

3-21-2010

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Recommended Citation

Sachar, Hagit (2010) "A Story of Collaboration: Haifa Council of Volunteer Organizations and Shatil," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 18.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol23/iss1/18>

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A Story of Collaboration

Haifa Council of Volunteer Organizations and Shatil

Hagit Shachar

Taking part in a partnership is a delicate and complex task involving many opportunities for leveraging initiatives together with power struggles, competition, and a great deal of sensitivity and vulnerability. A lot has been written about how partnerships should be conducted in order for them to succeed, including concrete recommendations on how to establish and sustain partnerships. Writers in the field also discuss the dilemmas faced by organizations that consider establishing collaborations. But the most powerful components of a partnership, the elements that cannot be controlled or moderated, are the chemistry and trust between partners and their willingness to make it successful.

The present essay tells the story of a partnership between two organizations: the Haifa Council of Volunteer Organizations (CVO) and the Haifa branch of Shatil (The New Israel Fund's Empowerment and Training Center for Social Change Organizations in Israel). They have cooperated for many years and, in the last two years, have further tightened their partnership.

The first part of this essay presents a theoretical framework that serves as a basis for the case study discussed in the second part. The summary offers a number of open-ended questions for further consideration and research.

What Does the Theory Tell Us?

According to professional literature, a *partnership* is a beneficial and well-established relationship between two or more organizations that helps them achieve results more easily than by working each on its own. A partnership is based on a commitment to the relationship between parties as well as to the shared objectives, and includes:

- Developing a collaborative organizational structure and mutual commitment

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- Sharing authority as well as the responsibility for success
- Sharing resources and rewards.

A partnership can be established for various reasons: it can be driven by internal forces (a need to develop, to widen the range of activities) or external forces (funding, customers' needs). A partnership can be established on a narrow, one-time, functional basis or on a wider, far-reaching, comprehensive basis. Being involved in a partnership may provide organizations with valuable assets and allow for new and unexpected directions for action. On the other hand, in many cases, a partnership can demand a great deal of time and energy and, in extreme cases, even drain personal and organizational resources.

When we examine a partnership, we can position it on a continuum ranging between *sharing* (a low level of partnership) and a *strategic partnership* (a high level of partnership), which enables a gradual change between limited commitment and investment and considerable ones, in terms of time, resources, and emotional and organizational energy. Following is a short review of each of the levels on the continuum:

- 1. Sharing:** One party shares one or some of its organizational assets and resources with the other party. Among the resources that can be shared are knowledge, information, connections, realty, and property. Sharing allows for one-sided relationships and a relatively limited investment, while still making it possible for both parties to develop mutual opportunities.
- 2. Participation:** An opportunity to combine one organization's activities with another's, either on a temporary or a permanent basis. Participation requires investing more time and resources, but can be limited to a one-time, specific activity.
- 3. Focalized collaboration:** Conducting together a move or a project that requires investing time and effort for planning, making decisions, and coordinating activities in a clearly defined limited period.
- 4. Continuous collaboration:** Unlike focalized collaboration, the time limitations of a continuous collaboration are not easily defined. This type of collaboration requires organizations to invest more time and effort because they need to react to changes and to work harder in order to establish and maintain associations and relationships.
- 5. Strategic partnership:** In a strategic partnership, parties share the core targets, mission, and values as well as the belief that the collaboration can bring about a real change. Shared activities are means for promoting and realizing core values; when they are not successful, partners can develop alternative ones.

The collaborating parties' decision on the nature of the collaboration is based on the similarity between the values of the organizations, on the collaboration's ability to promote and advance each of the organizations' interests, on the relations of power between the parties, and on their ability to invest time and effort in collaborative activities (for more on the theoretical framework of collaborations, see Liron Peleg-Hadomi's essay introducing this section).

Partnerships that are located on the higher levels of the continuum of collaboration require the parties to form a collaborative work model that acknowledges personal and organizational differences and combines the various views, values, and attitudes into an agreed course of action. The following elements should form the basis for a collaborative work model: A *shared vision*, which stands for the future to which they aspire; a *shared mission*, which expresses the goals of the partnership and the reasons for establishing it; *shared values* and *agreed principles*, which govern decisions made by the partners. Shared vision, mission, values, and principles are essential prerequisites for establishing a partnership, but they should also be continually reexamined, challenged, and reexamined along the way by all the parties in the partnership.

Among other elements that can contribute to a successful partnership we can list a fearless, determined, and vision-oriented leadership that is willing to cope with difficulties and disagreements; available human and material resources; other bodies' involvement in and support of the organizations; mutual trust and respect as a basis for making hard decisions and necessary compromises; predetermined structures and procedures including ones for coping with disagreements; direct and sincere communication that allows for an open exchange of ideas and feelings.

The CVO and Shatil

The following case study portrays the process of establishing a partnership that went through different types of relationships (supplier–consumer, consultant–consulted, competition, and finally, partnership) and has become a success mainly owing to mutual trust and a shared vision.

The Haifa CVO was founded by a group of volunteer organizations in order to promote volunteer work in Haifa. The council advances and supports social initiatives, coordinates local social change activities, and provides professional assistance for organizations.

Shatil, a national organization that has a branch in Haifa, is a capacity-building organization operated by the New Israel Fund. Shatil supports social change organizations and provides consultation and training services in such fields as organizational development, financial capabilities and resource development, media lobbying, advocacy, and conflict management.

Throughout the years, the relations between the CVO and Shatil went through different phases: at certain times, Shatil provided the CVO with various services, such as specific professional training workshops; at other times, Shatil's consultants accompanied the CVO's management staff and assisted them with issues of leadership and resource development. In 2008, the CVO invited Shatil to assist it in conducting the Lead Haifa program for socially responsible leadership. Initially, the CVO asked for assistance, and it was not then clear what type of partnership might develop later. The nature of this partnership became clearer with time, as work proceeded.

Lead Haifa is a program for developing local leadership based on social responsibility, collaboration, and social-change action. It brings together leaders from all sectors who are interested in influencing local issues. The program consists of weekly meetings that take place in the course of one year, as well as two one-week peer-learning seminars in Haifa and in Boston.

As we can see, in the beginning, the nature of this partnership was ambiguous — it was not defined as a partnership, but as a short-term, localized collaboration.

The theory examines the process of partnership building by using terms related to familial relationships: ideation; courting; giving birth; adolescence; and formalization, change, or termination.

The relationship between the CVO and Shatil was conducted carefully, mutual expectations were kept to a minimum, and there was a clear distinction between the areas in which Shatil would serve as a partner and the areas in which the CVO would be the leader. This cautious process was the result of the need to move slowly from one type of relationship to another. In the course of the first year, the partnership was not clearly defined and required little mutual commitment; it was based mostly on good will and a sincere desire to work together. The structure of the partnership was built gradually in a process that was led mostly by two leaders who served as the steering committee (Yael Abada represented the CVO and I represented Shatil), as well as a program coordinator appointed by the CVO (Liron Peleg-Hadomi).

During the first year, we established structures and built mutual trust and, consequently, felt it was time to formalize our meetings, decision-making processes, and planning procedures. Without noticing, our partnership transformed from a *short-term collaboration* to a *long-term partnership* and had the potential to develop into a *strategic partnership*.

When we were considering continuing the Lead Haifa program for the second year, there was no doubt that we would do so. This time, work and responsibilities were more clearly defined and required greater commitment. Ambiguous issues needed to be clarified and conflicts to be solved. When relationships became more formalized, we felt it was time to sharpen, elucidate, and explicate both parties' expectations. The partnership advanced to a new stage, and with new challenges for its partners.

When we examine the development process of the CVO–Shatil partnership, we can see that the partnership had reached the stage of *formalized relationship*. As we know from other types of relationships, such as spousal relationships, this stage does not guarantee a long-lasting successful partnership; paradoxically, challenges only grow with time. Today, it appears that both parties acknowledge their partnership and recognize its valuable contribution to each. The challenge now is “to keep the fire burning,” to continue the formalization process, challenge basic assumptions, and nurture the deep relationship and mutual trust.

Summary

Some partnerships are the result of a rational decision and are formed systematically and gradually by establishing a formalized infrastructure of shared vision, values, mission, and principles. The partnership between the CVO and Shatil grew out of existing relationships and was formed by a process of constant change while being sustained mostly by mutual trust, respect, and appreciation. It is a growing and developing partnership that constantly redefines itself and reexamines its mission and goals.

Several questions and issues remain: To what extent should we attribute the success of this partnership to the fact that it is led by three Jewish women? How does the partnership’s structure affect the gender and ethnic formation of the group of its leaders? What happened to several people who were central figures in the partnership, but withdrew from it when it became more formalized? To what extent is the partnership affected by other bodies not mentioned in the essay, namely the funding bodies — the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston (JCRC) and the New Israel Fund? And, furthermore, do we need to include more individuals (from within or from outside the organizations) in the partnership? If we include more people, will we be able to maintain the delicate equilibrium between good, productive work relations and contrasting approaches, which allows for new breakthroughs?

Translated from the Hebrew by Yoram Arnon





