

How Does Partnering Work?

Drafted and compiled by Brian F. O'Connell, REACT Services

Though all partnering efforts and collaborative initiatives are different, there seems to be at least three identifiable stages in the development of each. Like the butterfly's metamorphosis, we call these: Identify, Solidify and Let it Fly! Though activities and principles overlap in the different stages of the process, there are specifics of each to keep in mind, especially for multi-ministry efforts. By "chunking" the activities, the partnering process can be more manageable and achievements more easily measured.

Stage One Activities: Identify – *A caterpillar beginning to explore; building the foundation of the effort.*

- The exploration stage will likely take longer than you think! If at all possible, the process should not ever be forced on to a fast track.
- **Key objective of this stage: Relationship building – LISTEN!!.**
- Research and identify the key players for the partnering effort.
- Cast vision about the outcomes of the collaboration perhaps by showing the success of others that are doing similar work.
- Identify any key potential challenges that may need to be specifically addressed sooner rather than later.
- Identify a possible facilitator or, if you can be the facilitator, locate additional members of a group that can advise you – sometimes called a facilitation team.
- Aim at bringing together face to face these key players that will form the core of the organizing or facilitation team.
- While trying to be as inclusive as possible, keep expectations realistic as to the number of churches and/or ministries who might be involved at the beginning.

Key Best Practices and Principles of the Identify Stage:

- **Effective partnering takes time to develop.** Do not try and short cut the process.
- Effective partnering emphasizes what they can do together before putting structure together. The architectural principle of "*form follows function*" needs to be followed.
- Effective partnering has a facilitator and/or a facilitation team. Collaborative initiatives do not just happen; they take a person and/or a team of people committed to serve the wider group.
- Effective partnering efforts have clear purposes and outcomes; partnership for partnership sake spells failure.
- **Effective partnering is built on relationships of trust, openness and mutual concern.** Collaboration is more than just joint coordination and planning.

Stage Two Activities: Solidify --*The cocoon of the process of launching the effort*

- Continue to emphasize and work on relationships.
- Allow for significant prayer time with each other and ask specifically for God's wisdom and direction.
- **Key objective of this stage: convene an "exploration" meeting,** where opportunities to partner can be discussed. However, don't call a meeting too soon.
- Continue to be inclusive as possible – try and allow for wide participation. Do not be afraid of differences; instead acknowledge and celebrate the diversity while emphasizing what you have in common.

- Work on role identification and team building among the core group of organizers, but realize that sometimes core decisions need to be made and affirmed by the wider group.
- Allow partners as much access as possible to the decision-making process through consensus building.
- Establish key working groups around agreed upon priorities and identify specific steps to address them (action plans).
- If at all possible, set dates, draft timetables and assign personal responsibility.
- The facilitator and/or facilitation team plays a crucial role at this stage keeping things held together and communicating among the partners.

Key Best Practices and Principles of the Solidify Stage

- Effective partnering seeks God’s direction in all they do. Never underestimate the power of prayer.
- Effective partner have well-defined objectives. In the beginning these need to be limited and achievable. **Do not try to do too much too soon.**
- **Effective partnering focuses on what the partners have in common rather than on what makes them different.**
- Effective partnering maintains a high level of participation and ownership by the partners.
- Effective partners have clear identities and visions. Partners who have a strong sense of their own identity are the ones who most likely will be the most valuable players.

Stage Three Activities: *Let it Fly* – The butterfly of managing the work of partnering

- Communication is the lifeblood of partnering – keep it flowing.
- An on-going leadership or facilitation team should be appointed to provide training opportunities, mentoring of new working group facilitators, and the cultivation of new participating partners. This may be a different group of people than the group that explored and launched the effort.
- Keep the vision and goals up front and before all.
- **Key objective of this stage: always evaluate what you are doing and look for ways to make things even better.** Establish an on-going process to evaluate the success and lessons learned from your activities.
- Be flexible in order to adjust and adapt as needed.
- Identify key resources and potential new partners so that on-going work maintains momentum. Set up orientation for new partners.

Key Best Practices and Principles of the Let it Fly Stage

- Effective partners recognize that partnership development is an **on-going process, not an event**. It is often more challenging to maintain partnering initiatives than to launch them.
- Effective partnering keeps looking at the ultimate vision. It is easy to focus on the “means” rather than the “end”. Focus on the long-term vision and do not get overly distracted by the day-to-day operational demands.
- Effective partnering imparts the vision and skills for partnership development to all the partners continuously. Expect problems and develop a process for managing them.
- Effective partnering does not come free. Just participating costs time and money so all partners are investing in some way. Deeper commitment involves even greater investment, but the benefits outweigh these costs.
- **Effective partners have a designated “advocate” for partnering in their own organization.**