



Strategies for Joining Forces

By Gail S. Bower

Great organizations work with and through others [sic] to create more impact than they could ever achieve alone.

by Leslie R. Crutchfield &
Heather McLeod Grant, *Forces for Good*

What do golf and a festival have in common? In San Antonio this spring, it's customers and collaboration. San Antonio's New World Wine & Food Festival changed its dates and joined forces with the Valero Texas Open, a PGA event, to create what the San Antonio Business Journal calls "a destination traveler's dream come true."

While a golf event may seem like a competitor and therefore an unlikely collaborator with a wine and food festival, the two events see a synergy to broaden their audiences, enhance their event experiences, and is a pathway towards growth.

Does your organization or festival partner or collaborate with other organizations? If so, have you found these alliances to be exhilarating or exasperating? If not, are you curious about whether collaborating might be a wise approach?

You're in good company. The Nonprofit Finance Fund recently released survey results showing that in 2009, 52 percent of nonprofit respondents partnered with another nonprofit organization as a way of coping with the increase in demand for services in the middle of the economic tumult. This type of adaptive action, among others, respondents indicated, would likely carry over into 2010.

Common sense tells us that partnering can be an effective and cost-efficient strategy. Leslie R. Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant concluded in their well-researched book, *Forces for Good*, that partnering provides the leverage you need to build organizational impact. So, if more organizations are open to partnering and

if indeed it is such a valuable approach, then it pays to learn how to do it better, what strategies are best, how to overcome challenges, and what your choices are in case a good collaboration goes bad.

Why Collaborate?

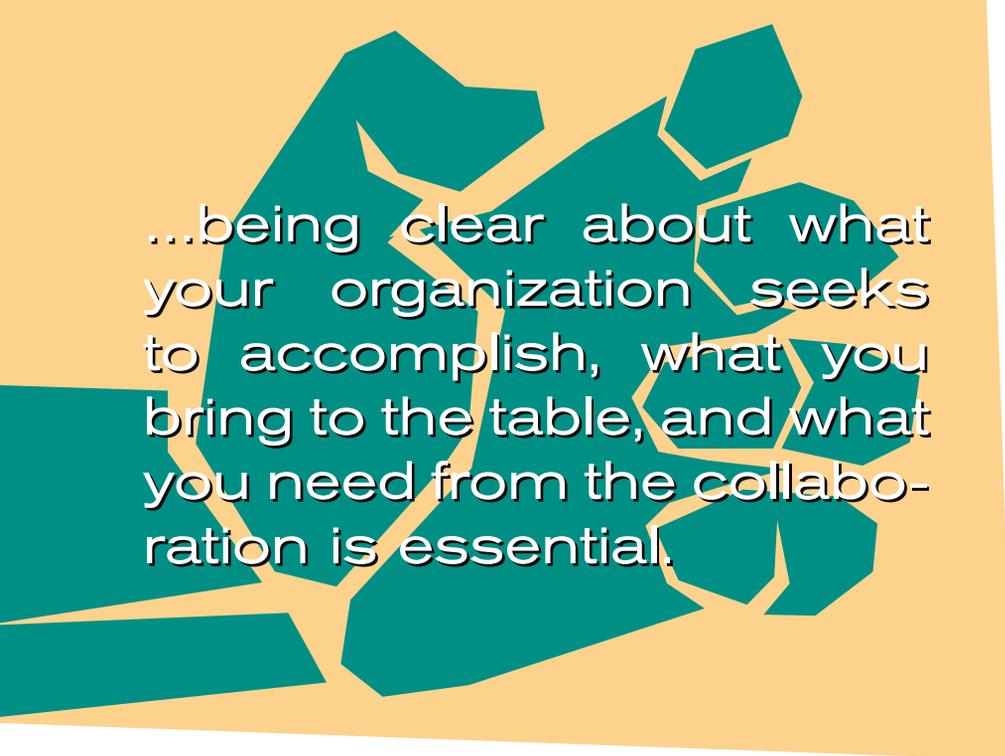
Partnering with others, nonprofit or for-profit, can yield many advantages, including:

- Allowing your organization to have a greater impact, as noted previously;
- The fulfillment of your mission;
- The broadening and/or diversifying of your services into communities that benefit from your services;
- Making limited resources (financial, human, and other) go farther; and
- Being able to undertake new projects, programs, or services that you would not be able to offer otherwise.

4 Strategies for Success

Collaborations come together in many different ways: you or your partner may see a need or issue that you can address together, or a funder may suggest the partnership. Success stories about collaborations that work usually involve one or more of the following strategic criteria:

- **Core Competencies.** Organizations come together because of different but complimentary competencies that when focused on a particular issue yields exponential results. There is no need to duplicate or reinvent the wheel. For example, the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive



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Surgery partners with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence on a project, called Face to Face. Three hundred surgeons across the country perform free reconstructive surgery on victims of domestic abuse a year after the Coalition liberates women from abusive relationships. Neither organization would be serving its mission by developing services already offered by the other, but clearly working together Face to Face has life-changing results.

- **Benefits-driven.** Two organizations come together because they each bring value that benefits the other. A national educational organization that champions a successful learning model partners with another larger organization that supports educators of a different model. The larger organization benefits because it is able to provide access to information of increasing interest to its members, and the smaller organization has access to a much wider universe of potential registrants for its conference, readers of its publications, and members.
- **Resource-driven.** In this strategy, organizations pool resources (which may include competencies) to develop a program, service, or initiative bigger or better than what one could offer alone. The joint effort saves dollars in the long run.

Last year, for example, I spoke at three conferences that were co-productions of two different organizations. The Washington, DC, chapters of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and the Direct Marketing Association jointly produce The Bridge Conference (where I'll be speaking again this year). Two nutrition organizations, one serving the

elderly and the other serving people home-bound by disease or illness, convened in Atlanta. And when I "played" Atlantic City – at the Spartacus room at Caesar's Palace, no less – I presented to members of the New Jersey and the Delaware Valley's Societies of Association Executives who convene there each year. (In fact at the 2009 event, the organizations announced their merger.)

Another example is Pro Bono Net, a national organization that delivers its mission almost exclusively through two extensive web platforms and has woven collaboration into its mission and strategy. In fact last year, one such collaboration earned the organization recognition from the Lodestar Foundation, which selected them as a finalist for The Collaboration Prize.

Pro Bono Net collaborates with organizations to provide specialty information for particular population sectors – people wrongly committed, immigration advocates, those along the Gulf Coast who suffered because of Katrina, and many others. The organization's resources include technology and its membership and its partners bring content and constituent bases, among other assets on both sides. The collaborative projects allow the impact of these groups to penetrate more deeply into the communities who need specific assistance and knowledge.

- **Revenue or Value.** In this model, organizations exchange value for a cash or in-kind fee. Corporate sponsorship is one such example. If structured well around the two organizations' business goals, the partnership can yield tremendous results in support of both organizations' strategies.

In each of these approaches, being clear about what your organization seeks to accomplish, what you bring to the table, and what you need from the collaboration is essential. Investing time here first, rather than just jumping in enthusiastically though perhaps blindly, will save time and aggravation later, once you're fully engaged. If, after explorations with your prospective partner, you conclude that the collaboration is not a fit or that the other organization brings nothing substantive to the discussion, proceeding may not be the best choice.

Ingredients for Success

When you do decide to move forward, however, you'll want to cultivate and adopt a set of best practices. Those that follow are culled from my own experiences and from discussions with clients and others who've found success (and learned from frustration) collaborating:

1. **Trust is essential.** You must both engender a trusting environment and be a trusted partner.
2. **Start at the top.** The vision and commitment comes from you, the chief executive of the organization. You set the example and blaze the trail for your staff. Conversely, if you're not invested, your staff is not going to champion the cause.
3. **Start at the beginning.** When you launch the collaboration, begin with a meeting of all the stakeholders – an opening ceremony, if you will – so everyone is in alignment.
4. **"Face-to-face is better than fax-to-fax."** One of my clients has a poster on her wall with this line. While the technology has certainly evolved from the fax machine, you get the point. Meet in person when necessary. It realigns and reconnects everybody with the project goals and with each other.
5. **Clarity about your needs.** Share your needs with your partner and encourage your partner to do the same. Work together to accomplish your interests. In a recent blog post on the Trusted Advisor blog, Sandy Styer describes the Thomas-Kilman assessment. Collaboration, she notes, is where Assertiveness and Cooperation meet: "Collaboration gets its power because it uses the energy of Assertiveness—ideas and real points of view, championed by people who care—and the energy of Cooperation—a willingness to make things work for all involved. From collaboration comes the best result, the idea or solution which is fashioned from everyone's input and is better than what any one person could have come up with on her or his own." No one is served by

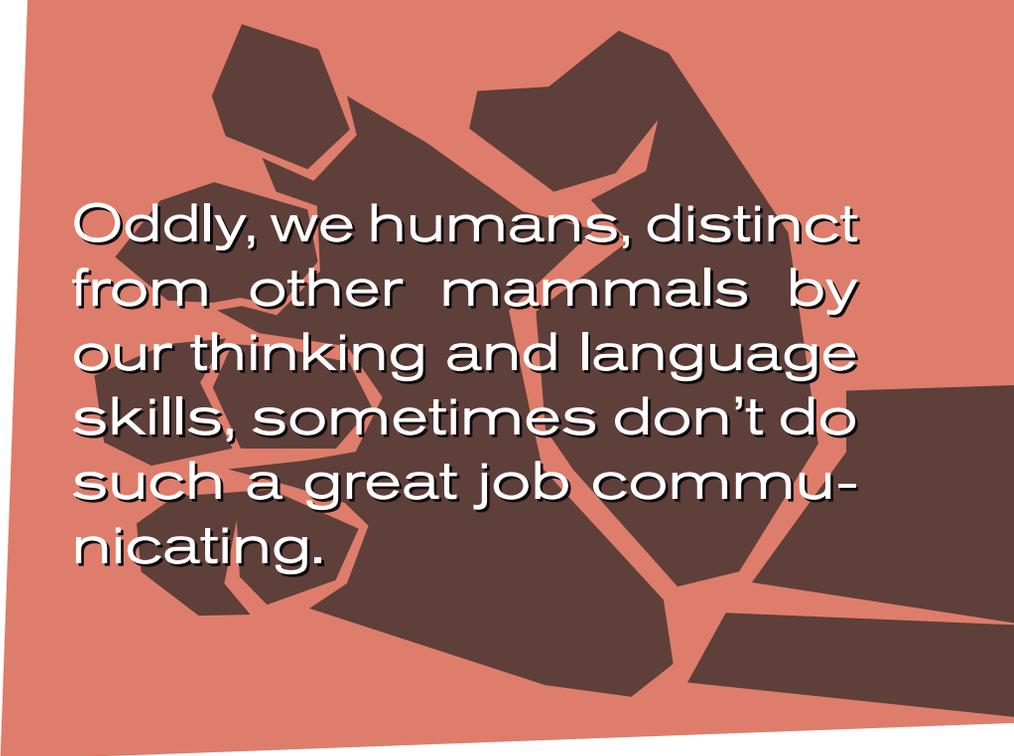
remaining quiet about what you and your organization need.

6. **Put it in writing.** Documenting the terms and parameters of your work together is just plain smart business. It may be a helpful tool later in the life of the partnership, especially if a leadership or staff change shifts the nature of the partnership.
7. **Accountability.** Besides an agreement, using a project management tool, even a simple spreadsheet, outlining tasks and deadlines and identifying staffs' responsibilities, will support workflow and provide a mechanism for accountability.
8. **Staff needs.** Be sure that your staff members involved in the collaboration have ample time to complete the thinking and subsequent tasks necessary to execute the project, in addition to their ongoing responsibilities.
9. **Balance.** When we think of collaborating, it's natural to have flashbacks to the failed group projects in 4th grade, where we got stuck doing all the work. A better way to look at collaborating, however, may be to consider the idea of balancing responsibilities over time, not on a day-to-day basis. Be mindful that your partner has ongoing activities, other priorities and deadlines. One client has found success by choosing to jump in and offer help, rather than allowing resentment to build.
10. **Realistic expectations.** It's easy to fantasize tremendous results, but don't allow yourself to become unglued and swept away. Be realistic and focus on long-term results and impact, not a quick fix.

Resolving Challenges

Despite the best planning and intentions, challenges occur. Conflicts are inevitable among human beings. These suggestions will help you resolve the most common difficulties:

- **Culture clashes.** Remember that you are two organizations – perhaps even two formerly competitive organizations – now working together towards a common goal. You and your partnering executive director must work to mesh the two cultures, fostering an evolution throughout the duration of the project or partnership.
- **Fear and resistance.** These two go hand-in-hand and are quite natural. However, they also offer nothing useful towards the outcome. The solution? Build trust.
- **Turf issues and politics.** Long-time collaborators note that sometimes starting off on small, non-threatening



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projects can help the two staffs make incremental progress together. Be sure that roles and expectations are clearly defined and understood by those involved.

- **Inertia and mixed signals.** When confusion and even lack of progress occurs, check CEO commitment levels. Are you fully embracing the project? Is your partnering organization's CEO? Are you each supporting the project internally and setting an example for your staffs? Is there an open atmosphere, allowing staff members to discuss concerns and challenges and to find solutions?
- **Miscommunication.** Oddly, we humans, distinct from other mammals by our thinking and language skills, sometimes don't do such a great job communicating. When you suspect miscommunication, use that as a signal to come together, face-to-face to talk over what's going on. And, of course, don't take things personally.

When Good Partnerships Go Bad

Not every partnership works out, despite high hopes and carefully planning. You have three options:

1. Walk away from the partner;
2. Walk away from the project;
3. Change your role and involvement.

Don't feel stuck, trapped, or in need of investing further resources in a losing proposition. Staff morale, energy, and enthusiasm is too precious; life is too short. Move on.

How You Benefit

Working with collaborators allows your organization to expand its service with a

relief of funding or without adding significantly to the operation. The benefits to your staff and organization, in terms of capacity building and professional staff development and growth, also add up. You may notice that staff members' communication and listening skills improve, which will be of benefit internally as well as externally on other endeavors.

Successful collaborations extend your reach into communities and among constituents in ways that are endlessly beneficial to your mission. Reaching more people with your expertise, services, messages, and stories expands your community, your base of supporters, and your impact.

Now it's your decision: are the social value coupled with the value to your operation and growth of individual staff members compelling reasons to improve existing or explore new collaborations in your market?

Gail Bower is the author of *How to Jump-start Your Sponsorship Strategy in Tough Times*.

Her consulting firm specializes in dramatically raising the visibility, revenue, and impact of non-profit organizations and events/festivals. She's a professional consultant, writer, and speaker, with nearly 25 years of experience managing some of the country's most important events, festivals, and sponsorships. Launched in 1987, today Bower & Co. improves the results of clients' marketing and event strategies and corporate sponsorship programs. She blogs at SponsorshipStrategist.com, and her web site is GailBower.com.