

# Philanthropies Working Together

## Myths and Realities

Robert Hughes

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# Discussion Guide

## Introduction

This discussion guide is designed to help you think through the concepts presented in Robert Hughes's monograph, *Philanthropies Working Together*, and consider how you might apply them in the everyday practice of philanthropy. The guide contains a checklist designed to help funders assess whether the conditions are in place for successful collaboration, as well as four case scenarios illustrating common dynamics in multi-funder initiatives.

## Conditions for Effective Relationships Among Foundations

In his research, Hughes found that the effectiveness of collaborations and partnerships depends on the presence of several key conditions. Without these elements, a collaborative initiative can lead to frustration, wasted resources, and a burden for all involved. The following questions allow funders to rate the strength of important characteristics in order to determine whether a given collaboration or partnership is likely to work.

High	Low	Are the conditions right for effective <i>collaboration</i> between your foundation and another funder?
←	→	1. How strong are the personal relationships among staff from the participating foundations?
←	→	2. How open are the institutions to outside ideas?
←	→	3. How much do their organizational interests coincide?
←	→	4. How much do the participating organizations respect each other?
←	→	5. How well do the funders understand one another's constraints?

- High      Low
- Are the conditions right for effective *collaboration* between your foundation and another funder?
- ←————→
6. How much organizational support is there for staff to engage in collaborative activities?
- ←————→
7. How stable is the staff at the participating foundations? Are the key players in the collaboration likely to remain in place?

- High      Low
- Are the conditions right for effective *partnership* with another foundation?
- ←————→
1. How clear are the partners about their goals? To what extent do goals coincide?
- ←————→
2. How honest are the participants about their interests and decisionmaking authority?
- ←————→
3. How willing are the participating institutions to negotiate and accommodate each other?
- ←————→
4. How likely are they to devote sufficient senior staff time to working out logistics?
- ←————→
5. How willing are the partners to commit sufficient resources to the initiative?
- ←————→
6. How likely is it the organizations will persist throughout implementation?

## Case Scenarios

Hughes points out that joint working relationships usually require foundations to make exceptions in their usual way of doing things. The four exercises that follow explore the flexibility and tensions inherent in collaborative ventures. The situation created in Scenario A will serve as the basis for all four exercises.

### Scenario A: History of the Future

CFAR (the Center for Applied Research in Philadelphia) has created the history of the future technique to help people explore possible paths for new initiatives. The exercise works best in a group, but can also be done by individuals. Participants project themselves into the future, and imagine that they have launched a successful collaborative initiative. They then reflect on the factors that made the collaboration so effective.

First, participants are assigned to one of two groups. One group will be the panel that tells the story of the success from some point in the future. The second group, which can be an individual or a few people, has the role of pulling the story out of the panel, asking questions that probe what

worked. Before starting, the first group is given time to think about the story they want to tell, while the second group thinks about the questions they want to ask.

The discussion should cover the following elements as well as others the group wishes to add:

- **Choice of a collaboration strategy.** (Sample question: Why was a collaboration the best tool to promote your aims?)
- **Goals.** (What were the specific objectives of the collaboration? What did the press release say about the project?)
- **Composition.** (How did you select the participants? Were the members limited to private foundations or were government and business involved as well? What competencies did the members bring? What level of foundation staff were involved in the collaboration?)
- **Structure.** (What form of collaboration was used? Did the funders play similar roles, complementary roles, or was the collaboration managed by an outside organization? Did the collaborative involve information exchange, pooled funding, joint venture, or other forms of participation? What time and financial commitment were expected of each participant? Were the expectations the same for all, or were there varying levels of commitment?)
- **Governance.** (Who led the initiative? How were decisions made? How did information flow? How were differences resolved?)
- **Managing tensions.** (How did the collaborative handle tensions related to: sharing credit for the initiative; funders' different decisionmaking processes, timetables, and reporting requirements; variations in program officers' decisionmaking authority—some had broad discretion, while others were required to get board approval for decisions—and different styles in working with grantees.)
- What made the collaboration so successful?
- How can you translate the story to planning for a collaborative initiative?

### Scenario B: Reporting to the Board

Imagine that time has passed and your foundation has been participating in the initiative described in Scenario A for a year. The board is impatient for results and you have to give a report. One board member will ask you, “How can we attribute the results to our investment?” What will you say? Is attribution really important or feasible?

### Scenario C: Evaluation

Now, imagine that the collaborative is about to select an evaluator but the participating funders disagree about the focus of the evaluation. Some funders want to concentrate on the process of change, whereas others are interested in outcomes. How would you develop a shared agenda for evaluation in this group?

- What would be the starting point for a discussion about the differences among funders?
- How do their theories of change conflict?
- What role should grantees have in this conversation?
- What short- and middle-term indicators should be considered? What should be the long-term indicators?
- Do competing theories of change facilitate or hamper the initiative?

### Scenario D: Leaving a Collaboration

Imagine that your foundation has been part of the collaborative for several years. The initiative has been successful—it has been well-managed, produced good results, and the participating funders’ financial commitment has been stable. Now, your foundation is changing direction, and investment in the collaborative is no longer consistent with your institution’s goals. How would you handle the situation?

- What would you do within your foundation? What arguments would you make for staying in the collaborative or withdrawing from it?
- What would you tell your partners?
- If your foundation decides to leave the collaborative, what is your exit strategy? How would you leave gracefully?
- How would you address the financial gap created by your foundation’s departure?