

CALEDON



INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL POLICY

Building Community through Partnership

Speaking Notes for

**‘Building a Winning Community:
Visions and Challenges for the
New City of Hamilton’**

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In preparation for this talk, there were a number of questions we were encouraged to consider:

- How do we define partnerships?
- How do partnerships contribute to building a stronger community?
- Why are partnerships particularly important at this moment in time?

To take the last question first, I think it is possible to see the rise of partnerships as a focus of attention in at least two different lights. On the one hand, we may see it in the somewhat dim light of government downsizing and the downloading of responsibilities. In this view, we may see the current talk of partnership principally as an effort to shift responsibility for a wide range of issues from higher levels of government to lower, and from government in general to individuals and communities.

On the other hand, there is a more optimistic view about the origins of the current interest in partnerships. The efforts to foster partnerships may spring from a desire among citizens for greater participation in shaping their own affairs (citizen engagement) and for a desire to be more connected to others in their communities (social capital).

What I would say is that there are elements of truth in both these perspectives. As a result, the interest in partnerships offers us both pitfalls and opportunities. To be explicit, the Caledon Institute does not support the promotion of partnerships as a means to allow government to divest itself of its responsibilities. Rather, we regard the formation of partnerships as a complement or supplement to an active and engaged public sector. Essentially, there are no simple solutions for complex social challenges such as poverty reduction, affordable housing and environmental protection to name only a few. And there are no panaceas. Different segments of society have different contributions to make to address these issues. The real opportunity in the work on partnerships is to find new and effective ways for each of us whether from the business, nonprofit, education or government sectors to make our distinctive contributions. In the big picture, then, the attention being given to partnerships might legitimately be seen as part of the process of rethinking and reworking how we govern ourselves, not in the narrow sense of how the formal institutions of government function but in the broader sense of how we all participate in governance.

One term that I've mentioned that deserves a little more attention as we enter the day is 'social capital.' Many of you will recognize it as one of the other phrases that has crept into our vocabulary along with 'partnership,' 'capacity-building' and 'sustainable communities.' Basically, social capital refers to "the relationships, networks and norms that facilitate collective action." It is an important term, I think, because it helps to operationalize something that we know is crucial for well-functioning communities but which often has a fairly intangible quality to it; namely,

relationships. Unfortunately, as scholars have pointed out, our society tends to think and act more in terms of separate individuals or individual organizations than in terms of the relationships that connect us to one another. The interest in partnerships is rectifying this shortcoming by helping people find effective ways to work together for the common good. Studies on social capital reveal that people living in communities that are rich in social capital tend to benefit in a variety of ways. There are benefits for instance in terms of mental and physical health, early childhood development, educational performance and reduction in crime rates. There are even specific benefits in terms of economic vitality. As Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter argued in her book *World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy*, local economies need both magnets and glue in order to succeed: magnets to attract a flow of external resources and glue to hold these various resources together –not just physical infrastructure such as public transit, however, but also the social infrastructure which enables communities to solve problems and act on opportunities.

By ‘partnerships,’ we are not talking about any and all manner of cooperative relationships. We are talking about relationships involving a substantial degree of formality, commitment and coordinated use of resources. In Caledon’s Social Partnerships Project, we defined partnership as “a voluntary collaboration among two or more organizations to achieve clearly identified goals.” We added that certain key elements also ought to be present if we are really talking about a partnership as opposed, say, to a relationship confined to an exchange of information and ideas, on the one hand, or a purchase of service arrangement on the other. The key elements include:

- Shared authority and responsibility.
- Joint investment of resources (e.g., time, work, funding, material, expertise, information).
- Shared liability or risk-taking and accountability.
- Mutual benefits, i.e., ‘win-win’ situations.

Multisectoral, multistakeholder collaborations constitute a special type of partnership. An example of this sort of complex partnership is the Opportunities 2000 project taking place in Waterloo Region which brought together more than 40 community partners, including nonprofit organizations, all four levels of government, the business community and people living on low incomes in an effort to reduce poverty in their community. Such broad-reaching partnerships tend to be created to address specific issues that no one agency, nor even one sector can effectively address on its own. Affordable housing and environmental health are two other examples of the type of issues involving a wide range of interdependent factors where more than one sector is required to achieve the desired outcomes. Given the scale and diversity of these partnerships, their development poses special challenges and requires structures and processes beyond those involved in more limited partnership initiatives.

There are numerous specific advantages to the development of partnerships. I have listed four general types.

First, there are *efficiencies* to be gained. They may be gained for example by sharing the costs of mutually required infrastructure. Sharing physical space as in co-location of services is one instance of this but there are others. In OP2000, the sponsor organization provided research and technical assistance to its network of partners, services that many of those organizations needed but would not have been able to finance on their own. Efficiencies can also be gained through collaborative planning which allows organizations to avoid duplicating services and to direct resources to areas where there are gaps in the system. There are still other ways that partnering can lead to increased efficiency such as the expanded appreciation of the resources that different partners might contribute. Partners traditionally regarded as sources of funds have other contributions to make as well, including expertise, staff time, building space, networks of contacts and influence.

Partnerships can improve *effectiveness* in at least two respects. First, by bringing together partners with different perspectives and expertise, more integrated services can be provided. In the same vein, the diverse vantage points that stakeholders have on the issue allows for a more complete picture of that issue to be drawn and a more adequate response to be created. For certain issues, individuals need a variety of supports to enable them to address problems they face. Where partnerships among the various agencies in that field are limited, the likelihood that people will fall through the cracks is greatly enhanced. Any effort made by one agency then is diminished because there are effectively no stepping stones for the individual to follow to move further down the road.

Creative outcomes are achieved when organizations that usually don't interact come into contact. A very simple example is the connection made between a Royal Bank vice president and the executive director of a food bank in Waterloo Region. They were introduced to each other when OP2000 was wooing the Royal Bank for funding support and staff participation. The banker asked the director what one thing the food bank most needed. She said a bigger building. As it turned out, the bank had recently moved out of an office building and with a few phone calls the vice president was able to arrange for the food bank to take it over. The food bank is soon to move into the larger quarters enabling it to expand its programs in altogether new directions, including more programs to help people meet their income and employment goals so that they overcome their need for emergency food services.

Voice is achieved by bringing a larger number of organizations together around a specific cause and making it a dynamic area of concerted action. Opportunities 2000 has been successful in engaging decisionmakers largely because it has created a critical mass of activity around the issue of poverty reduction. The result has been substantial allocation of resources from other institutions in the community including regional government which has seconded two full-time staff to the project and two major corporations who have also seconded staff. That same critical mass could be generated on any number of other issues.

Finally, I'd like to quickly share with you some of what the research says makes for effective collaborations. The Wilder Foundation in the US undertook a literature review to identify the factors influencing successful collaboration. They identified 19 factors under six headings. I've listed 13 that I'd like to bring to your attention since they might be helpful in discussions later in the day. In the interests of time, I'm not going to comment on each point at length:

1. Environment

- History of collaboration or cooperation in the community.
- Supportive community and public policy context.

2. Membership

- Mutual respect, understanding and trust.
- Appropriate cross-section of members.

3. Process/Structure

- Participants perceive that benefits of collaboration outweigh the costs.
- Members have a sense of ownership over both process and outcome.
- Partnership approach is diffused throughout the participating organizations, not isolated among one or two individuals or offices.

4. Communication

- Open and frequent communication.
- Formal and informal communication links.

5. Purpose

- Concrete, attainable goals and objectives.
- Shared vision.

6. Resources

- Sufficient funds.
- Skilled facilitation.

To conclude, I'd like to share just two broad conclusions based on our experience with the Opportunities 2000 project.

First, partnering is not easy work. It is time consuming and labour intensive. It requires patience and perseverance. Multisectoral, multistakeholder collaborations also require committed leadership and skillful facilitation. The work of leadership and facilitation can be draining so it is important that these responsibilities be borne by different participants at different times allowing people in these positions to become renewed periodically. Such initiatives are also complex balancing acts. You have to juggle short-term and long-term goals, the desire to be comprehensive in your efforts and the need for people to see near-term tangible results and a great many more factors that tend to pull in opposite directions.

On the other hand, and this is lesson two from OP2000, participants said that partnering was productive. It enabled them to do more and do it better. Given this finding, it is understandable that the network is continuing into a second phase with support from virtually all who participated in the first round of activity. So, it may be a difficult journey but, approached thoughtfully, it can be a valuable one as well. Good luck today in your discussions and on the road ahead.

Appendix

Building Community through Partnership

Overhead Notes for Presentation

to

**‘Building a Winning Community: Visions and
Challenges for the New City of Hamilton’**

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The Context for Collaboration: Pitfalls and Opportunities

- Downsizing of Government
- Downloading of Responsibilities
- Civic Engagement
- Social Capital

Social Capital

“The relationships, networks and norms that facilitate collective action.”

- John Helliwell

- Reorient energy toward the common good.
- Restore confidence in our ability to achieve desired outcomes through collective action.
- Remove the barriers that isolate us from one another so that we can find new and effective ways of connecting.

Definition of Partnership

A voluntary collaboration between two or more organizations to achieve clearly identified goals.

Key elements:

- Shared authority and responsibility.
- Joint investment of resources (e.g., time, work, funding, material, expertise, information).
- Shared liability or risk-taking and accountability.
- Mutual benefits, i.e., ‘win-win’ situations.

Multisectoral, Multistakeholder Collaboration

Advantages of Collaboration

- Efficiency
- Effectiveness
- Creativity
- Voice

Factors Influencing the Success of Collaboration

- Environment
- Membership
- Process/Structure
- Communication
- Purpose
- Resources

Environment

- History of collaboration or cooperation in the community.

- Supportive community and public policy context.

Membership

- Mutual respect, understanding and trust.
- Appropriate cross-section of members.

Process/Structure

- Participants perceive that benefits of collaboration outweigh the costs.
- Members have a sense of ownership over both process and outcome.
- Partnership approach is diffused throughout the participating organizations, not isolated among one or two individuals or offices.

Communication

- Open and frequent communication.
- Formal and informal communication links.

Purpose

- Concrete, attainable goals and objectives.
- Shared vision.

Resources

- Sufficient funds.
- Skilled facilitation.

Overall Lesson:

Collaboration is a Balancing Act

- Long-term vision with short-term goals.
- Comprehensive perspective with concrete initiatives.
- Stimulation and challenge with support and encouragement.
- A focus on outcomes with a focus on process.
- A bias for action with a bias for learning.
- A desire for unity with an openness to diversity.