Charities working collaboratively

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Abstract

A solution to the current social and economic issues facing the third sector is charity collaboration. As well as reducing costs, it can also help to increase awareness, fundraising and encourage growth and innovation for the collaborating charities. People Know How works collaboratively with partners to deliver projects. In particular, their Connect Four social innovation network can be used as an illustration of what a successful collaborative network looks like. However, there can be potential issues which present themselves, especially when charities differ in their ideas, plans and expectations. The impact of these issues can be mitigated through good communication and organisation..

Keywords

Charities, collaboration, third sector, social innovation, Connect Four

Key points

- Charities are facing a difficult social and economic situation which is likely to affect their funding.

- Charities working together can benefit all parties.

- Collaboration must be organised and communicated properly to be successful.

The importance of collaboration

Charities are facing increasing pressures on their resources and in order to maintain their services, collaboration with other charities is a promising option. Collaboration can take a variety of forms, such as projects, events and services. By working together, charities can increase the awareness of their projects, services, aims or the charity as a whole (Newton 2016). Indeed, collaborating on a project or event can, ideally, double the awareness of both charities with both organisations gaining greater exposure which can be beneficial in the long term,

possibly leading to more engagement in future projects (Maple 1996).

Charities can similarly increase fundraising through collaboration (Newton 2016). As the audience or attendance numbers increase, so does awareness and, by extension, their donation income. Interestingly, Newton (2016) has found that over one third of people cannot name a local charity. However, by collaborating on projects, such awareness can increase. More specifically, this may be achieved through pooling resources and focusing

on one event or project intended to reach a wider audience.

Furthermore, collaborating charities can grow from interaction and learning from one another which can generate improvements in the practice of each party. For instance, seeing how a partnering charity operates can help address organisational or structural issues within another charity (UK Government 2013; Newton 2016). Taking it even further, peer learning can be generated through official skill sharing events at local level – furthering collaboration between numerous local charities. Since the sharing of skills, knowledge and resources can aid in the creation of solutions and increase awareness, impact and fundraising, collaboration can be regarded as a sensible option for charities during the current political and economic situation (Davidson 2018). People Know How's Connect Four initiative, launched in November 2019, illustrates how such collaboration between charities and other sectors looks in practice. The Connect Four initiative is a Social Innovation Network which brings together people from academia, businesses, the public and third sector to share ideas and collaborate on socially innovative work. This is an important resource for charities planning on collaborating with other organisations.

Another recent example of a successful, collaborative effort is The Funding Network that was set up in St Albans in 2016 to raise money for four local charities. Following the event, the organiser wrote a blog outlining the lessons learned (Morello Marketing 2016). The organiser explained that having a good core team in place before they started planning the event was

crucial. As this event was perceived as a success, this example illustrates the potential for larger collaborative network events across the charity sector. Indeed, 82% of charities who have worked in collaboration with other organisations felt that their experience was successful, 29% thought the experience was very successful and only 5% experienced it as not having been successful (Charity Commission 2010). For charities that found the experience unsuccessful, they said poor leadership, planning or communication led to the issues (Charity Commission 2010).

Addressing issues in collaborations

Collaborating charities may have different ideas and expectations for the project, event or service that they are collaborating on (Rowe 2016). This can occur no matter how similar the charities are or how many meetings have taken place before the collaboration commences. Differing ideas can create tensions between collaborating charities, that are further exacerbated when there are unclear boundaries and competition between them (Davidson 2018). Employees are often overworked in the charity sector and working with new charities can put more strain on employees (Davidson 2018). The lack of resources available to the charities creates competition (Rowse 2016).

However, such competition can be addressed by the charities acknowledging the issues whilst continuing their collaboration. For instance, tensions may be overcome through the charities getting to know the history and culture of their

collaborators (Davidson 2018). Some charities similarly have a complicated organisational structure, which can lead to decision-making difficulties and, by extension, slow down processes. Thus, if the collaborating charities understand the foundations of one another's' organisational structure, history and aims better, potential issues can more effectively addressed.

As well as understanding the history and culture of charity partners, there are practical ways that can improve the working relationship. The partnership needs to have clear objectives, strong communication and distinct roles (Rowse 2016). Without this, the partnership may be full of tension and conflict (Davidson 2016; Rowse 2016). An important way to mitigate these issues is to have a formal written agreement. This agreement should assess the risks and address them properly, as well as outline the roles of each charity and the objectives of the project (UK Government 2013). It is also recommended that the formal agreement includes a termination of the collaboration, in case the partnership is not working for either party. In worst case scenarios, a formal agreement can then act as a back-up plan for any issues that might arise during the partnership if all other avenues have been exhausted.

Conclusion

Charities working together is one way of addressing the issues and strains that are currently affecting the British third sector. Collaboration can increase awareness, fundraising, growth and innovation. However, there are also potential challenges and issues that come with collaboration, such as competition, impatience and misunderstandings. This research briefing has outlined some clear ways to address these issues, including increased understanding between the collaborating charities, clear objectives and formal agreements. Charities can benefit from working together to fundraise and deliver projects. However, they must also ensure that potential issues and conflicts of interest are addressed to avoid detrimental effects for both projects and charities. People Know How's Connect Four initiative, which brings together people from academia, businesses, public and third sector to share ideas and collaborate on socially innovative work can function as an important resource for charities planning on collaborating with other organisations.

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