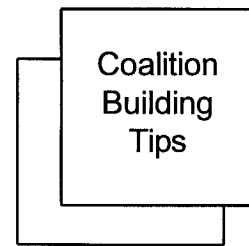


Building Coalitions between Arts and Community Organizations

by Craig Dreeszen, Ph.D. and Thomas Wolff, Ph.D.



Both of us have noted an encouraging upsurge in the frequency and quality of partnerships between community arts organizations, artists, and health and human service organizations. As one trend, more arts organizations are directing their creative talents toward solving community problems. Among many examples, the Cambridge Performance Project is sending the Back Porch Dance Company on a month-long residency at the new Cambridge Senior Center to perform, rehearse, and give workshops for elders.

At the same time, civic agencies are turning to artists and other cultural workers to help reach their constituents with theater, dance, storytelling, and the visual arts. So, in another example, the Family Planning Council of Western Massachusetts, which has been using theater as part of its teen-age health program for ten years, recently began working with a professional artistic director from Shakespeare and Company.

So why do we need a Tip Sheet? Doesn't collaboration simply mean two groups working together? The best answer may be yes and no.

Yes, because collaborations are often begun naturally. A local arts agency wants to extend its programs throughout a community, while a health maintenance organization is trying to draw people to its health education fair. They find something in common: musicians and storytellers at the fair would serve both agencies' goals. The health agency director rediscovers what community organizers have long known — the transformative power of story and song. Likewise, the artist is inspired and renewed through interaction with community members, up close and barrier-free.

But no, because these well-intentioned partnerships don't always go smoothly. The bumps may be serious enough so that the would-be partners are discouraged from a worthy collaboration. Arts and human service organizations come from two very different organizational cultures. When the arts take on community issues, they may not always anticipate the consequences (e.g., disclosures of abuse after a puppet show on abuse). And when human service organizations move into arts projects, they may not realize how important artistic quality is to success.

If partners take time to get acquainted and build trust, understand what each needs and can offer, appreciate what constraints each operates under, and focus on shared goals, their partnership will be likely to succeed. Southerners don't get down to business until they've done some "porch sitting." Similarly, in our rush to act, we may ignore the civilities that will build relationships and prevent problems later. To elaborate on this key point, let's examine some frequent barriers to successful collaboration, and how to overcome them.

□ **"You want what?"** Everyone enters a partnership with expectations. The oft-cited advice to "leave your agendas at the door" is naive. Everyone has an agenda. **But actually, different objectives and resources can make for a stronger partnership if they are complementary and made known.** It is hidden agendas that get in the way. So civic partners should not be surprised if the artists expect to be fairly paid. Nor should artists be surprised if they must yield the stage to a workshop leader. *Solution: Assume nothing. Ask explicitly, "What do you hope to achieve? What conditions must be met? What constraints apply?"*

□ **"Who's on first?"** Collaborations involve new relationships. It takes time to sort out who will do what, how decisions will be made, and who will follow through. In a gathering of leaders, don't be surprised if there is jockeying for leadership. *Solution: Take time to get acquainted and build trust. Do a simple project together before you commit to a major one.*

❑ **“I thought you were writing the grant!”** Especially in a new partnership, tasks need to be explicitly matched with those responsible for them. Otherwise, important tasks may go undone. *Solution: In any task-oriented meeting, you’re not finished until you answer this question: “Who is going to do what by when?”*

❑ **Risks, what risks?** Performances can unleash powerful emotions. Artists and arts groups venturing into community development may be naive to legal, emotional, and physical risks that health and human service professionals are well prepared for. Issues of patient confidentiality, and the emotional consequences of personal disclosures can catch the artist unaware. *Solution: If the arts are used in a therapeutic way, a competent health professional must be an active partner in program design and implementation.*

❑ **Quality control.** Artists and arts agencies naturally value artistic quality. But what kind? For a community artist engaging people in a participatory arts experience (e.g., helping kids create a mural) the quality of the creative process matters most. But for performances before an audience, the quality of the creative product matters more. An ill-tuned piano, screeching sound system, mumbling storyteller, or poorly-timed theatrical entrance can undermine the intended effect of an arts program. *Solution: Partner with professional-quality artists.*

❑ **Culture wars.** Some political and religious movements have found it expedient to rally their followers against invented enemies. Feminists, homosexuals, and the arts are among their targets. Locally, some people may use the arts as part of their strategy to polarize the community around values. *Solution: Assess the risks of potentially controversial programs, build political support, and think ahead about how to handle an assault.*

Despite these potential barriers, most arts and human service partnerships evolve quite naturally. Most difficulties are easily resolved. To ease such resolution, and increase chances of success, we can distill our recommendations into four basic steps.

1. Get Ready. Identify a likely partner. Look for overlapping interests and complementary resources. Get acquainted: Meet the director for coffee, attend one of their events, “do lunch.” Discuss and define the problem or opportunity.

2. Get set. Agree on goals and outcomes for the shared project. Make action plans. Establish how you will communicate and make decisions. Develop a budget, listing revenues and expenses. Draft a written memo of agreement.

3. Go. Implement your plans.

4. Ask: “How are we doing?” Keep in touch. Watch for unseen problems or opportunities. Monitor your progress. Adjust the work plan as required.

“Writers, poets, actors, craftspeople, artists — they are the heart and soul of our communities,” as Arthur Himmelman has said. The arts can move and elevate people and communities through their craftsmanship. When brought into collaboration with community service groups, this craftsmanship can lead to exciting community transformation.

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