

Building and Maintaining a Partnership

- Do different organizations in your community provide duplicate services?
- Would you like to improve your information exchange with other organizations?
- Would you like to pool resources with other organizations for large-scale projects?
- Do you need help keeping an existing partnership going?

If so, you may want to consider forming new partnerships and/or using the following tips for maintaining a more effective partnership.

What is a Partnership?

Partnerships allow organizations to cooperate and coordinate with each other to reach common goals while still maintaining their autonomy. A partnership can exist between at least two government entities or within the private sector of both profit and non-profit organizations. The purpose of partnerships is to eliminate duplication of work among agencies and organizations and to coordinate the resources available to them. Partnerships come in all sizes and shapes: formal and informal; with two or twenty members; for special projects or broad cooperation; with regular weekly meetings or infrequent ad hoc meetings. You can adapt a partnership to meet the particular needs and constraints of your organization.

Why Build Partnerships?

- Certain projects are not possible without partnerships
- They can improve service delivery to your community
- Participating organizations can gain credibility and increased visibility
- They can open lines of communication among the organizations involved

How to Maintain an Effective Partnership

Identify common goals: The partners should reach an understanding as to what the goals of the partnership are. It might be a good idea to have them listed in writing so no confusion or conflict arises.

Frequent communication: Effective and frequent communication is a necessary component in maintaining a partnership. It is important that you open a good line of communication not only with your partners but also within your own agency.

Function as mentors towards each other: Use the opportunity to find a mentor in the other agency. Learn the values and skills they offer. This is also an opportunity for you to provide knowledge to someone else by serving as a mentor to them.

Honesty: As with any working environment, honesty is a must. No secrets should be kept nor information withheld in the partnership. This will undermine and potentially cripple a partnership.

Be willing to compromise: Do not expect to have everything your way. You should be willing to compromise on certain issues. This indicates to the other party that you are sincere and that you are not in the partnership to take advantage of other partners.

Be sensitive: Consider other people's feelings when giving suggestions and constructive criticism. Be careful how you word things and the tone of voice you use when speaking with others. The same applies to written communication. Another agency may not have the same working style as yours.

Confront problems immediately: When conflict arises, deal with it as soon as possible. If the problem can not be resolved among the partners, seek mediation. The sooner an issue is addressed, the less likely it will turn into a much larger and intractable problem later.

Strong personal commitment: The executive and program staff of the organizations should have a strong commitment to making the partnership work and accomplishing its goals.

Productive group interaction: Use strategies that encourage productive interaction during group meetings. Encourage all members of the group to communicate their problems and comments. For example, you could use facilitators to make your meetings run more efficiently.

Additional Resources

- State Rural Development Councils
- "Tips for Building a Better Partnership, Tips for Working With New Partners," *Economic Development Digest*, February 1995
- Susan Rocke, Senior Project Director for the Partnership Project, (202) 624-5947

Additional copies are available from the Office of Community Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Room 701, 300 7th Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20024 (1-800-645-4712). Copies may also be obtained at

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ocd>