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NAVIGATING A NON-PROFIT MERGER: PARTICIPATORY TOOLS FOR SUCCESS,

THE LIFEWORKS STORY

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The Whole is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts

Non–profits that know how to leverage resources are ahead of the non-profit service curve. In Austin, Texas (USA), six social service agencies formed the Youth and Family Alliance (the “Alliance”) in 1996 in order to identify and discuss options for leveraging their resources and improve service delivery. The following year they employed the services of MeetingSolutions, Inc. of Austin, Texas, (U.S.A.) to help them negotiate options for them. Four groups eventually merged in 1998 as LifeWorks, the first merger of its kind in the U.S. They faced a number of predictable as well as unexpected challenges along the way. Within a year of the merger the organization, employing nearly 200 people, embarked on creating a strategic plan. This article reviews highlights of the LifeWorks story, its relationship with MeetingSolutions, and the methods that were employed to facilitate the merger and subsequent planning process.



Alliance Negotiates Partnerships - 1997

The Search for a Consultant

The executive directors of six long-standing social service non-profits had been colleagues and friendly competitors for years. Their professional relationships laid the groundwork for informal conversations about challenges they faced. With shrinking government dollars for social services, increasing community need for the services they provided and all indications that this increased need would not be abating any time soon, they decided to rethink the way they were working together.

Their many conversations concerning possible collaborations, how to leverage their collective resources and ultimately improve service delivery led to the creation of a more formal steering committee. The directors invited their board presidents to the table. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Austin, Child and Family Services, Communities In Schools - Central Texas, Pathways Community Counseling, Teenage Parent Council of Austin, and Youth Options joined together to form the Youth and Family Alliance (the Alliance) in January 1996. These six organizations began working together to identify and discuss options for improving service delivery to youth and families in Central Texas.

After securing funding to attend a Drucker Foundation workshop on collaborations and mergers they concluded they needed the help of a facilitator to help them negotiate their partnership. The Alliance issued a request for proposals for consultant services to help them. They were committed to:

- provide comprehensive, effective and efficient services to clients;
- provide integrated services;

- respond proactively to a changing social service landscape; and,
- explore a new structure for achieving the above goals.

They wanted to develop a range of alternative integrated relationships that would increase the effectiveness and efficiency of all the organizations' service delivery systems and operating processes. The proposal submitted by the firm of MeetingSolutions was selected for the following reasons:

- the firm had appropriate qualifications and credentials and a good professional reputation in the community;
- the proposed process would engage a large number of stakeholders;
- the participants would be involved in collaboratively designing the process along with the consultant;
- the proposed process plan offered sufficient structure to achieve their objectives, but sufficient flexibility to make changes along the way;
- the objectives and deliverables for each stage were clear;
- the firm was affiliated with the Institute for Cultural Affairs (ICA) through the qualification of the principal facilitator as a certified trainer in ICA's methodology, the Technology of Participation TM.

I. MeetingSolutions Facilitates Orientation to the Process: Values and Vision

The first of the five stages was an orientation to the three-month process. In addition to introducing the consultant and her associates and setting out a proposed schedule of meetings, this initial session was designed to begin to clarify the values and vision of a representative group of stakeholders. The challenge was to enroll a large group into a somewhat undefined



process. Our goal was to set the course for this journey and inspire confidence among the participants in the face of the unknown.

Sixty participants representing the boards, staff and funding sources of the six agencies were engaged in a highly participatory process for three and a half hours. After the welcome and meeting overview, a representative from each group highlighted the particular core values and beliefs of that organization for the entire group. The group then divided into three smaller groups in which the ToPTM focused discussion method was used to debrief the presentations. Participants introduced themselves and shared their observations, excitement and confusion. The facilitators helped the groups identify themes as well as possible misalignment between the six organizations.

The second half of the meeting consisted of three simultaneous consensus workshops to address the question, “What are the key elements of an ideal, integrated service delivery system that provides comprehensive, effective and efficient services to clients?” After a structured brainstorming process each group summarized their data into 12-15 key elements. Those elements were then collected and synthesized to form the vision around which the Alliance would begin to do its research.

Participants left that evening hopeful and with many questions. They asked, “If this is what the ideal might look like, what do we need to know now in order to begin to create it?”

II. Steering Committee Begins Asking Questions

Two weeks later an 18-member Steering Committee (the executive director, board president and a staff representative from each organization) met to review the values and vision work from the orientation, generate questions needing answers and craft next steps. The

facilitation challenge was to collaboratively craft practical next steps for the large group process in a two-hour meeting of 18 people.

A ninety-minute ToPTM consensus workshop generated 40-45 answers to the question, “What are the questions we need to answer in order to successfully negotiate the partnerships among the six agencies?” The results were then categorized into three major arenas of interest and concern: Clients, Services and Staff. Each organization was then asked to select representatives to serve on each of the three task forces.

III. Research Task Forces Create Scenarios and Ask More Questions

Within four weeks of the meeting, the three task force meetings were scheduled. With similar template agendas, each was set for three hours and tasked with answering three questions:

- A. Current Reality: What’s the situation now?
- B. Scenarios: What are some alternative scenarios for how things could be?
- C. Research: What questions would you need to answer in order to endorse any one of these scenarios?

These three task force meetings began to give the process some shape. Participants were beginning to see how they could play a role in this process. The breadth of the challenges before them became clear.

As a committed community volunteer, the facilitator’s challenge began to become maintaining content neutrality. Despite numerous opportunities to respond to requests for opinions, the facilitator’s task was to provide process expertise, and steer clear of the temptation to provide advice on organizational structure.



IV. Stakeholders Embark on Research Phase

The research phase produced different activities within each of the task forces depending on each group's unique needs. The Staff Task Force crunched numbers, looked at other agencies for models and benchmarks, studied salaries and benefits. The Client Task Force scheduled focus groups run by social workers with select clients to explore their issues and how the merger would impact them. The Services Task Force looked at standards of service from other parts of the state and nation. A new task force emerged, the Funding Task Force, and a team began to explore legal structuring options for the various scenarios the group had designed.

Group members themselves facilitated many meetings. The facilitator was called in as a process observer from time to time and to facilitate action planning sessions when needed. The participants were both energized and challenged by the process that created both enthusiasm and confusion. The challenge for the facilitator was maintaining focus, faith and a willingness to let the participants own the process and its associated outcomes, no matter what they were.

V. A Hundred People Make One Recommendation

Three months after the process began, the task forces were finally ready to report their findings. They first presented results to the Steering Committee before taking their work to the larger group. The Committee then designed the final retreat. The purposes of the retreat were:

to celebrate the three months of accomplishments,
get everyone on the 'same page,'
continue to build momentum for the merger, and
craft recommendations to take back to each of the six boards of directors.

The eight-hour session that Saturday in August involved nearly 100 people representing all six organizations, task forces, board, staff and funding partners. The group reflected the interests of people at various levels of responsibility within each group.

Each task force made presentations and then various small teams drafted resolutions, which integrated all the reports. These resolutions were written as recommendations to take back to each of the six boards of directors. They also explored the implications for funding and structure as well as challenges the next phase of the research process.

Participants left the retreat with a very clear understanding of what was required to take the next steps and move the merger to its completion. The spectacular accomplishment was that these 100 people all agreed on one recommendation document to bring forward to each of their boards of directors. It was day of celebration.

Officially Coming Together as One - 1998

During the ensuing months in 1997 and 1998, four of the six groups decided to pool their resources and take up residence as one organization. The two that chose not to do so were both affiliated with national organizations. In the end, the prospect of merging locally was not something their local boards of directors could do and successfully maintain their national affiliations.

On July 1, 1998 Child and Family Services, Pathways Community Counseling, Teenage Parent Council and Youth Options merged to become LifeWorks. The earlier vision of the Youth and Family Alliance “to provide a comprehensive continuum of services that youth, individuals, families need to build strong, resilient and healthy lives,” had become a reality.

With strategically located community-based service centers in three Central Texas counties, the organization was now serving over 10,000 clients through counseling, case



management and shelter services and another 25,400 through one time educational presentations or information and referral. The array of service included individual and family counseling, consumer credit counseling, street outreach and shelter for homeless youth, domestic violence intervention, teen parenting and prevention programs, GED and job training for youth, and school-based services.

They had successfully integrated facilities, equipment and services. Now they found themselves in need of a strategic planning process to enable the staff to take ownership of the new organization and to implement the vision they had realized. LifeWorks leadership knew that the challenges they faced integrating the four organization's cultures meant that a high degree of staff, board and stakeholder participation would be required to ensure the success of any plan they would develop.

LifeWorks Plans Strategically - 1999

Reconnecting with MeetingSolutions

With a goal of involving as many people as possible in an inclusive process, they contracted with the same consultant who helped them through the merger process. They awarded the request for proposals (RFP) to MeetingSolutions because: the firm already understood LifeWorks history, had performed successfully in the past and had a specialty in including a wide variety of people in the process. Using an adaptation of the ToP™ participatory strategic planning process, the three-phased planning project began in March of 1999.

I. Staff Input and Planning Retreat: Trends, Vision, Obstacles and Directions

The board and staff leadership wanted to spend a day and a half with a manageable number of board and staff planners to create a vision, look at potential obstacles and then draft strategic directions.

LifeWorks leaders wanted to include significant input from stakeholders and saw the staff as a significant stakeholder group. The combined staff of the four agencies constituted in a workforce of nearly 200. We designed a number of ways to involve staff throughout the upcoming process:

We first conducted SWOT Analyses (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) throughout the organization in order to generate staff data for the planning retreat. Social workers, administrators and support staff, people working on the front lines, all had the opportunity to inform the strategic direction.

We scheduled a half-day retreat just for the staff to be briefed on the progress of the planners and identify specific activities that would likely help the organization move in the strategic directions that had been formulated.

The closing ‘implementation retreat,’ scheduled for eight weeks later, was designed to include significant staff involvement because staff would be primarily responsible for implementing the activities that were ultimately selected.

At the conclusion of this first phase of the strategic planning process we had a number of outcomes to bring to all the stakeholders: a consensus was reached on the organization’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; the participants identified six elements of its 3-5 year vision and six obstacles that might block them from achieving it; they drafted three strategic directions, with two three initiatives in each, which would help remove the obstacles and impel the organization toward its vision.

The product of the retreat was a well documented, written report including all the decisions and a graphically simple but comprehensive companion report on overhead



transparencies (foils). The presentation would serve as a consistent message to the funding partners, clients and staff groups whose input would be sought in the coming weeks.

II. Stakeholder Sessions: Funding Partners, Clients and Staff

Each session was customized to meet the needs of the particular stakeholder group.

After a 20-minute presentation, a small group of funding partners was asked to respond. The facilitator used a series of ToPTM focused discussion questions. (i.e. what did they find noteworthy? promising? problematic? missing? about the strategic directions and associated work so far) to elicit their reactions.

The relatively brief (90-minute) client session focused on the services the dozen participants received and their vision for ideal service delivery.

The staff session involved almost 100 people and was scheduled for a half day. In addition to providing an overview of the discussions and decisions to date, the session focused on eliciting suggestions for specific activities the staff thought would move the organization in the strategic directions that had been identified.

III. Implementation: Synthesis and Tactical Planning

The closing event involved a team of staff and some board members to synthesize all the stakeholder reactions and craft the implementation plan. The 25- member group met on a Saturday to select the priority activities, develop SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time bound) for the coming year and action plans for the next quarter.

Despite their anxiety about what lay ahead of them, the participants were strongly motivated to move forward and felt compelled by the strategic directions they had developed together. The words they used to describe their experience at the end of the day included: “positive momentum... fatigue... excitement... fear... collaboration... humor... appreciation...

velocity... inspiration... results... concrete... direction... synergy... teamwork... productive... energizing... goal oriented and commitment.”

Conclusions

The story ends with a new beginning. It is LifeWorks’ constant commitment to a set of core values and to highly participatory processes that leads it to offer a higher quality, integrated social service delivery system. They can reach a wider range of clients than any one of the merging agencies could have individually. And they are doing it well. In the words of a local juvenile judge, the agency is respected because of its proactive efforts to respond to meeting needs, rather than rationalizing how it is unable to do so.

The creation of LifeWorks represents a bold and proactive approach to meeting the rapidly changing needs of a community. There are many similar mergers and collaborations attempted each day. The challenge for professionals who want to be helpful in facilitating these relationships is to listen carefully to the unique needs of the parties involved, to focus on the motivation for merging and the values that the organizations share, to patiently take the time required to enable participants to hear and respond to their differences and to maximize participation and inclusiveness. Successfully navigating partnerships creates a unique opportunity for skilled facilitators. Helping organizations to overcome their collaboration challenges creates extraordinary possibilities – not only for the organizations themselves and the services they provide - but ultimately for the clients they serve.

The Author

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processes. She is a qualified Technology of Participation™ (ToPTM) trainer who has applied the ToPTM methodology to a number of arenas, including the work described in this article. Her professional presentations include sessions at the International Association of Facilitators, chapters of the International Society for Performance Improvement and Meeting Professionals International and a United Nations conference in Latin America. Lynda is a founding Associate Editor of *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* published by IAF and currently serves as Book Review Editor. She is active in the American Society for Training and Development and currently serves as president of the Austin, Texas Chapter.

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