

# To Go Far, Go Together: The Trend toward Solving Social Issues through Collaborative Effort

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An old African proverb reminds us, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

When faced with society's acute needs and driven by a determination to address them—like many of us in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors—it's easy to be impatient, tempting to rush forward on a mission to solve a pressing problem solo.

After all, we live and work in a world that advances at a frenetic pace, where iPhone photographers and Tweeters regularly scoop the evening news, and the click of a button can have groceries delivered to your door.

Besides, working together isn't just slower, it's often harder. But addressing the region's growing and complex needs isn't a leisurely jaunt along the Schuylkill River. It's a climb up Mount Everest—and we'll never conquer it sprinting to the top by ourselves.

Fortunately, there's a growing trend for nonprofits and philanthropy alike to toil together to scale the mountain, reaching elevations higher than ever before and do more good for society. It's certainly happening in the Greater Philadelphia Region, our sphere of operation at the Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia.

Philanthropy Network is the membership association for philanthropy in our region. It is home to a large and diverse philanthropic community committed to addressing the challenges of persistent poverty that threaten economic opportunity and equality of vulnerable populations. In addition, we support the vitality and vibrancy of the region through arts, culture, creative public spaces and environmental protection.

To deliver impact, leaders across philanthropy know that strategic partnerships – not only amongst nonprofits but amongst funders – are growing ever more important. In fact, a 2014 survey of Philanthropy Network's members, detailed in *Giving in Greater Philadelphia 2014*, revealed the growing weight funders are giving to collaborative efforts. When we asked respondents to identify the factors that had the greatest influence on their work, "Collaboration to achieve impact" was the top-rated trend, with more than 95% of respondents citing it as 'highly' or 'somewhat relevant'.

## **The Sparking Solutions Agenda**

With the recognition that collaboration among a variety of constituents is truly the way to effect social change and have a lasting impact, it only makes sense for the philanthropic community to start by turning its eye inward, to “walk the talk”.

In 2013, Philanthropy Network launched an initiative called Sparking Solutions with the goal of fostering collaborative action among regional funders around five critical, poverty-related social and economic problems: (1) reading by fourth grade; (2) preventing and ending homelessness; (3) reducing hunger and fostering healthy eating; (4) increasing access to health care; and (5) promoting youth safety and youth development.

After investing much time and energy, these collective efforts have gained traction in several areas, most notably the READ! By 4th campaign to ensure all children in Philadelphia are reading on level by fourth grade and Your Way Home Montgomery County, a public-private partnership working to end homelessness in the county in the next five years. Your Way Home Montgomery County is also outlined in an article in the Social Innovations Journal by Tamela Luce of North Penn Community Health Foundation.

Philanthropy is also partnering to support the vitality and vibrancy of the region through arts and culture. The Knight Foundation and William Penn Foundation collaborative investments in ArtPlace, and most recently

in Reimagining the Civic Commons, have attracted national recognition using arts and culture to animate and connect communities to public spaces, especially those that are underutilized.

Although coordinated action by funders plays a critical role in making an impact on some of the region's most intractable problems and harnessing its most valuable assets, it is imperative to explore mission-aligned partnership and capacity building opportunities among nonprofits across all sectors to achieve greater results.

Building Agency Capacity for Program Evaluation illustrates recent efforts to help nonprofits to build capacity to assess their results. A joint initiative of the Scattergood Foundation, the Barra Foundation and The Philadelphia Foundation, Building Agency Capacity for Program Evaluation, helps nonprofits build capabilities in program measurement and expand their ability to implement data-driven practices. The results will help both nonprofits and their funders alike make responsive and responsible allocations of resources where they're most effective.

## **Building capacity to partner strategically**

Despite an active and vibrant regional nonprofit sector, some of the region's individual organizations struggle with issues of insufficient scale, duplication of effort,

undefined leadership succession, limited sources of revenue and high back-office costs. When these issues are not well managed, nonprofits may be challenged to achieve their missions in meaningful and measurable ways. Moreover, government funding and private donations are becoming ever more difficult to secure.

In this challenging environment, repositioning activities – from back-office consolidations, to programmatic joint ventures, to mergers and acquisitions – can be a powerful, though underutilized, tool for nonprofits seeking to increase their impact and sustain their missions by becoming more effective, more efficient, and more stable.

Organizations that are conducting the challenging work of exploring such transactions – on their own volition – should be acknowledged, encouraged and supported by funders to complete sensible transactions where appropriate.

The reality, however, is that organizational restructuring is not something most nonprofits have traditionally been comfortable talking to funders about, nor have funders been entirely receptive to these efforts historically.

Restructuring and formal collaborative work is time intensive and costly, and many foundations remain wary of supporting the cost of exploring or engaging in these activities. Nonetheless, in recent years, a number of funders in the region have supported over 55 transactions since 2011, investing over \$2.1 million toward repositioning activities to help Greater Philadelphia's nonprofits secure

and strengthen themselves.

Building upon this experience, as well as continued requests from nonprofits for this kind of repositioning support, seven foundations in the Greater Philadelphia region – as well as a national funder with extensive experience in nonprofit collaborative ventures – are launching the Nonprofit Repositioning Fund in October 2015. These funders believe that they will be better able to respond to and support quality repositioning projects through a pooled funding strategy, rather than operating independently.

The Nonprofit Repositioning Fund will offer additional support to nonprofits seeking to achieve greater impact through formal collaborative arrangements. Financial resources and technical assistance will be made available to nonprofits based or operating within the Philadelphia five-county region that wish to explore potential collaborative transactions in order to better advance their charitable missions. Philanthropy Network will act as the host for this pooled fund on behalf of the eight funders governing the project.

Similar funds exist in other cities, such as: New York City Merger's and Acquisition Fund (NYMAC); Boston's Catalyst Fund, or; Los Angeles' Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative, to name a few. While our region's Nonprofit Repositioning Fund seeks to provide support to thoughtful explorations and implementation of formal collaborative

transactions, it will place equal priority on legitimizing this as an option for nonprofit leaders, boards and funders to routinize this as a strategic consideration and practice.

Moreover, the Fund will work to further develop the regional capacity to provide wise and experienced technical assistance to nonprofits exploring these collaborative opportunities. Stay tuned for more.

## **Solving complex social issues falls to everyone.**

The scope and complexity of our problems mean that no one entity alone – be it business, foundation, or government – can solve our most pressing social and economic problems.

A lack of cross-sector collaborations often hinders private and public funders' effectiveness in coming together to address deep rooted challenges and intergenerational cycles of poverty that slow the region and city's economic growth and future prosperity.

As we collectively – philanthropic, public, corporate and nonprofit sectors – seek to find better, smarter and more efficient ways to collaborate within and across sectors, what other essential capacities do we need to build and invest in together?

Together, we can make it better for all of us. So let's get going. We have a mountain to climb!

**About the author: Maari Porter: Maari is the Executive Director of Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia, since February 2015.**

**Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia:**

**Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia is the region's membership association for organizations and individuals active in philanthropy. Serving primarily Philadelphia, Bucks, Montgomery, Chester and Delaware Counties plus adjacent areas, Philanthropy Network champions the role of philanthropy in improving the quality of life in the region and educates and inspires members to do their best giving. Believing that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, Philanthropy Network fosters connections and collaborations to enhance the impact of local philanthropy and brings funders together with civic leaders, government and community organizations to address areas of mutual interest.**