# Partnerships: Frameworks for working together

## The Meaning of Partnership

**Most successful partnerships contain these key components.**

If you're considering developing a partnership, you should become familiar with what a true partnership entails. There are several key components inherent in most approaches to partnering. Examine your organization and your potential partner's organization with these components in mind:

- **Leadership**
  Partnerships imply a shared leadership among respected individuals who are recognized and empowered by their own organizations to build consensus and resolve conflicts. However, one organization will generally take the lead on managing the process. Partners must have trust in each others' ability to lead effectively and honestly.

- **Common Understanding**
  Partners need to understand each other's organizational framework, culture, values, and approach. Partners also need a clear understanding of individual members' roles, responsibilities, and what the partnership's division of labor will be.

- **Purpose**
  Partnerships must be guided by a shared vision and purpose that builds trust and recognizes the value and contribution of all members. Each partner must understand and accept the importance of the agreed-upon goals. This leads to improved coordination of policies, programs, and service delivery. Shared and transparent decision-making processes are also essential as partners work towards their common purpose.

- **Culture and Values**
  Shared "can-do" values, mutual understanding, and an acceptance of differences (e.g., norms, ways of working) are essential to successful partnerships. Partners need to discuss their organizational cultures to identify how to work with their strengths and weaknesses. When partners respect each other's contributions and regard each other as equals, they can gain active involvement from organization representatives who will play a valued role in the partnership.

- **Learning and Development**
  A healthy partnership promotes an atmosphere of learning. This may involve monitoring and

evaluation aimed at improving members' performance. An open mindset and the desire to invest in partners' skills and knowledge will create opportunities to shape each other's work and learn together. In this environment, members can reflect honestly on both successes and failures.

- **Communication**
  If a partnership is going to succeed, there must be effective communication at all levels within the partnership and inside each partner organization. In addition, strong feedback loops should be outlined from the beginning of the relationship so that all stakeholders receive timely information.

- **Performance Management**

  The appropriate partnership structure, management practices, and resources must be in place to achieve the intended purpose of the partnership. Members must demonstrate both accountability for their actions and ownership for delivering on the objectives and targets for which they are responsible.

**There are barriers to achieving effective partnerships.**
You should also be aware of common barriers to working effectively with a potential partner. As relationships evolve, partners must work to resolve any road blocks that may arise. Typical barriers include:
- Limited vision or failure to inspire
- Lack of clear purpose or inconsistent understanding of purpose
- Competition between partners for the lead or domination by one partner
- Unequal and/or unacceptable balance of power and control
- Lack of support from organizations with decision-making power in the partnership
- Key stakeholders missing from the partnership
- Lack of commitment and unwilling participants
- Differences in philosophies or work styles
- Inadequate understanding of roles and responsibilities
- Hidden agendas
- Failure to communicate
- Failure to learn
- Lack of evaluation or monitoring systems
- Financial and time commitments outweigh potential benefits

# Types of Partnerships
## Partnerships fall into different categories.
Diverse organizations often join forces to achieve shared goals around capacity building and community improvement. Several types of partnerships are described below:
- Partnerships among community-based nonprofit service organizations
- Cross-sector partnerships (between nonprofits and the business, government, and/or academic sectors)
- Partnerships between donor organizations and recipients

When community-based nonprofits join forces, each organization must have the organizational capacity necessary to manage projects, budgets, and staff involvement. In community-based partnerships, decision-making should be inclusive and deeply engage the community itself.

Cross-sector partnerships are fairly simple to initiate but challenging to maintain. Regardless of the goodwill of the participants, two very different organizational cultures must come together to produce results. One key is to find common ground and use shared language that underscores the vision of the partners.

Partnerships between donors and recipients can create confusion. Is the partnership just about receiving money? This type of partnership actually aims to take advantage of what the recipient, as well as the donor, can bring to the relationship. For instance, this might include local expertise, on-site workers, or clarification of priorities and constraints. Donors can't coerce recipients, for the sake of obtaining resources, into doing things they don't want to do. Together, both sides must define the terms of the relationship.

**Partnerships can also be classified by their primary characteristics.**

This list of partnership types might help you determine what kind of relationship you want to establish.
- Collaboration involves great autonomy and no permanent organizational commitments or combined services.

  Examples: sharing information; coordinating efforts
- Strategic alliance involves shared or transferred decision-making power.

  Examples: joint programming; administrative consolidation
- Integration involves changes to organizational structure and control mechanisms.

  Examples:
  joint ventures (two or more organizations create a new structure to advance a program-related function);
  mergers (previously separate organizations combine program/administrative/governance functions)

- Funding alliance occurs when organizations come together to share a large grant/donation or create a recipient/donor relationship.

- Cost-sharing occurs when each organization provides different resources, such as facilities, staff, or equipment.

- Grant-match occurs when one organization provides a grant and the recipient provides a match in services, cash, maintenance, supplies, or volunteers.

# Forming Partnerships.

**The first step in partnership formation is to define the need for a partnership.**
The goal in partnerships is to achieve more than individual organizations can achieve on their own. In other words, the whole of the partnership is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Identifying self-interest is a critical part of this first step. In defining the need for a partnership, you should think not only about what the partnership can accomplish as a whole, but also about the concrete benefits to your organization in particular. Each potential partner should answer the following questions and discuss their answers together:

- What are our short-term interests? What does our organization need to accomplish or gain in the next 12 months to stay engaged in the partnership?
- What are our long-term interests? What does our organization need to accomplish or gain in the next 18-36 months to stay engaged in the partnership?

Possible answers might include additional organizational members or volunteers; enhanced products or services; greater community credibility or support; and improved access to businesses, agencies, or foundations.

**The second step in partnership formation is to start the process.**

Partnerships have to be developed and nurtured in ways that respect and recognize all individuals. Building relationships is not just the responsibility of organizational leaders, but of everyone working in the partnership. It's also important at the initial stages to agree on a set of ground rules for the partnership. This may seem obvious, but very few groups perform this fundamental requirement necessary for valuing and respecting the individual partners.

The stages of developing a partnership can be compared to the stages of team development—*forming, storming, norming, and performing. Forming* involves bringing people together to start the partnership-building process. It's important that all members help determine the partnership goals, structure, and processes from the onset. In the next stage, after the group has met several times, people start to question the purpose and direction of the partnership (e.g., "Why am I here?", "What's my role?", "Do we have the right priorities?"). It's important to work through this *storming* stage so the group can be open and honest about their perceptions. *Norming* is the stage in which the partners begin to develop protocols and reach shared agreements. *Performing* is when the partners are working together smoothly and accomplishing their objectives.

**The third step in partnership formation is setting up and maintaining the partnership.**

There can often be ambiguity or conflict regarding the division of responsibility between the partnership and individual partners. For instance, it's often difficult to clearly distinguish between strategic and operational (day-to-day) decision-making. Partners may be reluctant to delegate authority to the partnership. Therefore, the partnership can establish a clearly written legal constitution or contract (sometimes called a "terms of reference"). This document sets out the key objectives, procedures, structure, and outcomes of the partnership. It's also essential that this document reflect the business plan or strategy that forms the basis of the partnership's work.

The document gives members an overview of how agreed-upon action will be taken and develops a sense of shared responsibility for the partnership's achievements and failures. It also gives the partnership some structure and boundaries to work within, while allowing flexibility for change and growth. During the setup stage, partners can also develop a specific work plan and agree on their performance management processes so staff members know what they're meant to accomplish and how they're doing.

# Managing the Partnership with Work Plans and Technology

## Ensure your collaborative work plans have these key characteristics.

A collaborative work plan is a document that outlines the structure of work for the partnership or a specific initiative within the partnership. Good work plans have the following characteristics:

### Establish buy-in

Although collaborative work plans document the work breakdown for your specific tasks, they alone cannot motivate people to action. Increase your success rate by first establishing buy-in for the plan from the members of your work group.

**Are realistic**
It's important to be realistic when developing a collaborative work plan. People want to see progress, no matter how incremental. Stay within the scope of your project.

**Have measurable outcomes**
Consider developing immediate, short-term, and long-term outcomes for your collaborative work plan. Identify how you will determine the success of your activities and efforts. What indicators will you measure?

**Hold people accountable**
Communicate group accountability and interdependence of activities. Show how people's specific tasks impact the completion of the overall task. Having an effective structure for open, honest communication can support conversations about accountability as issues arise.
It can be tempting to let the lead organization serve as the center for collaborative work. However, when all partners host meetings, facilitate gatherings, or provide training to other partners, responsibility is shared by all members. This, in turn, increases feelings of ownership and long-term commitment to the partnership.

**Some of these technology platforms can help you manage your partnerships.**
Technology platforms that support online collaboration vary in terms of the depth of collaboration their systems allow. These platform categories include:

- Methods for distributing information, such as websites and electronic newsletters
- Systems for collaborating, such as electronic mailing lists and document sharing
- Systems for real-time interaction, such as Internet forums and online meetings
- Systems for managing the project, such as web-based project management tools

Technologies for distributing information are the least collaborative because they simply allow a lead organization to distribute information across a network. They're useful when you need to share a new resource, provide a deadline alert, or update your partners on the status of a project. To go beyond information dissemination, consider using collaboration technologies—platforms that allow multiple participants to have a voice. These platforms for communicating and sharing data allow partners to have a conversation, edit a document together, share data with each other, or all of the above.

Systems for real-time interaction not only provide online collaboration, but allow partners to work together online in real-time, replicating as closely as possible the experience of working in the same room. And, finally, using web-based project management tools allows a lead organization to be completely transparent with project plans, roles, responsibilities, and deadlines.