

Lessons Learned:

A wild, screaming collaboration – ‘We had no idea ...’

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In retrospect, we probably appear naïve as we assess the surprising results of what started out to be just a friendly Hawaii-style hui to protect our three nonprofits from the economic storm clouds looming on the horizon. We had no idea the incredible power of collaboration would transform our organizations ... we simply had no idea.

In late 2007 on Kauai, the executive directors of Malama Pono Kauai AIDS Project, YWCA of Kauai and Kauai Hospice had a chance encounter and realized we all had a very personal, shared interest in the problem of HIV/AIDS. We started a lunch club to provide peer support and creative thinking, hoping to reduce redundancies and possibly discover funding opportunities along the way. As our lunches (and sometimes breakfasts) progressed, their focus quickly evolved into this question: How could we position our organizations to withstand the accelerating economic downturn?

A local reporter heard about our hui and wrote a story with photo in a magazine distributed to every household on Kauai. The trustees of the Annie Sinclair Knudsen Fund of the Hawaii Community Foundation called us to meet to discuss our young collaboration. They asked how they might support us and what did we see that support looking like.



It took only a moment to describe the common problems holding us back from implementing our organizations' missions: community stigma and fear. We deal with domestic violence, sexual assault, racism, life-limiting illnesses, grief, loss, death and diseases spread by blood or sexual contact. It's difficult for community members to talk about these problems much less confront them personally. The trustees

invited the hui to submit a collaborative grant request to address those problems.

Within a day, we EDs designed a public relations project entitled "**Let's Talk About It**" based on our belief that, if Kauai people hear about these social problems often enough, they'll loosen up enough to talk about them with their families. The methodology was simple: Saturate Kauai radio and television with PSAs in a way the community had never seen or heard before. The Hawaii Community Foundation decided to fund the project because we were able to

demonstrate leveraging their investment through collective in-kind requests to the radio and cable television companies. Again . . . we had no idea.

What we thought would be a fun and easy project to reduce stigma turned out to have remarkable implications. The reason for our surprise was a trick written into the grant. It required each organization to create the other's PSA.



To accomplish that, each staff had to understand the needs, desires and directions of the other organization. The unexpected result was an explosion of creativity by staff and outside resources. Their enthusiasm attracted talented community members to assist. We were having fun.

For example, a local high school theatrical group created boundary-pushing radio and television PSAs in pidgin. Staff members began to interact with their counterparts. Commonalities and questions emerged: "How can we make these things happen and how can we do it together?" Both the YWCA and Malama Pono staffs knew that, other than HIV services, Kauai has little sexually transmitted disease prevention services. They wondered what a prevention clinic to meet bilateral needs would look like.

Malama Pono had received capacity-building support for several years from the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center. We directed NNAAPC's attention to YWCA's HIV prevention program for young native Hawaiian girls. "We have similar missions. Please support a mechanism by which YWCA and Malama Pono can come together to create a prevention clinic to cover HIV and STDs," we said.

Support was granted for the two boards of directors to meet socially to assess a working partnership at the board level. Nothing like that had ever happened before on the island. From that informal gathering, a decision was made to meet formally, guided by a Native Hawaiian facilitator. NNAAPC officials would sanction the endeavor and fly from Denver to Kauai to see the interaction and gauge its potential as a model.

Using a Native Hawaiian cultural framework, the two boards were given the joint task to set up rules of engagement, expectations and individual responsibilities. Thereafter, they broke into groups – governed by the rule of righteous, respectful, pono interaction – and asked to return with a vision. Each group responded with the same vision. Agreement was universal. The boards gave the vision to the EDs and directed them to make it happen. Again . . . we had no idea.

As our three organizations continued our project, we realized the biggest benefit of collaboration: All the intellectual resources, knowledge, abilities and vision of the EDs, staffs and boards of directors became available one to the other. Said one ED, "Where before I was alone running a small nonprofit with just a few employees, now I have someone to talk to at my own level in an absolutely safe, non-judgmental environment without expense."

While much of the talk was practical, the new arrangement seemed to give the EDs permission to overcome barriers. Simple solutions that were previously never thought of or could never be thought of before began to emerge.

One example is ED succession planning. All three boards faced the possibility that their ED could be suddenly incapacitated. Finding a replacement in an emergency places great stress on a board. A suggested solution was to have a formal, structured agreement allowing the two remaining EDs to provide organizational oversight, especially for complex matters such as governmental contracts. They would also provide staff support while the affected board performed a proper ED search and implemented its own internal succession plan.

It's obvious to everyone involved that the accomplishments of our collaboration just scratch the surface. For our three nonprofits, even though we don't share the same mission, we have a lot in common. We can create the future we want for our communities. And we are astounded by the rewards derived by mutually addressing that commonality.



We know we're in uncharted territory. It's as if collaboration is a rocket ship propelling our organizations and community to a higher level where we've never stood before.

None of what has been accomplished cost anything. All of it had been hidden from us. We were looking only to ourselves and thinking only in terms of stand-alone institutions. Our wild, screaming collaboration has brought us security, excitement, self-awareness, support, resources, creativity, community notice and a wonderful sense of relief. It has lifted burdens at the staff, management and board levels. Collaboration means we're still ourselves, but we feel three times as big.

And, you know what? We simply had no idea.