

# What Capacities do Nonprofits Need in Order to Collaborate?

Collective action is an effective way for nonprofits to increase their impact, but they often lack the key capacities that enable these types of partnerships to thrive. Nonprofits need time and space to explore and employ the power of collective action to advance their missions. They also need organizational slack, and board and staff leaders who are adept at building relationships and sharing power and responsibility.

Grantmakers can play a vital role in creating the space for collaboration and supporting nonprofits as they work together to get better results. This piece offers insights on the core capacities nonprofits need to collaborate and how funders can help.

## The Core Capacities of Collaborative Nonprofits

Achieving real and lasting impact often means changing complex and dynamic systems, but no single organization can succeed in this work on its own. When people reach across the lines that too often divide organizations and sectors, they tap into new ideas and new resources and create partnerships that can help them achieve their shared goals. Unfortunately, this kind of cooperation remains all too rare across the nonprofit sector.

**“To consider teaming up with a competitor requires a whole new way of thinking and behaving. It requires developing trust, which takes time, and additional organizational capacity, and time and capacity are as scarce to nonprofit leaders as capital.” – Carol Thompson Cole, Venture Philanthropy Partners<sup>1</sup>**

For more on this topic, see [Working Better Together: Building Nonprofit Collaborative Capacity](#) (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Thompson Cole, [“Towards a New Kind of Collaboration: A Networked Approach to Social Change.”](#) Venture Philanthropy Partners, 2010.

As much as funders would like to see more strategic collaboration among their grantees and other organizations, the reality for many nonprofits is that they simply do not have the time or the resources to do collective work. Each organization must seek its own funding, develop its own plans for sustainability, create its own niche and brand and, essentially, compete with other organizations for funding and recognition. In addition, the predominance of small, program-restricted, one-year grants requires nonprofit leaders to stay focused on meeting their organizations' day-to-day and year-to-year needs. This can prevent them from taking a broader view and thinking more strategically about opportunities to partner with others for greater impact.

In light of these constraints, GEO's interviews and research identified a few key capacities that enable collective action:

### Strong leadership and an open mindset

Organizations that build and sustain successful partnerships and networks know that it takes time and hard work. Their staff and board leaders study the ecosystems they are a part of to see who is doing what, where their organizations fit in and where there are opportunities for aligned actions. Leaders of these organizations also set out to build internal cultures that encourage and reward outreach and relationship building.

**With the tagline, “We help people grow food,” the [Southside Community Land Trust](#) works to increase access to locally produced, affordable and healthy food for the people of Greater Providence, Rhode Island. Since it was established in the 1980s, the trust has built a network of 43 community gardens and farms that provide opportunities for commercial agriculture, community participation and public education for people of all ages. The trust also was instrumental in creating the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, a coalition of diverse stakeholders committed to advancing state and local policies that support local agriculture and a healthier food system “from plant to plate.”**

### Ability to share power and responsibility

Working effectively in partnerships takes humility and willingness to trade control and power for a higher level of impact. As a result, participants often have to look beyond the specific objectives of their own organizations toward bigger mission goals. In order to do this well, people need negotiating skills, the ability to compromise and see the big picture, the ability to share credit and control, and openness to criticism and change. For more on the mindset shifts required for effective collaboration, see GEO's publication [Cracking the Network Code: Four Principles for Grantmakers](#).

**RE-AMP** is a network of more than 160 nonprofits and foundations across eight Midwestern states working in concert to reduce the pollution that contributes to global warming. Member organizations provide the staff for RE-AMP and elect a steering committee that guides the network's policy development, fundraising and other activities. According to RE-AMP Coordinator Jeremy Emmi, RE-AMP's success stems from members' ability to put aside any organizational pet causes that might jeopardize collective goals and projects. "Part of the RE-AMP agreement was to not work against each other when individual partners have goals for which there may not be consensus and, when appropriate, to convene a network discussion to help find common ground," he said.

### Adaptability and flexibility

It is hard to predict how broad-based partnerships will evolve; issue priorities may shift as new partners come on board and participants may decide to change the nature and focus of their collective work. All this means that organizations and individuals involved in collaborative initiatives need to approach the work with a high level of *adaptive capacity*, defined by TCC Group as "the ability to monitor, assess, respond to, and stimulate internal and external changes."<sup>2</sup>

**Arts for LA**, is a nonprofit that helps build consensus in the arts community on broad policy priorities and strengthens the capacity of local artists and arts organizations to be better advocates for themselves. For example, when the Los Angeles City Administrative Officer recommended cutting the Department of Cultural Affairs budget in 2011, Arts for LA mobilized an electronic letter-writing campaign reminding the city council of the public support that the funds had and urging them to maintain the funding. In less than 48 hours, the mayor and city council received more than 300 electronic letters, all with a positive message thanking them for supporting arts and culture.

### Strong connectivity and relationship building

Connections and relationships that evolve into productive partnerships are more likely to happen in certain organizations: those that are externally focused and those that support staff in reaching out to others to build relationships. To the extent that an organization's board and staff have the time and the freedom to build and sustain productive relationships with others, the organization will be more successful in its collective work.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter York, "[The Sustainability Formula](#)," TCC Group, 2009, 2.

As a partnership founded in 1991 between the corporate sector and the environmental community, Canada's [Alberta Ecotrust](#) spends time breaking down barriers to collaboration and mutual understanding. Alberta Ecotrust partners, in recognition of their shared goal of protecting the environment, created and continue to develop a successful model for cross-sector collaboration, which includes a fund to support grassroots environmental projects. It is not uncommon for industry members to sit on the boards of environmental organizations, or for watershed or land-use planning councils to be made up of representatives from several sectors.

## Approaches for Funders

If funders truly want to spur their grantees to align efforts, we will need to take a hard look at our core grantmaking practices and assess the degree to which we are encouraging a go-it-alone mindset. GEO heard from grantmakers and nonprofits that in order to best support collaborative capacity, funders need to:

### Help make connections, but don't force them

Collaborative efforts work best when they are organic — when the partners can come together, explore areas of common interest and make decisions about the structure and focus of their collective work. With our unique vantage point, grantmakers have the opportunity to see a broader scope of what is happening on the ground. Grantmakers can also help spur new connections among nonprofits and partners through activities such as providing office space to community nonprofits for collaborative meetings and events, providing staff with training in facilitation and other key network weaving skills, and hosting convenings where nonprofits can come together to build relationships and discuss important issues in their mission areas. That said, when exploring possible collaborative activities, nonprofits should remain in the driver's seat while funders focus on playing the connector role.

### Offer core support and flexible, long-term funding to grantees

Discretionary funding and general operating support can help ensure that nonprofits and their partners have the flexibility to adapt their work in response to new data and information, lessons learned about what is and is not working, and changes in the external environment. When funders provide steady core funding to organizations participating in aligned work, it can give organizations what they need to support staff and leaders in developing capacities for collaboration, reduce competition among collaborative members for project dollars and ease the process of trust building. Grantmakers also should remember that achieving real results from collaborative efforts can take time.



To the extent that grantmakers provide patient support over a number of years, their investments can deliver enormous returns.

### Provide necessary resources to support and enable collaboration

Staff of collaborating organizations need time and space to plan their aligned efforts, and the partnership needs resources for shared measurement and reporting systems, communications, technology, research, convening activities, and more. Grantmakers can provide critical support for the logistics and operations of partnerships. Grantmakers also should remember that, in addition to crucial financial resources, we can use our reputational capital to attract attention and additional support to this work — bringing other funders to the table, securing media coverage for the work, convening government and business partners, and more. Funders can also offer the intellectual and technical support and expertise of our board and staff to nonprofit collaboratives, where relevant.

## Conclusion

When collaborations are organic and are given the time and resources they need to grow to full strength, they can have an enormous impact on the effectiveness of nonprofits. However, many nonprofits and their leaders are frustrated with funders regularly telling them they need to spend time on resources trying to work together without providing any real incentives to do so. The challenge for funders, then, is to make a better, stronger case for collective action as a pathway to better results, while at the same time helping nonprofits develop the capacities they need to engage in successful partnerships.

## Practice What You Preach

It is hard to make the case that nonprofits should reach out to others and embrace collective action if grantmakers are not doing the same thing. Supporting nonprofits' efforts to collaborate effectively requires funders to develop our own capacities in areas ranging from relationship building to stakeholder engagement. Our leadership and staff need to approach this work with empathy and curiosity, a willingness to listen and learn, and an understanding that aligned efforts can take time to grow.

In GEO's listening sessions, nonprofit leaders stressed the importance of funders getting our own house in order when it comes to adopting collaborative approaches. Nonprofit leaders talked about how they no longer have personal relationships with funders in the area and how fewer and fewer foundations make site visits or take their phone calls. One leader commented, "More and more I'm finding online applications. There's no discussion; there's no one you can reach at the foundation to answer your questions. It is not only impersonal and a tough way to engage someone in your work, but I think the foundations are losing out on an opportunity to learn."