnerships. The key to ensuring that collaboratives have what they need to succeed is making sure that the funder's staff and board understand that aligned activities will require their own structures for meeting, getting things done, tracking progress and holding participants accountable for what they say they are going to do.

Grantmakers also should remember that they often bring multiple forms of capital to the table when supporting collaborative work among grantees and others. In addition to crucial financial resources, funders can attract attention and additional support to this work — bringing other funders to the table, securing media coverage for the work, convening government and business partners, and more. Funders also can lend intellectual and technical support and expertise to nonprofit collaboratives to the extent that their staff and board members can offer valuable skills in facilitation, research and more.

Several nonprofit leaders in the GEO listening sessions talked about the positive experiences they have had when foundations funded the development and implementation of collaborative efforts. One leader described her experience as follows: “In our field, a foundation funded a consortium of organizations to bring us together to look at how we could collaborate and support each other. At first, we focused primarily on programming, but then we looked at how to collaborate on back-office and administrative costs. ... We are looking at ways to collaborate operationally and not just on the program side. I thought it was a great initiative by the foundation.”

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Another nonprofit leader in the sessions expressed the wish to “see more focus on collaboration and collaborative funding opportunities, either with funders providing collaborative funding or being open to innovative collaborations requiring that community groups truly propose working collaborations.”

[The Community Foundation for Monterey County](#) (Calif.) does more than just talk the talk when it comes to advocating a more networked approach to the provision of social services in its community. The grantmaker provides extensive support to make nonprofit partnerships work. For example, the foundation recently supported a local environmental nonprofit’s efforts to organize partner organizations to push for a ban on single-use plastic bags in the region surrounding the [Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary](#). With 90 members, the [Central Coast Sanctuary Alliance](#) has presented data on plastic pollution, initiated public petition drives, and met with city and county officials to advocate the ban. The Community Foundation for Monterey County also offers grants to support organizations that are seeking to work in a more networked way, as well as classes on facilitation, “network weaving” and other skills that are essential to collaboration. “We want to keep the question of what it means to work in networks on the front burner for everyone,” said Janet Shing, senior program officer. The foundation, Shing added, is a strong believer that nonprofit organizations need dedicated resources to enable them to collaborate effectively.

CONCLUSION

Grantmakers can play a vital role in encouraging and helping nonprofits to work together to get better results. At the same time, it is important to remember that funder calls for increased collaboration can sometimes strike an unwelcome chord among nonprofits.

As noted earlier, many organizations and their leaders are tired of funders telling them they need to work together without providing any real incentives to do so. The challenge for funders, then, is to make a better, stronger case for collective action as a pathway to better results, while at the same time helping nonprofits develop the capacities to make partnerships succeed.

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The following questions can help you identify what more your organization could be doing to ensure that grantees are able to build the skills, relationships and resources needed to work together effectively.

HELP MAKE CONNECTIONS, BUT DON'T FORCE THEM

- ▶▶ What more can you do to help your grantees connect with each other and with other organizations engaged in related work?
- ▶▶ What more can you do to make sure your staff has the capacity and the flexibility to foster new connections with and among grantees and other organizations?
- ▶▶ What opportunities exist for your organization to play a convening role for grantees working in specific issue areas so they can come together on a regular basis at minimal expense to them?
- ▶▶ How else can you help grantees explore areas of common interest and possible shared projects?
- ▶▶ How can you enter, support and participate in collaboratives as a co-learner with grantees and other partners?

OFFER CORE SUPPORT AND FLEXIBLE, LONG-TERM FUNDING TO GRANTEES

- ▶▶ To what extent are you providing grantees with discretionary multiyear support that gives them the flexibility they need to build strategic relationships and explore possible partnerships and collaborations? How can you provide more?
- ▶▶ How can you increase understanding among your board and staff about the importance of allowing organizations to have the slack needed to pursue collaborations and partnerships without necessarily knowing where they will lead?
- ▶▶ How can you help grantees develop the capacity to use data and information more effectively to assess the successes and shortcomings of their collaborative efforts and change course as needed?

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PROVIDE NECESSARY RESOURCES TO SUPPORT AND ENABLE COLLABORATION

- ▶▶ What more can you do to make sure grantees have the funding and the in-kind support they need to build and manage new partnerships and collaborative efforts?
- ▶▶ What opportunities exist to work with other funders to provide dedicated resources to support nonprofit collaboratives?
- ▶▶ What more can you do to build your staff's understanding of the operational needs of nonprofit collaboratives?
- ▶▶ In addition to providing financial resources, what other types of support can you offer to the aligned efforts of your grantees — for example, connections to other funders, government and the news media; office space and back-office support; or staff and board expertise?

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PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

It is hard to make the case that nonprofits should reach out to others and embrace collective action if grantmakers are not doing the same thing. Supporting nonprofits' efforts to collaborate effectively requires funders to develop their own capacities in areas ranging from relationship building to stakeholder engagement. A grantmaker's leadership and staff need to approach this work with a high level of empathy and curiosity, a willingness to listen and learn, and an understanding that aligned efforts can take time to grow and bloom.⁶

In GEO's nonprofit listening sessions, nonprofit leaders stressed the importance of funders getting their own house in order when it comes to adopting collaborative approaches. Nonprofit leaders in a Maryland session talked about how they no longer have personal relationships with funders in the area and how fewer and fewer foundations make site visits or take their phone calls. One leader commented, "More and more I'm finding online applications. There's no discussion; there's no one you can reach at the foundation to answer your questions. It is not only impersonal and a tough way to engage someone in your work, but I think the foundations are losing out on an opportunity to learn."

6. For more information about engaging stakeholders, see *Do Nothing About Me Without Me: An Action Guide for Engaging Stakeholders* (Washington, D.C.: GEO, 2010). Available at www.geofunders.org.



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Grantmakers for Effective Organizations is a community of more than 430 grantmakers that are challenging the status quo in their field to help grantees achieve more. Understanding that grantmakers are successful only to the extent that their grantees achieve meaningful results, GEO promotes strategies and practices that contribute to grantee success. More information about GEO and resources for grantmakers are available at www.geofunders.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GEO THANKS THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS FOR THEIR INPUT AND FEEDBACK ON THIS FUNDER BRIEF:

Tom Bonderenko, Moveable Feast
Caroline Hotaling, formerly with the Ms. Foundation for Women
Barbara Kibbe, S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation
Rafael López, formerly with the Annie E. Casey Foundation
Curtis Ogden, Interaction Institute for Social Change
Gladys Washington, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

CAPACITY BUILDING ADVISORY GROUP

Jane Donahue, Deaconess Foundation (co-chair)
Elizabeth George, Deaconess Foundation (co-chair)
Fred Ali, Weingart Foundation
Jill Coleman, The Cameron Foundation
Don Crocker, Support Center for Nonprofit Management
C.R. Hibbs, Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society
Barbara Kibbe, S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation
Sylia Obagi, Annenberg Foundation
Kathy Reich, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Joann Ricci, Greater New Orleans Community Foundation
Belen Vargas, Weingart Foundation
Gladys Washington, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
Linda Wood, Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
Denise Zeman, Saint Luke's Foundation of Cleveland, Ohio

IN ADDITION, WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THE FOUNDATIONS THAT PROVIDED GRANTS TO SUPPORT THIS WORK, INCLUDING:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Deaconess Foundation
Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

GEO WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND A SPECIAL THANK-YOU TO THE FOUNDATIONS THAT HAVE SUPPORTED US WITH MAJOR UNRESTRICTED SUPPORT, INCLUDING:

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Blue Shield of California Foundation
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation
The Duke Endowment
The Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation
Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
The F.B. Heron Foundation
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation
Saint Luke's Foundation of Cleveland, Ohio
Surdna Foundation
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Weingart Foundation

