The Seven Rules of Successful Collaboration

It's not easy, but it is *simple, if you're willing to view the world a different way.*

BY PAUL STURM

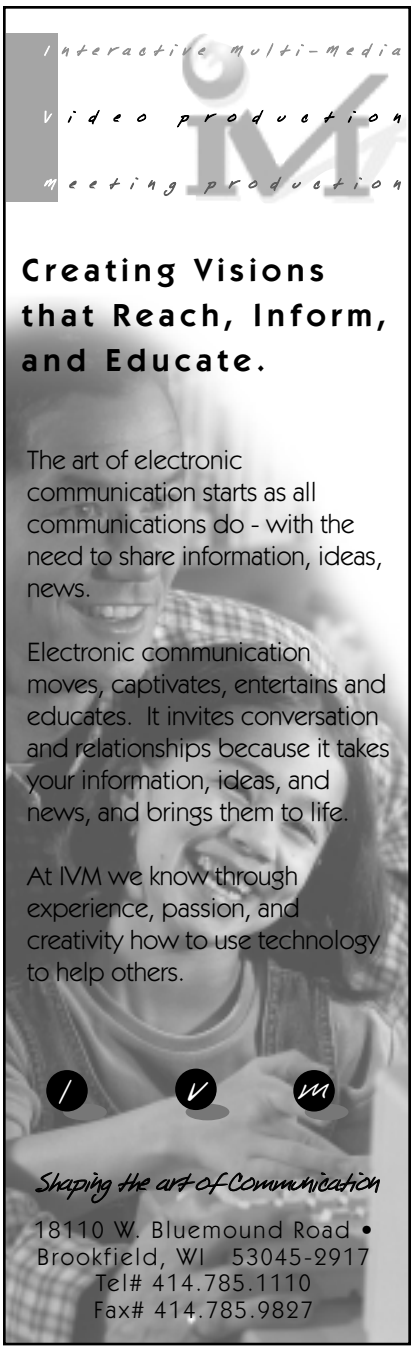
There may be no more important skill for nonprofit organizations than the ability to develop and sustain successful collaborations. Funders are increasingly seeking evidence of collaboration. And the impact we have on our communities correlates with our ability to collaborate–not only within our sector but beyond its borders. What follows are the essential rules of effective collaboration distilled from more than 20 years of working for and in support of nonprofit organizations:

1. Believe in the value of the work you do every day.

The nonprofit sector has never been more important to the well-being of our communities and society. Many signs point to our sector's growing recognition. Peter Drucker predicts that we will comprise the most important segment of American society in the 21st century. The number of college and university programs in nonprofit management has increased more than five-fold over the past 10 years. And we're on the Presidential campaign agenda as former Senator Bradley, Vice President Gore, and Governor Bush have all spoken about the essential role of nonprofit organizations in American society.

2. See your community as a place of abundance rather than scarcity.

New resources are created every day to support the work of nonprofit organizations. Foundations are granting record amounts of money. A recent survey by the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy indicates that most fundraising executives are optimistic about current and future giving. And with the maturation of the baby boom generation, an unprecedented transfer of wealth is under way, suggesting even more opportunities for people to donate. Your organization needn't fear a



shrinking pie. To the contrary, the pie is expanding.

3. Recognize the needs in your community are greater than one organization can meet.

A frequent barrier to collaboration is the mindset of some in the nonprofit sector that only their organization can provide a service or solve a problem. Although you should take pride in your organization's uniqueness, you should also ask "Can all the needs we're trying to address be solved by my organization alone?" If your answer is "yes," read no further. If "no," why wouldn't you want to be part of a collaboration that even more effectively addresses those needs?

4. Focus on community needs rather than organizational needs.

Organizations should not be viewed as ends in themselves. They are, rather, a means to the end of serving people or solving problems. Our organizations are the vehicles by which we plan and deliver programs and services. Rather than asking "What's in this collaboration for my organization?," ask "How can this collaboration benefit the people we're serving?" By focusing on this question, your interactions with collaborators take on an energy that will help achieve wonderful results.

5. Understand the strength of what you have in common with collaborators.

Is there any nonprofit organization whose mission is not related in some way to making your community a better place? How many of us have made our careers in the nonprofit sector for the same reason? How many in the public and private sectors contribute their time and talents to enhancing your community's quality of life? If we see only what divides us, we miss how much we have in common. And when the work of collaboration gets tough, the tough (and successful) look even harder for the strength of our common vision and goals.

6. Value diversity and synergy.

The whole is almost always greater than the sum of its parts. The different perspectives you and your partners bring to collaboration expand everyone's thinking about what is possible. Treating each collaborating partner with dignity and respect is not only the right thing to do, but will nurture an environment where all participants contribute their best work and collectively find the "other way" that is often more effective than doing it either my way or your way.

7. Reject the notions of "turf" and "territory."

If anyone claims your work or project is invading their organization's exclusive turf or territory, employ the Maynard G. Krebs response. A character on the Dobie Gillis Show, Krebs was either the last beatnik or the first hippie. He just didn't like to work. Whenever anyone said the word "work," Krebs would shriek "Work!" as if it was a contagious disease. For many nonprofit organizations, the outdated notion of turf and territory is a contagious disease. The work of making our communities better is not the exclusive fiefdom of any one organization. So if anyone says you are treading on their turf or territory, remember Maynard. And remind them that you and they are standing together…on common ground.

Is the work of developing and sustaining true collaboration difficult, challenging, and sometimes messy? Yes. Can we in the nonprofit sector afford to fly solo without reaching out to involve other community resources in achieving our common goals? Not any more.

We in the nonprofit sector have a golden opportunity to lead by example. In the words of Stephen Covey, we have the opportunity to "be a light, not a judge." The brighter we can make the light of collaboration shine, the more our communities and those we serve will bathe in its glow. ■

Selected References

"Are You a Collaborative Leader?", *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1997.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Management & Planning, Leadership Series.*

Wilder Foundation, *Collaboration Handbook.*

These references are available through the Society's Resource Center, 608-274-9777.

Paul Sturm is executive director of the Greater Milwaukee Nonprofit Institute (3505 N. 124th Street, Brookfield, Wisconsin, 53005). Through its "culture of collaboration," the Institute provides cutting-edge programs and resources that enhance the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations in Southeast Wisconsin.