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Strategies to Ensure Partnerships Thrive

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Partnering with another organization can strengthen your grant application. But partnerships are not successful just because two organizations shake hands and declare themselves partners. It takes work to collaborate with others. Why is it worth it?

Carefully selected partnerships can help your organization remain focused on its core competencies, its mission, while broadening its reach. Maybe a partner helps you reach a new population. Or maybe a partner brings critical expertise that you've discovered your clients need.

For example, organizations reaching out to families in poverty often discover needs among their clients they may not be as qualified to address - literacy, financial literacy, or domestic violence counseling. Finding a partner in the community who is already doing excellent work in these areas can benefit both organizations and ultimately, provide better services to the clients.

Here are five tips to create effective partnerships.

1. Look for your Natural Partners

What is a "natural partner?" Look for agencies whose mission, services, or clients align with yours in some obvious ways. Someone with whom you've previously collaborated is a good choice, because even through working together informally, you will have developed trust.

2. Look for an Equal Commitment to Sharing

Rarely are lopsided partnerships successful. A partnership is strongest when both members are getting something valuable from the relationship. Think beyond money when assessing value. The value may be increased visibility or credibility. It may be access to a population you couldn't otherwise reach.

3. Document Even Informal Relationships

For informal relationships, sometimes a memo to the file is adequate. This memo should document what each partner is contributing to an activity. It 's important, even if the two of you are best friends. Situations can change. You may fall suddenly ill. If no one else understands how your two organizations support one another or if a new boss doesn't see the value to your organization, the joint program can fall apart.

4. Make Expectations Clear

Misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities will strangle a partnership. Be as precise as possible regarding who does what, when. Writing this out and having everyone affirm this document at the first meeting will build a strong foundation for future success. It 's best to enter into a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), but at the minimum, have minutes that reflect the group 's adoption of the partnership document.

5. Reconfirm Expectations Regularly

When the grant is awarded, it 's important to reconvene partners and review the partnership roles and responsibilities. This is one last chance to identify any potential problems before you begin delivering grant services. Some partnerships find it beneficial to review the expectations of all partners at least annually. If the Executive Director or equivalent leader of any of the partner organizations changes, it 's smart to reconfirm the partnership agreement once again, just so that everyone understands the expectations and so that grant services can continue uninterrupted.

Documents alone won't guarantee successful partnerships. But strong documentation and collaborating with your natural partners, where it's clear what everyone is getting out of the relationship, will help make your partnership as successful as possible.

If you want to learn more, join us for a webinar from Cheryl Kester, "Upgrade Your Partnerships: Tips for Nonprofit Collaboration" on Tuesday, August 22, from 2:00-3:00PM ET.

Cheryl Kester (CRFE), is principal of **The Kester Group** and co-author of *Writing to Win Federal Grants: A Must-Have for Your Fundraising Toolbox*. She has more than 30 years of experience in the nonprofit sector and has been a grants professional since 1999. Today, her firm specializes in winning federal grants and serving as an external evaluator.

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