COMMUNITY
PROBLEM-SOLVING

Partnerships are great—except when they're not. Partnerships (or strategic alliances) allow us to tackle hard problems together and "co-produce" solutions. Here's how to ask—and answer—the four strategic questions that define effective partnerships.

STRATEGY TOOL #1

Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage?: Understanding The Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships

by Xavier de Souza Briggs

The Community Problem-Solving Project @ MIT
Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

May 2003

Download this and other strategy tools free at

www.community-problem-solving.net

Ideas in Brief

The concept of "partnership" as a mechanism for pooling resources to get things done is almost as old as recorded history. Useful partners may bring money, materials, expertise, reputation, relationships, and more to help us achieve things that matter to us—and, ideally, to them as well. Today, the demand for public interest partnerships has increased dramatically in response to changing social problems, as well as changing ideas about how best to tackle them. Not just facts of life but powerful vehicles when managed well, partnerships are here to stay, and we need to learn their potential as well as their many pitfalls.

Unfortunately, much available guidance either celebrates more than it clarifies or focuses on just a small part of the landscape. Decision-makers who want to make better choices about partnerships—those working in the public, private or non-governmental (nonprofit) sector or across them—need to address four (4) strategic questions and navigate the distinct *stages* of alliance building. This strategy note explores the key issues and, with real-world case examples, offers straight talk to support better decisions.

Ideas at Work

STRATEGIC QUESTION	DECISION ISSUES	CAVEATS
1. *Should* we partner? Partnering is one strategic option for getting something done in the world. Others are "make" (do it ourselves) and "buy" (contract for it). Partnerships *should* be strategic alliances, with risks and rewards weighed.	Can we do it ourselves, or do we need to develop this capacity? How much control do we need over the process and output? What would partnering enable us to accomplish over and above the alternatives?	Many partnerships are hastily entered, and some contractor relationships are labeled "partnership" because the concept is popular and marketable. Compared to the alternatives, partnering often sacrifices control for the sake of unique gains.
2. What overall *purposes* would this partnership serve? Beyond producing something special, or producing it more effectively, through joint work, partnerships often provide the *legitimacy* or *political support* that tough community problems require.	Who are the key stakeholders, and what are their expectations? Who has the credibility and capacity needed to act on this issue or problem? Are we ready to hitch our *reputation* to theirs? Do we *trust* their motives as well as their competence? How will our *other* allies or partners respond?	Taking a "multi-lateral" approach is often crucial, especially when social problems involve a history of conflict or mistrust among groups or tap deep controversies. But an ineffective partnership may make it harder for the individual players to "deliver the goods" that stakeholders expect.
3. How should we define *success*? Too many efforts forget to measure—and manage—the multiple dimensions of performance in partnership work. Partnerships often face great expectations and confusing performance demands.	What *outcome* (change in the "state of the world") do we want to create together? What measurable *outputs* (of our work) will those outcomes require? What kinds of *knowledge* and what *operational processes* will help us produce the outputs?	Not all successful relationship building leads to improved joint output, which requires learning, risk taking, and new behavior. What's more, partners may ignore the external factors that affect outcomes, creating a relational success and an outcome failure.
4. *How* partnered should we be? Partnership arrangements can operate at various levels of depth or "integration" in terms of the partners' activities and resources.	Based on our capacity and aims, do we envision "light" cooperation arrangements or deeper, blended activities and pooled resources? Or something in between?	Partnerships struggle when participants have different, and often unexpressed, assumptions about the right *degree* of partnership. And the labels—collaborate, cooperate, "partner" itself—are so broad.

Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage?: Understanding the Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships

by Xavier de Souza Briggs

Partnerships seem to be everywhere in demand. Among the world's great-but-loosely-applied terms, "partnership" is up there with "community." First of all, who would want to be *against* "working in partnership," at least in principle? And second, is there any problem-solving that partnership *doesn't* somehow describe or can't be made to describe? The surplus of labels employed—collaboratives, alliances, coalitions, consortia, and more—only adds to the confusion.

One way of thinking about the overall purpose of partnerships is both attractively simple and adds a little discipline to this highly elastic idea …

Partnerships are a means of "producing together" with others when we cannot produce something important—or cannot produce it nearly as well—on our own.

Partnership, then, may be thought of as *productive teamwork* scaled up to the level of organizations, communities, and even nations or groups of nations. Just as individuals collaborate in teams (small-scale workgroups), organizations or other entities may be able to collaborate or partner to mutual advantage.

If this helps explain, at least in a general way, why partnerships arise, another important question remains: why is the demand for partnerships growing—and

Xavier de Souza Briggs *is Associate Professor of Sociology and Urban Planning and Director, The Community Problem-Solving Project @ MIT, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 9-521, Cambridge, MA 02139 U.S.A..*
This tool was prepared to illustrate strategic challenges and choices facing people and institutions around the globe rather than to highlight effective or ineffective handling of particular situations.

so quickly, in so many domains, in so many corners of the globe?

To answer this one, let's take a quick look at history. As the inventors of the industrial assembly line, and their ancient forbears who built the Pyramids and other monuments, recog-

nized, there are but two big steps to getting something done in the world. The first is getting agreement on what it is that should be produced and by whom, which involves give-and-take or "politics" in the broad sense. The second step is "production" itself. Production, in turn, poses two overall challenges: dividing labor wisely and then coordinating it effectively.

In a general way, we've spent much of human history dividing up the work in the world, often by giving organizations particular "jobs" (missions)—think of how lawmakers create new agencies or new roles for existing agencies, for example—and sometimes by letting organizations claim those jobs without much community or civic input at all. Private for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, for example, may or may not consult widely before declaring and pursuing their missions.

Coordinating work effectively often turns out to be much harder than dividing it. Partnerships are one of the coordinating devices that spring up when particular players, in a world of very divided responsibility, find that they cannot handle some important job alone or do not wish to face alone the risks apparent in performing a function, entering a new field of practice, etc.

We've spent the last few thousand years assigning the work of society in increasingly specialized ways. On one hand, this created huge benefits, such as increases in efficiency that come with specializing in a task and rapid advances in well-defined areas

> *Partnerships are a means of "producing together" with others [but] the surplus of labels employed—collaboratives, alliances, coalitions, consortia, and more—only adds to the confusion.*

of knowledge. But it also created major problems for which we are now paying a high price as a global society: fragmented or poorly coordinated approaches to problems that should be approached holistically, problems and people that "fall between the cracks" because no one in particular takes responsibility, slow and defensive learning between specialists with narrow views of the work that needs doing, some unnecessary competition for scarce resources, and more.

One particularly urgent domain of work—public interest work, or the work of solving society's problems—only became more divided and more challenging to coordinate well when government privatized or "nonprofitized" (shifted to nonprofit organizations) many formerly "public" services.

In many countries, this massive trend—pushing work *outward* from government to the other sectors—has accom-

panied a second trend—pushing responsibility and political decision-making *downward, from central* governments to localities, states, or other "sub-national" levels. This "devolution" has been significant in America, compelling many local nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies to network with each other in innovative ways, especially in the housing, employment, human services, and health arenas. But devolution has happened even more rapidly and dramatically in the developing world in the past few decades, often with strong encouragement from multi-lateral aid agencies and foreign governments.

Partnerships, then, like their smaller cousins, teams, are a means of patching things back together, of *re-coordinating work* in a world of overly independent operators. At least, this is one thing that partnerships are, when we're lucky.

But sometimes, partnerships are also an *alternative* to something. For many organizations or groups, for example, "partnering" belongs on a short list of broad strategies for delivering value to the world. Specifically, an organization might want to:

- **"Make":** perform an activity in-house that produces value for citizens or citizen-customers, perhaps because the player in question wants the unique control, learning, and identity that comes from producing something *directly; or*

- **"Buy":** contract with, or "outsource" to, another organization or group if this might provide flexibility and generates savings that can be applied to other useful activities. Some organizations, such as government agencies that contract out key services and most philanthropic grantmakers, are primarily *indirect* producers. They rely heavily or completely on buying other organizations' capabilities to produce things of value; or

- **"Partner":** work to produce better and produce more through joint work with other organizations or groups, typically without the *level of control* of #1 ("It's my show") or the *directiveness* of #2 (i.e., "I'm the customer, and I know what's best").

As a strategy for producing valuable things for the world, then, partnering usually offers less control than "doing it ourselves" and suggests a level of mutuality and *shared* control that we don't associate with the traditional buyer/seller (contracting) relationship. What's more, the evidence is that partnering strategies are more likely to succeed when key players, especially "high-power" actors, are dissatisfied with the alternatives (on which more below).

But the boundaries among these strategies blur. Let's consider some of the forms that partnerships take.

Partnerships in the Public, Private, and Nonprofit Sectors (and Across Them)

What do *public* interest partnerships look like, and who's in them? The partners in question might be public agencies that find they must act together in order to achieve outcomes that each agency cares about. In the U.S. and many other countries, police departments and prosecutor's offices are a good example, since enforcing the law—preventing, detecting, and punishing crime—requires the well-integrated work of both. For the most part, the joint work of police and prosecutors is so expected and institutionalized that no one declares it "partnership," but the basic principle still applies—*the partners are acting together to achieve what neither could achieve acting alone.*

Another set of "inter-agency" arrangements help communities recover from natural disasters, such as floods and hurricanes, are also prime examples of the power of partnership. The operational work involved in disaster response is highly varied, and the activities of different agencies, each with its own systems and style—the fire and police departments and hospitals, say—must often be combined or "blended" in very specific ways. This is also true in the case of man-made disasters, such as war and terrorist attacks. Many communities are now debating their "domestic preparedness," which includes this particularly high-stakes, life-saving form of partnership work.

There are many other examples wherein units of government are asked to overcome "turf" issues, competition over scarce resources, different views of a problem, and other barriers to accomplish important public-serving work together.

For those who care about strengthening families and communities, the long and mixed history of "service integration," which began in the public sector, is particularly important. Fragmented human services, health care, and other important supports for people and places—even housing and economic development programs, in some cases—are to be integrated "seamlessly" on behalf of the citizen-clients. Such is the hope, at any rate. Later in this note, we'll look at a recent, and fairly classic, effort in Hartford, Connecticut to integrate the services of youth and work-force development agencies under a government program that *re-*

As a strategy for producing valuable things for the world, then, partnering usually offers less control than "doing it ourselves" and suggests a level of mutuality and shared control that we don't associate with the traditional buyer/seller (contracting) relationship.

Less mature "start-up" nonprofits can partner for the same reasons—as part of a strategy of limiting risk and maximizing impact as the organization grows and "makes a name for itself" (builds its reputation) in the community or marketplace.

quired "collaborative" approaches. That effort struggled to balance some partners' strong interest in comprehensive or "systems" reform with other partners' need for short-term indicators of service improvement in specific areas.

Nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can partner with each other, too, for many of the same general reasons that government agencies partner: two or more organizations find that each organization would perform better on its mission by "leveraging"— i.e., by skillfully and appropriately taking ad-vantage of—the capacity of the other organization.

For example, it is not uncommon for well-established nonprofit organizations to find that they need somebody else's unique capacity to limit their risks and have a meaningful impact on a changing problem or opportunity. *Tangible* capacity—skilled staff, special equipment, well-located facilities, well-organized client data, and more—may be relevant. But so too are more *intangible* aspects of organizational capacity, such as reputation ("brand name") and useful professional networks. (We'll look at just how critical those intangibles can be in a moment.) An excellent example is the partnership between the Society for Protection of Area Resources (SPARC) in Mumbai, India, and the National Slumdwellers Federation. SPARC provides research, technical assistance, and policy development around issues of housing, sanitation, and other critical community needs, which complements the grassroots self-help, organizing, and advocacy capacity of the Federation.

Less mature "start-up" nonprofits can partner for the same reasons—as part of a strategy of limiting risk and maximizing impact as the organization grows and

"makes a name for itself" (builds its reputation) in the community or marketplace. Start-ups are often particularly eager partners because they are too inexperienced and too strapped for resources to "go it alone" as a primary strategy. Npower, a small and fast-growing nonprofit technology service provider started in Seattle, Washington
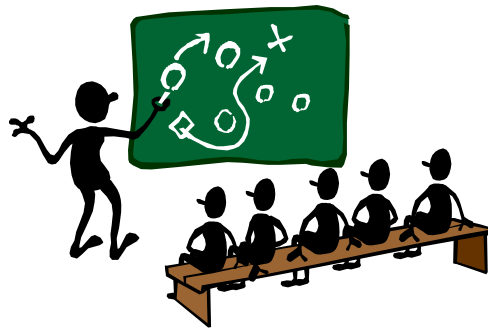
five years ago, partnered with Microsoft, one of the world's largest and most profitable businesses, to develop its strategy and service capacity. Npower did not merely want Microsoft's *financial* support; it wanted the *expertise* and enhanced *access* to helpful relationships that many successful partnerships provide.

A complex, promising, and increasingly visible set of partnerships is those between very different *types* of nonprofit organizations, such as between universities—which often serve not only as teaching and research providers

but as "anchor institutions" for the urban and rural communities in which they are based—and the "community-based" nonprofits motivated by advocacy, service, development, or other improvement objectives. Likewise, nonprofits that mainly do advocacy may find that partnerships with savvy nonprofit service providers leaves each with something new and valuable—more direct operational impact on social problems on one hand and greater political "voice" on the other.

For-profit business partnerships are perhaps the best known, most easily recognized, and most legally formal type of partnership. Some *firms,* including law firms and consultancies, are partnerships of owners who share the risks and rewards of their business. Other business partnerships are *projects* owned and/or managed jointly by two or more firms that may bring complementary strengths—not the same strengths—to the project. The most common generic term for these is "joint venture." So "partnership" is often legal term of art in the business world. It often refers to a legal arrangement between co-owners of a firm or project ("venture"). Finally, more and more businesses engage in *strategic alliances* with other firms to gain competitive advantage through access to new markets, learning, and more. Such alliances, says one careful observer, can range from "fleeting encounters" to close integration that leads to a full merger of the participating firms.

As complicated and varied as these partnerships *within* sectors can be, partnerships *across* sectors are also growing fast in number and variety around the world. These are public/private (government/business) joint ventures and other partnerships, public/

Cross-sector partnerships are particularly common in fields that are changing or evolving rapidly ... but [also] arise in fields that are structured to combine for-profit competitive demands and important community or social benefits.

… in the worst cases, this move to partnership can be more symbolism than substance, generating confusing signals about what defines the partnership and about whether accountability is a two-way or a one-way expectation, driven by the party with "the power of the purse" …

nonprofit partnerships, business/nonprofit partnerships, and even "tri-sector" partnerships that involve organizations from all three sectors.

Cross-sector partnerships are particularly common in fields that are changing or evolving rapidly, such as health and the environment. But they often arise in fields that are structured to combine for-profit competitive demands and important community or social benefits. One example would be the labor and economic development arenas, where "work" is both a market-driven matter of labor supply and demand (and thus the success of businesses) *and* a socially valued good that individuals, families, and communities care about and wish to improve. Dramatic, cross-sector efforts to promote black "empowerment" in post-apartheid South Africa reflect the hopes and dilemmas of efforts to accomplish this. And around the world, a variety of innovative partnerships of business, government, and community-based nonprofits are improving out-comes for employers and job seekers alike.

Another contemporary example would be efforts to do "comprehensive community revitalization" on behalf of children and families. Given the number of issues targeted and how widely dispersed responsibility is for services, advocacy, and other types of work on those issues, the needed partnerships often cross sectors.

A final, and particularly urgent, example of cross-sector partner-ship is in certain responses to the "epidemic" of youth violence in cities. As Mark Moore notes, when faced with the images of teens shooting teens (and children and adults for that matter), we become dis-

heartened not only by the seeming failure of institutions in their own spheres of activity—police, schools, employers, faith institutions, families, and more—but the scarcity of activities that usefully *combine* the contributions of the relevant institutions, especially those in which society has invested "a substantial amount of hope, public money, and authority."

There's growing interest in "performance-based" partner-ships that cross the sectors, mainly because ideas about accountability and how to achieve it often revolve around making performance measurable, discrete, concrete, indis-putable—and thereby ex-
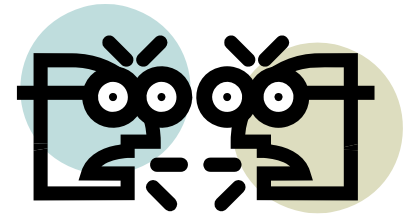
posing *nonperformance to scrutiny* and clear, consistently applied consequences. Ideas about re-inventing government often center on this, but so too do efforts to strengthen the non-governmental sector. And much of this interest in the two principal public interest sectors was inspired, of course, by the endless pursuit of high performance in the business world, where the "invisible hand" of the com-petitive marketplace is expected to weed out non-performers. I'll say more about performance in a moment when we turn to the question of defining success in partnerships.

As a final aspect of distinguishing among types of partnerships, there is

the issue of *choice. Some partnerships are more* or less chosen by the partners' independently, while others are coaxed along by the prospect of funding or other incentives ("carrots") or threat of de-funding and other disincentives ("sticks"). Many private philanthropic and public-sector grant programs, for example, encourage or *require* "collaboration"—and sometimes without guidance on how collaborative efforts should be forged and sustained, let alone *supported* to help the players become more capable of partnering well.

In other instances, government "outsources" (con-tracts out) services it used to provide directly but calls the contracting a "partnership" with the private or nonprofit organizations under contract. In the best cases, there is more 2-way learning, mutual support, and creative, shared decision-making than one

Whatever the specifics, a clear and common danger is the "shotgun marriage"—a union propelled more by the will of an eager third party than by mutual choice of the partners.

would expect in a traditional buyer/supplier arrangement. But in the worst cases, this move to partnership can be more symbolism than substance, generating confusing signals about what defines the partnership and whether accountability is a two-way or a one-way expectation, driven by the party with "the power of the purse" (implying "partner with me by providing the services I paid for … *or else!").*

One painful example was the "partnership" program launched by the State of Massachusetts Department of Social Services in the early 1990s. It involved eliminating much direct service delivery by government and contracting with nonprofit service providers that DSS though would bring better community

Partnerships help parties take more *legitimate* and *widely supported* action—help ensure a meaningful mandate—in a world in which operational capability alone is often not enough.

access and more culturally appropriate services, especially for immigrant and other minority families. When some of these nonprofits turned out to be unprepared for the challenges of child welfare protection and other controversial, traditionally government-run services, the partnership provided weak monitoring, little performance support, and too little accountability. Only the high-profile death of a child in the care of a key nonprofit, Alianza Hispana in Boston, brought needed attention and reform.

Whatever the specifics, a clear and common danger is the "shotgun marriage"—a union propelled more by the will of an eager third party—and/or the prospect of gaining new resources—than by mutual choice of the partners.

Legitimacy—the Second Purpose of "Public-Interest" Partnerships

Now the plot thickens (if it didn't, would you need this note?). Given many of the most visible reasons for organizations or groups to team up, our instinct may be to think of partnerships *only* in terms of their operational purposes, the word "partnership" and the spirit behind the word suggest another overall purpose as well. This second purpose is particularly important for partnerships (of various kinds) forged in the public or "community" interest.

Partnerships help parties take more *legitimate* and *widely supported* action—help ensure a meaningful mandate—in a world in which operational capability alone is often not enough.

To capture the importance of this idea, let's go to the extremes for a moment. Recently, the U.S. government has worked to build a worldwide "coalition" against terrorism, a priority apparent following the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center on September

11, 2001. This alliance provides the United States with tangible military and intelligence support and financial interdiction, to be sure—*operational* partnership benefits of the kind we have covered so far—but just as important is the political legitimacy that multi-lateral action confers.

Legitimacy is priceless in a community of nations suspicious of unilateral action by a superpower, particularly *military* action in a politically contentious region—the Middle East—where public opinion and official leadership often challenge U.S. interests and actions.

Legitimacy is a priceless asset, though, in *any* community, including local ones, where important values are contested, perceptions are important, and a complicated past creates mistrust, a lack of respect, and other barriers to

collaborative work. Isn't that most communities in the world?

Because many partnerships have this second purpose, it turns out that we need to re-think what they are … again. When partnerships include functions of winning support for an idea or cause—as they often do—and not just doing operational work together, then they fulfill many of the functions of *political coalitions* driven by shared interests or "agendas." Acting in coalition is enormously important in a world of diverse interests and dispersed capacity to promote change.

However, fulfilling these two purposes can be tricky. Unlike coalitions of parties that come together only to do politicking—to secure a government budget item, say, or passage of a new law or amended law, or to win official approval of a development project or other type of mandate—many partnerships have those sustained operational aims that provide a way to act on that mandate. Partners want to win resources and rights to do things, for example, and then work together to produce them.

How to keep track of all this? Let's look at an example or two.

Legitimacy is a priceless asset … in any community where important values are contested, perceptions are important, and a complicated past creates mistrust, a lack of respect, and other barriers to collaborative work. Isn't that most communities in the world?

In the community economic development arena, businesses and nonprofit organizations often need each other, not only for their respective operational strengths but to lend legitimacy to political arguments about who each group serves and what each deserves from taxpayers. Both sectors, in turn, need government not only for the distinctive operational capacities and powers it brings—planning, finance, and more—but for the "imprimatur" the public sector conveys, making private action more officially public-serving or "civic."

In the U.S., the 1980s and 1990s saw

The researchers' conclusions emphasize the vital legitimacy that black ministers provided for police action in a community long wary of police brutality and with a long experience of racial stigmas and harassment. But the Coalition did more than generate new community respect and legitimacy for police to "let them do their job."

the emergence of sophisticated, legally formalized joint venture partnerships between nonprofit community developers and major super-market chains in inner cities. The supermarkets wanted access to lucrative inner-city markets that had long been underserved by retail stores; to secure this, the supermarkets also wanted reliable employees from the neighborhoods they were entering. The community developers wanted better shopping and more jobs in their neighborhoods, as well as the economic stimulus that successful "anchor" stores often generate—positive spillovers to help other businesses grow and thrive.

Many local economic development "turnaround" stories thus reflect this dual purpose partnering (productivity plus legitimacy). But so, too, do partnerships for community health and well-being, affordable housing, environmental sustain-ability, and other objectives that involve value-laden issues and politically and socially charged debates.

In one particularly famous case, in the early 1980s, the State of Illinois partnered with black churches in Chicago to aggressively reduce the long list of black children waiting for adoption. A bureaucratic culture, mostly white staff, and a history of distrust between the public agencies and the black community left a chasm to be crossed. But the churches "adopted" children on the waiting list informally—in effect, taking responsibility for finding permanent families, using church facilities and worship services to market the cause. The churches' tangible operating capacity (staff, facilities, etc.) was important, but the State could have gone to any number of secular nonprofit groups for

similar capacity. What mattered most was the intangible asset of legitimacy that the black church possessed in its community. This "One Church/One Child" program soon won a national award for government innovation and was replicated in other communities in the years that followed.

It's no accident that the politics and history of race helped define that alliance, both in the challenges it faced and the impacts it has generated. In another widely observed case, Boston's Ten-Point Coalition brought together police, leaders of the black church, and others to put a stop—a complete freeze, for several unprecedented years—to youth-on-youth homicide in the city. Sociologist Christopher Winship has led a team of researchers in a study of the Coalition's origins and of its success creating this "Boston Miracle." The researchers' conclusions emphasize the vital legitimacy that black ministers provided for police action in a community long wary of police brutality and with a long experience of racial stigmas and harassment. But the Coalition did

more than generate new community respect and legitimacy for police to "let them do their job." Operationally, the Ten-Point Coalition generated many of the benefits of "community policing" pursued in more and more corners of the globe: specific actions by community members helped prevent crime, inform on patterns of criminal behavior to improve policing, and even re-integrate former offenders into the community in ways that tend to lower continued law-breaking.

Public-interest partnerships often rely on productive teamwork in the operational sense, then, as well as support-winning legitimacy in the social and political sense. They aim to secure both "the will" (a meaningful mandate for doing work) and "the way" (the tangible, productive means) needed to tackle social problems or opportunities.

In the simplest terms, it is these two that define "community" problem-solving in a changing world. (Sometimes problem-solving calls for action by "intermediary" organizations that help mobilize both the will and the way—see another note in this series on intermediaries, their roles, and the keys to their success.)

Perhaps we can expect more and more distinctly dual-purpose partnerships of the One Church/One Child and Ten-Point variety in the years to come, as communities problem solve their way across stubborn divides of race, culture, religion, and political values—as well as fragmented resources, specialized capacity, and differential access to the people, things, and ideas that can make a differ-

---

TAKING STOCK (Part One)

Questions you and your partners (or prospective partners) can ask yourselves and discuss together.

Goals and Alternatives. What *exactly* do we want to accomplish together, and why is partnering—acting *together*—the most *strategic* choice we can make among the alternatives for getting things done? What *are* all the alternatives, and *how* do they compare?

Timing. Why is partnering the best option *now?* What is happening in our environment to make this a promising or urgent time to partner in this way?

Clarity on purposes. How much is our prospective effort about *productivity* gains (improved tangible results in a product or service) as opposed to gains in the *legitimacy and political support* we need to act effectively on this problem(s) or opportunity?

To be fair, we run all three of those risks—of nonperformance, of getting lost in process, and of entrusting promising ideas to unwilling or under-equipped implementers (people)—*outside* the realm of partnerships as well. That is, there is plenty of room in the world to "screw up" acting on our own.

ence.

Before moving on, take time to take stock (see the panel below). You can use these questions to assess a partnership you may be considering—or already be part of. Now that we've covered the background ideas, we'll take stock more frequently in the strategy sections to come.

Defining Success: The Ups and Downs of Partnerships

The Promise. Whatever their purposes, at their best, partnerships—of all kinds—can bring a host of benefits to participating partners, including:

- *Tangible benefits* in the form of better work outputs (products or services), better outcomes (more "impact" on the conditions in the world that our organization or group cares about), and thus better performance on organizational mission or project goals; and

- *Intangible benefits* that may be vital in the short and long run, such as the greater legitimacy needed to act, better and more numerous relationships (networks), learning and growth opportunities, and enhanced recognition and reputation in the wider community (or market-place).

Together, the tangible and intangible gains can, as Archana Kalegoankar and David Brown put it, produce "innovative solutions to intractable problems" and "catalytic or multiplier effects for broader social change," as well as "social capital and new capacity" for joint action (see the end of this strategy tool for this and other useful readings and resources).

The Pain. At their worst, when poorly chosen, under-nourished, rushed, and/or forced along beyond their useful service, partnerships can bring a host of ills and pose a variety of important risks as well, including …

Reputation Risk: "hitching our wagons" brings with it the usual risk in surrendering total control. My reputation suffers because our partnership fails to perform ("sputters") or worse, because it does damage—or worse yet, because I'm now associated with you and suffer even from damage you do *outside* of our partnership ("guilt by association").

Transactions without Dividends (or "death by meeting and paperwork"):

like all relationships, partnerships involve what economists call "transaction" costs. Think of them as the costs we incur choreographing partnerships—the upfront investments of time, money, reputation, and more that we make *before* real benefits can be reaped and then the costs of maintenance after a partnership is established. The evidence is clear: these transactions are almost always more costly than the partners expect, usually because broad intentions that seem to be well-aligned are simply that—broad and "just intentions." When they look closer, would-be partners often discover that they have: quite different conceptions of the underlying problem to be solved or opportunity to be seized; different informal routines for getting work done or even for developing the strategies that shape work (some by informal conversation and walking around the community, others by formal planning meetings, surveys of customers, etc.); different operational systems that aren't easily "hooked up" to, let alone integrated with, one another; and other differences. Some partnerships never overcome the excess of process and paperwork relative to rewards. Among other types of costs, there is an important *opportunity* cost to these partner-ships, since time and other precious resources might be better invested somewhere else.

Strong on Principles, Weaker on People: partnerships among organizations and groups are rarely built by involving everyone on every side at every moment. In business, government, nonprofit, and cross-sector partnerships alike, partnering is often only as effective as the lead people who carry it forward—how well they nurture the relationship and how effectively they spur their own organiza-

The first lesson is the simplest and perhaps the most important: that not all partnership opportunities are worth it, that the "promise" of partnerships is just that—promise or potential … Partnerships may limit certain risks from "going it alone" but often pose new ones from "going it together."

tions to follow through on changes needed to make the partnership work. Beyond the follow- through point, real-world partnership efforts often reflect the "revolving door" problem. The point people involved in establishing a partnership may not be around as the effort matures, collective memory is missing, and expectations and commitments get confused or overlooked by the successors. This happened in Hartford, in the example outlined above. Early champions of the youth service integration effort, responding to a new federal "youth opportunity" grant program, left their posts and were replaced by those who were not aware of, and in some cases did not share, the priority interests that their predecessors had advanced.

Some Lessons from the Ups and Downs. To be fair, we run all three of those risks—of nonperformance, of getting lost in process, and of entrusting promising ideas to unwilling or under-equipped implementers (people)—*outside* the realm of partnerships as well. That is, there is plenty of room in the world to "screw up" acting on our own. But a few crucial, partnership-specific lessons follow from the outline of ups and downs.

The first lesson is the simplest and perhaps the most important: that not all partnership opportunities are worth it, that the "promise" of partnerships is just that— promise or potential. It takes work to realize that potential, and we shouldn't assume that a given partnership will necessarily yield the benefits that look so good on paper. *Partnerships may limit certain risks from "going it alone" but often pose new ones from "going it together."*

For this reason, the label "strategic alliance" is in many ways more precise than "partnership" for most of these arrangements. "Partnership" has become more a descriptor of the *spirit* of working together than a term that confirms the concrete value added by a working rela-

tionship. I don't mind that the business world uses the "strategic alliance" phrase mostly with the profit motive in mind. Why shouldn't people acting in the public interest make just as strong a commitment to being "strategic" in how they act and in when and how they choose to "ally"?

Take the One Church/One Child case outlined above. The State of Illinois gained access, legitimacy, and "reinforcements" in the effort to get black children adopted by loving families. But the alliance was strategic in the other direction as well. Black pastors were motivated by more than charity or a broad sense of obligation. The lead pastors quickly came to see the alliance with the State as providing them with a specific new avenue for serving their congregations (by building families), as well as a channel for influencing public policy and the management of important government agencies (through advocacy). Ditto Boston's Ten Point Coalition, which furthered important interests of cops, black ministers, and others in the community, and ditto the community developer/supermarket ventures I outlined. Both parties brought something distinctive and furthered specific interests that were important to them.

So partnerships should be strategic alliances—tangibly and visibly strategic for those involved.

On the other hand, a second lesson from the ups and downs outlined above is that alliances, like all relationships, require a variety of investments and take time to evolve. Even partnerships regarded as "successful" have their ups and down, and trust, power, and other old familiars matter a great deal, as every how-to manual on collaboration rightly emphasizes.

Ron Ferguson, who has studied the

evolution of community development alliances in America, highlights a number of trust questions that partners, in effect, ask themselves and "navigate" in stages over time, for example, "do I trust your motives?" (intent) but also "do I trust your competence?" (ability to deliver on your promises).

In English, we have a saying, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." We should expect that even the most worthwhile and (ultimately) strategic alliances will involve some heat, some conflict, some trust issues—a variety of growing pains. In a cross-sector partnership for housing the urban poor in the Philippines, "the lack of mutual understanding around expectations and pace of activity resulted in friction between the parties. While the community coalition believed that the slow pace of results was a necessary cost of community participation, the corporate foundation thought the delays represented failure." Recriminations and withdrawal followed, in part because there was no forum for resolving the clash of expectations.

A part of becoming more effective at partnering, then, is getting better at distinguishing growing pains that are leading us somewhere from "fatal flaws" indicating that a particular partner-ship may be unwise for us (or at least unwise for now). The discussion on stages of collaboration (below) outlines key considerations to frame such choices.

What often keeps alliance partners engaged with one another, and even exposed to considerable risk, is the urgency of the problems they want to tackle or the opportunities they wish to seize together.

A third lesson follows directly from the point on growing pains. It is about the "metrics" or the ways in which we measure what alliances are made of, how they act, and what they accomplish. Because alliances are dynamic creatures that may have varied objectives—affected by the alliance partners' preferences and by the larger environment around them—defining and then measuring their success is tricky. (By "measure," I really mean "pay attention to" or keep track of, as a way of acting more effectively inside an alliance,

> *… alliance partners may build relationships and do great at producing better outputs together but find that they have made the wrong choices, or incomplete choices, about how to impact the underlying problem they have tackled, [leading to] outcome failure.*

though formal evaluations have their place.)

For example, we might want to measure, even informally …

- The *attitudes and knowledge* that support development of an alliance and sustain it over time, including: indications of trust; a familiarity with the partners' identity, aims, and capacity ("knowing your partner well"); and the perception that the relationship is worth continued investment. Can such attitudes be detected? Are they gaining or losing strength over time?

- The tangible *actions* that reflect progress on commitments that alliance partners make to each other or to a larger community, including the laying in place of people, equipment, funds, and other resources needed to carry out the partners' joint work (whatever it happens to be);

- The *outputs* that indicate what partners' joint activities are actually producing that might have tangible value, such as jointly delivered health care or employment services, affordable housing or business ventures;

- The *outcomes* that those outputs are meant to positively affect—usually conditions in the world that the partners wish to influence together, such as the health of children and families, employment rates in a target community, levels of toxic air or water, and so on. We should keep in mind that alliances, like individual parties, often have limited control over these outcomes, which may be affected by many factors. Even the most effective local workforce alliance, for example, cannot guarantee the overall strength of the economy, which affects' employers willingness to invest, as well as their demand for labor.

Paying attention to these different indicators of success helps us distinguish different kinds of pitfalls or possible failures. For example, an alliance may be unsuccessful if there is *relationship failure* among the partners. A critical level of mutual respect, trust, and knowledge is never attained.

Alternatively, the relationship may be healthy and growing but tangible work outputs cannot be delivered together in the ways the partners hope (*productivity failure). Differences in working philosophy ("approach"), systems, or* other factors prevent the integrating of activities on which better out-puts— better scale, better quality—depend.

Finally, alliance partners may build relationships and do great at producing better together but find that they have made the wrong choices, or incomplete choices, about how to impact the underlying problem they have tackled (*outcome failure).* Consider the following hypothetical. *A* job placement partnership finds that the participating partners are positive on the relationship and that placement is going great for some clients but that employment rates for the "never-worked" group in the community have not nudged. On closer inspection, it turns out that many of the target clients in that group are not "job ready." That is, they need preparation for employment—coaching and skill development of various kinds—for which the alliance had not planned. This kind of factor, while not originally controlled, *can* often be addressed through adjustments that the service

providers make. As mentioned above, the overall strength of the job economy is quite another matter. It is uncontrolled and, to some extent, uncontroll*able* by workforce organizations.

A fourth and final lesson of the ups and downs list is more implicit; it's about the capacity needed to effectively engage in alliances and make them succeed. Because alliances entail hard work and some creativity and patience, not just the good intentions or a "warm and fuzzy" desire to work together, would-be alliance partners need capacities that directly support the development of effective alliances. Less positively but no less strategically, we also need capacities that support the dissolution of damaging or excessively costly alliances. In a world of growing demand for partnerships, we all need to learn how to more effectively get "hitched" *and* "un-hitched."

Rosabeth Moss Kanter has written, for example, about companies that possess a "collaborative advantage." But the phrase almost implies a single, dedicated capacity for partnering—access to some magic in-

In a world of growing demand for partnerships, we all need to learn how to more effectively get "hitched" *and* "un-hitched."

tended *specifically* for that purpose. What she and others have in mind is less a single-purpose capacity than a set of core capacities that should characterize any organization, group, or project in today's world—enabling them to engage in alliance relationships *as one of a range of strategies* that create significant value or social impact.

Some of the key capacities are those required for: "sizing up" other players (being both willing and able to assess other organizations or groups, whether firsthand or with help from third parties); sizing up the partnership option itself as an alternative to other strategies for producing things of value (options such as "make" or "buy"); engaging in joint direction setting and implementation activities with other organizations (facilitation, brainstorming, inquiry, and other group problem-solving abilities); being *self-critical* and doing *self-assessment of how and how well we produce and deliver* (since partnering implies mutual accountability); and a readiness to take calculated risks (if no risk, then no partnership and no reward).

These capacities don't live in the ether. They demand that real people engage in learning, persuading, and risk-taking. That means time, and *too many promising alliances have fallen victim to the myth that a highly effective partnership can be built in the "spare time" of a few committed souls, whether staff or community members or others*. Explored perhaps, but not built, sustained, and adapted over time.

Let's return to the Hartford example, which is rich in many of these lessons. The funder, the U.S. Department of Labor, insisted on a fast ramp-up of the collaborative service model for supporting youth development in the city. Although the joint effort by public schools, the local workforce development board, the Mayor's office, a local funder (the United Way), and a group of loosely allied nonprofit service providers lacked a clear structure for decision-making and accountability among the parties, and although there were important gaps in service delivery capacity, the funder's deadlines compelled a quick setting up of offices and opening of new programs. The effort later struggled with low youth enrollments, perception problems, and conflicts among the alliance partners, each

frustrated that the effort did not live up to its billing and each motivated by somewhat different priorities. But in this case, some hard-won lessons, and tons of patience, held the effort together long enough for a timely visit by the funder, which recommended a clearer governance structure, better contracting, and specific enhancements to services. While long-term *impacts* on Hartford's youth are still unclear, the alliance effort has spurred innovations in services (new and promising *outputs)* in what had long been an extremely fragmented and disappointing local system.

Having looked at overall purposes and types of alliances, along with some of their ups and downs and the challenges of defining their success, let's close with a brief look at the *dynamics* of alliances—the stages they must often navigate to produce real value and the different depths or levels which alliances may achieve. In these ideas and case examples, we'll see more of the real work of alliance building, especially where larger community problems and politics are at stake.

Now it's time to take stock again (see box below).

How Partnered?: Thinking About Depth and Stakes

Many practitioners and students of alliances have commented on the incredible variety of forms that such arrangements can take, from loose "networks" with fluid functions that extend well beyond the core participants in a given project and that continue almost indefinitely to very tightly focused project partnerships with discrete deadlines, budgeted resources, and scripted operations and success measures.

If alliances or partnerships are fundamentally about hitching up, a key question arises: *how* hitched should we be? That is, *how closely integrated with or dependent on our partners should we be?*

There's no simple answer to this one, of course. But there is some great evidence on what partners choose to do and what consequences follow.

Start with everyday personal relation-

TAKING STOCK (Part Two)

Rewards. What are the specific *tangible* benefits we expect from committing to this "strategic" alliance or partnership, and why? (Think about better outputs or enhanced impact of our work and what will produce these: new financial resources, expertise, facilities, other?) What *intangible* benefits (networks, legitimacy, reputation, learning) do we expect, and why?

Risks. What key risks can we identify? Think about risks to reputation, the likely costs of managing the alliance relative to concrete gains, and how you will handle the "people side" of partnering (are there informed, capable, motivated people who can build the alliance?).

Success. How will we know if we are making progress? Think about indicators of improved *knowledge* about the problems and each other's roles and capacities relevant to tackling the problem; key *actions* that indicate the alliance partners are acting to institutionalize that knowledge, such as in changes to their practices; indicators of new and improved *outputs* that depend directly on such actions being jointly delivered and coordinated; and indicators of improved *outcomes* in the underlying condition "in the world" that the alliance is intended to affect for the better. Do we have a "logic" model for why our actions should make a difference? Are outside factors identified? How will we handle them?

Capacity. Do we each have the *capacities* needed to engage in this alliance—at least to *begin* well? Think about capacities for assessing your own organization and your prospective partners; for conducting joint fact finding and group planning activities; for facilitating discussion and troubleshooting conflict when perspectives diverge; for measuring the kinds of progress indicators (see above) that will allow us to make informed choices; for sharing information on clients that we try to serve jointly.

In the communication model (parallel play), the alliance partners agree to share information on what they are doing and learning about a problem … There is no significant interdependence among the players.

ships. Some, such as parent/child and spouse/partner relationships, are emotionally close, include many types of exchanges, and entail what students of trust call "deep dependence." These are some of our most valuable relationships but also some of our most demanding and even risky—as every marriage or family counselor can explain in detail.

Other relationships, such as personal and professional acquaintanceships, are not as strong and often not as multi-layered. They tend to require less dependence but may still be quite rich and useful for us, in part because—more often than our close, intimate ties—these weaker ties connect us to people who are not like us. People who have different information and perspectives and who occupy different positions in the world. Inspired by the potential benefits of influence and information that reside in such relationships, one creative scholar even named a classic essay for "the strength of weak ties."

Partnerships that tie groups, or organizations, are not so different. Some involve many kinds of exchanges and some just one or two kinds. Some require or evolve into deep dependence—as in "if your contribution falters or fails, I'm in trouble!"—while others stay more shallow. Let's think about this range in more specific terms and then consider a real-

world example or two.

In a helpful review of inter-agency partnerships to promote community safety in Britain, a group of researchers identified these varied approaches to alliance arrangements:

· The **communication model** (parallel play). Here, the alliance partners mostly agree to share information on what they are doing and learning about a problem. The relationship is fairly informal, often with no written agreement, let alone agreed-upon consequences for not performing as promised. There is no significant interdependence among the players, though the fruits of the exchange—I learn things from you that help me in ways I can recognize and value—can inspire closer, higher stakes ties.

· The **cooperation model** (agree to work on problem together). Here, the parties not only share information but commit to pooling their *activities* somehow so as to have a greater impact on

the problem. These activities may not, however, be very formally coordinated, and accountability expectations remain limited.

· The **coordination model** (pool resources). By sharing scarce resources, the players raise the stakes of their joint work. Information, activities, and accountability for resource use tend to be more formally tracked. There may be agreements with external resource providers about shared accounting and

account-ability for results.

· The **federation model** (integrated services). Here the parties mesh their activities in formal ways, looking for gaps and "touch points" among their services, trying to make of the parts an integrated system. Commonly, this includes agreed-upon entry points for clients, standardized referrals from one service provider to another, more formal information sharing about each client among the providers, and so on. *Changes* in each parties' service practices—the accommodations each makes to improve the "fit" with alliance partners—are more demanding at this level and potential payoffs (in results) should be correspondingly greater.

· The **merger model** (remove boundaries). Here, at the deepest level of integration, the players remove the organizational boundary that separates them, becoming a single organization or project, often legally recognized. Mergers can be painful and ultimately unsuccessful, or they can generate major improvements in social impact. Notably, though, mergers are much less common and much less standardized in the public and nonprofit sectors than they are in business. In the public sector, distinct laws and regulations direct the activities of disparate agencies, legislative sub-bodies (such as committees) often take action without

... at the deepest level of integration (merger), the players remove the organizational boundary that separates them ... Mergers can be painful and ultimately unsuccessful, or they can generate major improvements in social impact.

coordinating amongst themselves, and agencies, once created, are hard to eliminate or merge with others. For one thing, very independent interest groups may argue for keeping them separate. Likewise, nonprofit or non-governmental organizations cultivate distinctive funding streams, issue turf (niches), and other attributes that discourage mergers (or acquisitions of a smaller nonprofit by a larger one). And performance measurement, on which smart merger decisions

rely heavily in the business world, is tricky and inconsistent among social impact organizations.

Any one of these—or none—might be attractive to a given organization(s) faced with a particular problem it wants to solve. Recall the example of the youth development alliance in Hartford. The federal funder specifically offered funding, on a competitive grant-making basis, for local "joint arrangements" (let me use the broadest label) that, at minimum, reflected the federation model above—with integrated services to replace more fragmented service delivery. The funder further articulated a preference for "one-stop" service centers that call, in some localities, for pooling resources or even merging disparate agency activities in shared space.

This was a tall order considering that many of the training, education, and other agencies that responded, not only in Hartford but in the 175 other cities that applied for the special new grant, rarely employed even the *communication* model of information exchange or the *cooperation* and *coordination* models that imply more ambitious, formally scripted joint action and pooled resources. The public schools, employment and training, youth "empowerment," and other agencies simply didn't talk often about specific youth development priorities in which they shared an urgent interest—let alone work together in more formal, coordinated ways to address those priorities.

Blaming the funder, especially in hindsight, is easy in these cases. But it often misses the point and lets "us" (feeling superior to "them"!) off too easy. Efforts to serve young people in Hartford *were* far too fragmented, and poor teamwork—whatever it should be called—among the players can't be blamed on the outside funders alone. The right questions were these: what degree of joint work to pursue, when, and how (via what process).

Everyone involved, in Hartford and a host of other communities participating in the grant program, agreed that a failure to lay groundwork, and unrealistic deadlines imposed from above, created an *illusion* of integration. As we saw ear-

---

TAKING STOCK (Part Three)

How partnered should we be? Questions you and your alliance partners can ask and answer to make better choices about the degree of integration you wish to achieve—and how:

Big-picture questions. What's the history of our relations with one another? What kinds of exchanges (information or other) have we had to date, and how shared is our vision of what purposes we each serve in the community? What degree of "integration" do we feel ready for now? What risks and potential rewards correspond to that level or another level of integration? What supports, internal or external, could help us mitigate the risks and see more of the rewards? When should we re-evaluate the degree question and on what basis?

Follow-through questions. What will it take to make the chosen degree of integration work? What are the needed steps and resources? The success measures? Who is responsible for what?

---

lier, it took revised expectations from the federal funder, a new decision-making structure in Hartford, and specific changes to front-line operations to get the effort more or less on track. A variant on the *federation* model emerged, with service referrals, some prioritized entry points (physical facilities, well-staffed) for youth, and clearer lines of authority and accountability for financial and other resources.

There are other ways to look at the question of depth or degree of integration in alliances, some specific to particular boundary crossings, such as business/nonprofit ones. In his study of strategic alliances between businesses and non-profits, Jim Austin indicates that such alliances can operate at several quite distinct levels, all useful and all potentially appropriate for specific situations:

· **"Philanthropic"** (low engagement, narrow scope, infrequent interaction, simple structure, limited "strategic value" to the alliance partners).

· **"Transactional"** (more of all of those).

· **"Integrative"** (highest engagement, broader in scope, frequent interaction, more complex arrangements, major strategic value, greater risk too).

Sometimes, the alliance partners can "migrate" through these levels quickly, changing resources, processes, and attitudes along the way. In effect, the levels become *stages in a process of deepening and integrating.* (More on stages in a minute.) In other cases, says Austin, partners are content to remain at a given level for years.

This sub-topic alone could fill a volume. For now, our thinking on this important question—"how deep and integrated should our partnership be?"—ought to reflect, at minimum, the same realism about risk and potential reward, the same strategic focus and willingness to face up to hard truths, that disciplines the more basic question: "to partner or not to partner?"

After taking stock, we'll turn to the final set of lessons—about the *stages* through which effective strategic alliances evolve.

Stages and Stutter Steps: How Alliances Evolve

How do alliances actually get built? What happens (or fails to happen) and when? And what forces shape the evolution of alliance through stages? Observers agree that regardless of specific function, depth, or form, strategic alliances evolve through distinct stages. The process is seldom linear or neat. In the words of *The Collaboration Handbook*, it's a "journey" with twists and turns.

Alliance partners may not possess, or perceive themselves as possessing, equal influence to shape the effort, share the risks, and enjoy the rewards.

Barbara Gray, focusing on the *collaborative process*, highlights three broad stages, based on her studies of hundreds of arrangements in dozens of fields of practice (see Table 1). Each of these involves important but quite distinct challenges and opportunities. Let's overview the main stages and then consider a few examples.

Work at stages one and two may be carried out quite informally as part of what collaborators sometimes define as a non-committal "sounding out" of the other parties. Early in the life of an alliance, prospective partners may not feel that this is "real work." But it's critical work, and early meetings are often telling. They set a tone, either of respectful inquiry, and building trust—being hard on the problems but not the people—or of distrust and defensiveness (what I call "hostile entry") or over-reliance on good intentions without thinking through objectives ("naïve entry").

Stages one and two are especially challenging if a problem is defined, or seems to be defined, from above, by funders or regulators. A new crop of federal demonstrations in the U.S., for example, presents some overall problem—high unemployment among a target group, homelessness, etc.—and calls for collaborative relationships that cross many boundaries: of sector (public-private-nonprofit), of task area (welfare assistance, housing assistance, employment, health, etc.), of organizations' main activity type (services, advocacy), and even level of operation (neighborhood, citywide, region-al, national). Likewise, trends in international development favor funder-coaxed collaborative relationships—not a bad thing in and of itself but an approach that risks the shotgun marriage problem.

But even without strong "topdown" pressures, power issues may loom large. Alliance partners may not possess, or perceive themselves as possessing, equal influence to shape the effort, share the risks, and enjoy the rewards. In Karnataka, India, a public/ private/non-governmental alliance to promote technology development promoted *shared* influence by structuring in intersectoral committees and advisory groups. These helped create more balanced input among business leaders, academics, government, and grassroots NGOs.

We have much to learn about the varied recipes or "institutional designs" appropriate for structuring such balance into alliances that operate in many different contexts with many purposes.

Navigating the early stages of collaboration *across* the boundaries outlined above often becomes challenging, particularly if some of the partners are not organizations but loosely organized citizen-client groups whose expectations vary widely and whose participation must be effectively managed. On one hand, such groups may not feel that their contributions are respected; they may feel that they are at the table merely to "rubber stamp" (approve) what has already been decided by professionals. On the other, with less formal operations and financial structures, these groups may be unaccustomed to the trade-offs, deadlines, and managerial demands that funders and service provider organizations expect. Account-ability can be hard to establish. More on this in the examples below.

Stage three in Gray's framework gets to the nitty-gritty of organizing or reorganizing operational activities and the capacities that make it possible to actually *produce* things that the alliance partners and others value. There may need to be a new division of labor and new reci-

Table 1. Stages of Collaborative Process (Adapted from Gray, 1989)

STAGE	STRATEGIC TASKS
1. Defining the problem	Deliberating and defining the target problem(s) or opportunity(ies) on which joint work will focus (in effect, the substantive purpose of acting jointly), determining stakes and stakeholders (what is at stake and for whom?).
2. Setting directions	Defining guiding principles, ground rules for working together, overall strategies for action, and accountability mechanisms; defining needed information (data and analysis needed to support decisions).
3. Implementing	Defining and pursuing specific operational tasks, work roles, and responsibilities; changing alliance partners' individual activities as needed; sharing information and measuring performance; troubleshooting and correcting or terminating the alliance, as required.

pes for coordinating that labor that span organizations or groups—and cultures and sectors and geographic boundaries as well. Older routines for monitoring operations and their results may also be inadequate. Careful and timely information sharing across the alliance partners' "front-line" operations and management decision-making often becomes critical. Think of what it takes to integrate services on behalf of the average client when the service providers *don't* have shared, up-to-date data on what the client needs, what services she has already received, whether follow through has happened, what changes in her life ensured, etc.

In Madagascar, local road-building alliances allocate to professional contractors the role of building roads and training villagers in their maintenance, to villagers the role of contributing their design-relevant local knowledge in addition to maintaining the roads, and to provincial committees of government and villagers the role of reviewing contractor applications and guiding the overall process. These roles were negotiated and agreed upon by the players' representatives.

The wisdom of these stages is in their simplicity. Similar to Gray's three stages, a private sector strategy consultant identified three essential stages for project teams that cross functional areas within firms or that cross firms: define the overall objectives (scope and intended results), establish roles and authority, and outline actions and deadlines.

On the nitty-gritty side of things, collaboration gurus Michael Winer and Karen Ray identify three useful options for coordinating joint activities: an interorganizational committee; a single lead agency; or a newly established joint organization on which alliance partners take board seats or other governance roles. Protocols for handling customers and their information may need to be revised and formalized in joint agreements, especially for collaborating health or human services agencies.

If these stages are unfamiliar or seem abstract, consider the example of Rebuild Los Angeles (RLA), a high-profile organization launched as a "public-private-nonprofit partner-ship" in the wake of the L.A. riots in Spring 1992. Let's consider the context and challenges of RLA and then contrast those with a more successful alliance.

Like many public-interest partnerships, RLA would have to tap both the *productive capabilities* of a number of institutions in the three sectors and the *legitimacy* needed to work in a socially and politically charged environment. Indeed, the unrest that followed the acquittal of white police officers in the beating of a black motorist was the costliest urban violence in American history.

Rebuild Los Angeles (RLA), at least in its tumultuous first year, was the classic case of a **declared** *partnership that had skipped essential steps.*

Unfortunately, when L.A.'s well-intentioned Mayor invited a well-known corporate "mover and shaker" to take the reins of the start-up rebuilding effort, he didn't offer the anxious community any clear sense of what RLA's role would be, how it would be expected to engage stakeholders in the three sectors that formed the agency's so-called "tripod," and how it would relate to local government or citizen oversight.

The organization's intended role emerged quickly. It was defined, along with the name and "look" or brand of the organization, by corporate leaders who joined Ueberroth as RLA's co-chairs. Pointing to high unemployment and urban blight as triggers for the recent unrest, the organization defined its target problem as a lack of private investment in business activity in the riot-torn areas. The obvious solution? Market inner-city Los Angeles as a business location. Ueberroth and his staff focused, most of all, on winning large-scale investment commitments from big companies to open or invest in new businesses in the target neighborhoods.

Why, then, did RLA's start-up leadership dissolve less than a year after the doors open, following a hail of criticism from the L.A. City Council, key media, "traditional" inner-city community advocates, and even some of its own senior staff?

RLA was accused of trying to make marketing the solution to racism, poverty, and years of civic neglect. Its approach had been "top-down" and business as usual, said critics, and it had not earned the trust of the very community it was founded to serve.

To be fair, RLA moved quickly in response to a crisis, and it did secure hundreds of millions of dollars in private capital for inner-city business during a deep recession, when as co-chair Barry Sanders recalls, "No one was investing *anywhere* in Los Angeles." Moreover, racism and other ills were arguably well beyond the reach of the corporate insiders that the L.A. Mayor had turned to when he realized that government resources would be inadequate to rebuild. But as a "partnership," RLA never managed to navigate even the first of Gray's three stages—agreeing on the problem to be tackled—at least not as joint activity engaging key parties in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors.

In some ways, RLA, at least in its tumultuous first year, was the classic case of a *declared* partnership that had skipped essential steps.

Contrast this experience with that of the One Church One Child public/nonprofit alliance outlined briefly in the first part of this note. One Church was

born in informal conversations between legislative staff and social service agency leadership, both in Illinois state government. The indicator (or symptom) that motivated the players toward an alliance arrangement was the long and growing list of black children awaiting adoption, particularly in Chicago and other large cities. Not only was the list long, but black children were *waiting* much longer, on average, than whites to find permanent homes. It didn't help that relations between the mostly white Department of Social Services staff and the black community were strained. The agency seemed all but completely unable to find black parents and match them well with children in need of adoption.

The waiting list indicators did not in and of themselves point the way toward promising solutions, of course. But a new, reform-minded agency director, figured that the status quo approach of his staff was clearly not solving the problem. Something new was needed, including perhaps some outside help with stronger ties to black families. Staff in the legislature, whose networks included a variety of faith and community-based organizations active in Chicago's neighborhoods, encouraged the director to approach black churches—starting with a well-respected and influential black pastor who, it was thought, would be sympathetic to the problem. The black church in America has a uniquely important and storied history of vigorous social and political activism, as well as direct service

delivery to its members.

In brief, what ensued was a much more auspicious launch and a stronger alliance than that evident in the Rebuild Los Angeles case. The first pastor was sympathetic, and he—not an outside funder or even an elected official eager to show results—called together his peers to discuss what might be done. Not everyone welcomed closer ties to government agencies that did have real reputation problems in the black community, but a number of pastors saw helping the children, and building new families, as very appropriate work for their ministries—as part of their churches' community building role.

Rather than channel government funds through formal, large-scale services, though, the churches decided to start by "adopting" (informally) one child at a time—thus "One Church, One Child." The ministers used the pulpit at each worship service to frame the cause in terms that would appeal to families

The ultimate approval or denial of particular families still belonged to government, entrusted as it was, with the children's care. These lines were never crossed, though the new alliance arrangement had huge and fairly rapid effects in the desired direction. The waiting list shrunk, wait times for black children fell, and relations between the agency and the black community improved significantly. There were positive spillover effects unforeseen when the alliance was launched. For example, the churches' engagement with state government led to better access to policymakers at the state level and greater experience, on the part of the ministers, navigating the complexities of social policy and program delivery.

Compared to One Church, RLA is one of many cases short on the "enabling conditions" that Gray and others have identified as important for effective collaboration or alliance building. To define a problem well together (stage one), for example, Gray notes that it helps when

It helps when alliance partners have a meaningful recognition of their inter-dependence and of the value of partnering *relative to alternatives*, when each stakeholder or stakeholder group has some minimal level of voice and power to redirect the process, and when respected conveners can help parties overcome barriers, such as differing values and work norms, different styles of communication, uneven information, and mistrust—including "the weight of history."

in the church, church facilities were opened to agency staff who met with prospective families there rather than in the government's own offices, and the ministers helped the agency revise its criteria for screening prospective parents. On close scrutiny, the old criteria reflected a number of cultural and class biases that had the affect of discriminating against otherwise suitable black parents. (In time, the alliance experience motivated a series of other overdue reforms in the agency's way of doing business.)

alliance partners have a meaningful recognition of their interdependence and of the value of partnering *relative to alternatives* (as we noted earlier), when each stakeholder or stakeholder group has some minimal level of voice and power to redirect the process, and when respected conveners can help parties overcome such barriers as differing values and work norms, different styles of communication, uneven information, and mistrust—including "the weight of history."

For setting directions together (stage two), the same factors act as enablers. In

For those inside and outside of particular partnerships who want to make them work, some of the most important judgment calls seem to be these: when to push the players and when to hold back? When pushing, how hard? And how do we get from the big-picture vision to the operational nitty-gritty?

addition, it helps when alliance partners have access to information or expertise that can generate *multiple* action options—this helps partners negotiate and make trades, based on their interests.

For implementing (stage three), the entire list of enablers can help. Sustaining the sense of interdependence remains critical, for example. But other enablers become particularly salient now, such as room to pilot activities ("try stuff") before going to scale, access to "models" developed by others and a critical assessment of their lessons and how the models might be adapted—plus pressure to see the work through.

The last "enabler" goes beyond what we typically associate with healthy alliances, since in theory, the benefits of working together should sell themselves. Moreover, shouldn't we want to avoid the shotgun marriage scenario, in which outside pressure drives the process?

This is a tricky balancing act. Challenging alliances present the alliance partners with many reasons to give up or to put special interests—a particular leader or manager's reputation or sense of control, for example—ahead of some larger shared interest. Plus, some over-eager alliances trample on the hard-won wisdom of those who are, justifiably, concerned about wholesale change in the way an organization or group or community does things.

Uncertainty about the future—the need to forecast well and build in the capacity to adapt to change—can become critical.

Take the earlier example of nonprofit community developers negotiating joint venture partnerships with major supermarkets to anchor shopping centers in
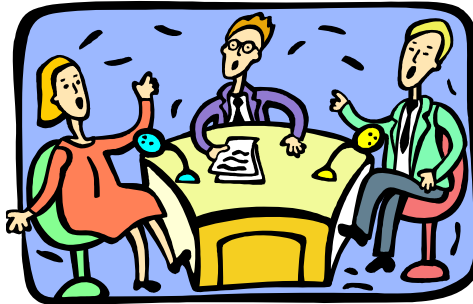
inner city neighbor-hoods. Because the agreements often involve assumptions about the market and long-term financing (10, 15, 30 years), the partners must *anticipate* changes in the market or other conditions that could make the project nonviable and *agree* on how to evaluate and respond to such conditions over time. For example, it is not unusual for an "assignment" clause in a retail lease to allow the supermarket or other retail tenant the flexibility to allocate some or all of its space to another business (should demand for the tenant's products fall off, say). But these clauses are sensitive, because community developers and their financiers care about the quality of their tenants and, of course, the tenants' success at generating revenues to pay fees, rent, and other costs that support the development. Typical agreements give the developer-manager partner a right of refusal or the option to take a dispute over assignment of tenants' space to arbitration if the parties cannot agree. They also employ objective indicators, such as revenue generated per square foot of retail space, to discourage arbitrary or subjective claims. And as you might expect, the lawyerly fine-tuning of these provisions is no trivial matter.

Beyond trust and goodwill among

the alliance partners, then, the capacity to *anticipate* possible changes in the environment over time and *build in adaptive capacity* to protect the effort's viability can be crucial.

Given the risks inherent in alliances and the fact that alliance arrangements are *not* always best, dissent and skepticism can be healthy. They can also ensure that innovative alliances never happen, so in addition to positive "pull" factors that encourage alliance partners, there is a place for the careful use of "push" factors—coaxing, insisting, nudging—as well.

I once had a muscle-bound chiropractor who stood 6-foot-six and weighed about 230 pounds. He left no mystery to the phrase "crack your back"! But when I moved across the country and found a new back specialist, she was half his size and couldn't "muscle" me in the same way. In fact, she advertised her service as "low-force technique." It was, in effect, a science of nudging and coaxing. And it worked, just not the *same* way.

For those inside and outside of partnerships that want to make them work, some of the most careful judgment calls of all seem to be these: when to push the players and when to hold back? When pushing, how hard?

Another key question is how to get from the big-picture *vision* to the operational *nitty-gritty*.

On this issue, researchers of alliances among government agencies and nonprofits have found many of the same internal tensions that students of business alliances emphasize, namely some divergence between the "top" and "bottom" players whose commitment is crucial for making alliances successful. For example, a study of inter-agency crime prevention in Great Britain had this to say:

A spirit of co-operation among representatives on a strategic level … might co-exist with acrimonious relations at the line worker level … Research … suggests that productive cross-agency links are sometimes accompanied by lack of support at higher levels, while in some crime prevention schemes of a

*Partnerships, even when they **are** relatively strategic alliances, aren't always the best way to approach work, whether in the public or private interest, and they seldom offer a "magic bullet" to knock out the most persistent social problems.*

more top-down sort, high-level resolutions concerning interagency co-operation in a few cases ran into major difficulties at implementation levels.

Or as Kanter puts it, middle and lower-level players—closest to the operational work that alliances wish to affect—"may lack knowledge of the strategic context in which the relationship makes sense and see only the operational ways in which it does not."

Or vice-versa: operations staff may find and pursue creative links with alliance partner organizations—but not receive support from higher-ups. The latter may lack needed insight into the benefits of partnering more fully, lack a commitment to the strategic changes perceived to be necessary, or simply focus on broader
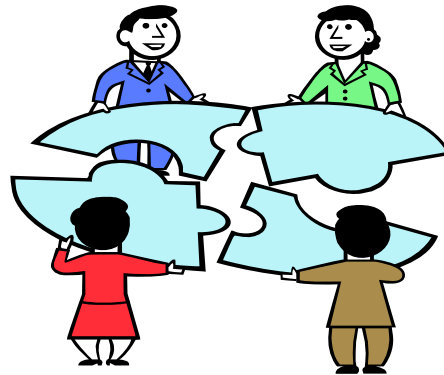
partnership risks of which operations staff are unaware.

Along with the "outside game" of problem-solving with the partners, then, alliance builders must pay attention to the inside game negotiated on "our side." This is one more reason to pace the change and focus on learning that happens up, down, and side-

ways—i.e., in all every useful direction—among the players involved.

Now, we'll take stock one last time before wrapping up and taking an overview of further reading and other useful resources.

Final Thoughts and Related Topics in This Series

In *Building Community Capacity, a study of* a variety of promising neighborhood-focused efforts in urban America, a group of researchers sum up helpful criteria for choosing effective partners and partnerships:

Clarity and expectations of role and contribution are critical, and partnerships among organizations are likely to work better when they are engaged in (1) a clearly defined project (2) that is central to the work of the participating organizations, (3) that involves work to which each organization can make obvious contributions, and (4) that is undertaken by organizations with the capacity (staff, resources, competence) to contribute.

Partnerships, even when they are relatively *strategic* alliances, aren't always the best way to approach work, whether in the public *or* private interest, and they seldom offer a "magic bullet" to knock out the most persistent social problems. But for reasons we explored at the outset of this note, such arrangements are here to stay. In fact, if the past few decades are any indication, they will only increase in variety, number, and public expectation in years to come.

On the next few pages, you'll find resources for doing more learning, not just about alliances but about a host of related topics in community problem-solving.□

Further Reading and Other Resources

Here is a list, both general and more specific, for learning more about why alliances or partnerships arise, how they function and dysfunction, and how to get more effective at leveraging the power of alliances in your community.

TAKING STOCK (Part Four)

Questions you and your alliance partners can ask and answer to navigate the *process* of building an alliance, or breaking one off, more effectively:

Tracking the Big Stages. *Where* are we in a larger process of building something together? Have we agreed on an *overall problem* to be tackled, and are we beginning to think about it in a relatively consistent way? (Clues: using some of the same *terms? Emphasizing a range of aspects* of the problem, including those that previously "belonged" to only one alliance partner or the other?) Are we identifying concrete *strategies* for tackling that problem—strategies in which each of us has a fairly clear *role* and some significant *contribution* (value added) to offer? Have these strategies been *reality tested? Are there models from elsewhere or clues in our own* past experience that allow us to "look before we leap" together? Have we worked out detailed *operational* obligations, practices that involve coordinating with one another (including sharing information we each need to do our part), and clear obligations and consequences for non-performance (accountability rules)?

Leveraging "Push" and "Pull" Factors. Who are the *stakeholders* in the activities, and especially the changes, we envision, and what are those stakeholders' interests? In particular, who may feel threatened or for other reasons *oppose* the changes it will take? What can we learn from those stakeholders, and how much should we protect against their opposition? Do we have a plan for managing and pacing change? What level of support have we communicated to "authorize" change? Is there room to express doubt and take risks without being blamed for failure? Are we investing in the kind of *capacity* (skill, time, materials) needed to carry out the activities we want to see? Are there, conversely, appropriate consequences for consistent failure to learn or for other drivers of ineffective action?

General readings:

For an excellent overview of multi-stakeholder **collaboration process**, see Barbara Gray, *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multi-Party Problems* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989). Gray also summarizes a large research literature, and the competing theories about why alliances arise, how they evolve, and why they succeed or fail, in Barbara Gray and Donna J. Wood, "Collaborative Alliances: Moving from Practice to Theory," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, volume 27(1), March 1991.

For a step-by-step guide to specific **design and implementation tasks** (assuming that partnering is a good idea), see Michael Winer and Karen Ray, *Collaboration Handbook,* St. Paul: Wilder Foundation (1994).

Mark H. Moore, "Creating and Exploiting Networks of Capacity," Unpublished manuscript, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 1999.

For ideas about networks and how **alliances and networks** relate to major policy changes, see Langley Keyes, Alex Schwartz, Avis Vidal, and Rachel Bratt, "Networks and Nonprofits: Opportunities and Challenges in an Era of Federal Devolution," *Housing Policy Debate* 7 (2):201-224 (1996).

On the importance of **developing collaborative capacity within an organization**, see Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Collaborative Advantage: The Art of Alliances," *Harvard Business Review* 13:96-108 (1994). On related forms of capacity development, see Robert J. Chaskin, Prudence Brown, Sudhir Venkatesh, and Avis Vidal, *Building Community Capacity* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2001).

On **stages of trust in alliance building**, see Ronald F. Ferguson, pp. 589-604 in "Conclusion: Social Science Research, Urban Problems, and Community Development Alliances," *Urban Problems and Community Development,* Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, editors (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1999).

On **degrees of partnering**, see Arthur, T. Himmelman, "Collaboration for Change," Big Picture Associates (Noveber 2001), World Wide Web page www.bigpictureassociates.com (and Moore paper cited above).

On the history and importance of **dividing and coordinating labor** (or "structuring" work), see Henry Mintzberg, *Structure in Fives: Designing Effective Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983); on teams, see J. Richard Hackman, editor, *Groups that Work (and Those that Don't)* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

On **inter-agency cooperation** and alliances in government, see Eugene Bardach, *Getting Agencies To Work Together* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1998).

For local examples in the **developing world** and useful ways of designing alliances, see Archana Kalegoankar and L. David Brown, "Intersectoral Cooperation: Lessons for Practice," Institute for Development Research Report volume 16(2), Boston, MA (2000).

Alliances by sector:

On business alliances, see business/nonprofit alliances, see James E. Austin, *The Collaboration Challenge: How Nonprofits and Businesses Succeed Through Strategic Alliances* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000);

On public/private alliances, see the influential *Reinventing Government* by David Osborne and Peter Plastrik (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992); and their *Reinventor's Fieldbook: Tools for Transforming Your Government* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); and Elizabeth Bennett, Peter Grossman, and Brad Gentry, "Public-Private Partnerships for the Urban Environment," (New York: United Nations Development Program, 1999).

On contracting relationships between government and nonprofits, see Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1993); and the controversial case of privatizing child protection services in the State of Massachusetts: "High Stakes and Frightening Lapses: DSS, La Alianza Hispana, and the Public-Private Question in Child Protection Services," Kennedy

---

LEARNING MORE

To learn about other topics that relate to effective alliance building, check out these strategy tools in our series, available at *www.community-problem-solving.net*:

Planning Together: How (and How Not) to Engage Stakeholders in Charting a Course. Many public-interest alliances aim to expand stakeholder participation in shaping, supporting, and monitoring the alliance's work. This is true for practical reasons of wanting more and better ideas and for legitimacy reasons as well—wanting a meaningful community mandate. Learn more about the often unspoken expectations and competing objectives that drive participatory planning and decision-making and sometimes undermine it. Learn more about the strategies and tactics needed to "participate the public" more effectively.

In the Middle: Roles and Challenges of Intermediaries. Alliances are often cultivated by intermediaries or go-betweens that act as conveners, facilitators, and even start-up or "take-it-to-scale" investors. Learn about the unique potential and special challenges facing these players (and those with whom they work) in communities around the globe.

"We are All Negotiators Now": An Introduction to Negotiation for Community Problem-Solvers. Many "community" problem-solvers think of negotiation as a dirty word—the very antithesis of community. Negotiation may conjure up images of hard-nosed horse trading, half-truths, and power games. But as negotiation gurus Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Program on Negotiation put it, "Everyone negotiates something every day … It is back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement when you and the other side have some interests that are shared and others that are opposed." Negotiating effectively is particularly important where: you will be dealing with "the other side" repeatedly in the future, not just in a "one-off" agreement; a number of seemingly distinct bargains are actually linked (help me on this, I'll help you on that other matter); and because of likely spillover effects, the parties affected are not simply those "at the table".

School of Government Case Program, Case #1265.0.

On cross-sector alliances, see Steve Waddell and L. David Brown, "Fostering Intersectoral Partnering: A Guide to Promoting Cooperation Among Government, Business and Civil Society Actors," *Institute for Development Research Reports* 13(3):1-22 (1997); and "Moving from Collaborative Processes to Collaborative Communities: Exploring New Paths," (Washington, DC: Community Building Institute and National Civic League, 2002).

Specific policy or program areas:

On labor or workforce development and training alliances, see Bennett Harrison and Marcus Weiss, *Workforce Development Networks: Community-Based Organizations and Regional Alliances* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998); and *Networking Across Boundaries: New Directions for Community-Based Job Training and Economic Development, Volumes I, II, and III, (Boston: Economic Development Assistance Consortium, 1998*.); and Linda Y. Kato and James A. Riccio with Jennifer Dodge, *Building New Partnerships for Employment: Collaboration Among Agencies and Residents in the Jobs-Plus Demonstration* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2001).

On integrating human services, see Sharon Lynn Kagan and Peter R. Neville,. *Integrating Services for Children and Families: Understanding the Past to Shape the Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See also "Finding Black Parents: One Church, One Child," Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Program, Case #856.0.

On partnerships between universities and community groups, see *Journal of Planning Education and Research, Special Issue on University/Community Partnerships (Summer 1998)*; David Maurrasse, *Beyond Campus: How Colleges and Universities Form Partnerships with Their Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and the website of the Office of University Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (www.oup.org).

On economic development alliances, see "Rebuilding Los Angeles: A Public-Private-Nonprofit Partnership," Kennedy School of Government Case Program, Case #C16-99-1542.9, Harvard University, 2000; "Supermarkets in Inner Cities," Harvard Business School Case #N1-796-145, Cambridge, MA (1996); "The Cleveland Turnaround' (Parts A-D), Harvard Business School Case # 9-796-151/2/3/4, Boston, MA (1996).

On community safety issues, see Jenny Berrien, Omar McRoberts, and Christopher Winship, "Religion and the Boston Miracle: The Effect of Black Ministry on Youth Violence," pp. 266-285 in *Who Will Provide?: The Changing Role of Religion in American Social Welfare,* Mary Jo Bane, Brent Coffin, and Ronald Thiemann, eds. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000).

Got ideas?

Send us your feedback on the content of this tool—or any and all ideas you would like to share on taking action to make a difference in communities:

feedback@community-problem-solving.net

Xavier de Souza Briggs
Associate Professor of Sociology + Urban Planning
and Director
The Community Problem-Solving Project @ MIT
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 9-521
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139 U.S.A.

feedback@community-problem-solving.net

www.community-problem-solving.net

Strategy for a changing world.