

Building a Culture of Collaboration

Ashley Tobin 23 January 2013

Getting started with the act of collaboration involves two key components: a group of willing participants and a structured conversation. Connecting Coffee is a free networking program for nonprofit professionals, started because there wasn't a venue for people to describe their work, ask for what they need and form relationships with other agencies. In the structured environment of Connecting Coffee, a moderated small-group discussion, nonprofit professionals are coming together and solving problems.

We in the nonprofit sector tend to act like there is a cold war among all the other agencies in the area. We keep to ourselves and don't talk to other agencies in the area. We hear about their work from our donors and when they get the big grant we wanted. We wonder how they are getting things done. Rarely do we ask them ourselves and rarely do we truly understand who our competitors are and who our potential partners are.

This isolation could also be a contributor to staff turnover. The lack of a network of like-minded people increases the sense that you are the only one doing what you are doing. The ground-level work is hard, with an emotional

investment that can take a toll on your key people. When a group of people starts talking about how hard it is, there are social bonds that develop to make the next part of the conversation easier: finding solutions. Some people have called this therapy for nonprofit professionals: It's not. It's a productive business tool that breaks down walls and creates pathways for communication and collaboration.

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The greatest frustration in the nonprofit sector is when an agency creates a new program when a similar, high-quality program is already offered by someone else. The act of partnering with another agency to share a program or expand its reach does not need to be a major undertaking. When agencies can identify their needs and then seek out partners to fill those needs with high-quality solutions, nonprofits become more efficient and more effective.

Connecting Coffees start by building a common or shared interest. After we introduce ourselves, I ask a question to get the conversation started. If there is a specific topic for the session, the question will be about that topic. Sometimes we start with a question like, "Who is doing great work in Philadelphia?" When I start with this question, very rarely is the answer "my agency," so we spend some time dissecting that.

The common interest often expressed is frustration.

Having a chance to vent is an important part of the process. Because it's a moderated discussion, we don't dwell on the frustration for long. Instead, we start talking about solutions. What would change the shared frustration? What is a resource that you need to make this better?

In the fall of 2011, Philadelphia VIP hosted a Connecting Coffee about volunteer management. Volunteer management is a topic that always gets a good cross-section of people at the table: executive directors, social workers, volunteer managers, development directors, etc. The greater the diversity of voices, the better the conversation.

At this session, the group talked about how volunteer management can be a challenge because people who don't know how to manage volunteers, and who have job responsibilities outside of volunteer management, have to manage the work product and expectations of the volunteer and the person who is benefiting from the volunteer's efforts. Although well-meaning, a volunteer doesn't always understand the beneficiary's situation and his or her volunteer experience can become frustrating.

For example, a lawyer who is helping a family through a legal problem may not understand why the family's phone works one day and not the next. That family might be on a limited cell phone plan and have run out of minutes. They might have needed to make some hard decisions about

how to spend their money that month: food or phone? The lawyer may only see that he or she is having a hard time doing the pro bono work that will resolve the situation. The lawyer, the family and the staff person are spending more time trying to manage the connection than they are helping the family. Nonprofit professionals could come up with dozens of these examples. I use the lawyer example because there were representatives from a number of agencies that work with lawyers in the room.

The conversation then turned to solutions. What would make situations like these easier? After some deliberation, the group started talking about trying to find a shared resource for cultural competency training. They wanted a program that would show volunteers some of the realities they will find when they try to help. They wanted something engaging and interactive, something that could be provided in one session because so many volunteers don't have a lot of time to spend. The interactive training had to show the decisions that a family living in poverty needs to make. A short, persuasive video describing the life of a family living in poverty would be helpful and could be viewed anywhere.

The room was positively electric with the hope for a solution that would resolve this persistent and universal issue. I said I would do some research, and other people offered to reach out to organizations that they knew had well-developed volunteer training. For several months I talked to video production companies, looked for funding,

talked to agencies that corral volunteers. And then I heard from the host of that day's session, Susan Wysor Nguema of Philadelphia VIP.

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Philadelphia VIP is an agency that provides last-resort legal services for a low-income population, often helping people with basic needs such as shelter and health. In order to provide this legal help, they recruit and train lawyers. And Susan is one of those social workers who takes a project and runs with it. She talked to her leadership team and they saw that this training program was within the mission and scope of the agency.

In October 2012, Philadelphia VIP held the first cultural competency training program—complete with continuing legal education credits in the coveted ethics category. Susan has been invited to provide the same training to corporate in-house counsel at a large Philadelphia-based company. Her program is bridging gaps, misunderstandings and hurt feelings between volunteers from the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. And she's doing it because the need and solution were identified at Connecting Coffee.

This example is, on a grand scale, what I see at Connecting Coffee each session: People articulating what they need and peers providing solutions.

It can be scary admitting that there is something you need, especially when you feel isolated. Many people who come to Connecting Coffee feel like they are the only ones doing what they're doing, the only ones struggling. After we build that as a universal truth, we start getting to the productive discussions about solutions. People swap names of people who can help and available community resources and find new uses for existing resources. What about using free tickets to the theater as incentives for families that are starting to change behavior that landed them in difficult situations? Sure!

As Philadelphia nonprofit professionals start to have these conversations and see the benefits of collaboration, we are building the skills within the agencies to build partnerships instead of new programs and shared resources instead of secrets. Philadelphia and the people we serve are better for it. And in the future, we'll have a system that is more effective and efficient because everyone is working together.

Author Bio

Ashley Tobin is the Principal of Work Better Consulting, producer of Connecting Coffee. She is an independent nonprofit professional who works with small to mid-size nonprofit agencies in the Philadelphia region. Her specialty is partnerships and collaborations and working with the executive leadership team to develop nontraditional strategic planning. She turns ideas into

action plans.