

Chapter 27

Strength in Numbers? Shaping Collaboration During a Period of Uncertainty and Change

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ABSTRACT

In response to environmental volatility, uncertainty, and change, seven not-for-profit organizations decided to join forces to deliver more efficient and effective solutions to deeply rooted social and educational challenges in the city of Birmingham, West Midlands, United Kingdom. From the perspective of the change agent, this reflective case history explores the processes involved in developing the network and the successes and challenges associated with its people and their ambitions for the future.

INTRODUCTION

Strength in Numbers

Against a backdrop of sweeping cuts to public spending, the demise of local services and a marked increase in social upheaval, chief executive officers (CEOs) from 7 culturally and economically diverse not-for-profit organisations based in Hodge Hill, Birmingham, UK, joined forces to protect community assets and to find 'network based' solutions to deep rooted social and educational challenges. Championed by Birmingham City Council, and supported by local stakeholders, the idea behind heatnetwork (Hodge Hill Enterprising Active and Transforming Network) was a simple one; through the combining of organisational resources and capabilities, cost efficiencies would be achieved, local competition avoided, and bargaining power strengthened when competing regionally and nationally for scarce resources to support the 121,678 adults and children residing in one of England's most deprived areas. In total, the organisations that comprised heatnetwork (Crossover, St Margaret's Community Trust, Somali Disability & Elderly Support Group, Comm:Pact, Worth Unlimited, Aim Higher Education Link and Our Community) employed over 100 staff and engaged 250 volunteers to deliver more than 1000 activities to three-quarters of the local population each year. In 2009, reported turnovers amounted to circa £3m

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(combined). Individually, each organisation was contributing significantly to neighbourhood management and had achieved city-wide respect for positively impacting the areas of education and training, employment, social care and youth and community regeneration. In 2010, with a great deal of good will, and a renewed sense of optimism, a formal working agreement was signed, and the CEOs began meeting fortnightly to plan and progress the work of heatnetwork.

When Reality Bites

No sooner had the network started meeting, then the bottom fell out from under the sector. Across the nation funded organisations were losing financial support overnight. While some were having to demonstrate immediate efficiencies for financing to continue, others were less fortunate, and the shutters came down within a matter of weeks. In response to mounting pressure, the CEOs felt railroaded into taking a step back from heatnetwork and reluctantly adopted a ‘survival of the fittest’ mentality as they scrambled to protect jobs and to secure the futures of their discrete organisations.

Where There’s a Will There’s a Way

Although the work of the network had stalled, the desire to work collaboratively remained unabated, and with the support of local influencers and a constituency wide appeal for financial help, a little funding was found to drive forward the development of heatnetwork with the help of an external consultant.

Incumbent within the not-for-profit sector, I had for a period of 10 years operated across Birmingham, UK at a strategic level bringing together private, public and third sector organisations to help create life changing participatory music opportunities for disadvantaged children. Due to our combined successes in for example reducing anti-social behaviour, improving literacy rates, elevating general levels of wellbeing, and securing sustained levels of funding, I was engaged by heatnetwork to help progress the project over the short term.

Unresolved Tensions

Further to a document review (heatnetwork formal working agreement and terms of reference, and the annual reports and business plans for each of the organisations) my first contact with heatnetwork was via one to one meetings with each of the CEOs (now to be referred to as board members). Each spoke candidly about their professional and organisational challenges, their ideas for the network, and the immediate obstacles that would need to be overcome if heatnetwork was to flourish. Given that 6 of the 7 organisations were faith based (3 Christian and 3 Muslim), there were many religious and cultural sensitivities that needed to be managed. For example, whilst lottery funding was viewed as a key opportunity to exploit by Christian based organisations, from an Islamic perspective, it was derived from gambling and therefore ‘haram’. The largest of the organisations – a Church of England limited company led by a vicar whose previous career had been in corporate accounting - was viewed by some of the smaller organisations as one more focussed on ‘empire building’ rather than on genuine collaborative working. Another, led by a local labour councillor, often arose suspicion due to a possibility that the CEO might have been operating in ways designed to further personal political ambition. The smallest organisations voiced concerns about functioning in the shadows of the larger ones and their difficulties in exerting

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