



CHAPTER THREE

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Ten years after launching its first funder collaboration, *The Philanthropic Collaborative* has tackled and solved many problems faced by new collaborative endeavors. Several key approaches which contributed to these accomplishments are described in this section.

FIND COMMON GROUND

To be effective, a collaboration must incorporate the multiple perspectives of its sponsors. Finding this common ground, without losing strategic focus, is key to a successful collaborative effort.

“We weren’t afraid of different perspectives or opposing points of view,” said former TPC president Charles Terry about the work in the Northern Forest, “but rather tried to bring them into the conversation.”

This approach is particularly critical for new issues. For instance, the Genetically Modified Foods Collaboration is not staking out a narrow position, but rather urging caution in the adoption of this new, largely untested technology. This strategy appeals to a wide range of donors, and puts the collaboration in a facilitator position as the public interest community, foundations, and the general public gain a greater understanding of this new and confusing issue.

SET CLEAR GOALS AND KNOW WHEN TO END

If clear goals and objectives are not defined, a collaboration will flounder. TPC collaborations spend significant time at the outset—and at regular intervals—establishing, refining, and measuring project achievements and challenges against specific goals. With clear goals set, the appropriate time for ending a collaboration project will be clear.

Do your homework and identify what you want to address. You need clear goals: both long-term goals that may never be accomplished, and short-term objectives that funders can relate to and see what their money is doing.

TPC staff member

For instance, some issues require long-term, sustained funding—such as the preservation of the Northern Forest. Being clear from the outset about the need for sustained support helped ensure that there was enough commitment from donors to stick with it for the long haul.

With the Youth, Community Gardens, and Urban Environment Collaboration, a narrow focus was necessary as there was a desire to see a high impact with limited dollars. Sponsor and family member Julie Robbins states, “If a collaboration is scattered among everybody’s personal interests, you can’t get the strategic impact that you want.”

When goals have been achieved, it is time to wrap up the collaboration. In addition, few members can handle multiple collaborations at one time. “People get collaboration fatigue,” says Richard Rockefeller. “We always feel the pull and pressure on our philanthropic energies.”

INVITE VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Part of the appeal of formal collaborations is the structure they provide for raising funds among family members. Potential donors are not pressured into participating by TPC staff or collaboration sponsors. “It should be truly optional,” said one collaboration sponsor. “Float a trial balloon to see if you get anyone to rally around it. There should be no arm twisting.”

With the Population, Development, and Environment Collaboration, several family members were quite interested in the issue, but before a formal collaboration was started, family interests were assessed during a retreat. This careful approach led to more sustained commitments from more donors.

EVALUATE REGULARLY AND REMAIN FLEXIBLE

Issues are complex and the political, social, and strategic context for grantmaking can change over the lifetime of a collaboration. Through regular evaluation, staff and family members gain clarity about necessary strategic adjustments and when to end the project.

For instance, the Youth, Community Gardens, and Urban Environment Collaboration originally supported programs for youth at community gardens. But when the gardens themselves became threatened, the collaboration expanded its focus to include advocacy and active garden preservation.

If you want to start a collaboration, don't start a collaboration. What you want to do is start working with people funding in your area. Once you have a history of funding together with a few relatives or colleagues, then go back to the family. If you've already been working together, you can make a much stronger case.

Richard Rockefeller

USE TOOLS OTHER THAN GRANTS

A collaboration offers flexibility in structure that lets it operate outside of the traditional grant cycles of most foundations. Convening grantees, acting as a fiscal agent for projects or creating a “quick-response” fund are just some of the strategies a collaboration might employ.

For instance, the Community Gardens Collaboration was able to bring together a coalition of funders and nonprofits—a role it could play because it did not have turf and fund raising concerns. TPC also provided a fiscal home for the Funders Working Group in Biotechnology, allowing the Genetically Modified Foods Collaboration close access to coordinating efforts with other funders.

KEEP DONORS ADEQUATELY INFORMED AND INVOLVED

Collaborations provide a special opportunity for donors to play a hands-on role in program direction, gaining a more in-depth understanding of issues and working closely with other funders and grantees. “If you are going to do a collaboration, you have to be willing to meet and discuss and learn about the issues,” says Mary Morgan. “If it's really going to be a meaningful thing in a family, rather

than just a thing that the staff carries. While staff support is key and allows people to carry on with their lives and do their own thing, there is no substitute for sponsors taking an active interest from beginning to end.”

Part of keeping donors and sponsors excited and committed over time is keeping them informed. This means more than updates in the mail; it means direct connections (meetings, phone conversations, email discussions, etc.) between staff and donors, and among family members.

Ensuring that sponsors and donors are involved in making decisions and determining strategic direction is key. “I try, to the extent possible, to have people who want to learn something or accomplish something, do the work themselves,” advises family member and collaboration sponsor Julie Robbins. “It’s a much more rewarding experience than it is just to re-create a mini-foundation and give out grants that the staff determine will be useful.”

However, it is crucial not to overwhelm donors with administrative or other burdensome tasks, or they may “burn out.” If the collaboration is seen as too cumbersome, family members may quickly lose interest.

COORDINATE AND COLLABORATE WITH OTHER PHILANTHROPIES

Some collaborative efforts are closely allied to issues associated with or located within a specific geographic concentration of a particular funding source. Therefore, there may be conflict or confusion with the philanthropic efforts of other foundations or funding sources in these areas. It is critical to investigate and coordinate efforts wherever possible with the staff and board of such funding sources, if only to keep them informed.

At best, this communication will allow a new collaboration to learn from the insights and experience of these funders. For instance, the Genetically Modified Foods Collaboration worked closely with staff at the Rockefeller Foundation to coordinate funder information briefings on this complex issue.

TPC funder collaborations have frequently been involved with or helped to initiate formal or informal relationships with other grantmakers. For instance, because TPC was an early funder in the Northern Forest, family members and staff took on a leadership role in bringing other funders to the table. Also, with the Genetically Modified Foods Collaboration, TPC helped to initiate and then host a funder affinity group and small pooled fund.

These affiliations can lead to joint funding efforts, thus leveraging funds to have greater impact. For instance, when the Community Gardens Collaboration brought together funders focused on community greening and gardening in New York, the group launched a pooled fund, to provide shared funding toward a city-wide campaign to purchase gardens threatened by auction.

INCLUDE OVERHEAD COSTS

Collaborations can be very time consuming and labor intensive, especially in the initial stages. “Without dedicated staffing, collaborations would fail,” says a TPC staff member, “and dedicated staffing means costs—no matter how you cut it.”

TPC prepares for that from the outset by preparing a work plan. Overhead costs, including site visit travel and meal expenses, conference calls, duplicating, in-office and off-site sponsor meeting expenses and consultant fees, need to be built in from the start, so donors are not surprised about unexpected expenses.

HIRE THE RIGHT STAFF

Collaborations take a lot of research, time, and effort to bring together, facilitate, and to maintain. TPC often hires outside professional consultants who can work on a steady and consistent basis with program staff to bring about results. Staff support allows funders to be involved as little or as much as they want, with the confidence that the collaborations are well-managed and key issues are being tracked.

“It is important to know that you are really using the money well,” said one family member. “Having good staff in place is key to that.”

Distinct from many foundations, funder collaborations tend to have very active funders, taking on more hands-on and leadership roles. However, funders are not professional staff members—it’s not what they do day-in and day-out. Staff provides institutional history and strategic guidance. Staff leadership also gives collaborations “presence” in the philanthropic world. As one foundation program officer said, “When I think of the Northern Forest, I think of [TPC staff] Marcia Townley’s expertise and reputation. That gives me and other funders confidence.”

TPC has found that to be most effective, staff members need a unique skill set. Because TPC funder collaborations generally deal with complex issues, they need dedicated staff to do important background research and extensive networking. Staff needs not only a firm grasp of the issues, but the ability to work well with others, including family members. Key to this is the ability both to take on a leadership role on the issue, and ensure that collaboration funders have ownership over the program. This kind of transparency of the staff is vital. Flexibility is also crucial, as issues develop over time and funder interests evolve.