



The Nature of a Partnership

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DECEMBER 2019

Partnership is a common topic in our non-profit world today. Many organizational strategic plans include the term and concept of partnership at some level for the organization's future. The term partnership is applied to a wide variety of organizational contexts and relationships by all types of non-profits and governmental agencies. Does use of the word partnership across a wide spectrum of definitions hinder effectiveness? Should we have a common definition and use of terms that are relevant to non-profit work?

Organizations define partnership as it best fits and benefits their needs. In most cases when the word partnership is used, it is in the context and the need to strengthen an organization's fiscal stability. Almost any involvement or contribution with another organization is referred to as a partnership. Is this a true partnership or some other type of organizational relationship?

Core Organizational Relationships

Three core types of organizational relationships, commonly referred to as partnership, are defined: Business/Sponsorship, Collaborations, and Partnership. By establishing a common definition for each of the three core relationships with differentiating factors; a model can be established, that illustrates the differences and connections.

Each of the proposed core organizational relationships are equally important to any organization. Any single relationship may remain at that level or it could evolve into another level. Each requires its own set of energy, commitment, and results to remain viable.

Business Relationships and Sponsorships

A business relationship is when an organization seeks and receives services or provides a product in return. Examples include: An organization needs a vendor for a product or service and pays for that service when rendered; a local business provides fiscal support for an event and receives recognition; receiving funds from a sponsor (foundation) to provide a specific program or service. To be successful in the business and sponsorship relationship, both parties need to receive what has been previously agreed upon while meeting each organization's expectations.

- **Description:** The relationship can be short-term, such as a one-time grant from a foundation, or long-term, which could be 20-year history with a company that provides services. Often the long-term relationships can result in donated or reduced cost for services and supplies; or business sponsorships for special events.
- **Relationship:** A faithful exchange of the service required. If a foundation provides funding, it is going to require documentation and evaluation. If a vendor provides

plumbing services, it needs to receive payment on time. If the organization requires an electrician, the vendor needs to show up on time and fix the issue. The relationship can be enhanced through excellent customer service, in both directions, or it can be broken if one or both entities fail to provide their part of the agreement. As long as both entities are in business and the relationship is satisfactory, the relationship can last the life of the organizations.

- Interactions: Interactions are transactional, meaning the customer/business relationship is reciprocal and can be enhanced by best practices in the establishing and maintaining good relations, product delivery, and reimbursement.
- Case example: As a former director I observed my site manager time chit-chatting, having coffee, and sometimes lunch with our cadre of facility vendors. He was building strong business relationships and that time dedicated (although transactional) was critical for speedy and competent service when we needed help. This was not a partnership because both entities were acting on their needs, but this type of relationship is critical to operations.
- Formula: $1+1=1$. Both entities offer and receive value, but the relationship remains organizationally centric.

Collaborations

Collaborations are relationships between two or more entities that allow the institutions to reach their own goals and provide existing service to the community more effectively and efficiently. Example: Two community organizations that both provide scheduled food service for the poor or homeless. Both were providing the service on a Tuesday evening. Through collaboration one decided to change to a Thursday. This not only increased service to the community, but it also allowed the two organizations to share resources, volunteers, and joint public announcements.

- Description: The relationship requires additional trust and a specified process to identify the purpose and desired outcome of the collaboration. A jointly-developed program and agreement results from the collaborative work and is maintained through regularly-scheduled communications and periodic evaluation of the relationship.
- Relationship: Continued and open communications and adherence to the agreement are required along with a review of the nature of the relationship. The participating organizations may explore developing new programs for a broader purpose, something that none of the participants were doing, which could lead to a true partnership. The collaboration to establish the joint product may also end if it becomes totally operational and embedded into the culture of all the entities involved. If the program/product is intended to be a long-lasting service to the

community then periodic review is required to remain a viable relationship.

- Interactions: Primary interactions are transactional (driven by need) and with opportunity to become transformational. (driven by desire). As a transactional relationship each entity exhibits behaviors to establish and maintain trust and open communications, but the relationship can be broken if one of the participating organizations disregards the agreement. The relationship is both organizational and community centric with a transformational relationship possible when the organizations begin to vision and create beyond their original agreement.
- Case example: Three environmental education centers that were offering a similar program to the same grade level students. The organizations formed a network, and each decided to offer different programs to specific grade levels. This reduced competition, encouraged joint marketing, and improved service to the schools.
- Formula: $1+1=2$. Although driven by the need for the participating organizations to be more efficient and effective in delivering a type of service (organizationally centric), the product/outcome increases the benefits of service to the intended audience. (community centric).

Partnership

The nature of a true partnership includes two or more organizations that are engaged together to create and implement something new, something that does not exist, something that is community centric, and something that one organization could not achieve on its own. A partnership is never formed just to focus on organizational needs but can only be formed when there is a desire to contribute to a larger community service.

- Description: A true partnership requires an organization to step out of its norm. It has to look beyond its own needs and refocus on the long-term needs, desires, and vision of the community it serves. Partnerships require trust not just in who they are, but trust so they can become something greater together.
- Relationship: A firm belief that by working together and with the community, the relationship can make a broader impact. The relationship is transformational, meaning all parties are changed for the better. The end product or service will change how each the community views each organization. Generative alliance is a term describing the impact for each organization that each is equal, and each partner is transformed. (Gauthier,2013). Partnerships can be both short and long term depending on the nature of the intended product or service. As long as the relationship remains community centric and transformational there is no limited time. Partnerships can end if the impact results in a new organization

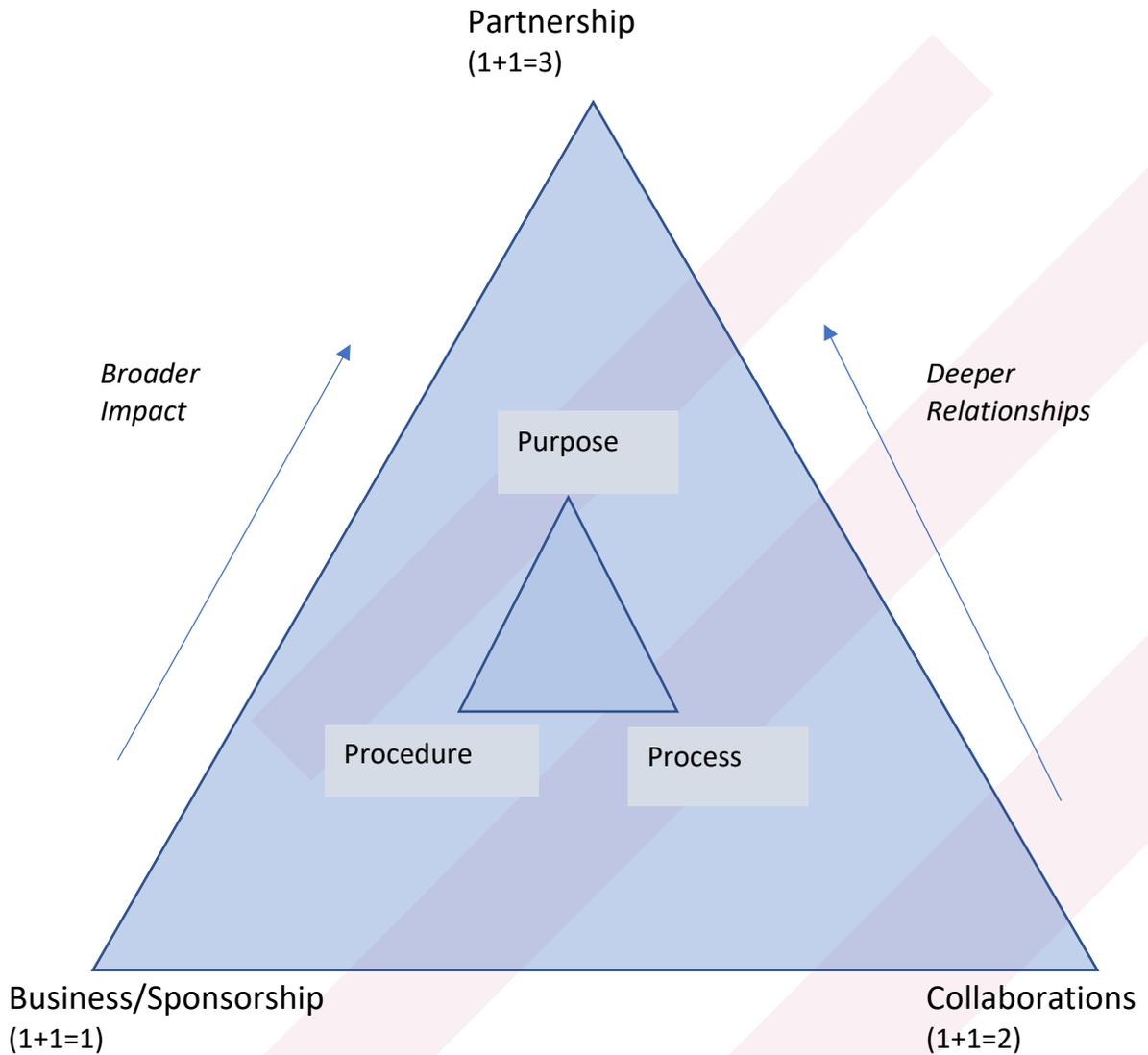
that is purposed to continue the operations of the partnership. Indicators include level of trust, communications, and continued desires that are community, not organizationally centric.

- Interactions: Partnerships require transformational relationships that result in a generative alliance. Transformational interactions require an open willingness to let go and to be open to change. A generative alliance results when all participating organizations interact to achieve a larger community centric cause.
- Case example: A small town has a network of local leaders from a wide variety of organizations. Through discussions it became apparent that there was a collective desire to create a county wide leadership program. All of the organizations had already realized they could not create or operate this type of program on their own. The partnership was created and included a local chamber of commerce, the city manager, a community college, a university unit, university extension, and interested citizens. The partnership produced a new county-wide leadership program that is now in its 10th year.
- Formula: $1+1=3$. A new community program, product, or service is created that would not exist without a true partnership in action. Participating organizations and the community are transformed.

The Concept of Organizational Relationships

Exhibit 1 illustrates the nature of the three major types of organizational relationships. Each of three types are of equal value, but each relationship has its own purpose, interactions, and indicators.

The Concept of Organizational Relationships



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Indicators

The Business Relationship/Sponsor is driven by Procedure or “doing things the right way” with best practices to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships so all organizations receive and deliver what is expected based on the agreements in place.

The Collaboration is driven by Process or “doing things the right way for the right reason”. Collaboration requires a deeper level of commitment, self-discovery, and openness to find solutions and pathways for common challenges and opportunities.

The Partnership is driven by Purpose or “doing the right thing” to discover a broad, long-term service, program, or product that benefits the community and that could not have been completed by any single organization.

The model and tool can be used to determine what types of relationship currently exists and what type of relationships the organization should be seeking.

Resources

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