Developing a Partnership Mindset in Extension 4-H Programs

Betsy Olson Minnaert
University of Minnesota Extension, betolson@umn.edu

Jessica Pierson Russo
University of Minnesota Extension, pier0239@umn.edu

Margo Herman
University of Minnesota Extension, mherman@umn.edu

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University of Minnesota Extension

Partnering has become a growing strategy within the Minnesota Extension 4-H program to support a strong organizational commitment to reach all youth with opportunities to learn, lead, and contribute. A partnership approach requires recognizing the unique contexts in which youth live. Since not all communities are the same, adaptable partnership approaches are essential to developing programs that are responsive to diverse communities. These approaches require staff skills and perspectives that recognize how, with partnerships, we can do better together what each entity could not do alone. Staff with a partnership mindset help pave that pathway. To learn about what a partnership mindset entails and how organizations can support its development, the authors completed a literature review and collected survey data from 32 4-H staff who had successfully developed viable community partnerships to support youth programming in Minnesota, reaching new and typically underserved audiences. Merging youth development research with our survey results, we found that a partnership mindset included persistent effort, effective relationship skills, transparent communication methods, and adaptability. We also learned that organizations can support successful partnership building when they remain adaptable to the needs of varying community contexts and actively provide resources for staff.

Keywords: partnership mindset, 4-H, skill-building, reaching under-served audiences, organizational partnerships

Introduction

Strong partnerships help organizations expand the potential audience for their programs, which adds value to their programming. Minnesota Extension 4-H has an organizational commitment to reach all youth with a mission to increase the quality, availability, and impact of community learning opportunities for youth. Partnerships are an essential way for 4-H leaders to accomplish their mission with young people from diverse cultures, incomes, races, religions, and geography. Partnerships help leaders reach youth who may otherwise be inaccessible.

The authors investigated why some staff were more successful than others in building quality partnerships by asking participants, "what perspectives help staff build effective partnerships with other organizations?" This research brief identifies participants' perspectives that

contribute to successfully accomplishing these tasks. How staff perceive partnerships—their attitude and interest level in forming them—can profoundly impact the development and maintenance of successful collaborations. The authors conducted a literature review of relevant youth development research and surveyed their 4-H colleagues. The literature review highlighted specific conditions that strengthen organizational partnerships. The researcher-developed survey asked staff questions related to the personal strengths they called upon to successfully partner with other organizations. The survey results contribute to a better understanding of what factors define what the authors call a partnership mindset. A partnership mindset is made up of practitioners' internal perspectives that are commonly recognized as essential for creating conditions for effective partnerships.

The literature supports the results of the survey, illuminating four perspectives essential to developing effective partnerships with community organizations (Bringle et al., 2009; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gazley et al., 2013; Judd & Adams, 2008; Miller, 2008; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Thompson & Jesiek, 2017). These four perspectives include

- propensity for persistent effort,
- attention to building relationships with a partner,
- transparent communication, and
- adaptability.

More specifically, the literature delineates the specific nature of relationships that result in effective partnerships. These variables complement the skills reported by survey respondents.

Because the context in which staff are operating impacts effective partnerships, the authors' research also revealed three work environment characteristics important to supporting partnership building. Although work environment characteristics were not part of the original research question, the data from both the survey and the literature review strongly pointed to the important role that organizations play in providing an environment that supports partnership building (Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gazley et al., 2013; Judd & Adams, 2008; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Thompson & Jesiek, 2017). These work environment characteristics include

- support for staff time to pursue partnerships,
- flexible structures and policies, and
- well communicated organizational benefits to partnership participation.

When staff have a partnership mindset and a work environment with the characteristics listed above, there is evidence that impactful organizational partnerships can more readily be built and maintained.

Methodology

The first step was a literature review exploring the proposed research question. The results helped influence the questions the authors asked in the survey of 4-H staff to better understand what a partnership mindset entails.

The survey was designed to help understand what perspectives help staff build effective partnerships with other organizations. To answer this research question, the authors collected data from 4-H staff who have demonstrated effective partnership building. Five key informants identified 53 staff that had relevant experience building organizational partnerships in their work.

The authors developed the survey to understand how staff perspectives relate to the development and successful implementation of new partnerships. The survey included a particular focus on organizational partnerships that reach new and underserved audiences with 4-H programming. Survey questions asked about the mindset and skillset necessary for developing effective partnerships, what specific perspectives respondents thought were most critical, what made the partnership successful, and what challenges they experienced. Sixty-five percent of the survey questions were open-ended, providing a text box for participants to describe, in their own words, their experiences and expertise. The survey is provided in the Appendix.

Respondents were sent an email request to participate in the electronic survey with an explanation related to how they were selected for participation and a description of how the survey results would be used. Two reminders were sent to those who did not complete the survey. A hyperlink was provided, allowing respondents to opt-out. The authors received 32 responses (60% return rate). Eighty-nine percent of the respondents were women. Over half had worked in 4-H for less than four years and the majority identified as non-Hispanic white. The survey did not ask about youth development experience outside of work with 4-H. Respondents predominantly worked in urban counties, with only 21% ($n = 7$) working in rural counties as defined by Egbert and Brauer (2017).

The authors utilized the constant comparison qualitative analysis method (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008) to analyze the open-ended survey responses. First, survey responses were placed in a table, and identifying characteristics were removed by staff not involved in the research. Second, all three authors reviewed the survey responses and developed independent themes in the open coding process. This inductive approach to analysis was chosen because all the authors had practical experience in organizational partnership building. Next, data were coded with a descriptive coding matrix built from axial coding or grouping the codes into similar categories. The coding matrix was created by matching the themes of the independent coding processes across all three authors. Finally, the codes were independently verified through additional analysis by an external evaluation expert to monitor for bias. The external evaluator conducted an independent open coding process, and then themes were compared. Three themes were eliminated because the external evaluator did not independently identify these categories.

As a final step, the literature review was revisited to identify what within the survey results was supported by scholarly works. This is how the four perspectives and skills were identified.

Results

Interpreted results identified four personal perspectives, defined below, that staff consistently utilized when developing organizational partnerships. The analysis also identified three characteristics of the working environment that employers can provide to facilitate effective organizational partnerships. The definitions of these perspectives and characteristics are based on how survey participants described their experiences in building partnerships.

Four Partnership Mindset Perspectives

- **Persistence:** Continued effort dedicated toward a course of action, specifically not giving up and possessing the determination to "get it done."
    - Example quote: "Never stop with one not right now. Always check back to see if there are needs that can be met from 4-H."
- **Attention to relationship building:** Focus on elements that build interpersonal relationships, including trust, cooperatively defined mutual benefit, and noticing opportunities to interact.
    - Example quote: "Developing relationships, seeing where I could collaborate with other groups, and how 4-H could fit in."
- **Transparent approach to communication:** Initiating and maintaining "open communication" between organizations utilizing proactive communication strategies as well as "active listening."
    - Example quote: "Communicate, communicate, communicate. Be transparent and make others aware of your needs."
- **Adaptability:** Remaining open to new ideas, flexibility, and working to fit programs into the constraints of each organization.
    - Example quote: "Creative problem solving…finding a way to compromise."

Three Work Environment Characteristics

- **Support for staff time:** Staff have confidence that the organization allows for the time-consuming work of initiating and maintaining effective organizational partnerships.
    - Example quote: "It is important work, but it takes much time and energy."
- **Flexible structures and policies:** Policies and procedures (e.g., partnership agreements, enrollment structures) can adapt to meet the unique needs of each community and allow for innovation.
    - Example quote: "4-H has had to think differently about how to program in a variety of settings."

- **Well-communicated organizational benefits:** Staff understand and have access to clear information and documentation explaining the benefits that the organization offers partners.
  - Example quote: "[an obstacle is] a lack of understanding of what 4-H can offer—we get there, but it takes more time sharing ALL that 4-H can offer beyond the 'traditional' ideas and ideals of 4-H."

Whereas participants identified each of these perspectives and workplace characteristics independently of one another, the authors' analysis shows and literature supports that they are also interconnected. For instance, respondents mention persistence or perseverance independently on seven occasions; respondents also mentioned repeat attempts to communicate, highlighting the interconnection between persistence and communication on three occasions.

Findings also demonstrate that staff relied upon the organization they work for to provide an effective context in which to seek out and work with organizational partnerships. Respondents noted that support from colleagues (including supervisors), as well as a recognition of the time it takes to develop relationships and trust, supports the growth and maintenance of organizational partnerships, whereas a lack of such support and recognition of time makes partnership building difficult. Staff also recognized that in order to adapt to the needs of the partner, they need structures and policies that can adapt to and support new ideas and ways of working. Finally, respondents noted the importance of well-communicated organizational benefits where staff are provided a narrative that they can use to educate partners about 4-H.

Discussion

The authors defined a partnership mindset as a set of perspectives that results in the ability and the will to build quality collaborations where both parties achieve greater outcomes than they could alone. Using this definition, the key components of this mindset can be outlined by merging current literature with practical experience. As this discussion section will show, the survey results supported the literature by identifying perspectives that matched the relationship building characteristics identified by literature as influential in creating strong organizational partnerships (Bringle et al., 2009; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gazley et al., 2013; Judd & Adams, 2008; Thompson & Jesiek, 2017). In addition, survey respondents reported utilizing these practices and recognized that organizations play a critical role in carving time for staff to initiate, maintain, and ensure the success of partnerships.

Relationship Building Core to Effective Partnerships

Practitioners and literature alike recognize that effective relationship building is an essential part of successful organizational partnerships. Research has demonstrated the critical role of relationships in very specific terms. Bringle et al. (2009) relate organizational partnerships to a series of interpersonal relationships, the strength and quality of which depend on the degree to

which they express closeness, equity, and integrity. They determine closeness based on how often the individuals interact, the diversity of what they do in those interactions, and how much influence they have on each other. Equity is determined by how equal each person perceives the interactions and outcomes of the partnership. Relationships with integrity are those that ensure they are working from a common set of values.

Respondents of the survey described effective partnerships as those with mutually defined goals and outcomes. The framework laid out by Bringle et al. (2009) helps us see the spectrum of outcomes that partnerships can have and which characteristics are necessary for parties to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. They identify a spectrum of outcomes ranging from exploitation (one or both parties using each other for personal gain), transaction (the execution of goals), to transformation (the achievement of something greater than expected). Gazley et al. (2013) and Judd and Adams (2008) also highlight the importance of mutually defined goals and outcomes, which are necessary for transactional partnerships and transformational partnerships. Literature and the survey respondents both clearly identified the critical role collaboration around goals and outcomes plays in effective partnerships.

A prominent theme in the research reported here, as well as in the literature review, is the critical role of staff persistence in effective partnerships (Bringle et al., 2009; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gazley et al., 2013; Judd & Adams, 2008; Noam & Tillinger, 2004). Judd and Adams (2008) found that commitment is "the most important key to success of the partnership" (p. 120). Commitment in this context is notably similar to the persistence described by survey respondents. Active engagement over time, or persistent engagement, is critical to sustaining a partnership beyond a single project or interaction (Dorado & Giles, 2004). The survey participants stressed the importance of perseverance and continued ongoing connections with partners. These practices are the mechanisms by which staff indicate a commitment.

Communication is intertwined with commitment and persistence since communication is a critical facilitator of collaborative relationships (Bringle et al., 2009; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gazley et al., 2013; Judd & Adams, 2008; Noam & Tillinger, 2004). However, communication is about more than frequency, which relates to persistence and commitment. Relevant research indicates that it is imperative that staff collect critical information, distribute it to all who need to know, and ensure that information is seen as authentic (Miller, 2008; Judd & Adams, 2008). These transparent communication strategies are an essential part of "effective partnership programs" (Judd & Adams, 2008, p. 121).

An aspect of partnerships that connects with youth development and out-of-school-time programming in a unique way is adaptability. As Noam and Tillinger (2004) pointed out, after-school programming "does not typically produce neat steps in progression" and has a great "potential for creativity." This requires staff to adapt in order to effectively respond to this creative and messy environment. In addition, partnerships by their very nature include multiple

organizational and community cultures. Navigating these cultures requires the adaptability of the staff involved (Miller, 2008) to be responsive to the unique convergence of the partners.

The Role of the Organization

Even when staff possess a partnership mindset, their efforts can become lost in an organization with no will or structure to support it (Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Thompson & Jesiek, 2017). Because partnerships are based on relationships, two critical elements to provide space for relationships, namely staff constancy and persistence, are key to making continued progress. Yet Noam and Tillinger (2004) point out that one of the primary challenges to collaborations is the inability or unwillingness of organizations to dedicate staff time to supporting and sustaining the partnership. Adaptability is also a necessity (Gorski et al. 2015; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Thompson & Jesiek, 2017). We cannot expect to succeed in partnerships if we remain within the confines of our own narrow program parameters. Through negotiation and compromise, partners can develop solid mutually beneficial goals, thus reaching a higher level of collaboration and transformation (Noam & Tillinger, 2004). When there is a strong organizational will to dedicate time and resources to partnerships, barriers (such as lack of resources, shared mission/goals, clarity of roles and cultural norms, and mechanisms for communication) can be minimized. Thus, the authors found that both an individual and an organizational mindset towards partnerships is essential to building successful collaborations.

Limitations

A purposive sample, like the one used for this study, is common when looking to gain a deeper understanding of inter-organization dynamics and professional skills. However, this type of sampling can narrow the generalizability of results due to the similar backgrounds of respondents. The respondents in this study are likely to have worked together and have knowledge of each other's work. This level of closeness among participants increases the risk that the organization's culture and its approach to organizational partnerships may bias the results. The purposive sample was necessary to ensure that respondents had tangible experience in developing partnerships.

The results rely on self-reported data, and responses cannot be verified independently. Therefore, attribution, exaggeration of skills, and selective memory may have influenced the data collected. The majority of respondents were female, highly educated (bachelor's degree or higher), and white. The lack of gender and racial diversity is likely to influence the findings and may limit the applicability of practices identified in the data analysis. Staff turnover at youth development organizations influences this research as well. What the authors define as sustainable partnerships in this environment is influenced by the typically short tenure of youth development staff, as well as the complex nature of program sustainability itself (Center for Public Health Systems Science, 2018).

Further research would be needed to investigate whether the themes are reflected in other organizations' experiences and in different cultural contexts. Observational data would help to further this line of research by providing evidence to verify self-reported data. Observations could be done by people who work with staff who are successfully building partnerships and who understand the approach of successful staff (e.g., supervisors, partnering organizations, or colleagues). Observations could also be conducted by objective observers/researchers. Investigating partnerships outside of higher education contexts would help broaden the applicability of this type of research.

Implications/Recommendations

There are several methods for encouraging the development of a partnership mindset that an organization can implement. For instance, practical experience in the field is often the best way for staff to learn the skills and resources needed to develop effective organizational partnerships. Training can decrease the amount of experience required for staff to become effective. However, the perspectives and skills that were most prevalent from the survey (flexibility, adaptability, and persistence) are those that may be harder to teach in a course than they are gained through experience. Staff who completed the survey indicated that they felt the most success in building partnerships when they had organizational support to do so. The survey found that staff experience the tension between the responsibilities of their regular workload and the unique demands of supporting organizational partnerships. To help relieve this tension, staff acknowledged that they need additional support from mentors, supervisors, and organizational leaders, and literature reinforces this as a need (Miller, 2008; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Thompson & Jesiek, 2017). This support involves time for administrative tasks specific to partnerships, such as contracts and program agreements, as well as support for creating networks and working through obstacles. In addition, the survey results showed that organizations should equip staff with a deep understanding of mission and the competitive advantage their programming has in the field, provide opportunities for them to network internally and externally, and mentor and encourage them to try new things and practice partnering skills.

Organization adaptability and flexibility are essential for partnerships to take root (Gorski et al., 2015; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Thompson & Jesiek, 2017). The authors contend that for an organization to be sufficiently flexible requires a level of organizational humility—a recognition that to stay relevant, we need to constantly and consistently review structures and supports to ensure that they meet the needs we profess to impact. We need to better understand the critical role that the organization plays in providing a foundation for staff with whom to partner successfully.

Conclusions

A partnership mindset is a set of perspectives that result in the ability and the will to build quality collaborations where both parties achieve greater outcomes than they could alone. Organizations

that establish the right work environment for building partnerships can support staff in creating an effective mindset for doing so. From the most skilled partnership builders, the authors learned that a partnership mindset includes a propensity for persistent effort, effective relationship skills, transparent communication, and adaptability. The authors also found that organizational support is essential for ensuring that collaborations are not dependent only on the staff who built them. Adaptability in an organization's culture allows room for staff to apply a partnership mindset to develop sustainable partnerships. Thus, both the individual staff and the organization need to possess a partnership mindset, as described in this article.

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Betsy Olson Minnaert is a University of Minnesota associate Extension professor leading program planning in central Minnesota that helps staff engage in strategic partnerships, build culturally responsive quality learning environments, and build evidence of impact.

Jessica Pierson Russo is a University of Minnesota associate Extension professor leading program growth and innovation across Minnesota, with an emphasis on building the staff capacity to conduct and lead local program planning in communities with high concentrations of diversity.

Margo Herman is a University of Minnesota associate Extension professor focused on supporting regional 4-H programming, including partnerships and volunteer systems, and developing and delivering curriculum for youth development staff and volunteers on social-emotional learning and culturally responsive youth work.

Appendix

Partnership Mindset Survey

This survey is for 4-H Program Coordinators and Extension Educators who have developed partnerships with other organizations to expand 4-H program delivery to under-served and new audiences.

We will be using the results of this survey to develop a scholarship piece "Developing a Partnership Mindset" in which we will explore key perspectives essential to developing effective partnerships.

For the purpose of this survey, a partnership is defined as two or more entities coming together in a relationship to address the goal of providing new program opportunities.

1. Since working for 4-H, how many partnerships have you developed with an organization outside of Extension to address the goal of serving first time 4-H youth?

   ☐ Zero

   ☐ One

   ☐ Two - Five

   ☐ Six or more

2. Please select the types of partners that you work with. Check all that apply.

   ☐ Schools

   ☐ Community centers

   ☐ Cultural specific community organization

   ☐ Supportive housing community

   ☐ Other _____

3. How did you learn to form partnerships? Check all that apply.

   ☐ From an Extension colleague

   ☐ From professional development workshop or coursework

   ☐ From another organization

   ☐ Learned from past experience (describe) _____

   ☐ Sheer determination

   ☐ Other _____

4. Tell what that learning looked like related to the learning experiences you checked in the previous question.

5. Please list below three internal personal strengths or skills that have helped YOU successfully build partnerships. Then rank their order of importance for anyone building partnerships.

                                Rank

_____ Skill 1 _____

_____ Skill 2 _____

_____ Skill 3 _____

6. Please list three specific skills you have learned or gained from the experience of developing partnerships. Then rank their order of importance.

                                Rank

_____ Skill 1 _____

_____ Skill 2 _____

_____ Skill 3 _____

7. How have your partners benefited from partnering with 4-H?

8. How has 4-H benefited from partnering?

9. What resistance or obstacles have prevented you from forming partnerships?

10. Describe how you have been able to move beyond those obstacles?

11. Tell about a particularly challenging partnership experience.

12. What did you learn from this challenging partnership experience?

13. Describe two or three key factors contributing to the success of your strongest partnership.
    1. _____
    2. _____
    3. _____

14. What is your level of confidence in 4-H's ability to be an effective partner through your work?
    ☐ High
    ☐ Medium
    ☐ Low

15. What level of importance do you place on building partnerships as a strategy for building effective 4-H programs?
    ☐ High
    ☐ Medium
    ☐ Low

16. How long have you worked for 4-H?

    ☐   1-4 years

    ☐   5-9 years

    ☐   10-14 years

    ☐   15 or more years

17. Tell us anything else you think would be helpful for us to know about your partnership mindset.