Miami's Third Sector Alliance for Community Well-being

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Abstract

The Problem: Traditional capacity-building approaches tend to be organizationally focused ignoring the fact that community-based organizations learn and take action in a larger network working to promote positive community change.

Purpose: The specific aim of this paper was to outline a vision for a Third Sector Alliance to build organizational, network, and sector capacity for community well-being in Miami.

Key Points: Building a foundation for social impact requires a strategy for organizational, network, and sector capacity building. Organizational, network, and sector capacity building can best be achieved through a cooperative network approach driven by a solid community–university partnership.

Conclusion: Although a Third Sector Alliance for Community Well-being does not yet exist in Miami, Catalyst Miami and the University of Miami (UM) have partnered closely to articulate a vision of what could be and have been working to make that vision a reality.

Keywords

Capacity building, organizational capacity, third sector, networks, collective impact, communities of practice.

tions (TSOs) to address ever-growing human and community needs with ever-decreasing resources. By "third sector," we are referring to those community-based organizations that operate exclusively for charitable, community-building, advocacy, or educational purposes and are neither traditional for-profit business (first sector) nor governmental agencies (second sector). TSOs are expected to remain steadfast in their missions and simultaneously, meet ever-higher standards of performance in a rapidly changing environment. However, there is often decreased local support for TSO staff and boards of directors to learn to adapt to these demands and to build effective organizations and strong partnerships to better contribute to community well-being.

Miami is fortunate to have a committed and resilient third sector; nonetheless, there has been little progress on some of our community's greatest challenges. One potential explanation is a lack of operational capacity in organizations. This is based in the belief that effective programs and services are more likely when organizations have adequate capabilities, efficient operations, and strong management systems. Another potential explanation is that organizations lack the capacity to engage in transformative practices that address the root causes of social problems. A third, equally important explanation is insufficient collaborative capacity that limits the ability of TSOs and their constituents to work together in ways that leverage a variety of assets. This partnership between Catalyst Miami (Catalyst), the Community and Educational Well-being Research Center (CEW) at the UM, and organizational consultant Catherine Raymond, co-created a third sector capacity-building strategy that attends to both organizational and sector capacity-building needs. We believe organizational, network, and sector capacity building can best be achieved through a community alliance driven by a solid community–university partnership. This approach matches the practical wisdom, energy, and aspirations of Catalyst and community partners, with the resources, frameworks, and research capacities of the UM.

The specific aim of this paper is to describe a vision for a Third Sector Alliance for Community Well-being in Miami (the Alliance). Note that this Alliance does not currently exist, but through a long-standing community-university partnership, we are building it little by little. First, we set the stage by describing the unique sociocultural context of Miami and briefly reviewing the capacity-building literature. We then outline our hopes for a cohesive Alliance that goes beyond traditional organizational capacity-building models to build third sector power for social change. We end by describing the current status and steps we are taking to achieve our vision and acknowledge the potential challenges to come.

MIAMI: ASSETS AND CHALLENGES

Miami is a gateway global city where civic culture has been shaped by continuous migration, economic booms and busts, epic storms, ineffective, and too often corrupt political leadership. Miami is also a place where diverse social groups, immigration, poverty, and inequality create an intense need for economic and social supports. These tremendous challenges cry out for visionary civic leadership, but recently Miami has become famous for its low civic engagement. The Census Bureau's Current Population Survey identified Miami as last, or close to last, on four key indicators among 50 major cities: Voting, volunteering, donating, and participation in community meetings.¹

TSOs are an important vehicle for channeling residents' community spirit and creating essential social capital. Although Miami-Dade hosts approximately 8,000 TSOs, too many are financially and structurally unstable, with much of their energy focused on survival, not on systemic community concerns nor seeking ways to collaborate for broader impact. Efforts to improve our community thus require efforts to improve our TSOs. And these efforts must not just focus on operational stability, but also create the means and the momentum to engage in addressing the larger societal concerns.

CATALYST AND UM-CEW: SOCIAL CHANGE PARTNERS

For more than 17 years, Catalyst, formerly Human Services Coalition of Dade County, Inc., has served as a hub for positive individual, organizational, and community change in South Florida and beyond. Catalyst has an annual budget of \$2.1 million and employs 30 full time staff. The mission—to support individuals, organizations, and communities in creating a more just, equitable, and caring society—is addressed by identifying and launching innovative and proven efforts that help communities to thrive. Catalyst promotes economic self-sufficiency and participation in civic and community life, inspiring people to get involved and preparing them to step up to leadership roles that lead to long-term community transformation. Catalyst plays an important role as a community facilitator, serving as the "backbone organization" for a range of civic initiatives. Catalyst has been the facilitator and lead organizer of a number of successful legislative advocacy efforts including passage of the county Living Wage ordinance, increased asset limits for public benefits eligibility statewide, improvements in the state child health insurance eligibility system, and sustained county government funding for TSOs.

The UM-CEW is housed in the School of Education and Human Development and has pioneered community-based research with local organizations using a conceptual framework that draws on an ecological understanding of individual, organizational, and community needs. 3,4 This framework posits that human service funding and the practice it supports is often too little (focused on individuals while ignoring social context), too late (reactive), deficit oriented, and disempowering. The work of the UM-Catalyst partnership is guided by this framework and affords an opportunity for testing approaches that are strengths-based, preventative, empowering, and focused on root causes.3 Starting in 2008, Catalyst and UM-CEW established a partnership to enhance Catalyst's own organizational capacity and to enhance Catalyst's role as hub and intermediary for other organizations' increased effectiveness. Working together, UM-CEW and Catalyst are committed to building greater collective capacity across organizations, communities, and sectors, and promoting collective action.

BRIEF REVIEW OF TRADITIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY-BUILDING APPROACHES

Although there is no shared definition of organizational

capacity building,⁵ it is fundamentally an organizational change process with the goal of strengthening the performance of TSOs so they can better "improve the quality of life for the people and communities served." Factors most consistently cited in the literature as important to organizational capacity building include leadership involvement, organizational culture, and organizational readiness. Organizational culture is composed of many intangible phenomena, such as values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, behavioral norms, artifacts, and patterns of behavior within an organization. Creating organizational readiness for change involves proactive attempts to influence the culture in organizations so that change can happen.

An additional factor often cited as critical to capacity building is the issue of dosage. For capacity to be built, a sufficient amount of an intervention provided over a period of time so that new practices can be learned and institutionalized. 12-14 Although stand-alone training sessions can be useful to increase staff knowledge, they are unlikely to build capacity unless they are coupled with additional efforts that increase the total dosage. In addition to enhancing learning and skill-building peerto-peer learning opportunities such as roundtables, case study groups, or learning circles change the quality, substance, and frequency of peer relationships 15 and reduce isolation, promote collaboration, and enhance collective problem solving. These intimate learning communities offer mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity. 16

An emerging view of organizational capacity building places it within a broad theoretical framework that links the goals of capacity building with creating, and sustaining, civically engaged individuals, organizations, and communities.¹⁷ Researchers and practitioners are moving to conceptualize capacity building in collective and holistic terms, recognizing the relationships among and between individual, group, organizational, and community development.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Establishing networks of TSOs learning and working together with individuals, communities, and organizations from all sectors strengthens the potential impact of the sector.^{2,18} Many funding agencies are recognizing that philanthropy needs to focus on developing learning systems to fully leverage their investments in social change.^{18,20}

A VISION FOR A THIRD SECTOR ALLIANCE IN MIAMI

The magnitude and complexity of many of the social issues

facing communities today means that TSOs cannot go it alone. Organizations need to collaborate and build sector capacity for community change. We propose a capacity-building approach that creates the type of connectivity that helps to foster an environment in which organizations act beyond their own borders; a precondition for more sweeping sector-level change. We believe in the power of network building, and that building social capital among organizations in the third sector—creating the conditions for innovative and collaborative activity—is a powerful approach to third sector capacity building and social change.

ORGANIZATIONAL, NETWORK, AND THIRD SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Miami's Alliance will provide an overarching structure for building organizational, network, and sector capacity. The Alliance has three goals: (1) Strengthen organizations to better achieve mission impact, (2) strengthen inter-organizational collaboration and networks to build collective capacity for impact, and (3) strengthen the sector as a whole to build power for community and civic change. This extension of traditional capacity building to collaborations and the sector as a whole focuses on what is really important: better outcomes for people and communities.

At the intra-organizational level, capacity building will target four broad interdependent domains: (1) Management and operations, (2) learning and adaptability, (3) collaborative capacity, and (4) transformative practice. We intentionally address this forth domain to build awareness that providing efficient services is necessary but insufficient in bringing about social change. Ameliorative, individual-level interventions can do little to address the greater social and economic forces that influence well-being²¹ and organizations need the critical capacity to engage in transformative efforts in partnership with others. Researchers from the CEW at UM have been working with community organization partners on these transformative practice concepts and strategies for several years and this learning will inform Alliance capacity-building approaches.^{3,22}

At the inter-organizational level, capacity building is about the creation and maintenance of spaces that provide the opportunity for a variety of community actors to coordinate resources and action. Given the complexity of social and environmental problems and the unrelenting pressure to reduce

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the cost of solutions, networks offer a way to develop and share knowledge and weave together capacities for greater impact.²³⁻²⁵

Last, the Alliance seeks to build sector capacity. Today's social and environmental problems increasingly cross issue and geographic boundaries, and making systemic progress will require us to connect, coordinate, and focus our efforts across organizations and networks. Although strong organizations working in collaboration are essential to addressing these issues, cities like Miami will benefit greatly from an organized third sector apparatus providing services, support, and representation for the sector as a whole.

CORE ALLIANCE ACTIVITIES

Workshops

A monthly capacity-building workshop series provides the foundation for the Alliance and offers opportunities for members to learn and apply general skills and strategies while providing a valuable networking space. Workshops highlight organizational topics suggested by members and feature an array of facilitators who are key leaders. The workshops will also emphasize building new relationships to facilitate collaboration.

Communities of Practice

"Communities of practice (CoP) are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." These are small, focused discussion, learning, and action groups that harness the wisdom and experience of professional peers and outside consultants as needed. CoP are geared toward defining realworld challenges and finding incremental action steps that address issues raised by members. CoP meet for a minimum of five 90-minute meetings over the course of several months

Online Community

To further increase learning and bolster the Alliance as a network, a web-based, social network, and resource platform will allow participants to connect, collaborate, share resources, post video-taped workshops, and seek ongoing support by peers and experts. An important component of this virtual community will be "group spaces" to support the ongoing work of the CoP.

THE ALLIANCE STRUCTURE

Community—University Partnership

We believe that providing comprehensive capacity-building services such as these can best be achieved through a cooperative network approach driven by a solid community-university partnership. Catalyst will serve as the lead community-based agency and will provide overall coordination of Alliance activities and facilitation for the CoP. The CEW at UM will host monthly capacity-building workshops, manage the online community, and drive the ongoing research and evaluation for the Alliance. The CEW will work together with Catalyst to establish the Alliance and drive the start-up phase. This lead team will serve as the leadership for the Alliance and develop the vision, values, and goals for the Alliance and solidify structures and strategies that advance the goals of the Alliance.

Alliance Community Board

Key to the design of the Alliance is the creation of a culture of community engagement and corresponding structure that supports a greater inclusion of constituent voice, choice, control and influence in decision making. The Alliance Community Board will be the enabling structure for meaningful constituent engagement. The Alliance Community Board will be made up of community members nominated by member organizations as well as representatives from organizations that are exemplars of constituent engagement. Catalyst is currently implementing an organizational "design team" made up of community members that will play a key role in guiding their civic engagement programming. We will utilize the expertise of Catalyst and others that have demonstrated capacity for meaningful constituent engagement.

Membership

Although the resources of the Alliance will be open to all, to ensure the sustainability of the effort as well as collective responsibility, organizations and individuals will become "members" of the Alliance and pay annual dues based on a sliding scale. Members will receive benefits such as reduced cost and priority access to conferences, workshops, and trainings, as well as discounts on consulting and capacity-building services. Coordinated peer networks will be built to tap into

the existing assets in the community and allow for learning and "crowd sourcing" of relevant knowledge, solutions, best practices, and organizing.

Sub-sector Networks

The Alliance will support the development of sub-sector networks formed around specific "fields of service" and/or public concerns. This will allow for a more targeted approach and set the stage for effective and coordinated action. For example, Catalyst and the CEW are currently working with a collection of anti-poverty organizations in the Miami Thrives Network. Network "weavers" will be recruited and tasked to map and understand the structure and needs of the sub-sector, improve knowledge sharing, catalyze and facilitate relationship development, and bring organizations together to work toward common goals.

Consultant Pool

We will create a consultant pool by inviting consultants who meet certain criteria. These consultants will agree to provide a number of workshops and trainings annually on behalf of the Alliance and will also provide a la carte services to Alliance members or other TSOs.

HOW WILL WE MEASURE SUCCESS?

With all the emphasis on learning and capacity building, we need a strong culture and practice of evaluation. Alliance activities will be evaluated on several dimensions related to the impact of capacity-building activities and the general health of the Alliance as a network. In assessing the impact of Alliance capacity building, the core emphasis will be on assessing five levels of change: (1) Improving knowledge and skills or changing attitudes, (2) application of what was learned from the activities in the practice context, (3) tangible organizational benefits and changes, (4) tangible community benefits and changes, and (5) new inter-organizational relationships and initiatives that form as a result of participation in Alliance activities. These last two levels are important to capture, albeit harder to measure. These are the levels for which action research and developmental evaluation are key strategies.

EXPECTED CHALLENGES

Embarking on an initiative of this scale is not without its

challenges. Although there are surely a host of hurdles ahead, we focus on three interdependent challenges here: Governance and coordination, sustainability, and constituent engagement. The challenge of governance and coordination relate to overall strategy and alignment of activities. Putting in place the right mix of roles, structures, and systems is critical for success. However, there is a risk that too much structure and control restricts participation, shared accountability, innovation, and adaptability. Too little structure risks disjointed efforts, poor communication, confusion, and limited impact. This is a tension that must be attended to. Related to this challenge is the important consideration of sustainability. The quality and relevance of Alliance activities will determine the ongoing value to members. Although we are hoping for start-up support from local funding partners, this is not a long-term solution to resource sustainability. We will be developing a blended financial model that includes paid memberships, grants, and individual and corporate support. The issue of constituent engagement is both a challenge and a possible antidote to the first two challenges. Effectively engaging all forms of membership will resist institutionalization of the effort and contribute to sustainability. Adherence to the principles and practices of constituent engagement and participatory democracy require enabling structures, good planning, and patience. Redistribution of power through constituent engagement helps make the Alliance both more resilient and more responsive to the community.²⁶

TRANSFERABILITY

One might wonder how transferable the Alliance model is to other communities. We feel there are certain benefits to structuring this effort as a community–university partnership. Partnering with universities can bring faculty, student, and material resources, space, conceptual frameworks, applied research and evaluation, and a link to current research, to name a few benefits. Many communities can partner with local colleges and universities to customize these principles, structures, and activities to meet their specific context and needs.

In those cases where there may not be a readily available university partner, some additional ingenuity might be needed. Communities can look to existing and emerging technologies to help them connect with university-based partners in other cities. For example, the Florida Keys Children's

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Shelter is located in a remote area in the Florida Keys without any nearby campus partner. The Florida Keys Children's Shelter reached out to the faculty at UM to explore ways to use video-conferencing to partner on everything from skill-building webinars and organizational consultation to case consultation and tele-mental health counseling. The Florida Keys Children's Shelter was recently awarded a grant by a local funder to purchase the necessary equipment and software to facilitate this remote partnership. Utilizing communication technologies, communities can partially overcome the geographical limitations that may create barriers to partnering with academic institutions.

CURRENT REALITY: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The core ideas for the creation of a Third Sector Alliance in Miami were outlined in a concept paper distributed to key community stakeholders in May 2011 by the authors of this paper. At the time, local organizational capacity-building resources were disappearing, leaving significantly less local support for TSO staff and boards of directors. Unfortunately, the Alliance concept did not initially resonate with the agencies that have the resources to fund the startup of such an initiative.

Nonetheless, three things happened over the past year have helped us to move closer to the Alliance vision. First, Catalyst took the lead on developing a Nonprofit Leadership Training Institute that brought local TSO personnel together around a series of organizational capacity-building workshops developed based upon findings from a local survey of capacity-building needs. The idea was to start doing something to help fill the critical capacity-building need in Miami with the assistance of local consultants, practitioners, and academics. This effort sowed the seeds for a nascent network upon which a broader initiative could be built. Second, we began having new conversations with key stakeholders and funders to move the issue forward. The CEW and Catalyst hosted several meetings with funders and colleagues from the Business School at UM

and began building momentum for some collective investment in the Alliance's development. Finally, as a first step toward a larger rollout, Catalyst and UM CEW, in partnership with the UM Business School, launched the Leonard Turkel Nonprofit Network workshop series in spring 2013 focusing on "Nonprofit 101" organizational capacity topics, such as "What Makes a High Performing Nonprofit?", "Fundraising in Today's Economy," and "Social Media Strategies." Workshop evaluations conducted during this fall series show that participants are learning, applying their learning, and seeing value in the opportunities to network with others. They are also providing useful feedback on how to make the workshops better as well as input on what they would like to see in the future. One aim of the series and accompanying website is to support building a cohesive network of TSOs that can blossom into the Alliance when the startup funding comes. We plan to continue the workshop series and begin piloting a small number of CoP in the fall of 2013. Although this phasing in of components was initially necessary owing to lack of funding, we are learning that this approach is effective in building the appetite and readiness for a more comprehensive strategy.

CONCLUSION

The outline of a Third Sector Alliance presented here is a vision not constrained by previous capacity-building models or what might be acceptable to local funders. It is a vision built on theory, practical wisdom, and a strong belief in the power of networks to drive social change. It is also a vision grounded in a community-university partnership dedicated to working together to address some of our community's biggest challenges. Formidable barriers stand in the way to be sure. Creating and maintaining an Alliance such as this will take leadership, persistence, and adequate resources. But little by little, we are making progress. We are putting the pieces together, weaving the network, and working to make the vision a reality.

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