

United We Stand

How some nonprofits are working efficiently by working together. |

BY NORAH MCCLINTOCK |

Picture this, says Tim Beachy: Instead of paying a computer expert, who may not understand the world of nonprofits, something upwards of \$100 an hour to come in to trouble-shoot computer problems, a group of nonprofits gets together and hires an expert on salary. The person learns about the business these nonprofits are in and provides service at a much more reasonable price. Great idea, huh? And what about all those CAs and CGAs that so many nonprofits have on staff? Most of them don't do CGA work eight hours a day. In most cases, it's more like two hours a week. The rest of the time they're doing book keeping and payroll and heaven know's what else. Wouldn't it make sense for a group of nonprofits to hire one CA or CGA to work for the whole group?

And don't even get Beachy started on telephone services, negotiated long distance services, computer equipment, office supplies, you name it. The nonprofit sector is a \$1.5 billion industry in British Columbia alone, he says, "and it's being run like small business." No, make that, "It's not even being run as well as a small business. If you're a corner store, you're part of a buying group that gets together and demands prices from wholesalers. That doesn't happen in this sector."

At least, it hasn't up until recently. In B.C., that's changing, thanks to United Community Services Cooperative (UCSC).

With just over 40 members by the end of November 1999, UCSC had just launched its first product for members: banking and investment services offered through Vancouver City Savings Credit Union and Royal Bank of Canada that will give co-op members lower service charges and higher interest on liquid and investment funds based on the total "pooled funds" in the accounts of co-op members. All member accounts remain separate.

Beachy says the co-op is working on a second product — client tracking software that will allow members to produce reports in a variety of formats to meet the requirements of funders, including government, and to track the various services used by clients. A reference group has evaluated a number of packages and found a "best of breed." The co-op is now trying to make a deal with the software developer.

"Our potential membership spent something like \$12 million on hardware and software in the past two years," Beachy says, "and will likely spend that much in the coming two years. We want to help them focus their purchasing." UCSC is also exploring an insurance package for members.

Even though there is no model for UCSC and Beachy has to spend a lot of time explaining the concept to the commercial world, he's confident the co-op will grow. The sky's the limit, to his mind, as he sits dreaming and planning in his little office, which he occupies thanks to another collaboration, this one initiated by West Coast Child Care Resource Centre. West Coast, UCSC and three other agencies are involved in what is called co-location.

"The building we used to occupy was in an industrial neighbourhood," says Pam Best at West Coast. "Wheelchair access was getting to be a real issue. When our lease expired, it was time to look for something else."

The problem was one common to nonprofits: they didn't like the sites they could afford and couldn't afford the sites they liked. So West Coast decided to play to its strength



ILLUSTRATION: JANICE GOLDBERG

— its history of working with others to achieve its goals. The organization was born out of collaboration in 1989 when a number of small, struggling child care organizations realized they would be better off working together rather than independently.

Just as West Coast's lease was coming up, Best says, she heard about a project called CAPP — Community Agency Partnership Project — a group of agencies who were meeting to explore how to work together. Best decided to check it out and to see if anyone at the CAPP table would be interested in sharing space with West Coast.

In the end, one of the CAPP agencies, Learning Disabilities Association of Vancouver (LDAV), came on

board, as did three other groups. West Coast's is the name on the lease, and West Coast is the one that deals with the landlord when, say, the roof springs a leak. Each agency has its own space, but they share meeting rooms, loading and parking spaces, reception, and coffee and lunch rooms. There are monthly meetings at which the co-locaters can raise areas of concern.

Benefits beyond saving on shared space have emerged. West Coast and Learning Disabilities applied for and secured funding from the Ronald McDonald Foundation to integrate their libraries. This has allowed West Coast to offer to its users the specialized Lдав collection, while Lдав now has access to a much broader collection on children and child care.

An unexpected bonus: West Coast, Best says, "has made a lot of allies in the community who aren't necessarily in the child care field. We know a lot more about other groups. We're crossing boundaries, and that gets carried anywhere any of us goes in the community."

It hasn't been without its challenges. One group got the jitters after the plans had been drawn up for the space. It dropped out. The roof really did spring a leak. Signage, Best says, is really important (groups are listed alphabetically) because it touches on groups' identities. One of the co-locaters is Vancouver Supported Child Care Society, a brand new agency that, when it signed on in the space, had very little profile in the community. Its name is similar to West Coast's, and has led some people to assume that it's part of the same organization.

Risk can be a problem. Everyone, Best says, asks the question, whether or not they say it out loud: "What if I attach myself to your organization and you get a bad reputation or one of your board or staff members does something negative?"

It's also taken a lot of time to manage the co-location. **Obstacles to working together** Time can be a huge obstacle to working together, says Kylie Hutchinson, author of *Getting It Together: Collaboration Models for Community Groups*. Hutchinson is a Vancouver consultant who was hired by CAPP to help it find ways to work together. The book grew out of her research on its behalf.

"You can't just show up for a meeting once a month and think that a collaboration will happen or will sustain itself," she says. She polled executive directors about how much of their time they were putting into collaborations as much as two years after their inception. The answer? Thirty to fifty percent — and that's out of 60-hour weeks.

The precarious state of funding for many nonprofits can work against attempts to collaborate. At least one CAPP member is existing on a month-to-month contract. Another got word that its funding was going to be cut by 30 percent. "In those situations," Hutchinson says, "you focus on your individual agency and the first thing to go is the collaboration."

People who think that working together automatically saves money will likely be disappointed, she adds. "Think of a small little organization in a show box somewhere that has a crummy photocopier that's always breaking down. If they move into a co-location, all of a sudden they have to share the cost of the lease on a big expensive photocopier. The savings are not always immediately evident."

What are FUNDERS DOING?

Talk to charities about collaboration and you often hear two things: funders often push charities to get together, but they don't do much to facilitate this happening, and they don't "walk the walk" themselves.

There are, of course, exceptions.

The Grey Sisters of the Immaculate Conception ran a school in Ottawa from the early 1920s until 1993. For a few years after that, they tried to sell the building, but the market was soft and no buyers stepped forward. So instead the Sisters decided to offer the space to community groups.

The result is Bronson House, home to 28 groups in Ottawa that range from Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Bereaved Families of Ottawa-Carleton, to native and literacy groups and programs dealing with substance abuse. Rents are low and are intended only to cover operating costs — 100 square feet goes for \$71 a month. Occupants share a cafeteria, two classrooms, one of which, says Bronson House director Maureen Moloughny, "is fondly called the board room because someone donated a board table," a quiet room that used to be the chapel, and a 920-seat auditorium. At least a third of the groups don't have photocopiers or fax machines, so they use Bronson Centre equipment. Reception is staffed by Grey Sister volunteers who range in age from 79 to 90. The atmosphere, says Moloughny, is that of a community kitchen or a small town.

Kae McColl is executive director of People, Words & Change, a community literacy group that in its 20-year existence has lived in "five different cubby holes," the last of which was in "a completely disgusting building with an absentee landlord who had nary a care for the facilities." PWC now has a large space in Bronson Centre for which it pays \$620 a month. It's client-friendly and easily accessible. Bronson Centre is right downtown on a main bus line, not far from the Queensway, the main artery.

Being housed with 27 other groups, McColl says, has had its side benefits. The most important are networking and cross-referrals. Some of the Centre's maintenance staff, for example, were hired from among participants in a woodworking shop that began as a program to teach new skills to street people. Some of them have since come on as PWC learners. A man who came to PWC for literacy help discovered that the space right above was occupied by the Rainbow Centre, which has a sewing co-op to teach clothing design and sewing to low income

Maintaining autonomy is vital for most groups, which means that success is almost always predicated on bringing board members and key staff members into the process early on. By involving them in the talks — including frank discussions of pitfalls — you can start to build trust and avoid a situation where a group of executive directors is gung-ho, but board members choke at the last minute. **More collaboration models**

If one looks at collaborations on a continuum, Hutchinson says, a consortium is dating, the virtual agency is a chat room, and co-location is living together — the closest thing to the marriage called merger.

The Multi-Board Collaborative Process (MBCP) is an example of a consortium. About three years ago, with government cutbacks announced, members of an exist-

women. His wife has since joined that program. And if the fire alarm goes off occasionally when the native men's group smokes sweet grass, well, nobody seems to mind.

The only possible concern is that the real estate market is rebounding in Ottawa-Carleton and the Grey Sisters have received a few offers on the property. So far, they're standing pat.

When it comes to getting together, the board of directors at Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF) practises what it preaches. Two years ago, the citizens of neighbouring Burlington, Ontario called on HCF for advice on what it would take to start a community foundation in Burlington. Instead of feeling threatened — the two communities border each other — HCF adopted an approach that kept all eyes firmly on the ultimate objective. When it became clear that both groups shared the same vision — to strengthen the community by building community foundation assets as quickly as possible — collaboration seemed a natural.

The result? The Burlington Community Foundation (BCF), less than a year old, is structured as a fund within HCF, but it has its own board of directors, its own executive director (who is part of the HCF management team), its own location and its own identity. It decides where grants will be made. The benefits to the fledgling foundation have been enormous. Burlington board members are being mentored by their Hamilton counterparts. And, points out Burlington executive director Hugh Greenwood, "Some investment firms won't get involved with you unless you have a certain amount of money in your fund, and it might take four or five years to get to that level. Here, our fund is part of Hamilton's and we're able to take advantage of the size of their investment portfolio and tag along."

HCF even released \$50,000 to the new BCF so that it could make grants in its first year, which will help to raise its profile in its community. The icing on the cake: BCF is tapping community pride and already money is flowing to it that, all agree, would never have gone to HCF. It has already received a couple of bequests, and proceeds from the Burlington Mayor's Gala — \$150,000 to date — have been placed in the Fund.

Caroline Milne, HCF's executive director, is proud of this win-win situation. She's received requests for information about this innovative model from as far away as the U.K. and eastern Europe.

ing inter-agency network in B.C. decided to get together to discuss the potential impact. Out of this arose talk of how the agencies might collaborate. A steering committee was struck to explore co-ordinated planning for more effective service delivery.

The group has developed principles of collaboration that are evolving into a blue print for a community development council, says Cathy Crouse. Crouse, executive director of the North Shore Disability Resource Network, is a member of MBCP. In addition to this "big picture" work, she says, several MBCP agencies have worked together on other initiatives. A group of ten agencies got funding to catalogue and put online their library databases. This led to another project — a community Web site and individual Web pages for each organization. Crouse says she's part of another sub-

group that is looking at putting services for kids with disabilities under one roof. They've been working on site development proposals for a year and a half now.

A higher level of collaboration is being considered, as nine agencies, including North Shore, are presenting a business case to their board members to pool their resources. One model being explored is a management service organization in which each board remains a separate, autonomous entity, but they jointly manage administrative supports.

Sandy Middleton is project coordinator for an initiative in the middle of the "getting to know you" continuum. The BC Literacy Electronic Network has been running for almost three years now, with funding from the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology and the National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources Development Canada. Almost 200 people from community colleges, and community and family literacy groups are using the network to enhance and supplement communications among literacy practitioners.

Members can participate in topic-specific online conferences. Some are ongoing, others run for short periods of time. There's need for more research on literacy, so the Network is working to facilitate this by offering professional development, training and consultation and urging users to ask questions, talk about their research and share results with others.

Because electronic networks are still relatively new, major challenges have centred on encouraging participants to work differently. First there's the technology challenge — depending on individuals' comfort levels, just installing the software and getting it up and running can present problems. "Generating participation has been a hurdle," Middleton says, one shared by all nascent online communities. Some people are shy when it comes to posting messages online — they are, in essence, committing something to "paper" for all to read. Middleton has had to do a lot of nurturing of participants.

The benefits are indisputable, though. In addition to

increased communications among those involved in literacy training in B.C., the network has broken down a lot of the isolation felt by literacy workers in northern B.C. or in the interior of the province. People may join a specific conference online and, once there, they find they're "meeting" other people. "It really expands your relationships with people in the field," Middleton says. The biggest surprise, though, she says, has been the professional development opportunity presented by the new medium. The Network was started to get people communicating. In fact, it is allowing them to learn, especially through some of the time-limited conferences, like last year's "Let's Talk Tutors."

Advice on collaboration

"Have a good reason to work together," Kylie Hutchinson says. The collaborations that have worked are those in which participants have a compelling reason to stay together. This doesn't mean a crisis, which usually has a negative effect on collaborative efforts. But starting small and achieving some early success through well-defined projects, like a joint library database, that benefits everyone tangibly can help all partners get to know each other better and start to develop the trust that any collaboration demands.

Be frank about potential problems and fears. Pam Best says that one of the best conversations West Coast had as it nailed down its co-location was when its then-executive director said, "There will be fights over the photocopier. We have to acknowledge that, deal with it, and move on." Being realistic is part of managing any relationship — personal or professional.

Always consider involving a third-party. Let's face it, each group's representatives come to the table with the best interests of their own group at heart. It's human nature. An objective party at the table can push issues a little harder, challenge preconceptions, and help put things in perspective.

And stay fixed on the long-term. Remembering why you got into a collaboration — and keeping your eye on that particular pot of gold — can help you overcome the problems that will inevitably arise.

How to conduct a feasibility study

Before you begin a collaboration, you should conduct a feasibility study. Information collected from such a study can help you identify which collaborative method is best for your group. Here are the steps you should take.

1. *Begin with an extensive interview of senior staff at each organization.* The purpose of these interviews is to collect information on each organization's needs, organizational values and challenges, minimum conditions for partnering, and expectations from the collaboration. Who attends these meetings may be left to the discretion of the organization, but it is recommended that at least one board member be present. Some organizations will prefer to have only the executive director and a board member involved at this point, while others may wish to have more staff attend.

2. *Review agency materials such as annual reports, audited financial statements, newsletters, operational budgets, organization charts, descriptions of services and programs, and lists of office equipment for additional information.* This information is used to complete a comprehensive inventory that permits the comparison of agency sizes, resources and other pertinent information at a glance.

3. *Examine the results of interviews and completed inventory to identify as many commonalities among organizations as possible.* Commonalities may be found in the areas of agency mission, services, target groups, catchment areas, current challenges, and organizational culture. You may choose to place these in a table in order to reveal at a glance the degree of commonality that is present among organizations.

4. *Look for other examples of collaboration in your community.* Collaboration in theory can be very different from how it actually operates in real life. Look for organizations in your community that have embarked upon a collaboration and consider how you might apply what they learned to your own efforts.

5. *Consider all your findings and draft a set of conclusions.* Once you have collected all of the above information, examine it to see what conclusions you can make. Share and discuss these results and conclusions among your partner organizations.

-Reprinted with permission from Getting it Together: Collaboration Models for Community Groups, by Kylie Hutchinson.

Where to get more help

Getting it Together: Collaboration Models for Community Groups, by Kylie Hutchinson, is published by the Society of Special Needs Adoptive Parents. For information on getting a copy of the book, call (604) 660-0675 or e-mail bccf@istar.ca

See "Tips and Techniques" on page 12 for more excerpts from the book.

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Conducting Effective Team Meetings

Meeting frequency depends on the goals, tasks, and activity levels of team members. If members require a lot of interdependence and their goals overlap greatly, more frequent meetings are necessary, and they will usually focus on information exchange, problem solving and decision making.

In general, effective meetings depend on five key things:

1. Distributing agendas in advance
2. Starting and stopping on time
3. Using time efficiently
4. Leaving each meeting with next steps in place
5. Following through on decisions

Tips for meeting preparation

- Ask all team members for ideas and issues to be included in the meeting agenda.
- Distribute the agenda ahead of time.
- Ask all team members to come prepared with their comments and suggestions to use meeting time efficiently.

Tips for conducting team meetings

- Aim to start and end meetings on time.
- To achieve balanced

participation, draw out quieter members for their comments gently, and respectfully direct the group's attention from those who are dominating the discussion.

- Use the agenda as a discussion guide. Some of the team members' tangents might be useful to your meeting and some might not. Encourage members to speak up if the discussion isn't useful to them.
- Near the end of the meeting, recap and summarize key points and decisions and decide on next steps.
- Determine individual roles and responsibilities to carry out next steps and other expectations.

Tips for meeting follow-up

- Publish and distribute minutes or meeting notes.
- Complete actions that you agreed to carry out.
- Report progress to the rest of the team, as agreed.

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Tips for Successful Collaboration

The following ideas can help your collaboration get off the ground and run smoothly.

1. Define a clear vision and stay focused on it.
2. Establish a common understanding and ground rules.
3. Develop clear roles for members and leaders.
4. Establish a formal decision-making process and mechanism for resolving disputes before they arise (and they will!).
5. Be open with each other and use mutual disclosure to build trust.
6. Deal with difficult issues head on.
7. Focus on long-term results versus short-term rescue plans.
8. Keep staff informed of the process throughout.
9. Involve those stakeholders who will be affected by the process.
10. Strive for "win-win" scenarios.
11. Test out the alliance early with small, simple projects that build trust, commitment and credibility with stakeholders.
12. Divide up tasks based on who has most expertise in an area.
13. Keep good documentation of the process.

14. Involve a neutral third party for negotiations when appropriate.
15. Spend time getting to know each other.
16. Develop goals and objectives with timelines.
17. Be persistent and patient.
18. Take time to do it well.
19. Celebrate milestones reached!

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12 Reasons to Collaborate

1. Increased financial and organizational stability.
2. Improved service delivery:
 - reduce duplication of services
 - create innovative solutions to fill existing gaps and meet increasing demands
 - provide one-stop shopping for clients through co-location
 - provide more holistic service delivery through integrated community approaches
 - increase ability to respond and act on a larger scale
3. Cost and time savings through shared administrative and program delivery.
4. Greater accountability of limited resources.
5. Enhanced resource development capacity:
 - new ideas and energy
 - funders favour collaborative proposals
 - decreased competition
6. Increased information sharing.
7. Access to a larger knowledge and skill base.
8. Better connections and networks.
9. Greater visibility and credibility in the community.
10. More influence speaking as a united voice.
11. Reduced isolation for smaller organizations.
12. Access to a greater number of resources among organizations:
 - better facilities
 - improved technology

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