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Achieving Meaningful Partnerships with Nonprofit Organizations: A View from the Field

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a topic of vital importance to the nonprofit sector: the dominant preference of its institutional funders for visible partnerships and the reality that most of these are shallow relationships entered into by their participants to obtain funding. The article draws attention to the not-so-subtle variations in the use of the term *partnership* by public, private and nonprofit sector actors as a cause for misaligned performance expectations. The article also introduces *meaningful partnership* as a desired outcome for partnership endeavors involving at least one nonprofit organization participant. In this usage, *meaningful partnerships* are those that are transformational in some fashion, going well beyond transactional contract-for-services relationships and lead to benefits that strengthen the participants in some manner. Entering into meaningful partnership offers the promise for nonprofit leaders and decision makers to apply performance benchmarks that they may use to receive greater return-on-investment in their partnership endeavors.

Key words: meaningful nonprofit partnership; shallow partnerships.

Introduction

At a colloquia held during the 38th Annual Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action conference, a panel of three senior nonprofit executives observed that public policies and practices requiring their organizations to enter into partnership arrangements in public sector contracted work complicated and added unfunded costs to their operations in the fulfillment of their responsibilities (ARNOVA, 2009, Session F1; Mendel 2009). The highly respected executives with well-documented track records for mission fulfillment in their organizations utilizing partnerships involving at least one nonprofit organization member mentioned that for many human service and other nonprofits participating in public sector and grant-maker imposed partnerships, forming shallow transactional and nonpermanent arrangements with other nonprofit organizations was common among their peers. In further commenting on the trend, the executives noted that from their perspective, the rationale for requiring partnership had more to do with the objectives of the funding source and a patriarchal approach by public and private authorities than with the voluntary action and intentionality of the nonprofit participants. These executives did not consider contractually obligated partnerships between nonprofit service providers as partnerships because they seldom led to *meaningful partnerships*, which they characterized as transforming or strengthening their organizations in anticipated and unanticipated ways.

The phenomenon identified by the nonprofit executives is an important one. From our work in a university-based research institution with over fifty completed nonprofit capacity building projects, we can confirm that nonprofit leaders can and do consider a *meaningful partnership* to be a preferred outcome for their organizations' limited time and treasure. Our view from the field also suggests that nonprofit leaders use a set of particular return-on-investment value-judgments to weigh the ways a partnership will benefit their organization beyond transactional funding for services provided. From the perspective of nonprofit leaders meaningful partnerships are particular kinds of arrangements with distinctive qualities and characteristics, and that not all public policy and private grant maker imposed partnerships are meaningful nor likely to be partnerships at all, despite the nomenclature assigned by public managers and others to these ventures (Casey, 2011; Amirkhanyan, 2009; Graddy, 2008; Linder, 2000). For the purposes of this discussion, *meaningful partnership* will refer to a relationship in which both parties view themselves as approximate equals in participation, decision making, risk and accountability, and are using the social, economic and/or political capital of their counterpart to gain benefits from the collaboration that are unique to each (McDonald, 2011; Yankey and Willen, 2010; Bedsworth, Goggins-Gregory, and Howard, 2008; La Piana, 1997).

The scholarly writing on nonprofit partnership has done little to resolve the dilemma of forming meaningful partnership posed by the nonprofit executives. Scholars have also done little to sort out the confusion nonprofits and others have with the outcome performance intentions of public managers who appropriate the terms partnership or collaboration as an applicant criterion in their requests for proposals. Frequently, public and elected officials compound the confusion when they cast awarded contracts for services with nonprofits as partnerships (Graddy and Chen, 2009; Chen, 2006; Gray, 1989).

Nonprofits charged with delivering services face the frequently uncompensated and difficult tasks of creating and managing partnership relationships in public sector project work and private grant maker initiatives. To address this dilemma, this essay will argue that *meaningful partnership* is a framing concept that will drive nonprofit leaders and managers to make better decisions prior to entering into and in selecting partnership projects. The essay will discuss the subtly different ways the term partnership is used by government, business and nonprofits when each serves as lead or dominant actor in a partnership and how the differences contribute to confusion and cost for their nonprofit partners. This essay will also use the relevant scholarship supplemented by *from the field views* of the experienced, long-tenured nonprofit executives who comprised the 2009 ARNOVA panel. These executives represent sophisticated private, well-staffed and well-funded independent nonprofit organizations providing strategic community leadership through research, policy analysis and advocacy; nonprofit organization capacity building; and a membership organization serving as the premier resource for philanthropic institutions throughout Ohio. Finally, this essay is informed by the decade-long perspectives of the academic research staff at the Center for Nonprofit Policy & Practice, Cleveland State University derived from their work on over fifty funded contract technical assistance projects in the areas of nonprofit organization capacity building, organizational performance and impact, organizational development and governance and fund development.

Stimulating Nonprofit Partnerships and Cross Sector Expectations

Public and private sector policies that encourage partnerships to form are consistent with the nature and function of nonprofit institutions (Mendel, 2010; Drucker, 1992). Scholarly writing and practical experience has well established that collaboration and partnership are important characteristics of the nonprofit sector in the United States (McDonald, 2011; Gazley, 2010; Alexander & Nank, 2009; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Galaskiewicz & Colman, 2006; Seldon, Sowa & Sandfort, 2006; Guo & Acar, 2005; Prytchitko & Boettke, 2003; Mulroy 2003; Austin 2000). Scholars also note that partnership between nonprofits can arise for a variety of reasons (Shaefer, Deland & Jones, 2011). Rationale for partnerships include: purposes related to the missions of the collaborating participants; external incentives encouraging collaboration; self interest and motivation of key stakeholders (Singer & Yankey, 1991); and large scale community processes that build trust and social capital in a system of services providers (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Kjaer, 2003; Issacs & Rodgers, 2001; Bracht &Tsouros, 1990).

In the best of circumstances, partnership arrangements involving nonprofits with either other nonprofits, governments or businesses are entered into voluntarily (McLaughlin, 2010; Snavely & Tracy, 2000; Wood & Gray, 1991). Conceivably, partnerships can take place without third party prompting for purposes of program and operations efficiency, cost savings and economies of scale, changes in the market place and mission convergence among other reasons (Takahashi & Smutny, 2002).

Despite the fertile conditions for forming partnerships among the axioms of the nonprofit sector, public managers can require nonprofits to form partnerships as a basis for funding using the coercive power of requests for proposals (RFPs) and grant applications processes. Private philanthropy is not immune from this phenomenon. For example, grant making that requires collaboration was the policy of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's $4 million award to the National League of Cities. The Gates

Foundation targeted seven cities to boost college graduation rates by better coordinating the services that colleges, schools and communities provide to students (Chronicle of Higher Education, November 4, 2009). The underlying logic for the award required education, business, and civic leaders to work together to coordinate and streamline the guidance and services young people need to get in to, and through, college (Foundation Center blog, November 7, 2009).

The rationale to require partnership and collaboration ventures is plain: public contracting funds and philanthropic grant-making dollars are limited. To obtain the best return on their investment, policy-makers and funders use their dollars to stimulate and oblige partnership from nonprofit contract and grant seekers. Compelling nonprofits to work together in their view, gives rise to efficiencies, service delivery capacity, and amplifies the reach of public–serving programs through partnership (Brinkeroff, 2002; Alexander, 1999). Moreover, by requiring collaboration by nonprofit respondents in RFPs, public dollars can be used as an instrument of policy to control the behavior of nonprofit service providers. Illustration of this trend, took place in Ohio in 2009 when Cuyahoga County public officials required the nonprofit Cleveland Food Bank and the nonprofit Hunger Network of Greater Cleveland to share public funding resources and submit joint proposals (Cleveland Plain Dealer Editorial Board, December 26, 2009).

Implied in the practice of required partnership, is that public managers, policy and private grant makers expect nonprofit organizations to form and manage the partnership relationships prior to and during the work of the contract or grant project. To the nonprofit, placing the burden of the partnership on the nonprofit participants are unassigned costs they absorb. In effect, the nonprofit partner subsidizes the public sector funder or private grant maker by providing a free rider fulfilling an unfunded project performance requirement (Rose-Ackerman, 1996; Steinberg and Gray, 1993; Weisbrod, 1988; Hansmann, 1987). Some scholars observe that these funder expectations overlook the complexity and cost incurred by the organizations in forming and managing partnerships (Gazley, 2008; Mulroy, 2003). It is not surprising that scholars have also noted that a top-down, policy-driven practice of required partnership between nonprofit players seldom result in enduring partnerships (Lounsbury & Strang, 2009; OECD, 2006).

In addition to the free-rider principle where nonprofits absorb the costs-of-partnership, nonprofit participants assume the risk and expense incurred to one or both partners during the partnerships formative stages (Norris-Tirrell, 2011). Both the "view from the field" of ARNOVA panel nonprofit executives, university research staff and scholars share that many organizations may not recognize the pitfalls of partnership for reasons that Mulroy observed in quoting Takahashi and Smutny (2002): the skills required of a leader who forms a partnership differ considerably from the skills required to manage one and are rarely found in one person (pp. 48, 2003). Executives also observe that a nightmare scenario for joint ventures is the risk of entrusting their organization's intellectual and human capital, credibility or reputation to a partner who is unable to deliver on their commitments, offering little benefit or even harm in return (Mulroy, 2003; Foster-Fishman, Salem & Allen, 2001).

Complicating matters are poorly conceived partnerships, funding uncertainties, and community-level factors that are variables beyond the control of nonprofits but that have direct bearing on partnerships (Mulroy 2003). An outcome of the challenges of complexity and opportunity costs nonprofits assume in forming a partnership is the tendency for organizations and others to celebrate shallow collaborations formed to meet the funding prerogatives of philanthropy and government.

Understanding Differences between Two Partnership Organizations Across Sectors

The view from the field expressed by nonprofit executives is that the burdens of required or contrived partnerships detract organizations from forming meaningful partnerships. Some of the challenge may be found in the ways public and private players describe and set expectations for nonprofit participants. Understanding the difference across sectors in the use of the terms partnership and collaboration is important for both policy-makers seeking to kindle cooperative arrangements and for nonprofit leaders engaged in making them work (Seitanidi, 2010). Scholarly writing has noted the understated differences in definition and meaning across the sectors of the terms “collaboration” and “partnership” (Bielefeld, 2011; Yankey & Willen, 2010, page 383; Mendel, 2009; Fairfield & Wing, 2008; Van Slyke, 2006; Austin, 2000; LaPiana, 2001 & 1997; Linder, 2000; Andreasen, 1996). The not-so-subtle differences can influence the decisions leaders in each sector make about the nature of collaborations and their expectations for outcomes of those collaborations. In other words, the manner in which the people leading the partnership conceive of its *meaningfulness* to their organization through processes, outcomes, sentiments or some other variables, weighs strongly in any assessment of whether or not those relationships can be or have been successful (Gazley, 2010). From this point of view, the perspective of the primary partner in the relationship contributes in important ways to the manner in which the relationship unfolds. So, parsing the subtle differences in the meaning of *partnership* that public, private and nonprofit leaders and manager assign to their funding and RFPs is an important detail for partner organizations committing to creating durable and high performing meaningful partnerships (Glasbergen, 2007; Waddock, 1988).

Comparing Inter-sector Understandings of "Partnership" in the Literature

One reason for the emphasis of public sector contract-inspired partnerships between organizations by scholars – particularly by thinkers in the field of public administration - is the plethora of real-world examples arising from increased public contracted work performed by nonprofits since the end of the Reagan administration (Fosler, 2002; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). It is not surprising that since the middle 1990s, important essays have been published on cross-sector collaboration and public-private partnership (Austin, 2000; Mulroy, 2003; Guo & Acar, 2005; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Alexander & Nank, 2009).

While the writing on partnership reflects the nuanced differences in which government, business and nonprofits view partnership and collaboration, little writing has scrutinized the distinctions leaders in public policy and private philanthropy use when they apply the subtle concept of partnership across sectors. The failure of scholars to address this question has serious consequences. For example, terminology such as strategic alliances, affiliations, consolidations (Bailey & Koney, 2000), inter-organizational collaboration (Hardy, Phillips & Lawrence, 2003), organizational networks (Iset & Provan, 2005), and nonprofit collaboration (Selden, Sowa & Sandfort, 2006) are common when describing the working relationship between two or more nonprofits participants. By comparison, the phrase "public-private partnership" and the term "alliance" are more common in the public management and business literature

(Austin, 2000; Bartling, 1998; Osborn & Hagedoorn, 1997; Gomes-Casseres, 1997; Kanter, 1994; Wasserman & Galaskiewicz, 1994; Wood & Gray, 1991), despite their frequent involvement and performance expectations of nonprofit organization participants in such endeavors (Mendel & Brudney, 2012; Seitanidi, 2010).

Table I illustrates differences reflected in the literature to describe partnership or degrees of collaboration when government, business and nonprofits are paired with a nonprofit member.   The examples in the table refer to binary or one-to-one relationships of just two different sector participants. The table also lists the reverse inter-sector relationship where the nonprofit serves as a dominant partnership driver to illustrate through comparison the differing motivation, expectation and measures through which each assesses the partnership.

Findings and Analysis

We are reminded that the source of the data in Table I are three fold: relevant scholarship, views of experienced nonprofit executives, and the experience of university-based academic research staff specializing in nonprofit organization capacity building and others specialties. These sources of data offer several noteworthy findings.

First, there are significantly different motives for partnership among lead actors in government/nonprofit partnerships as compared to nonprofit/government partnerships. There are several explanations for this variation in motives for partnership. An example includes public policy makers seeking to generate *high value at low cost* collaborations are constructed by public managers for their nonprofit partners for that purpose – to hold them accountable for the delivery of services. Another possibility for this variation is

Table I

Partnership Characteristics of Government, Business and Nonprofits when paired with a Nonprofit Member

Sector partner	Dominant character	Factors Driving Collaboration and explanation	Source
Government/ Nonprofit	Public	Services provided by contract organizations are more efficient and effective than government can perform alone. Emphasis where the sponsor (government) focuses on the services provision by the nonprofit through a political lens, and bureaucratic oversight, accountability and contractual performance determine the success of the partnership.	Brody, 2005; Bailey & Koney, 2000.
Nonprofit/ Government	Private	Emphasis on mission of the nonprofit as a reason to enter into the contract with government. Each actor can bargain on its own behalf. Partnerships are long term and enduring (excludes relationships dependent on grants or competitive contracts). Each actor makes contributions to the partnership. All actors share responsibility for the outcomes . Relationships are a means for government to build trust with citizens	Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Alexander & Nank, 2009.

Business/Nonprofit	Private profit making	Access to markets, branding and profits that business alone cannot achieve.	Austin, 2000; Seitanidi, 2010.
Nonprofit/Business	Private	Strategic advantage from access to expertise; financial support for purposes of sustainability. Philanthropic – where the nature of the relationship is that of charitable donor and recipient. Transactional – where there is an explicit exchange of resources focused on specific activities such as in-cause related marketing, event sponsor-ships and contracts for services; Integration – where the partners mission, people and activity begins to merge into more collective action and organizational integration	Austin, 2000 (page 71); Linder, 2000; Seitanidi, 2010; Mulroy, 2003.
Nonprofit/ Nonprofit	Private	Mission achievement, organizational sustainability, and valued added features of collaboration. Two organizations work together with parity of authority, investment and commitment to address problems through joint effort, resources and decision making and share ownership of the final product or service. Social capital, equity between partners, political, social and economic engagement.	Yankey & Willen 2010; Coleman-Selden, Sowa & Sandfort, 2006; Guo & Acar 2005.

that in requiring nonprofit service providers to engage in collaboration and partnership, public officials and managers are able to claim contract work is leveraged or compounded in purchasing power beyond a single dollar of funding for a dollar of services. Leveraging offers policymakers a way to measure return on investment, the potential of prompting changes in society and the development of systemic capacity by stimulating a network of nonprofit service providers interacting with government and one another (Alter, 2009; Gazley, 2008; Brinkerhoff, 2002; Ahn, 2006). Collaboration and leveraged funds can also be cast to the tax payers as an investment that attracts private dollars brought to the endeavor by the nonprofit participants who come together as service providers. As mentioned earlier, there is also the desire by policy makers to alter the behavior of private sector actors - both business sector and nonprofit – through incentives such as funded projects.

Second, government initiators of partnerships view their relationship with nonprofit service providers as a hierarchical and legalistic “contract for services.” Nonprofit executives and scholars view nonprofit motives and perspectives as more nuanced and elaborate than are articulated by a limited contractual obligation. Opportunity costs reflected by the commitment of resources of mission, money, merit, (Krug and Weinberg, 2004) by nonprofit organizations cause a nonprofit executive decision maker to enter into a partnership if they perceive a transformative and meaningful pay-off for the endeavor beyond the transactional work for hire. Executives note that the margin for error in many nonprofit organization operating budgets is slim, so ventures that add costs and risks must offer a clear return on investment. From the perspective of a nonprofit executive, nonprofits may seek returns that include: strategic advantage in a competitive marketplace for knowledge, power, prestige and financial resources (Austin, 2000; Hardy, Phillips & Lawrence, 2003; Guo & Acar, 2005); opportunities to learn from one another; gain access to funding; benefit from the association with the partner organization; ability to deliver services and expand their capacity to perform work; political advantage for reasons of long term sustainability (Seldon, Sowa & Sandfort, 2006; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Gazley, 2008).

Third, among the private sector comparisons between business/nonprofit, nonprofit/business and nonprofit/nonprofit, other important findings arise. For example, the use of the term "alliance" in business/nonprofit ventures suggests separate and self contained institutions interacting for the convenience of the circumstances. Such an image conveys a temporary, shallow, transactional nature for a quick return on investment. The nonprofit/business partnership examples also trend toward brief interludes of connection as executives also point to the many examples of corporate philanthropy, cause-related marketing or civic leadership connections.

Lastly, the nonprofit/nonprofit partnerships present the best insights into the motives for both participants to strive toward maximization of *meaningful partnerships*. Experienced nonprofit executives share that the best partnership outcomes and opportunity for enduring, effective, mutually sustaining *meaningful partnerships* are those that offer a risk-reward return for each partner that each is likely to measure and value. In such situations, the nonprofits anticipate and recognize ways they can reduce the risks of collaboration if they view themselves not as powerless charities receiving alms from third party funders but as true negotiating partners among equals participants (Andreasen, 1996).

Five Ways to Assess Meaningful Partnerships

The findings suggest five ways of thinking about and measuring meaningful partnership. These five measures are listed in Table II. Column one lists the five meaningful partnership measurement categories. Column two offers a description of the categories. Column three posits a sample - for illustrative purposes only - of queries nonprofit executives may use to test their organizations performance in the designated category. Column four notes the scholarly writing that supports use of the category as a measure for *meaningful partnership*.

From the five measures listed in Table II, we observe from scholars and the practical experience of nonprofit executives that there is a delicate balance and equity of power required in forming, maintaining and effectively utilizing bonds of connection between nonprofit organizations (Carnwell and Carson, 2005). Second, the strength of a partnership bond is reflected through the density of social interactions and network of the executives and leaders in each partner organization (Knoke and Yang, 2008; Takahasi and Smutny, 2002; Schensul, Lecompte et al., 1999; Granovetter, 1983). Third, the longevity of a partnership arises from the predictable actions of the participants, the perceived level of risk by each participant and the return-on-investment or benefits each participant realizes from the relationship (Rasler, 2007). Fourth, the framework for collaboration may be marked by the formality of the bond between organizations, and social asset maps which are a method of envisioning those bonds (Schensul, LeCompte et al., 1999). Fifth, transformations in the way the partners carryout their work or benefit from the experience of the partnership (Linder, 2000).

Table II

Measures for Establishing a "Meaningful Partnership."

Relationship measure	Description of measure	Illustrative queries nonprofit executives may use to determine if the partnership was a "meaningful partnership"	Supportive scholarship reference
I. Balance and equity in the partnership	Degree of authority, responsibility and decision-making ability allocated to each participant as the partnership forms and operates.	Do nonprofit organizations perceive they are equal partners?	Carnwell and Carson, 2005.
II. Strength of a partnership bond	Reflected through the density of social interactions, buy in and participation of leadership in each partner organization, and the access to their network of relationships outside the partnership.	How well and in what ways do the partner organizations complement, supplement, and benefit from one another?	Knoke and Yang, 2008; Takahasi and Smutny, 2002; Schensul, Lecompte et al., 1999; Granovetter, 1983.

III. Longevity of a partnership	Duration of partnership. Short term and temporary. Longer term and renewable.	In what ways will the partnership endure beyond the project period?	Rasler, 2007.
IV. Formality of the bond between organizations	Whether or not the partnership is formalized as a formal written agreement, contract or something less formal.	What is the commitment and enforcement of the leadership of the organization to the partnership?	Schensul, LeCompte et al, 1999.
V. Evidence of transformation	Observable changes that benefit the organization in some manner than can include program deliverables, organizational culture, practices or in unanticipated ways.	What did the organization learn from the counterpart organization? Have any changes occurred within the organization as a result of the bond with the partner?	Linden, 2000.

Forming Meaningful Partnerships

Table III captures several recommendations executives suggest policy makers, public managers and others may consider to better align their desire to stimulate partnerships with nonprofits desire to create meaningful partnerships.

The three issues of timing, shared values and adaptive nature were offered by nonprofit executives as key elements that are important to the success of their partnership endeavors.

In the spirit of stimulating the best possible circumstances for “meaningful partnership,” public managers, policy makers and others might provide resources to the nonprofit partners that strengthen ways to track the five measures listed in Table II. One method of traction may be in the adaptive use of evaluation “logic models” that are increasingly widespread in private, philanthropic grant making (Frumkin, 2006) with an important caveat. Typically the gravity of “logic models” are weighted toward alignment of project with mission and purpose of the public funder or the mission of the philanthropic institution. Little provision is available for outcomes that include forming a “meaningful partnership” or other outcome not directly aligned with the grant maker priorities. This tends to inhibit adaptation and flexibility in outcomes despite circumstances that may require shifts by the partner participants. Shifts might arise, for example, based upon exigent circumstances or needed deviation from a proposal and project work plan related to building trusts and operational coordination in the partnership, unexpected external conditions, extended implementation time lines and a host of other issues that arise during the course of project work complicated by

Table III

Recommendations for Forming Meaningful Partnerships

Elements of meaningful partnerships	Explanation	Recommendations
Timing	Public and private policy makers and funders must be patient with the nonprofits engaged in collaboration due to the time consuming process of developing trust over many meetings. In complex initiatives, these time-consuming processes may not be well served by two to three year project horizons.	Policy makers and grant makers hoping to stimulate meaningful partnership must phase their investments over time and establish measureable performance objectives, progress benchmarks and adaptive timetables.
Shared Values	Meaningful partnerships are those that endure because of shared values and functions between the participants that transcend isolated self-interested transactions contrived by funders. Shared values that may or may	This dilemma was attributed to the need for trust building by leaders of both organizations of the partnership, their actions of leadership at the start of a joint venture and the important work of removing risks

	not be "mission-based" drive each member to take on the duties of steward for the partnership. The panelists suggested that these values-based characteristics along with agreement by both members of the mutual benefits were characteristic of partnerships regardless of whether they were temporary or permanent.	to the parties during the collaboration. In this point of view, collaboration would be based upon familiarity between organizations, and trust developed at the top but also down through the staff hierarchy of both participants' organizations and the purposefulness of the partnership
Adaptive nature	Nurture an open-ended, flexible and adaptable process leading to more intense connections between the collaboration members. The panel members suggested the most meaningful, durable and effective partnerships among nonprofits would arise when public policy and grant makers included them early in the project design.	One of the colloquia panelists observed that policy makers, funders and nonprofits frequently talk past one another due to their different understanding of the requirements of collaboration and partnership. The people charged with making policy and allocating funding tend not to credit the views of the nonprofit recipients as credible to change their policy and funding implementation models and expectations.

partnership. Nonprofit executives and scholars inform us that following a strict logic model can hinder innovations that create opportunity between nonprofit organization partners and obstruct communications that nurture collaboration (Bedsworth, Goggins-Gregory, & Howard, 2008; Granovetter, 1983). Therefore, the exercise of creating a logic model can work against the needs of developing a partnership.

Conclusions

The benefits and costs associated with nonprofit organizations involved in public and private sector driven collaboration and partnership are important policy considerations.

The need for a way to classify partnerships as *meaningful* and assess the potential of partnership to be meaningful is a dilemma for nonprofit leaders that is heightened by the common practice of policy makers and philanthropic program officers - since the 1980s - to craft RFPs that require respondents to include collaboration as part of their proposed project work (Smith & Lipsky, 1993). This practice has been part of a movement by public administrators and others that credits induced partnerships as leading to project cost savings, operational efficiency through economies of scale, enhanced capacity to deliver services and increased accountability (Van Slyke, 2006; Martin, 2004; Frumkin, 2001). Other reasons include a desire by officials to amplify the reach of public-serving programs funded with tax dollars (Reed, Bowman & Knipper, 2005; Brooks, 1999; Osborne, 1993) and the need to attract funds from additional public and private sources in support of policy priorities and to concentrate the resources of private philanthropic grant making.

To the dismay of some, public and private policy makers have been slow to pay attention to the added costs, hardships and unintended consequences required of nonprofits in partnership ventures (Morino, 2011). While policy and grant makers may affirm the benefits of partnership among the organizations with which they work, nonprofits charged with delivering services face the difficult tasks of creating and managing them. We learn from nonprofit executives that forming and maintaining partnership takes time, commitment and costs of opportunity. Also, nonprofit executives and leaders contemplating inter-organizational cooperation, collaboration, network, partnership and even merger face a bewildering array of challenges, each with its own complexity (McDonald, 2011; Jacobs, 2008; Yankey, Jocobus & Koney, 2001; Bailey & Koney, 2000; Yankey, Wester & Campbell, 1998). The risks and rewards of partnership for nonprofits are not always obvious, and leaders may not readily recognize when an opportunity arises, the difference between a shallow collaboration or a durable, meaningful partnership, or what can be expected from them during the many permutations in between (McDonald, 2011; Van Slyke, 2003; Alexander, Nank & Stivers, 1999).

Collaboration obligated through policy considerations are further complicated by the nuance in the way each of the public, private and nonprofit sector actors describe and conceive of partnership (Shaefer, Deland & Jones, 2011; Alter, 2009; Mulroy 2003; Austin 2000). In the cases of many smaller nonprofits, this under-appreciated tendency toward subtle definition and expectation across sectors contributes to miscommunication, misplaced expectations, poor outcomes in meeting performance benchmarks required by policy makers, negative experiences, and increases barriers to forming lasting, resilient, and productive partnerships (Foster & Meinhard, 2002; Goldman & Kahnweiler, 2000).

Yet another consideration is that while many public policy makers may seek to stimulate collaboration, few public contracts and private grants provide resources for the stewardship of the relationship, frequently leaving the important work of maintaining a partnership to the good intentions and uncompensated, contributed time of one or more of the players.

Experience informs us that policy makers can drive the integrity of partnership ventures by holding partnership participants accountable through clarity in defining their intentions for partnerships or as nonprofit executives advise by "saying what they mean;" holding all parties, including themselves, responsible for outcomes; to only use partnership as a requirement if it necessary for the fulfillment of the work.

Implications for Policy and Further Study

The benefits and costs associated to nonprofit organizations involved in public and private sector driven collaboration and partnership are important components to the realization of public policy. One of the assertions of this essay is that policy-inspired collaborations and partnerships bear greater scrutiny by those encouraging them and those entering into them than is typified by public managers and grant makers through requests for proposals. Practical experience shared by nonprofit executives inform us that the meaningful partnerships have a return on investment that can contribute to the greater good and offer the greatest potential to solve public problems with limited resources.

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