

# Two National Organizations Strive to Model Generative Partnership to Accelerate Their Shared Visions

Tracy Wareing Evans & Susan N. Dreyfus 20 September 2017

*"Want to go fast, go alone. Want to go far, go together"*

*—African Proverb*

The delivery of critical programs and services to millions of people each day illustrates the close, long-standing relationship between the public and social services sectors. Yet, the relationship is more complex than only delivery of services. Rather, it includes a shared passion to strive for a healthy and equitable society where all people can reach their full potential.

But to make a truly meaningful effort to reach that goal, it is imperative that the sectors work within a more agile, solutions-oriented relationship -- what we refer to as "generative partnerships." These partnerships are more than collaborative efforts around single initiatives; their aim is something bigger and their potential impact transformative. The outcomes that can be realized when the public and social services sectors work in generative

partnerships are validated by a Nobel Prize-winning economist.

Research by Elinor Ostrom, the 2009 Nobel Prize winner in economic science, corroborated that any complex, difficult social problem is best solved not in the public or the private sector, but rather in an environment where both sectors are working together, in earnest, to bring resolution.

Cause-driven organizations like the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities (Alliance) understand that an endorsement embedded in economic science isn't enough. We know that the more sectors, fields, and systems that we can join together in generative partnerships, the better chance for results that will address the significant social issues facing our communities.

In fact, such partnerships give the APHSA and Alliance networks a much better opportunity to create a modern and integrated health and human services system that is capable of breakthrough, generative results at the individual, family, and community levels.

## **Generative Partnerships Are Different**

Generative partnerships remind us of the process of putting together a jigsaw puzzle versus playing a game of

chess. These dynamic partnerships feature unique roles, assets, and responsibilities for each sector that must be understood and respected by the other sector in order to establish a partnership that achieves true generative results.

APHSA and the Alliance began the journey toward a generative partnership more than five years ago. We started out on the right foot because while we are distinct in our sectors and our roles, as organizations we are both ultimately striving to achieve the same thing as witnessed through our organizational visions and missions:

## **APHSA**

*Vision:* Better, healthier lives for children, adults, families, and communities.

*Mission:* APHSA pursues excellence in health and human services by supporting state and local agencies, informing policymakers, and working with our partners to drive innovative, integrated, and efficient solutions in policy and practice.

## **Alliance**

*Vision:* A healthy and equitable society.

*Mission:* To strengthen the capacities and influence of our national network of high-impact nonprofit human-serving organizations.

Through these five years, our teams and members have developed relationships with and learned from one another, continue to share resources, and are committed to creating new knowledge and unique opportunities for our networks. We are also very committed, where appropriate, to partner together in advocacy at the national level. Yet, we still recognize that our paths may not always be in sync and may at times require distinct journeys in pursuit of our shared visions.

## **Benefits of Generative Partnerships**

The experiences of APHSA and the Alliance have taught us that there are multiple benefits to be realized through generative partnerships, including:

- When you commit to a generative partnership, you will more fully leverage each other's assets, expend existing resources more efficiently, and spur innovation and adaptive solutions, which actually generate new resources.
- You gain "co-owners" rather than "renters" of your shared cause. Generative partnerships last beyond individual leaders and have the capacity for achieving population-level results.
- You gain access to additional perspectives and insights necessary to help all of us understand root causes of the nation's tough societal issues, and systemically address the causes of stressors facing families and communities.

- When times get tough, these are the partners who are by your side to help keep you focused on the "north star."
- Sustainable systems change becomes more attainable. When two distinct systems partners come together, the capacity and leadership to create longer-term change are more achievable.

These benefits are not unique to our partnership. They are easily transferred to any set of cross-sector leaders who fully understands that we need adaptive solutions to adaptive challenges, and that the old technical solutions are no longer viable in the 21st century.

## **Accelerants to Generative Partnerships**

As we reflect on the last five years and look forward to the future on our continued journey to generative work, we have come to understand through experience that there are six accelerants that are core to creating, developing, and sustaining generative partnerships.

We believe these are highly transferable to all partnerships that are striving to realize breakthrough results. However, none are more important than sharing a common vision and principles upon which that vision will be realized, and coming together in a spirit of trust, honesty, and mutual respect.

1. Be clear on each other's roles, distinction, and

boundaries. There will be times that you need to go it alone.

2. Authentic positive relationships among executive leadership and your teams are crucial and must be developed intentionally—they do not just happen. The journey to generative partnerships requires capacity development for how to engage in collective problem solving.
3. Generative partnerships happen over time. Success begets success, and you can't rush it!
4. Generative partnerships are disruptive to status quo. At times, their untraditional nature will expose underlying tensions and leaders must be able to fully hear those concerns while keeping focused on solutions.
5. Each partner must articulate early and clearly a shared vision and core beliefs, as well as each organization's commitment to advancing individually and in your collective work.
6. You can't put a price tag on honesty, transparency, trust, and respect as the foundation for generative partnerships.

## **Generative Partnerships and Networks Key**

As the generative partnership between APHSA and the Alliance continues to evolve, we believe we will be modeling for our field and sectors one of the keys necessary at the local, state, and national levels to

achieving a more modern and integrated health and human services system capable of breakthroughs and durable results.

The road before us as leaders is exciting, challenging, and full of opportunity and uncertainty. Complex challenges require adaptive solutions that move us in new directions, and we are committed to working with and through our networks and through generative partnerships to pave the path forward as we strive to ensure all people in our nation can reach their full potential.

## **Author Bios**

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