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Concentric Concerns: The Art of Administrative Collaboration

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Introduction

Those working in cultural organizations routinely collaborate with an extensive array of community partners. "We already collaborate, what more do they want from us?" is a common lament from those who feel they are being pressured into collaboration by funders without guiding models. Meanwhile the landscape is shifting dramatically, as captured in a recent James Irvine Foundation Working Paper (2006):

> There is now a serious imbalance: the current level of public participation and financial support is not sufficient for what the nonprofit arts sector needs to survive. As a result, increasing numbers of organizations are facing significant financial hardship . . . Inaction or 'business as usual' is not a viable option. (pp. 5 & 6)

The focus of this piece is to share the experience of CEPA Gallery, Just Buffalo Literary Center, and Big Orbit Gallery/Sound Lab (1) which have just completed a three-year Administrative Collaboration pilot project, supported in large part by The John R. Oishei Foundation.   This article is intended to provide information for culture workers and others interested in considering administrative collaboration.

In our case, public funding sources (city, county, and state) which had traditionally supported cultural organizations had already been, or were in danger of being, dramatically cut. CEPA Executive Director Lawrence Brose joked at the beginning of the collaboration that we were "beyond doing more with less, beyond lean - we were anorexic."

CEPA and Big Orbit Gallery had a history of working together and had begun experimenting with more significant collaboration. Sean Donaher, Big Orbit's non-salaried director, had been hired as CEPA's Artistic Director and moved into an onsite office. I met CEPA Executive Director Lawrence Brose at a Grantmakers conference in late 2002, and the conversation began in earnest among the three directors. It was hoped that a funding proposal could be developed and submitted to a local foundation with strong interest in this area. Paul Hogan, John R. Oishei Foundation Senior Program Officer, became our link in developing the proposal.

Much has been written about collaboration (and other types of strategic partnership ranging from informal networking to mergers) in recent years. However, very little is yet available in terms of practical help for those running nonprofit cultural organizations who sense the promise and possibility of pursuing "Real Collaboration" (La Piana, 2001) as a strategy but aren't sure how to go about actually doing it. Often interest in organizational partnerships is sparked by a sense of funder mandate, "collaborate or die," which has permeated both the foundation and public/government funding arenas.

This call for collaboration has only escalated in light of the financial market meltdown and economic recession. Mr. Rooney of the Center of Philanthropy (Gose, B., Wasley, P., & Wilhelm, I., 2008) noted that, "I don't want to say the sky is falling, but . . . A lot of 'more fragile organizations' will be in jeopardy" (p. 15). Charity Navigator Chief Executive Ken Berger urges charities to consider joining forces – or at least sharing administrative staff – and doing it now (p. 15).

Going into our administrative collaboration, we searched for models to help us. We found none. There were plenty of articles about business mergers, but those had little in common with our goals. One of the indications that this is a fairly new area of exploration, with much room for growth and discovery, is that there is very little agreement in mainstream and academic literature about even basic terms and concepts related to collaboration. This adds to the lack of practical advice for those exploring it as a possibility. This article seeks to fill that gap with one specific example.

As we began our conversations in early 2003, we knew we wanted to collaborate

in a way that was substantive, that had as its first priority strengthening each of our individual organizations, and that focused, at least initially, on the "back office." We began envisioning a sort of 'hybrid organization' which, like the first hybrid automobiles, would take an investment to develop, but ultimately, would enable us to go farther on fewer consumed resources. Although not considered directly at the onset, we found it to be of great benefit that our three organizations have different, but complimentary, art forms. This echoed Backer (2003) who stated that, "partners with common values but different kinds of artistic products are often the best candidates for successful partnership" (p. 48)

The following section will highlight some key issues and recommendations for groups interested in developing similar concentric concerns.

Boards

One of the first things program officer Hogan put on the table was that "this needs to go beyond the three Executive Directors, you need the support of your boards." Boards by nature can be risk adverse and the concept of an administrative collaboration wasn't an easy sell at first. It was something new and unknown. We were helped by the fact that everyone was feeling the impact of funding cuts. Initially, each organization got a letter from his or her board expressing only "support for exploring administrative collaboration."

In our case, a group of 2-3 from each organization board, and the three Executive Directors, became the Collaboration Committee. This has served us well as a simple, non-cumbersome method of governance and coordination. This group meets quarterly to provide expertise, review progress, and communicate back to individual boards – and is critical to weaving the collaboration into the fabric of the organizations.

In meeting with other organizations since then, we have stressed the importance of finding a way to get your 'boards on board.' Training, conducted jointly with a shared consultant, and forming a committee comprised of representatives from each organization are both ideal ways of giving people the chance to get to know each other and begin to develop the personal connection and comfort level that is essential if things are to move forward. For us, now much later in the process, the creation of joint task forces and additional work on creating community among the full boards has become important.

Outside/Independent Consultants

The next critical milestone was when the Oishei Foundation offered to provide a

small planning grant in the fall of 2004. This enabled us to secure the Canisius College Center for Professional Development as an independent consultant. They worked with us to:

- bring representatives from each of the three boards together for meetings to get to know each other better, including confronting the 'brutal facts' of the current environment and sketching out a shared vision for our work together;

- create a Memorandum of Understanding;

- prepare a workplan - including baselines, benchmarks, goals, timelines, and value statements;

- draft a contract for a shared grantwriter;

- discuss how we would deal with conflict.

In addition, Canisius provided access to a top development consultant who has worked with each organization to increase individual and major gifts support through creating a case for support, identifying donors, designing campaigns around specific programs or exhibitions, and learning to do personal solicitations. In this, CEPA has taken the lead, increasing major gifts from $15K to $72K in one year. Witnessing their success has inspired the other organizations to surpass past expectations. Fifty to 75 hours of time over the course of a year with a consultant shared together and individually by three organizations is an investment that cannot be overstated. Although we initially expected the need for these hours to decrease over the course of the 3 year pilot, the exact opposite occurred: as we gained traction and experienced our first successes with major gifts fundraising, new needs emerged such as establishing methods for donor recognition and retention, which required additional time and training.

Space/Proximity

Many organizations are interested in the benefits of collaboration but do not want to give up anything, especially space. In our collaboration, the decision was soon made for Just Buffalo to move downtown to share CEPA's offices. It was a leap of faith, as it was on CEPA's end to give up one of their gallery spaces and convert it into offices for Just Buffalo staff and a shared administrative assistant.   This experiment had a great deal to do with the individuals involved and the tremendous goodwill extended throughout the continuing process. This is not something you can capture through a survey or due diligence, but it is critically

important when you are putting your organization and future at risk, and should be approached in the same way you would approach any major relationship decision—with care.

Particular to the smallest and/or youngest organization in a collaboration is the issue of equity. For us, it has been vitally important to ask, "Where is Big Orbit in all this?" Having organizations at different points in their own life cycles means that each organization's unique needs and challenges must be made part of the collaboration conversation.

Proximity has enabled our organizations to realize savings through sharing office space, equipment, a development software and maintenance contract, phone/internet service package, combined pool of volunteers and interns, graphic design and other specialized skills possessed by staff and board members as well as development training.

Perhaps the most significant, but less quantifiable, by-product of proximity has been the impact on the three Executive Directors. Working so closely together has created a synergy of complimentary skills, resulting in expanded capacity, reduced isolation, and creation of a built-in brain trust and support system for problem solving and practical help.

Staffing

As is the case in many cultural organizations, individually we could rarely afford the staff we really needed. Our first shared position was a full-time grantwriter, budgeted in our collaboration proposal, with a phased in timeline for the organizations to pick up the cost directly. This position began shifting some work off the executive directors (freeing up capacity to develop individual giving programs) and has resulted in a number of new grants – some pursued by two or all three organizations together, and others for individual organizations. To cover the cost of a highly skilled person in a position like this, thinking in terms of three to five years for a full return on investment is not unrealistic. Organizations need to look carefully at covering salary expenses through building it into program budgets and development goals; new program revenue or freeing up the executive directors to do other essential work does not automatically bring in the revenue needed for additional salary expenses.

Pooling resources to create a full-time shared position, with good pay and benefits, allowed us to recruit a top notch administrative assistant who is now a cornerstone of the office. This replaced Just Buffalo's part-time position, CEPA's full-time position, and gave Big Orbit access to clerical support for the first time.

Having 'one brain' working for all has resulted in unexpected benefits in everything from mailings to donor data base management. We believe a shared-skill staffing model will prove to be an important way for our organizations to build capacity beyond what would usually be possible based on size and budget. This is an area we will continue exploring in the next phase of our collaboration.

Conclusion

Since formally launching the three year pilot in May 2005, our organizations have experienced tremendous progress in terms of board and staff development, revenue diversification, and expanded visibility. Individual contributions have increased by 300%, corporate funding by 200%, and membership by 22%. Each organization's artistic programming has been significantly enhanced. Unexpected benefits have included a decreased sense of isolation, the magic of proximity fostering new programmatic collaborations, and feeding off each other's creativity – at the executive, staff, and board levels.

We believe that what we are doing is important, not only for us, but for the field as a whole, as we struggle to protect and enhance our missions in challenging times. A recent RAND Corporation (2001) study suggested that mid-sized organizations working on their own may suffer the most from evolving conditions. These organizations are not able to attract the talent and audience that the larger organizations can, and at the same time they are burdened with administrative structures that smaller organizations don't have. (p. 132). And yet, mid-size organizations are among the groups least likely to become involved with strategic partnerships.   This is a particular paradox, one which our model of administrative collaboration seeks to address.

For those interested in pursing a strategy of administrative collaboration, the desire must be genuine and not funder-forced or coerced to succeed. There must be a strong feeling of trust among the potential partners. In addition, as highlighted in this article, attention will need to be given to:

- committing first and foremost to strengthening each individual organization;

- finding ways to get the boards on board;

- securing an independent consultant to help guide the process;

- exploring values, working styles, and needs which can best be met through administrative collaboration;

- creating a Memorandum of Understanding, work plan, and goals (with this we were careful not to overstate expected cost savings – new collaborations can actually cost organizations much time and money on the front end because of the work involved. Modest cost savings and longer term gains in revenue growth became our focus);

- coming to terms with the issue of space and what may need to be given up;

- considering shared administrative staff positions.

Our experience with the administrative collaboration - and coming to live in a world shaped by concentric concerns - has been so successful that we are committed to continuing it as an ongoing way of doing business. Even now, entering our fourth year, we are not given the luxury of becoming complacent or of thinking we have somehow 'arrived.' As bigger and ever-new challenges await, such as navigating the next round of even deeper state funding cuts, developing our signature joint education program *Writing With Light* (website being launched later this year; documentary video available for $15), and assessing the feasibility of a new shared space, we call on everything we have learned, and continue charting the journey. One thing we know for sure: we will be better able to find the answers together.

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1. With colleagues CEPA Gallery and Big Orbit/Soundlab, Just Buffalo is implementing a first-of-its kind administrative collaboration designed to reduce overhead, increase earned and contributed income, and preserve, protect and expand the artistic mission in turbulent times.

For more information about each individual organization, go to their websites: CEPA Gallery http://www.cepagallery.org; Just Buffalo Literary Center http://www.justbuffalo.org; and Big Orbit Gallery http://www.bigorbitgallery.org. [back to text]

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