



Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review™

## **Partnering for High Impact - Part 2 of 2**

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[Part 1 of this article](#) discussed recent research findings which showed that partnering outside organizational boundaries led to increased impact for nonprofit organizations. In Part 2, we explore the skills necessary to promote, nurture, and sustain high-impact partnerships, and how nonprofit boards and executive directors can increase proficiency in these skills.

### **Skills for High-Impact Partnering**

What are the most important skills required to create successful partnerships? Building and sustaining successful partnerships is dependent on building and nurturing relationships. Okay, so what skills are necessary to build relationships that promote the greater good? Here are some that I've found to be most important in my work with partnerships. The ability to:

- See both the big picture and the smaller picture at the same time, both the forest and the trees,
- Focus on the strengths that people and organizations bring, and how the potential of new combinations of strengths can create a greater good that benefits all the partners,
- Listen to others, nurture and promote budding ideas and relationships, and set aside personal agendas to allow for the common agenda built on shared values to become clear,
- Be patient and allow for things to emerge, for people to think, and to generate meaningful conversations; and
- Allow people to figure out what to do rather than tell them what you think they should do.

## **Skill Acquisition**

How does one acquire new skills or increase proficiency in existing skills? There are two models which may be useful to nonprofit leaders. The model discussed in Robert Garmston's *The Presenter's Fieldbook* involves the following four stages.

Stage 1 - Unconscious Incompetence, I don't know that I don't know.

Stage 2 - Conscious Incompetence, I know that I don't know.

Stage 3 - Conscious Competence, I know that I know.

Stage 4 - Unconscious Competence, I know it so well that I don't have to think about it.

A second model is the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition. In this model there are the following five stages of skill acquisition: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert.

## **Sill Building is not "Fixing" Weaknesses**

How can these models help nonprofits think about developing new skills for high-impact partnering? The skills that promote partnering are skills that everyone can learn. I do not see these as weaknesses that must be fixed. There is very little payoff in trying to help people improve weaknesses. Deficit based approaches to creating positive change have had minimal success. The big payoff is in helping people use their strengths.

## **Acquiring Skills for High-Impact Partnering**

If we look at the skills that promote high-impact partnering as something that our sector collectively can acquire, the question then becomes how can we best do this? Collectively we are predominantly in stages 1 and 2, either we don't know we don't know how to partner effectively, or we do know but we don't know what to do. This is why the research that was discussed in Part 1 is so important. We now know what works to create impact for nonprofits, and we can look collectively at what some of the next steps may be to move toward conscious competency.

If we look at the Dreyfus model, what is clear is that there is a progression of skill acquisition, and we don't jump from beginner to advanced. Advancing takes time and practice. An investment in raising the proficiency of our sector seems well worth it when we look at the alternatives.

## **Seven Norms of Collaboration**

There are Seven Norms of collaboration described by the Center for Adaptive Schools, which require the skills necessary for high-impact partnering. Consciously using these norms can promote the acquisition of the skills that promote high-impact partnering. They are:

*Promoting a Spirit of Inquiry* .Building a culture of inquiry promotes the exploration of what people mean rather than making assumptions.

*Pausing* .Pausing is one of the most powerful practices. Pausing allows time for thinking and reflecting. Learning comes from reflecting, not from doing.

*Paraphrasing* .Starting with a paraphrase of what you heard another person say is one of the most helpful ways to clarify what is meant. When hearing a paraphrase people often realize that what they said isn't actually what they meant.

*Probing* .Asking for more details or for clarification is very effective at increasing understanding.

*Putting ideas on the Table* .One of the principals of successful brainstorming is that no criticism is allowed. This is because idea generation is richer when people focus exclusively on generating ideas.

*Paying Attention to Self and Others* .This is something that has a big payoff when working with groups. Watching how people are responding and reacting will allow for changes to be made in the conversation that will positively impact the group.

*Presuming Positive Intentions* . Often people get caught up in attributing negative intentions for a behavior they are noticing, without doing any checking. When people report others negative intentions, it can lead to misunderstandings which are not based in reality. Further investigation often reveals that there was a positive intention.

## **Using the Seven Norms to Build Skills for High-Impact Partnering**

Skilled facilitators often use these norms. If you want to start building your collaboration skill set, you can use the Seven Norms toolkit to assess how often you and your group are using them. This offers a way to look at what your meetings and conversations look like now, and identify opportunities for growth. Like any new skill, they can't be learned overnight. They are something you can aspire to in your organization and among your partnerships. How can they be helpful?

In addition to using these norms when partnering with other organizations, boards and executive directors can use them within their own communication as a way to increase proficiency, and model the behavior they would like to see from their staff.

## **Presuming Positive Intentions of Clients**

Paying attention to self and others and presuming positive intentions work well together. There are often efforts made to include parents and family members in the operation of programs that deliver services. Frequently, parents are asked to come to meetings that are predominantly attended by “professionals.” In these types of situations, the parents may find it difficult to attend because they work or take care of small children. If they do attend, they may not feel comfortable because they don’t understand what is being discussed because of the use of acronyms which aren’t explained and other jargon. If the staff who are inviting the parents, presume that the parents are interested in their children and want to participate then they will treat them differently than if they assume that the parents “don’t care.”

If they are paying attention to how their actions are perceived by the parents, staff can make modifications in the types of meetings that they invite parents to. They could form a group of all parents, teach them the acronyms, and make these meetings at a convenient time and location for parents. They might provide child care, transportation or other things that make it easier or more comfortable for parents.

### **Better Decision Making Leads to High Impact**

Putting ideas on the table in combination with the other norms allows for the best thinking of a group and incorporates many perspectives and experiences. If you’ve been in meetings where someone asks for ideas or input and then every idea is greeted with reasons why it won’t work or comments about how it was tried before and it didn’t work -- you know what happens. People stop making suggestions. Criticism inhibits creativity. Another common experience is for someone to ask for input and then ignore it all because decisions had already been made. Everyone who has experienced this knows that it is better not to ask for input if it won’t be used. When people pay attention to how they are speaking and how others are responding, participation and input can result in new ideas, better decision making, and higher impact. For more information on the Seven Norms go to [www.adaptiveschools.com](http://www.adaptiveschools.com).

#### **About the Contributor**



#### **Cassandra O’Neill, MA:**

Cassandra O’Neill, MA is a Co-Founder of Wholonomy Consulting LLC located at [www.wholonomyconsulting.com](http://www.wholonomyconsulting.com). Our mission is to assist organizations turn their good ideas into great results. We use a blend of approaches which include: Appreciative Inquiry, Cognitive Coaching SM, Open Space Technology, and Polarity Management TM.

Ms. O'Neill has over 20 years of experience with program development, implementation, and evaluation. She has worked as a consultant to non profit and for profit organizations, government agencies, and colleges and universities for the last six years. She has expertise in workforce development, health care, social services, and education. As a consultant, she has worked with over 70 organizations, and raised more than \$60 million in grant funding. Prior to consulting, she worked for a national social service agency, state government agencies in New Jersey and California, the National Governors' Association, and Rutgers University.

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