

The Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative: A Case Study of Collaborations

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Collaborations among community partners—often seen as the most effective way of making a lasting impact in a community—are not new. What makes a successful collaboration? What specific shifts in thinking and practice have to take place for a collaborative effort to be considered a success?

According to the Wilder Research Foundation, collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two of more organizations to achieve common goals (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Successful collaborations require trust, leadership, productivity, sharing of ideas and decisions, and a highly developed communication system (Bergstrom et al., 1995).

This article highlights the Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative collaboration—a case study demonstrating the step-by-step development of a successful collaboration and the shifts in thinking necessary to make it all work.

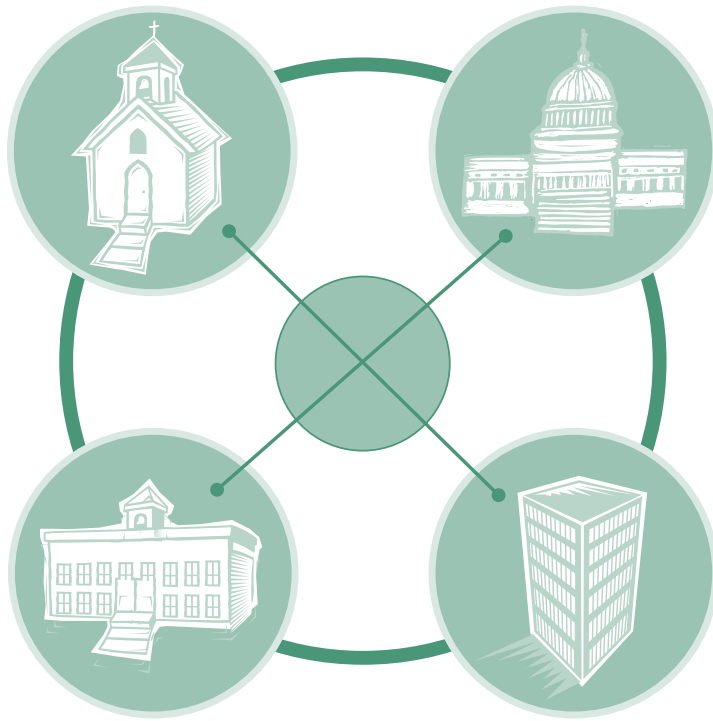
The Problem

In the fall of 1993, Dr. Bruce Anderson, superintendent of Moorhead public schools, met with representatives of law enforcement, the judicial system, and city and county government to discuss the increase of violence, racial tension, and gang activity among Moorhead youth. Because of its history of community collaboration and commitment to youth development, the University of Minnesota Extension Service, Clay County, also was invited. A discussion

about the problems and concerns facing adolescents and systems serving youth was discouraging. The problems were strikingly clear; solutions were not. Law enforcement officers lobbied for more officers while the representatives of the judicial system wanted a new juvenile detention center. The county attorney wanted stiffer laws for juvenile offenders and the mayor wanted to focus on positive aspects of the community.

Superintendent Anderson and Nancy Frosaker Johnson of Clay County Extension were aware of a different, more positive approach advocated by Dr. Peter Benson of the Minneapolis-based Search Institute. Benson identified 30 key positive building blocks, or “assets,” necessary for positive development of young people. (Since then, the Search Institute has identified 40 assets.) The Search Institute advocates a comprehensive, community-wide approach to provide these important assets for children and youth. The Moorhead group was skeptical but intrigued enough to pursue further information about Benson’s approach.

Dr. Benson traveled to Moorhead in November of 1993 to share his vision for building healthy communities for children and youth. More than 60 professionals representing education, government, business, and the religious community attended the presentation. Benson offered Moorhead the opportunity to become one of two cities in the country participating in a new asset-building initiative. After key leaders



and other influential people from the community spoke in favor of involvement and agreed to provide leadership to the effort, the Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative was launched.

The Initiative

The Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative is a citywide, long-term project that seeks to surround all children and teenagers with a wide range of social resources or “assets” crucial for healthy development. The Initiative is an orchestrated, sustained effort drawing on city, school, family, recreational, volunteer, business, and religious sectors. This new kind of collaboration is driven by a shared vision and shared responsibility for the well-being and positive development of the community’s children. The primary goal of the Initiative is to increase developmental assets for all children and teenagers; to increase school success, caring, and personal well being among youth and decrease health-compromising choices and behaviors.

Several strategies dominate community responses to violence, chemical use, teen pregnancy, and related high-risk behavior of children and adolescents. The most common approach is naming the problem (e.g., alcohol use, dropping out of school) and then trying to fix it. The goal is reducing or controlling negative behavior through prevention, early intervention, treatment, and/or incarceration. Professionals supported by public funding do most of the work in this problem-focused paradigm. In addition to being costly and resource limiting, this paradigm seldom has a major impact or causes the problems to subside.

Emerging in contrast to a “reducing-the-negative” approach is a “promoting-the-positive” approach, with support from researchers in a number of fields including resiliency, prevention, developmental psychology, social psychology, and sociology. Dr. Benson of the Search Institute calls this approach “asset building” (1990). Benson defines “asset” as a set of factors

that promote positive youth development, and “deficit” as factors that may inhibit healthy development. Bogenschneider and Riley (1990) use “protective factors” and “risk factors” to define a similar concept.

The asset-building paradigm differs from those used to combat negative youth behavior because, rather than defining problems, it begins by answering the question: What do young people need to navigate successfully through childhood and adolescence? The answers are “developmental assets” (Benson, 1990), a series of building blocks essential for positive development. Pittman (1991) uses the terms “competencies” and “needs” to support the same premise. The Moorhead Initiative is grounded in research on developmental assets conducted by the Search Institute.

The empirical evidence is unequivocal: Assets are additive and powerful. The promotion of these developmental assets calls for a new kind of initiative in which asset promotion is increased in all socializing systems of the community as well as in informal connections between children and other generations. This transformation demands the following community-wide shifts in thought and action.

Shift #1: From problem to positive language

We have only to listen to the evening news or read the newspaper to be reminded of the problems facing young people: Teen pregnancy, crime, violence, drug abuse, poor school performance, eating disorders, low self-esteem. This focus on the negative is compounded by public and private funding sources available to identify a problem or “enemy.” Funding is seldom available for nonproblem-focused efforts designed to promote positive youth development.

Shift #2: From reliance on programs and professionals to relationships

The problem-centered approach leaves members of society believing they have little capacity to intervene or make a positive difference in the problems of adolescents in their community. As a result, they leave the responsibility of caring for the children and youth to those paid to do it. The asset-building approach advocated by Benson (1990) has less to do with hiring professionals and developing programs than it does with activating and enhancing the current capacity of community members to build sustained, informal, positive relationships with children and teenagers. Unfortunately, far too few adults are involved in helping youth thrive.

Shift #3: From age segregation to inter-generational community

Sadly, we have become an age-segregated society. Evaporation of the intergenerational connections necessary for healthy adolescent development is a major factor in society’s dilemma with its young. Most young people have little connection with adults from another generation other than parents. Youth spend most of their time with their peers, watching TV shows aimed at their demographic subgroup, or shopping in stores designed to meet their tastes and interests. Moreover, families seldom live close to relatives and extended family members who could provide important intergenerational connections. There are enough adults in communities, however, to fill the gap created by the absence of extended family. In our society, which has been built around self-interest, paying attention to “other people’s” children is a low priority.

Shift #4: From efficiency to redundancy

The concept of “one message—many messengers” is supported by most in the fields of education and human development. However, “duplication

of services” often dominates discussions among government officials and taxpayers. Although concern over waste and inefficiency in service-delivery systems is justified, successfully raising healthy young people requires a certain measure of duplication or redundancy. Developmental assets should be available to youth across community socializing systems. For healthy development, young people need to “bump up” against the same asset-building messages in their families, schools, churches, youth organizations, at work, and during play. When it comes to raising healthy kids, communities must shift concern from efficiency to planned redundancy.

Shift #5: From civic disengagement to engagement

Civic engagement—individual citizens shaping the future of their community—underlies each shift in thought and action previously outlined. Civic engagement challenges the assumption that people are primarily responsible for their own lives and the lives of their family members. The shifts identified here are essential for rebuilding the developmental infrastructure for children and adolescents as they indicate fundamental changes in the way individuals and systems within communities organize around their young.

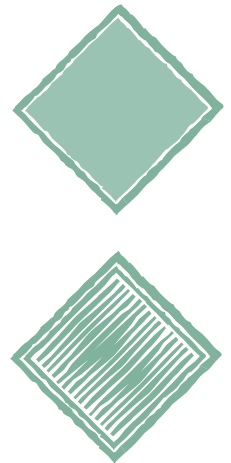
The Collaborative Process

The Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative was conceptualized in three phases: Phase I, the organization and planning phase, to generate the knowledge base necessary to develop the long-term initiative design and build leader and citizen interest and commitment; Phase II, the design phase, to develop the long-range strategic plan of action; Phase III, the actual implementation of the strategic plan.

Phase I: Organization and Planning

Development of Steering Committee

Community leaders and concerned citizens representing the city’s various socializing systems were invited to be part of the Initiative’s steering committee. Steering committee membership was open to everyone. Special efforts were made to involve members of groups seldom involved in the community’s decision-making process, such as older adults, people of color, youth, and members of the gay and lesbian community. Eighty people joined the steering committee, which met six times over an eight-month period to plan and design the Initiative.



Formation of Executive Committee

The steering committee nominated five individuals, all of whom had provided initial leadership to the project, to serve on the Initiative’s executive committee.

Selection of Project Coordinator

Although the Initiative was under the direction of Dr. Benson, the 250 miles between Minneapolis and Moorhead, and the Initiative’s day-to-day management demands necessitated selection of a local coordinator. The coordinator would serve as a liaison between the Search Institute and the steering committee, lead the executive committee, and coordinate the steering committee’s work.

Development of Financial Support Base

Grant dollars had been solicited through the Fargo-Moorhead Area Foundation, but none had been secured when the Initiative began in February 1994.

Collection of Baseline Data

One of the Initiative’s first tasks was collecting baseline student and community data to inform the design of the Initiative and lay the ground-

work for measuring its progress. The steering committee gathered information using the following methods:

Student Survey

Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors was administered in February 1994, to 2,358 Moorhead public school students in grades 6 through 12. School staff administered the survey using standardized procedures developed by the Search Institute. The survey average revealed Moorhead youth possess only slightly higher levels of developmental assets than youth in the national sample. Moorhead eighth and ninth grade students, however, ranked below the national average in total assets in their lives. Key survey findings and implications were shared with the public at a press conference hosted by the Initiative and attended by three network television stations and the regional newspaper. The Initiative's steering committee also hosted a town meeting to share survey results, gain input from concerned citizens, and garner support for the Initiative. Over 400 community members attended.

Focus Group Interviews

Members of the Steering Committee were trained in the focus group interview process with materials developed by Dr. Dick Krueger of the University of Minnesota, a noted expert in the field of evaluation. They conducted 40 focus group interviews with over 500 citizens. Interview results were synthesized and shared with the Steering Committee and the media. In addition to providing community input, the focus group process provided an opportunity to market the Initiative and further mobilize members of the community toward involvement.

Survey of Community Attitudes

A 125-question survey was developed by the Search Institute in cooperation with the Initiative's Steering Committee to measure community attitudes about the way Moorhead raises children and teens, and gauge community readiness to take action on a youth-centered initiative. The survey was sent to 2000 randomly selected citizens. The survey also informed a broader group of citizens of the Initiative's existence and encouraged their involvement and support.

Establishment of Speakers Bureau

Steering committee members and citizens who attended town meetings or participated in focus groups were invited to be part of a speakers bureau to educate citizens about the Initiative and its asset-building mission. Citizens also were also encouraged to become asset builders in the lives of young people.

Public Relations Campaign

A series of newsletters highlighting the Initiative's work and purpose were developed and distributed through the mail and at public pre-



sentations. The mission of the Initiative was communicated to the public through press conferences, television and radio interviews, town meetings, articles and advertisements in school, church, and community newsletters, focus group interviews, a survey of 2000 citizens, public presentations, and newspaper editorials and feature articles. A local marketing firm donated the services of an advertising executive who designed the Initiative's logo.

Establishment of Key Asset Task Forces

Once the data was synthesized and the key areas of need were identified, seven task forces were established to develop preliminary action plans for harnessing the community's collective resources toward strengthening the developmental infrastructure for children and youth. The 75 task force members focused their attention on seven assets: Intergenerational relationships, strengthened neighborhoods, youth involvement in service, establishment of community values, enhanced youth development opportunities, and establishment of safe places for youth to gather.

Phase II: Design of Strategic Plan of Action

Leadership Structure Formalization

As the Initiative moved into the implementation phase, a more formalized leadership structure was necessary. A Board of Directors, bylaws, and nonprofit status were important to the future of the Initiative, particularly if funding was to be secured from private and public sources. A job description was developed and 30 individuals were selected to serve two- or three-year terms on the Initiative's Board of Directors. Executive committee members personally visited each nominee to request involvement and provide information regarding expectations and responsibilities of board mem-

bership. The first official meeting of the Moorhead Healthy Community Board of Directors was held in November 1994.

Strategic Plan Development

Utilizing information from surveys, focus groups, town meetings, and task forces, a strategic plan of action was developed. A discussion draft was developed and shared with the steering committee and concerned citizens at a town meeting. Input from the meeting was utilized in developing the more finalized plan, which was reviewed, revised and later adopted by the Initiative's Board of Directors.

Funding and Staffing

A \$100,000 grant from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety Office of Drug Policy and Violence Prevention and several private gifts allowed the Board to hire a full-time coordinator and a half-time support staff person to direct Initiative work for a minimum of two years. In addition to pursuing grant dollars, the Initiative organized fund development breakfast and luncheon meetings at which more than \$30,000 was given in support of the Initiative.

Factors Influencing the Collaboration's Success

In a 1992 report entitled "Collaboration: What Makes It Work," Paul Mattessich and Barbara Monsey of the Wilder Research Center reviewed research literature on factors influencing successful collaboration. The authors identified 19 factors that influence the success of collaborations of human service, government, and other nonprofit agencies. The report grouped the factors into six categories: Environment, membership, process/structure, communications, purpose, and resources. Insights of Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative collaboration members

about the presence of these factors were gathered through interviews.

The Collaborative Environment

According to those interviewed, the political and social climate of the community was ripe for an initiative and there was a growing sense that Moorhead's youth and future were in jeopardy. Those interviewed also felt key community leaders played a vital role in the collaboration's development, primarily in the early stages. Several individuals said the presence of the University of Minnesota Extension Service, Clay County, influenced their decision toward involvement.

Characteristics of Collaboration Membership

In Mattessich and Monsey's review of the literature (1992), the most important factors regarding membership in any collaboration are respect, trust, and understanding among individual members and the organizations and institutions they represent. All of the Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative Steering Committee members interviewed reported the strong presence of trust and understanding in the collaborative. They cited the history of successful collaboration among the partners as contributing to trust and understanding among members. The Initiative's autonomy as an effort independent of any institution or agency also built trust and understanding among members.

According to Mattessich and Monsey's research summary (1992), an appropriate cross-section of members is important to a collaborative's success. Although this factor received special attention, it was perhaps the weakest link in the process. People representing communities of color, low-income levels, gay and lesbian communities, and youth were underrepresented in the decision-making process. While these groups were deliberately involved in focus groups to

gain their input, invitations encouraging their involvement were only marginally successful.

The Structure/Process of the Collaboration

Members of a successful collaboration must feel ownership over the way the group works and its results or product (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Those interviewed cited the solid sense of ownership in the process as a strength of the Initiative.

Communication within the Collaborative

Open and frequent informal and formal communication is critical to the success of a collaboration (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Respondents cited communication as a relatively weak link in the process. This was due in part to the geographical distance between Moorhead and the Search Institute. Communication with the broader public included a quarterly newsletter, press conferences, newspaper articles, and articles in agency newsletters. These efforts were deemed successful by those interviewed; however, they said more could have been done internally to enhance communication between the Initiative's leadership and the steering committee.

Collaborative Goals, Vision, and Purpose

Every person interviewed paused to reflect when asked, "Were the goals, vision and purpose of the Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative clear and attainable?" Perhaps this reaction is an answer in itself. The majority said the Initiative's goals and vision were not clear, especially to the public and those outside the Initiative's Board of Directors.

Despite considering the goals unclear, all responded that the objective was to increase developmental assets in the lives of children and youth in the community. The lack of clarity in

the implementation phase may reflect a divergence in opinion regarding the action the Initiative should have taken in pursuit of its purpose. Because Moorhead and St. Louis Park, Minnesota, were the first communities in the country to embark upon Healthy Community Initiatives with the Search Institute, they developed a model rather than following a pre-established blueprint. This likely contributed to the lack of clear direction. A certain degree of uncertainty was to be expected.

Resources Available to the Collaborative

The sixth and final factor revealed in Mattessich and Monsey (1992) is the availability of financial and human resources necessary to develop and sustain the group. The presence of a skilled and charismatic leader is particularly important. Those interviewed said the involvement of the Search Institute was crucial to the initial success of the Initiative. Financial resources were a problem throughout the collaboration's developmental phase. Eventually, Initiative members with fundraising experience assumed some responsibility for raising necessary funds, but, as is often the case, time and attention intended for program development was redirected toward surviving a funding crisis.

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Conclusion

The mission of the University of Minnesota Extension Service includes the phrase, "to involve people in the improving of the quality of life." This can be done through successful collaboration. The Moorhead case study presented here is an illustration of how the collaborative approach can work to effectively involve local citizens in determining and meeting the needs of local communities. When local community members and leaders come together to determine what is needed, to develop strategies, and to decide what course of action to take, important and lasting work can be done.

Successful collaboration is tough work and takes time. Collaborative processes do not just happen, but develop over time and could be seen as a transformational process. The lessons learned from the Moorhead Healthy Community Initiative are important because they empower the community to assess strengths and commitment, restructure resources, and develop ongoing working relationships. It also identifies the importance of equipping Extension educators with the skills to develop and participate in community collaborations. These skills will be critical for our work as we move into the next century.