

What Makes a Partnership Successful? Lessons to be learnt from the Families First Edmonton Partnership

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Abstract

This paper explores contributors of partnership synergy evident in the formation stage of the Families First Edmonton (FFE) Partnership, a large, multi-sectored collaborative partnership that was established to determine the best health and recreation service delivery model for families with low incomes. Partnership characteristics that influence synergy are examined through an analysis of qualitative interviews with partners that focused on the collaborative effort. This analysis is guided by the Determinants of Partnership Synergy framework developed by Lasker, Weiss, & Miller (2001). The analysis explores how some of these determinants of synergy are manifested in partners' experiences of the partnership. The analysis reveals themes within four partnership characteristics that are relevant to the creation of partnership synergy. This research contributes to the understanding of the process of large, multi-sectored collaborative partnerships in the formation stage of development as it describes how the FFE partnership characteristics of leadership, administration and management, governance, and efficiency influenced partnership synergy.

Introduction

Health and social service providers face many challenges when promoting community health, including improving the health of families with low income. Many programs that attempt to alleviate the problems faced by these families are fragmented and ineffective (Schorr, 1997). This is so, in part, because it is difficult to alter service delivery from a reactive system, focused primarily on health problems of individuals, to a proactive system focused on targeted, community-based, and coordinated services (Gray & Wood, 1991; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). Furthermore, systems tend to be individually governed, and thus, they usually fund and design services around single, narrowly-defined problems or illnesses (Hill, 2002; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000; Provan & Sebastian, 1998).

Collaborative partnerships have become an increasingly popular strategy in the promotion of community health in recent years (Chinman, Anderson, Imm, Wandersman, & Goodman, 1996; El Ansari & Phillips, 2004; Granner & Sharpe, 2004; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000). It is a widely accepted assumption that collaboration can achieve outcomes that are more effective, efficient, and sustainable than what can be realized if organizations work alone (Browne et al., 1999; Browne & Roberts, 2002; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2000).

Collaborations are particularly necessary when organizations share a common purpose, and when that common purpose addresses a meta-level problem (Chisholm, 1996) such as the health of families with low income. As the issues facing these families are rooted in an array of social, economic, and political conditions that extend beyond the control of any one entity (New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2001; Trist, 1983), government sectors, community systems, and service agencies are encouraged to respond by initiating collaborative efforts. Government incentives for working together have turned into directives to work not only across departments but also across levels of government and with local service-delivery organizations. In fact, the public sector worldwide has consistently moved toward collaborative governance, collaborative public service provision, and collaborative approaches to addressing health and social problems (Gray & Wood, 1991; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Healey, 1997; Jennings & Ewalt, 1998; Provan & Sebastian, 1998).

History and Context of the Families First Edmonton Partnership

Families First Edmonton (FFE) grew out of an initiative by the Quality of Life Commission, a gathering of individuals who expressed concern about the health, safety, and recreation needs of children living in families with low incomes. Throughout 2001, the group met with numerous key members from municipal, regional, and provincial governments and requested them to work to address this problem. Following nearly five years of consultation and planning, the FFE research project was launched in November 2005 through a community-government-university partnership.

This partnership is particularly noteworthy because of its complexity. FFE is multi-sectored, traversing 12 partners¹ including government

¹ The partners in this research project included: (1) Alberta Employment and Immigration (co-lead); (2) City of Edmonton Community Services

(provincial, regional, and municipal) funders, community, and university, and is focused on families with low income, including those on social assistance, the working poor, and Aboriginal, immigrant and refugee populations, and works through the most senior level to the front line service delivery level. The first objective the FFE partnership was to conduct a community-based research project to determine the best health and recreation service delivery model for families with low incomes.² To this end, the FFE partnership undertook a longitudinal research study (two years of intervention and data collection followed by one additional year of follow-up data collection) focused on linking families with low incomes with services and supports needed to promote health and well-being. Primarily, the FFE research project seeks to determine whether delivering health, education, family support and recreation services in an integrated way can provide better outcomes for families with low incomes. In addition to studying the outcomes of the FFE intervention, research efforts were undertaken to study the nature and effectiveness of the partnership itself. Thus, the second objective of the FFE partnership was to examine the preconditions, processes, and outcomes involved as FFE partners collaborate to provide primary health and recreation support services to families with low income. The research reported in this paper addresses some of the processes of collaboration that are considered to have influenced the success of the FFE partnership.

(co-lead); (3) Alberta Children and Youth Services; (4) Alberta Health Services (Capital Health); (5) Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services Authority, Region 6; (6) University of Alberta - Community University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families; (7) Edmonton Community Foundation; (8) Quality of Life Commission; (9) Alberta Mental Health Board; (10) Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee; (11) Alberta Health and Wellness and, (12) United Way of the Alberta Capital Region. Please note that additional partners joined FFE at a later stage and after the data were collected for this study. These additional partners are: (13) YMCA of Edmonton; (14) Multicultural Health Brokers Co-Operative; (15) KARA Family Resource Centre and, (16) Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society.

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The purpose of this paper is to identify the particular partnership characteristics of the FFE partnership that have had a significant impact on the partnership synergy that has enabled it to be a successful collaboration. Specifically, this large complex partnership in its formation stage was able to create and sustain: 1) a leadership that was able to span the boundaries of individual partners to capitalize on their collective efforts; 2) a mode of administration and management that was flexible and supportive while providing structure to oversee the project's activities, ensuring open communication, and maintaining the visibility of the partnership; 3) a set of governance arrangements that give rise to manageable and effective decision-making processes; 4) and, an efficient distribution of partners' efforts ensuring that partners contribute according to their expertise, skills, and interests. It is argued that these factors enhanced the partnership's capacity to: bring together an optimal combination of partners; build an environment that promotes positive working relationships; and integrate the viewpoints, skills and resources of diverse partners.

The Significance of Synergy

Partnership synergy that is created through combining the skills, resources, and viewpoints of multiple partners is considered to be an important factor contributing to successful collaborations (Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, & Walsh, 2003; Hemphill, McGreal, Berry, & Watson, 2006). Collaborative partnerships facilitate mutual benefits for partners by amalgamating partners' strengths and capacities (Lasker et al., 2001). Synergy is evidenced through a partnership's activities and relationships, and through the knowledge-building that accrues from the collaborative effort. For example, synergy can be manifested in thinking that is creative, comprehensive, practical, and transformative (Lasker et al.). This newly created understanding has local relevance and can lead to comprehensive actions and strategies to achieve improved health outcomes (Richardson & Allegrante, 2000; Lasker et al.).

Further to this, Lasker et al. (2001) identify components of partnership functioning that are thought to influence a partnership's ability to generate synergy. These determinants of partnership synergy include resources, partner characteristics, relationships among partners, partnership characteristics, and the external environment. This paper will focus on partnership characteristics which are comprised of leadership, administration and management, governance, and efficiency. These characteristics can significantly impact synergy as they strongly "affect the ability of the partnership to actively engage an optimal mix of

partners, create an environment that fosters good working relationships among partners, and combine the perspectives, resources, and skills of different partners” (Lasker et al., p. 193). Literature relevant to each of the four partnership characteristics is reviewed.

Partnership Characteristics as Contributors to Partnership Synergy

Leadership

Leadership is a strong predictor of partnership effectiveness (Austin, 2000; Gamm & Benson, 1998; Gray, 1989; Jewiss & Hasazi, 1999; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000; Selin & Myers, 1995). Successful collaborative partnerships, because they involve unconventional roles and tasks, look beyond the roles of traditional leaders (Austin, 2000; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Finance Project, 1998; Lasker et al., 2001). As observed by Chrislip and Larson, collaborative efforts cross many boundaries and involve participants from both the public and private sectors and from the broader community with different backgrounds in terms of training, experiences, and values. Moreover, the focus of collaborative leaders is on promoting and safeguarding a process that is constructive rather than one that imposes answers upon collective issues (Chrislip & Larson).

Administration and management

Administrative and management systems closely coordinate the activities and resources of collaborative partnerships (Lasker & Committee on Medicine and Public Health, 1997), providing the “glue” that enables multiple, independent people and groups to work together (Lasker et al., 2001, p. 194). These systems organize, direct, and oversee all of the functions in a partnership (Shortell & Kaluzny, 1994). Given the evolving needs of partners and ever-changing environments, partnerships are constantly shifting and adjusting, making them particularly difficult to manage compared to traditional bureaucracies (Forrest, 1992). As noted by Lasker et al., successful partnerships therefore require administrative and management approaches that are flexible and supportive.

Governance

Governance, which is primarily concerned with positioning the partnership relative to the external environment within which it operates (Mitchell & Shortell, 2000), is key to partnership functioning (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993; Flower & Norris, 1994; Mitchell &

Shortell, 2000; Weiner & Alexander, 1998). Partnership governance involves a number of tasks, including setting priorities for partnership goals, choosing the membership composition, determining and obtaining the needed resources, and providing measures of accountability (Mitchell & Shortell). A key issue for partnership governance is maintaining a manageable and effective decision-making process (Weiner & Alexander). This is accomplished by defining the extent to which and the way in which members have influence in determining the actions of the collaborative effort (Kegler, Steckler, McLeroy, & Malek, 1998).

Governance asserts its effect on synergy level by influencing the extent to which partners' resources, skills, and perspectives are combined (Lasker et al., 2001). As noted by Lasker et al., the extent to which partnership governance fosters synergy may be reflected in how comfortable and supportive the partners are with the decisions made, the timeliness of those decisions, and the decision-making process itself.

Efficiency

Partnership efficiency, the degree to which a partnership optimizes the use of its partners' involvement and resources, significantly influences the level of partnership synergy (Lasker et al., 2001; Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker, 2002). Efficient partnerships, as noted by Lasker et al., make the best use of what each partner has to offer, which includes their expertise and skills as well as their financial resources, in-kind resources, and time. Making good and productive use of each partner's financial and in-kind resources, as well as time, is crucial to the continued participation and commitment of partnership members (Huxham, 1996; Jewiss & Hasazi, 1999). This aspect of efficiency is especially important in partnership functioning because partnership work is usually not a partner's primary responsibility (Israel et al., 1998). As Huxham points out, partners not only need to invest actual time in such activities as achieving mutual understanding, creating trust, and negotiating bases for action and coordination, but must also bear in mind the lapsed time needed to cope with accountability issues and other organizational priorities.

Method

The intention of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the process of large, multi-sectored collaborative partnerships in the formation stage of development. To this end, the study describes how the characteristics of leadership, administration and management,

governance, and efficiency influenced partnership synergy within the FFE collaboration.

As our aim in this study is to understand the phenomena of partnership characteristics in a large, multi-sectored partnership we adopted a purposive sampling approach (Mayan, in press). Eighteen key decision-makers who were involved during the formation stage of the partnership were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Included in this sample are senior managers/directors, and others responsible for designing and implementing FFE from all partner organizations. The 18 participants interviewed were instrumental and accountable for the initiation of FFE, and were knowledgeable about the entire formation stage from February, 2001 to November, 2005. Of these 18 participants, 10 were from the government sector, four were from the community sector, and four were from the university sector. The interviews lasted 50 to 90 minutes each and explored partners' perceptions and experiences of working together in the partnership.

Analysis

ATLAS/ti, a personal-computer program for managing text, was used to allow for a structured coding process of one of the determinants of partnership synergy called partnership characteristics. Partnership characteristics consisted of leadership, administration and management, governance, and efficiency. The analytic process was guided by well-defined theoretical constructs to clarify the significance of pre-existing conceptualizations (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of partnership characteristics that are theorized to promote partnership synergy. The analysis began with the assignment of transcripts as "primary documents," and the input of the four partnership characteristics as predetermined categories into an ATLAS/ti file.

After each transcript had been read twice by the first coder, coding began. Text passages from the transcripts were coded into one of the four partnership characteristics (leadership, administration and management, governance, and efficiency) when they corresponded with, or constituted examples of the four partnership characteristics. In this approach, we applied Lasker et al's (2001) prior-formulated, theoretically-derived model to our qualitative data, resulting in the methodological controlled assignment of each partnership characteristic from the model to corresponding passages of text (Backman & Hentinen, 2001; Berg, 2007; Mayring, 2000). This analytic technique has been used and/or discussed by many researchers (Burnard, 1996; Kasila, Poskiparta, Karhila, & Kettunen, 2003; Latvala & Janhonen, 1998; Latvala, Janhonen, &

Moring, 2000; Latvala, Janhonen, & Wahlberg, 1999; Upenieks, 2002 & 2003). The end product was a list of all of the categories and their descriptions with their corresponding text passages from the transcripts. Coding discrepancies between the two coders were resolved through dialogue that resulted in consensus on the meaning of text. The findings from the analysis as they relate to each partnership characteristic are described below.

Partnership Characteristics in the Families First Edmonton Collaboration Leadership

Merging divergent perspectives and moving beyond the boundaries of individual partners to create a new 'inter-sectoral space'

According to participants, the leadership challenged the partners to critically examine alternate ways of approaching the work of the partnership and placed “the onus back on the group” to seek consensus about how to move forward. Leaders posed “thoughtful questions” to encourage a broad focus and this served to “move the group out of the problem zone and into building consensus.” The leadership demonstrated a strong ability and willingness to listen to participants and to understand their divergent perspectives. In sum, FFE leaders navigated the partners through an examination of numerous and divergent perspectives “to come up with an encompassing vision” to “bring people together without excluding too much.” The leadership, in turn, was then able to span the boundaries of partners’ individual jurisdictions as it created new inter-sectoral space in which the partnership could exist.

Linking the partnership’s vision to the necessity of collaboration

Leaders in the very early stage of the FFE partnership were seen as visionaries who were not detail focused, but who demonstrated their personal commitment to the overall objectives of the partnership. These visionaries saw that the partnership had immense potential to improve the well-being of families with low income. FFE partners saw these leaders as champions of the partnership and described them as being “single-minded” in their bid to push the partnership to have a “maximum impact.” The leadership articulated a clear vision that described an improved quality of life for families with low income, by way of “strengthened service delivery, supportive policies, and sound research” (Families First Edmonton, 2003, p. 2). Furthermore, the leaders’ efforts to maintain the

vision helped to motivate and “reassure” partners that the partnership was moving forward.

Commitment to the collaborative process in general was well established in the formation stage of the partnership. Commenting on the significance of collaboration one participant stated,

I have such a fundamental belief within me that this is how we need to work. Yeah, the days when you sat in your office and thought great thoughts and wrote a memo and sent it to somebody, are long past. If you want to make a significant difference, you’d better be out there working together.

This personal commitment to collaboration was modelled by the leadership. It was significant to participants that leaders did not delegate to the extent that they were not perceived to be leading. Remarking on the importance of such perceptions, one participant reported,

...we had said very early on, that [leadership] is not a responsibility that can be delegated, that we all have to come to the table and we all have to be here and I think that is important. Because everybody back at your shop is looking to see who is actually going to this meeting...and if [high-ranking leaders] were showing up, you know, people see that the organizations are saying, “Yeah, this is important.”

Commitment to the collaboration was further illustrated through the way in which individual leaders avoided the pitfall of being overly focused on gaining personal rewards and organizational credits and acknowledgements to the detriment of the partnership itself. FFE leaders concentrated on the partnership’s desired outcomes and what could be achieved by joining forces. One participant noted the importance of this approach to leadership and commented, “worrying about, you know, naming my department will kill [the collaboration] very quickly.”

*Preserving the partnership’s commitment to collaboration in hard times:
Maintaining momentum and managing conflict and risk*

FFE leaders provided focus and stability which were necessary considering the large number of people and multiple jurisdictions involved and they maintained the momentum of the partnership despite several challenges. At times the leadership had to defend the partnership to their own organizations and as asserted by participants this required “a

lot of in-fighting” and “behind the scenes work” to convince their organizations to remain committed to the partnership. In addition, the leadership supported the intentions and purpose of the partnership and they supported their representatives to work to establish the project even though its feasibility was occasionally questioned by partners. A participant recounted the comments of another partner who asserted “I think it’s great but I will be very surprised if this project ever gets off the ground because it’s such a big, expensive, complicated project.”

During the formation stage, the FFE partnership experienced a significant turnover of those people in leadership positions which could have been detrimental for the partnership development. New FFE leaders, however, were able to orient themselves in a timely manner. By witnessing their predecessors’ immense commitment for the partnership, they too, quickly became staunch supporters. This provided a continuity of supportive and effective leadership.

Additionally, participants pointed to the willingness of FFE leaders to take on a fair amount of risk as the project was initiated before all of the funding was secured. Participants suggested that the leadership could have terminated the project on a number of occasions because of a lack of adequate funding. For example, though commitment among all partners was very high in the beginning some partners eventually withdrew fiscal support of the project. Furthermore, it was also suggested that had the project ended because of a lack of funding, this would not have been interpreted as an abject failure because the leaders’ efforts to sustain the project were already widely acknowledged. Thus, the leadership could have allowed the project to come to an end and still be credited for their effort in trying to realize the project. While recollecting a low period of the partnership, one participant commented, “we would have seen this project shelved and it would have been shelved with a good feeling, that we tried and it didn’t work.”

Nonetheless, leaders sustained momentum and avoided the collapse of the partnership. A potential important fact in this regard is that, for the most part, leadership was represented by high ranking officials in their respective organizations. These people could assume more authority to take greater risks than lower ranking officials. And they did take risks. One participant remarked,

We were at a do or die situation...do you either do it, based on the assessment of the risks, or not. And obviously, my strong recommendation was: we do it. It wasn’t necessarily where the stars were all aligned and we just ride this, but recognizing you may have had this one chance to continue to do this; because if

you waited another year or another cycle, the issues became: did you still have the research funding? Was it going to be any easier to get the departments on board? Probably not. You would lose a whole bunch of momentum. People from the communities would get more disillusioned. And, pretty much, I went to [name of superior] and said, “We need a decision. We either have to go, or not go. And you know where I’m at: we’re going.”

Administration and Management

Project management approach: Overseeing the activities of the project and maintaining the visibility of the partnership

In the early stage of the FFE partnership, a project management team was convened to carry out the administrative and management functions of the partnership, and as such, this team played a decisive role to ensure the viable and overall smooth operations of the partnership. According to participants, the project management team was deemed as “necessary” as “it gave the entire project structure.” Furthermore, the project management team enabled the partnership to remain updated about the development and progress of the work plan, thereby helping to sustain support from the various organizations in the partnership. One participant recalled that the project management team kept the partners “well informed” about the “work plan that they were grinding their way through” and stated further, “if there were questions raised, those questions were answered in a very timely manner. I thought that there was a pretty efficient team there behind the scenes that was making [the project] happen.” As suggested by participants, the project management team’s attempts to be proficient in open-communication served to demonstrate its commitment to each partner and to the partnership as a whole.

The importance of adequate and proficient staffing

The FFE partnership employed a full-time project manager in the early stage of the partnership. Participants suggested that the appointment of “a dedicated person was critical” to provide necessary project management resources to help establish and operate the project on a day-to-day basis. The project manager coordinated the project’s efforts and organized the scheduling of project tasks. An important role of the project manager was to ensure the proper orientation of new partner representatives. One participant recounted,

The project manager welcomed and provided orientation for new partner representatives, informing them about salient events and achievements of the project thus far, and providing them with documents relevant to the partnership. [I was sent] a binder of information that included: the terms of reference; the original pilot project ...some of the research findings, the minutes of previous meetings, and all of that kind of stuff. That was how I got myself oriented to what the project was about.

To review, the adopted project management approach helped to organize and provide the structure for the work of the project. Project management coordinated and continuously monitored the project's efforts, and brought overall clarity to the planning process of the project.

Governance

Charter development: Establishing formalized structures and procedures

The government structure that would oversee the responsibilities of the partnership, including the decision-making process, was designed to respond to the complexity and large size of the FFE partnership. Early on, a charter was established that outlined the partnership's governance structure. One participant commented,

I think it was very wise of our first Project Manager and our Steering Committee to set up the Charter and the governance structure right from the get-go. It's a very complicated governance structure, and people who aren't involved in the day to day details of it, I think, have a hard time understanding the relationship between all the committees and who reports to who and what responsibilities go with which committee. But I think it's necessary, this is a huge, huge, process and a project that needs different people [to be] involved at different levels.

As documented in the charter, the FFE governance structure is composed of Steering, Operations, and Research Committees, along with their respective subcommittees. The Steering Committee is the decision-making body for the service delivery model and research outcomes, and it oversees the high level coordination and implementation of the overall project. The Steering Committee and primarily the Executive Steering Committee work to secure funding for the project. The Operations Committee is responsible for the development and monitoring of the

plans, budgets, and deliverables of the service delivery component of the project within established time-lines, and quality guidelines approved by the Steering Committee. The Research Committee is responsible for the design of the research component and is also responsible for development and the implementation of the research component including application to, and management of research grants (Families First Edmonton, 2003).

At the beginning stage of the partnership, most decisions were made at the Steering Committee level. This resulted in an “inner and outer circle in terms of making decisions.” The identification of problems and proposed solutions often came from the Operations Committee and were directed to the Steering Committee’s Executive Committee. Appointments to the various committees were guided by the preference to sustain manageability and to ease the decision-making process. One participant recalled,

I remember having a conversation about who should be on the Steering Committee and who should be on the Operations Committee, and how do we keep it manageable? And so I think there was a conscious decision about who should be on which committee, and I think I was generally in agreement with [these decisions].

Strategic governance structure

FFE partners were strategic in advocating for and influencing the placement of particular people with the desired experience and role in their organizations on different project committees. Noting the importance of being able to influence who sits at which committee, one participant explained that it was necessary to be “quite strategic” and offered the following comments,

Rather than looking for a representative, we’re actually being much more prescriptive in what we want to see in that representative and even going so far as trying to name a potential person we’re familiar with and comfortable with and believe would bring a certain asset to the table.

As mentioned earlier, many partner leaders had the power to make decisions in their organizations. One participant declared that many people at the Steering Committee level were “the right people [to have] at the table” as they could “influence and make decisions within their own organizations.” The participant went on to say, “I think the right people

were involved because they were able to raise an enormous amount of money.”

Egalitarian decision-making model

The chosen governance model clearly outlined the decision-making process and participants noted that this structure worked well during the partnership’s formation stage. According to participants, decision-making involved working through differences of opinion. As one participant observed, “I think there was a lot of group decision-making at the beginning, and in the group decision-making different people might have had slightly different ideas but ...we seemed to work those out.” Indeed, participants expressed comfort with the way in which decisions were reached noting that “the natural process of the discussion always led to ...a reasonable solution, or people feeling comfortable with the decision that was being made.”

The observation was largely that decisions were made following a democratic model where all participants could articulate their opinions, positions, and priorities and where discussion was encouraged. However, this view can be contrasted with the perspective that when making decisions “the buck has to stop somewhere” and as such it is important to be transparent about how ultimately some people carry more authority to finalize decisions than do others.

Efficiency

Optimizing partner involvement

Participants in this study pointed to the broad range of skills and expertise that were evident within the partnership. Some of the areas noted include talents related to leadership, project management, relationship building, communication, service delivery, and research.

The diverse sectors represented in the partnership made their own contributions according to their respective areas of proficiency. For example, university, community, and government participants had access to knowledge about different sources of funding through connections in their respective sectors. This strategy of accessing funding sources was articulated by a participant who noted that each sector is aware of or “in touch with their bank of resources, places that they can apply for grants. ...but you tend not to know everybody else’s [funding sources], so when everybody is sitting at the table [sharing this information] that really was a benefit.”

Partner involvement in the collaboration was often dictated by representatives' availability of time to contribute to the partnership. An optimal division of labour among partners and allocation of tasks according to availability was very important in the FFE partnership. While some were able to be more fully involved, others played more limited roles. One participant talked about the personal necessity to "set certain boundaries of my involvement" while still bringing "value to the project" and stated further that, "I am quite satisfied that [I made] a good contribution without overextending myself." Another participant also noted the requirement to distribute work in an efficient manner, and stated, "the way that work has been delegated has certainly worked for me, because I don't have the time to do a lot. You know, I can take away a very concrete task, but I couldn't be more involved with my other work [commitments]."

The partnership optimized participants' involvement in the partnership as people contributed according to their interest and expertise. Pointing to the importance and intrinsic worth of consulting across sectors one participant reflected, "there's a lot of learning that can be done, and there's a lot of expertise each one of us can contribute to this project." Overall, the partnership benefited from the extensive scope of expertise among partners and there was a perception that everyone's contributions were meaningful.

Discussion

Data gathered from FFE partners reveal themes within each partnership characteristic that are theoretically relevant to the creation of partnership synergy. To begin with, the FFE leadership was instrumental in the creation of partnership synergy in the FFE partnership. An important factor in the formation stage of the FFE partnership was the ability of the leadership to span the boundaries of individual partners to capitalize on their collective efforts. A common characteristic of many successful collaborative partnerships is that they have boundary spanning leaders who are able to understand, bridge, and connect the different cultures of the participants (Alter & Hage, 1993). The credibility of these leaders with individuals in different sectors helps to give potential partners the confidence and trust they need to build new relationships (Lasker & Committee on Medicine and Public Health, 1997). Moreover, collaborative leaders' understanding of the different languages involved, their knowledge of partners' common requirements, and their awareness of the concerns and needs of all sectors help make the collaborative

process and product more responsive to everyone involved (Lasker & Committee on Medicine and Public Health).

The FFE leadership's commitment to the necessity of collaboration was integrated into the vision of the partnership effort and this helped to cultivate an understanding of the common objectives among partners from different sectors to address the health of families living with low income. Indeed, collaborative leadership is decidedly visionary as it helps the group create shared and authentic visions of what the collaboration can accomplish, as well as strategies for addressing shared concerns (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Gray, 1989; Lasker et al., 2001). Furthermore, effective collaborative leaders are able to use the partnership's vision as a means to align potentially disparate member interests (Metzger, Alexander, & Weiner, 2005).

The FFE partnership averted collapse, in part, because its leaders successfully maintained the momentum of the partnership and managed conflict and risk under difficult situations. Given the voluntary nature of partnerships, the collaborative leader's ability to promote and nurture commitment and involvement by the participants and their organizations and community, is especially important. Leaders of collaborative efforts cannot control many of the factors that erode participation, such as turnover in partner organizations, competing home organization demands, and changing incentives (Metzger et al., 2005). Nevertheless, within such constraints, collaborative leaders can foster participation by establishing and maintaining consensus on mission, vision, goals, and strategy, thereby impacting members' perceptions as to the benefits and costs of participation (Metzger et al.). Additionally, effective collaborative leaders are able to sustain hope and participation by promoting and protecting a process that participants believe in (Chrislip & Larson, 1994).

The findings support the suggestion that partnership synergy was encouraged by the administration and management of the FFE partnership. The adoption of a project management approach provided structure to oversee the partnership's activities, ensured open communication, and maintained the visibility of the partnership. Lasker et al. (2001) have identified several administrative and management functions as likely to be important determinants of partnership synergy, including, enabling meaningful participation, promoting effective communication, and providing documentation. As new partners are recruited to the collaboration, proper orientation is essential to help ensure that each participating partner is involved in the partnership in a meaningful way (Condo & Martin, 2002). Open and effective communication strategies are central to the management and operation of collaborations as they support the members in partnership work (Winer &

Ray, 1994; Austin, 2000). Systematic and ongoing documentation, feedback, and critical reflection are all important administrative and management capacities that should be used to assess progress, celebrate successes, and redirect efforts (Roussos & Fawcett, 2000). Providing partners with synthesis materials can help them make timely decisions (Lasker et al., 2001).

A key advantage enjoyed by FFE was that it was staffed by a full-time project manager who organized and coordinated the work of the partnership. Partnership success ultimately rests on the shoulders of those carrying out the work of the collaboration (Waddock, 1988). As Waddock noted, the multiple interests and agendas of partnership members call for the best and the most competent people to be selected to carry out critical tasks such as documenting and monitoring the progress of the partnership. Staff stability is essential, which is why successful, sustainable collaborations tend to have full-time administrative staff (Jewiss & Hasazi, 1999; Winer & Ray, 1994). Such staff, paid by the collaboration itself or provided by member organizations, free up collaboration members for other roles (Winer & Ray). Designating these staff with assigned responsibilities, clarifying, reinforcing, and nurturing their roles, as well as providing them with the needed support, help them implement the partnership's work effectively (Austin, 2000; Winer & Ray).

It is likely that the characteristic of governance contributed to the partnership synergy in the FFE partnership. The development of the FFE Charter established formalized structures and procedures which helped to manage the complexity and large size of the FFE partnership. Formalization of governance (the degree to which rules, roles, and procedures are precisely defined) is crucial (Butterfoss et al., 1993; Metzger et al., 2005; Wandersman, Goodman, & Butterfoss, 2005). Prescribed structures or procedures are required to underpin collaboration (Morrison, 1996). Such clarity and formality in governance help to create a stable and predictable operating environment (Rogers et al., 1993). These formalized processes and procedures not only clarify staff and member roles and responsibilities, as well as areas of authority and lines of accountability for all the key players, but also provide clear guidelines for all of the processes involved in collaborative work, including decision-making and interagency agreements (Bond & Keys, 1993; Butterfoss et al.; Kegler et al., 1998; New Economy Development Group, 2005; Rogers et al., 1993; Wandersman et al.).

FFE participants were strategic in designing governance structure as they were deliberate in placing particular individuals in different roles in the partnership. Central to partnership governance is the involvement of the right people with the right motivation (Flower & Norris, 1994). A

prerequisite for effective governance is the strategic selection of members who reflect the nature of the mission and goals of the partnership and have the ability to work together effectively (Mitchell & Shortell, 2000).

FFE chose an egalitarian decision-making model and this served to engage all partners in democratic decision-making. By choosing the best decision-making styles for its purposes, collaboration can achieve a balance of ownership and productivity (Winer & Ray, 1994). Partnership implies the concept of equality among partners, at least in terms of decision-making about partnership efforts (Waddock, 1988). Willing cooperation, honesty, trust, and the free sharing of ideas characterize collaborative decision-making processes (Metzger et al., 2005). Partnerships can ensure that these collaborative practices serve their purpose by maintaining open and explicit processes with clear and unambiguous procedures for decision-making (Metzger et al.).

It is argued that partnership synergy was promoted by the characteristic of efficiency in the FFE partnership. As the partnership is represented by diverse sectors the FFE partnership benefited from a wide range of expertise. Partner involvement was further optimized by allowing individuals to contribute according to their interest and availability. Efficient partnerships are able to increase access to essential member resources, and embrace members' expertise, and thereby maximize the level of synergy. The primary asset of any partnership is its membership (Butterfoss et al., 1993; Wandersman et al., 2005). A highly diverse membership is likely to provide the partnership with access to a wide range of skills and knowledge, which it needs to achieve its maximum collaborative capacity (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001). Successful coalitions engage members by assigning them with roles and tasks that match their particular interests, strengths, capacities, and areas of expertise (Jewiss & Hasazi, 1999; Whitt, 2001; Winer & Ray, 1994). As noted by both Whitt and Winer and Ray, when members work on issues they are interested in, this enhances both their ownership and commitment.

Implications for Practice

The following draws from the study's major findings that suggest how partnership characteristics may contribute to the generation of synergy in large, multi-sectored partnerships in the formation stage. It is clear that leadership plays a decisive role in the success of such collaborative partnerships. Leaders need to vigorously promote the efforts of partners to join forces. Collaboration should be envisioned not simply as a choice, but as a necessity to achieve desired outcomes. Collaborative leaders need

to effectively nurture the creation of a new inter-sectoral space that spans the jurisdictional boundaries of individual partners. This is crucial to the development of a distinct partnership entity – it gives partners something tangible to believe in and preserve. The leadership's commitment to the collaborative process can increase the partnership's ability to sustain its momentum despite significant risks and during periods of instability when partnerships are particularly vulnerable to collapsing. In sum, the prerequisite of a collaborative-savvy leadership to achieve a successful outcome should not be underestimated.

In reference to the salience of administration and management, a project management approach can serve to organize and carry out the multitude of tasks and activities required to launch a successful collaborative partnership. Furthermore, coordinating communication among partners and the community at large about the work of the collaboration can help to maintain the visibility of the partnership. Administration and management activities are essential to carry out the operations of partnerships. Yet, the ability of partnerships to perform these tasks can be symbolic of the commitment to collaboration and can thus help to sustain both community and partner interest in the partnership's overall objectives. Significantly, the decision to hire full-time staff can also support the notion that the partnership's efforts and goals are valid and attainable.

Effective governance within collaborative partnerships can be promoted through charter development with the goal to establish formalized structures and procedures including the mechanisms to oversee the decision-making process. A partnership can benefit from a governance structure that is thoughtful in its bid to strategically match individuals with required knowledge, skills, and organizational roles to committees with varying responsibilities. The adoption of an egalitarian and democratically-based decision-making model can contribute to positive relationships among partners. Dialogue can lead to broad understanding about the differences in perspectives among partners. This learning can facilitate partners' abilities to achieve consensus on matters where divergent perspectives are apparent.

Lastly, efficiency can be increased through optimizing partner involvement. Partners should participate in meeting the objectives of the partnership according to their expertise, skills, and interests. Acknowledgement and appreciation of the individual abilities and unique qualities among partners can support the development of beneficial working relationships. Additionally, partners can come to respect the diversity of knowledge and expertise which, in turn, can lead to the integration of diverse points of view within the partnership.

Conclusion

The salience of collaboration has grown tremendously in the past 20 years, as a means of both community research and intervention (Trickett & Espino, 2004). To make the most of the potential of such partnerships requires capturing the way in which partnerships maximize their work (Blaxter, Farnell, & Watts, 2003). The aspect of partnerships and collaborations that is least understood by researchers is the process itself (James, 1999). In particular, this research contributes to the understanding of the process of large, multi-sectored collaborative partnerships in the formation stage of development by describing how, within this partnership, the characteristics of leadership, administration and management, governance, and efficiency influenced partnership synergy. It is suggested that the FFE partnership characteristics enhanced partnership synergy as they strongly affected the partnership's ability to bring together an optimal combination of diverse partners, promote an atmosphere conducive to positive working relationships, and successfully integrate diverse partners' points of view, skills and resources (Lasker et al., 2001). Further, the findings of this research provide a valuable starting point for analysis of partnership characteristics during the formation stage of a partnership, paying due attention to the application of Lasker et al.'s (2001) framework in understanding the factors that promote partnerships' ability to achieve high levels of synergy.

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