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The Power of Three



Workers installed a massive pedestrian bridge this spring in Manhattan, the result of a public-nonprofit-business partnership that raised funds, navigated red tape, and promoted the public good, while also generating tax revenues and raising property values. The partnership that accomplished the project, known as the [High Line Moynihan Connector Civic Project](#), may be noteworthy more because of where it occurred than the fact that actors in the three distinct sectors – government, charitable nonprofits, and business – were able to work so effectively together. Yet, the news really is just the most recent example of a unique nonprofit superpower: the Power of Three. That is, nonprofits that collaborate with the other sectors of the economy can achieve things that no one entity or even sector can accomplish.

Up front, it must be acknowledged that collaboration with the other sectors of the economy isn't the natural default for many charitable organizations. Governments can regulate nonprofits out of existence and businesses often take nonprofit

innovations and use them to “turn a profit” without proper acknowledgement or recompense. A nonprofit professional from rural Nevada once remarked that nonprofits outside of urban centers feel they are on their own and must solve problems however they can. Waiting on the cavalry isn’t an option, they observed, because the cavalry – meaning government intervention – could just as easily be hostile as helpful.

Therefore, any nurturing of the superpower of collaboration requires making a deliberate choice and building and nurturing trust. In rural areas, these tasks may be easier because, for one thing, individuals who grew up in the area tend to know their counterparts in government and local businesses. For another, necessity being the mother of invention, under-resourced nonprofits often don’t have the luxury of “going it alone” or relying solely on fundraising and service delivery to make the change that is required. Likewise, rural governments usually don’t have the tax base that their larger urban and suburban counterparts enjoy, so they often need partners.

Looking at problem-solving approaches in rural areas can be both inspirational and instructional because they rely on necessity, a recognition of common goals, and a respect for separate impacts. Here are two good examples:

- In **Iowa**, nonprofits running senior residential facilities and local farmers had food-related challenges that they decided to solve together. The nonprofits needed affordable fruits and vegetables for their residents. They also had congregant kitchens licensed by the state, but the kitchens could only be used for making meals. Farmers had excess produce, but no place to can or preserve their products for later sale. In a win-win-win collaboration, the state agreed to work with them to adjust regulations and inspection rules to enable the farmers to use the nonprofit congregant kitchens during off hours. In return, the farmers paid for the use of the facilities in food for the residents. Either of the parties from the three sectors could have insisted on the status quo; but they all agreed to act in the public good.
- Ask any nonprofit providing summer meals for students and you will hear an earful about low government reimbursement rates, particularly in rural areas where the cost of delivering meals countywide can be as much or more expensive as preparing the meal. The first tri-sector solution we heard of occurred in northern **California**, but examples abound as well in **Wyoming** and elsewhere. The trick to delivering hot, wholesome meals over long

distances efficiently and economically requires choreography and cooperation. With variations based on location, the nonprofit prepares the meals and puts them on public transportation (e.g., a bus going county-wide) which transports the meals at no cost. Volunteers collect the meals at each destination, serve them to the intended diners, and return the reusable equipment to a central location. Then, a vehicle from a for-profit delivery service picks up the equipment on its return trip to the depot (usually “deadheading” empty vans) and delivers the equipment for free to the start location. And it all happens again the next day.

The phrase “public-private partnership” gets bandied about on a regular basis to address numerous topics like the privatization of jails and highways to projects to solicit foundation support for public obligations. The Power of 3 is something much more and can be much more lasting – the commitment of governments, charitable nonprofits, and businesses to trust each other, build on each other’s strengths, and where possible, get out of each other’s way to achieve positive, mutual results.