

The Power of Collaboration

We all know that collaboration is a powerful tool. We know that synergies make the partner organizations capable of accomplishing more than the sum of our individual efforts.

There are several definitions of the word “collaboration.” But the one I like the best is:

the process where two or more people or organizations work together to realize shared goals. This can be as simple as the intersection of common goals seen in co-operative ventures, all the way to a deep, collective, determination to reach an identical objective.

Most of you probably already realize the power of collaboration, but may be left wondering how to go about searching for partnerships, instead of waiting to stumble into one. There are a number of ways to approach this but here are some ideas to get started.

Look for low hanging fruit. A quick look around will usually find groups within your own organization that have similar goals. But it’s up to you to start the discussion; divide tasks to avoid duplication of effort; initiate the sharing of contacts and relationships; agree to respect boundaries where goals diverge; be the first one to put an idea on the table. Taking small first steps like this to build trust in a relationship can lead to long lasting partnerships.

Explore organizations with overlapping missions or similar constituents. When you look to the outside world try to identify organizations that have similar goals or serve similar populations. For example, the City of Santa Clarita’s WorkSource Center serves the unemployed and underemployed with a goal of placing people in jobs. Meanwhile, the College of the Canyons Fast Track Institute has a mission to train people for jobs in industries that have openings.

Working together, the WorkSource Center recruits and screens candidates for such programs, while the Fast Track Institute provides the training to the student. The college’s Career Center also plays a role in this initiative, by helping to organize special job fairs and other unique placement opportunities.

However, the employers are the final, and arguably the most important, component of this collaboration. In addition to hiring Fast Track graduates they assist by helping to design industry applicable curriculum and work with instructors to ensure the types of job skills they’re looking for are being delivered in the classroom.

Expand your options. Management consultant Dr. Tom Steiner suggests including one out-of-the-box “wild idea” whenever you’re brainstorming. It’s not the particular idea that has the impact, more importantly the expansion of your range of options is where the true benefit occurs. Brainstorm about organizations and projects that you might have a similar connection with, but don’t be afraid to look for hidden synergies.

Perhaps someone who might be a competitor in one arena may be a partner in another. This is the very essence of trade associations. The aerospace industry has traditionally been fiercely competitive. But recently our local aerospace coalition worked collaboratively in supporting the college’s Center for

Applied Competitive Technologies (CACT) grant application to train manufacturing employees — realizing that an increased pool of qualified workers is in the best interest of all.

Other things to keep in mind. Make sure there is a champion in your organization. Someone has to be the driver behind the collaboration, and in some cases that will have to be you. Be sure to publicize your successes. It's rewarding to the members of the collaboration to have their efforts acknowledged and it may stimulate other organizations to seek out partnerships with you. Nothing attracts success like success.

Finally always be on the lookout for opportunities to partner. If the question "how can we partner?" becomes a common theme in your meetings and project discussions, you'll find opportunities for collaboration a lot more often.

A mission of the California's community colleges is to "advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to continuous workforce improvement." The College of the Canyons Economic Development Division stands ready to collaborate with you.

Pete Bellas is the COC Dean of Economic Development and the Fast Track Project Director. His column reflects his own views and not necessarily those of The Signal. For more information about the College of the Canyons Economic Development Division, call (661) 362-3521 or visit www.canyonsecondev.org. For more information about the Fast Track Institute, visit www.canyons.edu/fasttrack or email fasttrack@canyons.edu.