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Lessons Learned from Successful Task Forces

The following excerpt is adapted from [Partnering for Impact: Government-Nonprofit Contracting Reform Task Forces Produce Results for Taxpayers](#), National Council of Nonprofits, April 2013.

Key Elements for Building a Successful Collaboration

The creation of inclusive, nonpartisan collaborations offers promising first steps for fixing broken contracting systems. These collaborations create an environment in which pragmatic reform efforts can be proposed, evaluated, and then successfully developed and implemented. There are several seemingly simple universal principles for all participants to keep in mind when building a collaborations. Although these may appear to be obvious, failure to be cognizant of them can interfere with the group's ability to develop a plan that is truly mutually beneficial.

Cooperation is not the same thing as collaboration. Collaboration entails exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.

Collaboration is a process, not an event. Trust is an essential component of collaboration, and this takes time to develop. It is not uncommon for participants of a group to initially come with baggage related to their past relationship with another participant that may take time for them to overcome. However, trust can be built by sharing important information. Additionally, all human groups go through normal stages of development, typically referred to as forming, norming, storming, conforming, and performing. Although this can be difficult and discouraging at times, it is a sign of positive progress.

Relatively equal representation of both governments and nonprofits provides stronger results. The dominance of one perspective hinders the openness needed to truly identify the problems and their solutions that will result in mutual benefit. Including state associations of nonprofits on task forces enhances this balance since they are both statewide and sector-wide, allowing them access to a broader pool of insights.

Clear common goals are established. From the beginning, everyone must identify, understand, and accept the goals established in the same way in order to move forward together in the same direction.

No one is to blame for the current condition of the government-nonprofit contracting system. The current condition of the government-nonprofit contracting system has developed over many decades through adding new reporting regimes, contract clauses, and other items often created in response to a certain situation without attention to how the components fit into the system as a whole. There is no point in focusing on blame since it prevents moving forward.

Everyone recognizes the need for reform. Both government and nonprofits are hampered by the cumbersome, redundant, antiquated processes and are eager for improvement.

Everyone's concerns are valid. One of the most important reasons that both government and nonprofit contractors must be equal participants is because what may make perfect sense to one could have unintended consequences for the other. These things must be identified so solutions can be developed that are mutually beneficial.

A collaborative effort needs public support from government leaders. At a minimum, the head of the government agency must be willing to support the

collaborative if plans are ultimately to be implemented. For multi-agency efforts legislative and/or gubernatorial support are even more critical.

The successful implementation of any plan includes changes to the organizational culture. The reason so many reform efforts fail to reach their potential is because implementation efforts more often than not focus only on the mechanics of the change and not on investing enough effort into changing the surrounding culture.

Everyone must be open to doing things differently. This means being willing to make adjustments mid-stream when necessary since things don't always go exactly as planned.

Meaningful change takes time. Decades of evolving problems cannot be solved overnight.

Considerations for Selecting Task Force Members

Formation

There is nothing magical in how these collaborative task forces get formed. Sometimes legislatures create them (Connecticut, Hawai'i, Illinois, Maryland, and Texas), other times via a Governor (New Jersey) and Attorney General (New York), and still other times they flow from shared efforts of state agency heads and nonprofit leaders (Maine and North Carolina). Regardless of how a task force is created and structured, it is vital to include both government officials and nonprofit leaders with the necessary knowledge and experience of government-nonprofit contracting to add to the discussion and assessment of recommendations.

Participation

A key element in selecting members of a task force is their ability to participate on a regular basis. Without consistency, the process is slowed down by having to catch up participants who missed a meeting and catch up new people serving as temporary replacements. Such inconsistency causes frustration and delay, making it difficult to obtain direction and maintain momentum.

Authority

Task force members must be authorized to make decisions regarding proposed recommendations without having to seek permission from superiors. Likewise, some task forces have found value in forming subcommittees to serve as workgroups of the larger task force to include higher levels of expertise in specific subject areas. These individuals who are more informed on real issues and pragmatic solutions need the authority to approve recommendations within their workgroups. The progress of both the workgroups and task force is limited considerably, when participants must seek permission from a higher authority before proceeding. Once workgroup recommendations reach the task force, a final opportunity exists to make changes, if they are seen as necessary by the task force.