Session Title: Collaborative Grantseeking

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The session will cover types of collaboration – we tend to think of collaboration as one thing, but it’s many different kinds of things. The session will cover Leadership Principles – the characteristics you need to be successful, and Generating Ideas – how do you come up with great ideas for collaboration.

We must agree on a functional definition, something practical. Collaboration is an interaction between two or more persons or organizations that agree to mutually beneficial goal sharing.

The question is: how do you know a successful collaboration? You see a high level of interaction, and you see a lot of goal sharing. When you see those, then you know you’ve got collaboration.

[Next slide is a graph of interaction and goal sharing, the types of collaboration] Different collaborations have different amounts of each of these.

Co-existence: imagine two kids in the sandbox, each working —one says can I borrow your shovel? Sure. They aren’t interacting very much, their collaboration is more like co-existence, the lowest form of collaboration. I have seen so many of these grants with the lowest form of collaboration. A grant writer says, “Oh my gosh I need a Medical College collaborator! We need a letter of support from you Dr. Smith!” And he writes some sort of generic thing and it’s a “collaborative” proposal. As a grant reviewer, I know that’s a phantom collaboration. If it’s a real collaboration, you’re collaborating before, during and after the grant period. This first form is these silos with maybe a small bridge between them: tokenism collaboration.

The second form is the coordination collaboration, moved down on the interaction scale. They’ve done more to get people involved in the process, there’s a lot more communication. The partners have a co-dependency on each other, as opposed to the tokenism. Sort of a shared partnership concept.

A third type of collaboration is cooperation. What’s happening here is there may be less communication, but in order to really pull this off, you needed someone else who is really committed to the same goals—the vision of what could be, and agreements on specific, measurable objectives. A purposeful experience, we’ve got our sights set on it.

The fourth type is the coalition collaboration. You have a great deal of goal sharing, and a great deal of interaction along the way. I can think of one example, a pediatric asthma grant. It was a project that involves the Medical College, there was so much goal sharing and interaction that after the project was over they spun off and became their own 501(c)3.

When I set out, I don’t say “I want that kind of collaboration.” It’s a judgment you make after the fact. Goal sharing defines itself by the resources that each person is bringing to the table. Are there certain tangible things you can bring along? What kind of personnel can you bring along? Are there business services or intellectual property that would be useful in this project? The list goes on and on (next slide).
When I see these things, that’s when I can determine what kind of collaboration I have. When people can bring these, then you can see the extent to which they are really sharing their goals.

I’m writing a grant right now, and one of the things I have in that proposal was to say, “In preparing this grant among our collaborators, we exchanged 874 emails, and had weekly conference calls that totaled 14 hours of conference calls.” These are the kinds of specific statements that let reviewers know that there’s substance to it—it’s not one of those phantom collaborations. Those are some things you can show, to document you have a substantive collaboration.

A collaboration has to have a leader. It can be plural, that’s fine. But there has to be someone responsible for keeping things on task, on time, and on budget. What is a leader? Leadership is the ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the success of the organizations of which they are members.

The key to the collaboration is communication. If you don’t have that interaction part, you get caught up in a really vicious cycle. If people don’t communicate well, there start to be these little criticisms, and a little blame. That leads to a loss of respect. Once you lose respect, people start to get isolated, have an inward focus, and start to work on their own things. You get little divisions, people start to modify their aspirations, and the whole thrust of the collaboration is changed. Then people start to get negative. “Well I tried to work with them, but it didn’t work.” You really need to buy in to the goal sharing, and communication is the key thing to help keep your collaboration going.

What are some of the concrete behaviors that we can observe that differentiate successful from unsuccessful collaborations? When you have a strong collaboration, how do you know it when you see it? Collaborations often bring about change. The very fact that we’re organized; one way can often make it difficult to do something else. Sometimes things might have to change on you!

You can see how if we flip these winning dynamics, if we flip them around you can see how you can recognize a negative collaboration.

This is the yardstick that I have. If you are leading a collaboration, take something like this and put it on the table. Say, if we’re going to be successful, these are the things we need to do. Can we all agree to this?

Generating ideas: There are some pre-collaboration steps. If you’re going to be involved in a collaboration, there is a mental checklist of things you have to do before you get going. See how you stack up on these particular features.

Take a look at yourself. Do you think you have the capacity to lead a collaboration? Recognizing that collaboration is shared governance, somebody has to be the cheerleader and get things going. Conceptualization. Do you have a good handle on the process, the problem? Do you feel like you understand it? If you don’t understand it very well, maybe you shouldn’t lead it. You need to do your homework on it before you get involved.
You need to be able to identify, who might share these ideas that I do? Do I have enough access to these collaborators, who might bring this expertise together so we can lead in a collaborative way.

The last is selection. Can I identify the people who have very specific contributions to the table. The inventory list of resources. (See slide)

This is the process I like to go through. Yes, I think I can lead. I think I have a handle on the issue. I know some collaborators, and I have an idea of the things that everybody can bring to the table.

Now that we’ve got our collaborators identified, you’ll have some potential meetings and will start to identify some ideas.

There are tons and tons of ways. Most people know about focus groups. The typical focus group is run as what I would call a brainstorming session. We’ve got some real issues dealing with this issue. What are some of the ways we could reduce the incidence of pediatric asthma? The concept of the brainstorming focus group is pretty easy, people can just go with the flow. You get a lot of variety in the ideas. You can deal with multiple topics. You might shift to the resources that communities have to solve the problem, you might deal with the shortage of qualified personnel, or housing, or you can go lots of different ways. But there are some negatives with the brainstorming approach as well. You can’t really control it too well, you don’t know where it’s going to go. You’re not always certain about what the outcomes are when you’re involved in a brainstorming session. You don’t know if you’re going to end up with things that can result in strategic planning. And some people tend to dominate the discussion. This person is so dominating that it suppresses ideas of the other people.

A brainstorming session has pluses and minuses. In a round robin focus group, you have a specific topic that you want to address, and then you set up certain rules of the game of how you’re going to do the focus group. You’re going to go around the table, somebody will be a note taker, and you keep going around the table one person at a time. And if you don’t have something to suggest, you just say pass. Usually these focus groups are around 7-15 people, 60-90 minutes. Some of the values of a round robin focus group is it ensures equal participation and it gets rid of the dominator. You’ll get multiple ideas.

In a typical round robin focus group, I get one new idea every two minutes. If I run one for an hour, I’ll get 30 concrete ideas. Then later on we can evaluate them and sort them out. But we start the process by generating some really good ideas. Once people get into the process, by the third or fourth time around the table, you get some really good stuff that people wouldn’t have thought about before, and it gets to be a really good way to get ideas to put in a proposal/application.

Disadvantages, there’s a certain pressure to speak. The solution there is you can say “pass.” People have to give a very direct answer, and don’t usually have time to go into detailed explanations. Our idea here is to generate a lot of new ideas.

In my work, I’m doing more of the round robin than the brainstorming. Simply because I need to get as many good ideas on the table as quickly as I can. That’s been one of the benefits. But there have been cases where I’ve used both of them.
Regardless of which type of focus group you’re talking about, you need to have a good facilitator who explains the rules of the focus group. Formulating the question is the responsibility of the facilitator, and articulating that question is really key.

Bigger than 15 people is really too big. I also like to arrange the seating in a circle, so it’s all equal. It needs to be a quiet environment. The only materials I use are a flip chart. Maybe I’ll put a list of the ideas on the wall, and then I’ll ask everyone to put a checkmark by the three best ideas. Then it immediately becomes clear what the strongest ideas in the group are. You’ll then do a closing and talk about how you’re going to follow up.

*Question:* Is there such a thing as too many collaborators at the table? How many groups should really be involved?

*Answer:* It depends upon what people can bring to the table. What resources do you need to pull off the project? I look at the goals we are trying to accomplish. I talked about the four different types of collaboration—it’s also clear that not every collaborator will have that same type of relationship to the whole thing. Maybe one person is letting you use some materials, but they’re not really involved. But someone else might be doing the heavy lifting in terms of the collaboration. The best size, I don’t know. I guess the smallest you could have would be two. The largest I’ve ever been involved in had upwards of 50. If I look back over an average, probably 4-12 is the range. But don’t take that as a straight jacket.

*Question:* Because sometimes when you find out about grant opportunities you don’t have a lot of time to figure out who your collaborators might be. Should you go through this process before you hear about those grant opportunities?

*Answer:* Take a gold star! You are exactly right. The time to build a collaboration is NOT when you are pursuing a grant! You go out for a cup of coffee and say “it looks like you and I share some values here.” You identify this beforehand. There needs to be that kind of networking, and you should start tomorrow, if you haven’t already done so! Maybe you already have, but maybe you have not gone as far as what I’ve been talking about here in terms of addressing these questions.

*Question:* What is the title of your book?


*Question:* How do you get your collaborators to contribute to the proposal in the end-stages, when the deadline is tomorrow and FedEx is coming?

*Answer:* I’ve had that problem many, many times. There are so many answers. It starts early in the process when you get people to buy in to the goal. There’s certain behaviors you need to engage in to have that. You have to have one person who carries the responsibility for writing that grant. It may or may not be the leader. Early on, create a time and task chart. Say, we need this needs section, you’re going to write that section. Get people to agree to that and send it to the writer, and then have the writer polish it out so it looks like one person wrote it instead of 5 people. With one proposal, I got
people to agree to have everything completed two weeks before the real deadline, so you have a chance to polish it.

If you find out about a proposal 10 days before the deadline, pass on it. It will look weak, and reviewers have the skills to sort all that out.

**Question:** Can you share the top 3 mistakes that grantseekers fall in to?

**Answer:** Number one, the single biggest mistake is failing to engage in pre-proposal contact. They don’t talk to anybody and just put it in the mail. I can think of no better way to get turned down. People who engage in pre-proposal contact increase their odds by 300%. I talk to the program officer, the past grant winner, and the past grant reviewer.

Number two, read the guidelines and believe them! Take them seriously.

Number three, get a copy of the reviewer’s evaluation form. You assume many times that the evaluation form is the same as the guidelines for the content for the proposal. In my experience, at least 30% of the time there is a discrepancy. And when I discover that’s the case, I ignore the guidelines without guilt, and follow verbatim the evaluation form. And I get comments back—this was well organized! It was easy to read! And they don’t have to jump around and get “where’s the needs section? Where’s this section?”

**Question:** Where would you get the reviewer’s evaluation form?

**Answer:** What you get in life is a function of what you ask for. Ask for it! If it’s federal grants, they have to give them to you by law, but they don’t volunteer it. You have to ask for it. In a private foundation, the big foundations behave like the government. So I can get one from RWJ. Where you run into problems is the small to medium sized foundations. They don’t have to give them to you. That’s why you have to engage in pre-proposal contact, because then you can start to sort that all out.

I’ve thrown a lot at you, and appreciate you taking the time to hear from me. Thank you very much.