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Keys to Successful Programming: Incentives in Multi-Institutional Partnerships

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Abstract: Collaborative partnerships are an important mechanism for meeting client needs in an era of declining resources. Partnerships work best when their areas of concern, goals, and objectives overlap. Yet overlapping goals do not guarantee successful outcomes; rather, aligning incentives is necessary to motivate partners to invest. This article reviews incentive types and discusses the incentives that motivate Extension, government agencies, and private entities. Examples of successful partnerships are provided, and practical steps for achieving successful partnerships are discussed.

Introduction

Significant cuts in appropriations for federal Extension funding are expected as the government grapples with record budget deficits. Indeed, a $29 million reduction in Smith-Lever funding was proposed by Congress in FY 2011. With Extension resources declining, stakeholders and clients seek alternative models for providing impactful programming (Hoag, 2005; Smith, 2009). These models include collaborative partnerships combining the efforts of government, Extension, businesses and nonprofit advocates who share overlapping goals and objectives. Partnerships are desirable when:

- Resources can be pooled for programs that might not otherwise exist. As an example, private entities might provide the effective conduit for reaching clientele, while Extension educators develop programming that is government funded;

- Problems and solutions are identified that might otherwise elude detection. When partners create formal relationships through advisory committees, information is shared and collaboration facilitated. Each partner's perspective is different, and the diversity can generate novel solutions. Innovative delivery methods are one possible outcome, as demonstrated by Hine, Fulton, and Pritchett (2005) when creating scenario-based role playing for cooperative director training.

- Integrated efforts create cumulative effects that lead to a desired outcome. As an example, Greder, Garasky, and Klein (2007) report on a partnership that began between Iowa State University Extension and the Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC) to learn more about food insecurity and health. Their findings led to a subsequent partnership with Primary Health Care Inc., which provided medical care to individuals receiving food from DMARC pantries.

Selecting partners requires that collaborating organizations have overlapping goals and objectives, as is indicated in the Venn diagram below (Figure 1). Each circle in the Venn diagram illustrates the areas of concern for the partners—government agencies, private entities, and Extension. Successful partnerships result when activity focuses on the "sweet spot" of overlapping concern.

Figure 1.
Venn Diagram of Partnering Organizations

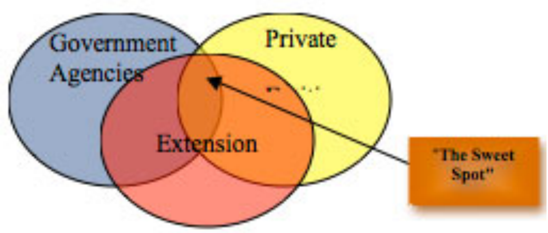

Figure 1's collaboration is intuitive, but successful partnerships are difficult to create and maintain (Astroth, 1986), in part because each partner's incentive for investing in the sweet spot differs. This article poses an overarching question: how might incentives be aligned to ensure the success of collaborative partnerships intent on meeting the needs of clientele?

Partnership Incentives

Franz (2003) recognizes that "good" partners invest in the sweet spot (Figure 1) by making a commitment to strong communication within the partnership, promoting partnership outcomes to internal and external stakeholders, and integrating the partnership into their own organization.

Appropriate tailoring of incentives facilitates the commitment referenced by Franz. Germane is Dollman's (1996) examination of incentive systems in Extension in order to better understand how these systems affect an organization's capacity to change. We adapt the Dollman's ideas when considering how incentives influence partnerships. Incentives are broadly categorized as:

- Material—tangible rewards such as salary.

- Solidarity—intangible rewards that include camaraderie.
- Status—an individual's standing in the organization.
- Purposive—the satisfaction a partner gains from satisfying a sense of mission. (Wilson, 1989).

A key ingredient of successful partnerships is recognizing the incentives that motivate the individuals from each of the partner organizations (e.g., government agencies, private entities, and Extension).

Partnership Incentives for Extension Personnel

Extension professionals—whether they be county Extension staff, regional experts, or tenure track faculty—respond to purposive incentives; in fact, their commitment to mission is clearly indicated by their occupational choice. Yet Extension personnel are increasingly asked to finance their activities via fee-based programming in order to cover budget shortfalls. Extension personnel are then caught between two competing incentives—a purposive incentive to provide programming to clients with limited means and a material incentive for programming that pays its own way. The competing incentives cause conflict and frustration for Extension personnel. Partnerships that enhance the purposive mission and reduce the funding obligation placed on Extension personnel tend to lead to more successful collaboration.

Tenure track Extension specialists also seek impactful outreach programs, but must generate measurable, discipline-specific research or else fail to be retained. "Publish or perish" summarizes this incentive, and specialists are sometimes stymied when trying to fulfill both their outreach and research roles. Similarly, many specialists are converting (or have converted) from 12-month appointments to 9- or 10-month academic appointments. The specialist must then fill the remaining salary with contracts or grants. Yet the proportion of competitive grant funding designed to solely promote Extension efforts is limited. As a result, the specialist faces a material and status incentive to pursue extramural funding that is not necessarily aligned with the needs of a collaborative partnership.

Elevating the status of specialists who participate in partnerships via awards is one means of aligning incentives. Reducing the indirect cost recovery needed for multi-organizational partnerships may be another means for aligning incentives. Moreover, partnerships that effectively communicate outcomes to administrators are more likely to garner intuitional support that includes contacts with key centers of influence in government and industry. Last, partnerships that generate research output at the same time that Extension deliverables are created will align incentives and perhaps reduce some tension that exists between Extension professionals and tenure track specialists.

Incentives for Private Entities

Businesses, non-government organizations, and foundations are entities that bring unique resources to a partnership. As an example, a for-profit firm focuses on client needs in order guarantee a better competitive position, generate profits, and increase shareholder wealth. The firm's emphasis on efficiency results in effective marketing channels to clients that might be leveraged by the partnership. Likewise, successful non-profit organizations maintain a circle of influence among donors and clients that represents an efficient means for reaching joint goals. The customer intelligence that both entities provide is invaluable in creating materials and targeting clients.

Integrating private entities into partnerships entails recognition that material incentives (e.g., profits and political clout) motivate the organization. Private entities seek partnerships in order to gain credibility by association with Extension and government agencies. At the same time, the organization's individuals may be motivated by the increased status that accompanies a successful collaboration. Timing is important because private entities may become impatient with partnerships that demonstrate results too slowly. Yet Extension and government agencies may need to work on a longer time scale.

Smith and Pritchett (2011) provide an example of an Extension effort that includes private entities, agencies, and Extension in developing a consensus around water sharing strategies in the Colorado River Basin. Important keys to the successful partnership include:

- An advisory committee that includes Extension, agencies, and private entities in activity planning, especially the timing of events and project deliverables,
- A practical means for enhancing credibility of the effort through associated university research and Extension publications, and
- An opportunity to elevate the status of the partnering members through publications used with internal and external stakeholders. In this venue, each entity could "tell their story" relative to the purposive mission of sharing water resources.

Project deliverables are of particular importance to the private entity. Best practices in partnership design involve designating the specific deliverables for the partnership, who "owns" the intellectual property and determining how widely it might be disseminated.

Incentives for Government Agencies

Government agencies are mission-based organizations whose objectives often reflect the changing, and at times conflicting, needs of constituencies. These agencies can hold a unique relationship in a partnership as may be the case when the agency:

- Is a source of funds such as competitive grants, contracts, or directed in-kind support,
- Serves as a rule-making or rule-enforcing body,
- Provides access to information or clientele that is expensive or impossible to obtain. Examples include farm cost of production data and survey recipient contact information.

Government agencies have a distinct material incentive—agencies must compete for their share of a public budget each year, and a typical budget justification includes outcomes from partnerships with constituents. At the same time, agencies eschew controversy that might adversely affect their ability to meet shared objectives. As a result, agencies may require significant review of partnership plans prior to execution and distribution of project deliverables, a process that partners may find frustrating.

Individuals who work for government agencies share a purposive mission with the partners and also seek action that elevates their status among peers. Often cast as the rule maker and enforcer, they enter into a divisive atmosphere when partnerships are first formed. Successful partnerships will invest in building trust among members, inclusive of the agency personnel. If the agency partner is comfortable with his or her role and the partnering environment, then the greater the effort should be in meeting jointly determined outcomes.

Practical Steps for Aligning Incentives

Every partnership is different, but investment in the sweet spot means that incentives need be aligned to encourage investment by partners. In a practical sense, the underlying principles for creating/aligning incentives involve:

- Identifying desirable outcomes that are shared by the partners;
- Understanding and clearly identifying the incentives that are in place for each of the partners so the overall program can be developed to work with rather than against the different incentives;
- Developing trust early among key personnel that enhances a shared vision of outcomes;
- Communicating expectations and responsibilities early in partnership development;
- Creating a process for managing and adapting incentives as conditions change;
- Broadcasting the value of the partnership and its accomplishments to all parent organizations.

In an era of declining resources, significant challenges threaten the viability of Extension. Partnerships are an opportunity to leverage resources, but these innovative models will fail if the incentives of government agencies, private entities, and Extension professionals are not recognized and aligned.

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