



THE GOLDEN STATE OF COLLABORATION

FOSTERING INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS IN CALIFORNIA

APRIL 2020



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE



SECTOR
LABS



The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient. We pursue this goal by:

- Providing assistance to federal agencies to improve their management and operations, and to strengthen their leadership capacity.
- Conducting outreach to college campuses and job seekers to promote public service.
- Identifying and celebrating government's successes so they can be replicated across government.
- Advocating for needed legislative and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service.
- Generating research on, and effective responses to, the workforce challenges facing our federal government.
- Enhancing public understanding of the valuable work civil servants perform.

X Sector Labs advises executives to realize greater impact through the power of courage, connection and community. We work with amazing leaders with the courage to bridge silos through Cross Sector Leadership, the desire to leverage our collective assets, and the initiative to build community to create the future we want to see, together. In service to this mission, X Sector Labs coaches executives, facilitates collaborations and launches new ventures.

The San Francisco Federal Executive Board serves as a vital link to intergovernmental coordination by identifying common ground and building cooperative relationships across the metropolitan San Francisco Bay Area. The Board represents approximately 70,000 federal, postal and military employees throughout the nine Bay Area counties (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma) as well as agencies in the Sacramento area.

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Introduction

Organizations in any sector enhance their ability to tackle challenges when they combine their strengths and share their knowledge with other entities, either across sectors or within their own.

California has some of the most innovative organizations in the country, making it a hub for new ideas, and as the fifth largest economy in the world and home to the largest regional population of civilian federal workers outside the Washington, D.C., area, it is well positioned to be a leader and model for effective collaboration. Melding the knowledge, resources and abilities of multiple organizations in the Golden State could lead to even greater impact, both locally and beyond. Our country benefits from a federal government that relies on expertise, capabilities and best practices to carry out its work in a more efficient and effective manner. For the federal government to innovate today¹ and flourish in the future,² it is important to collaborate across agencies, between levels of government and with external stakeholders.

In 2019, the Partnership for Public Service launched a project with X Sector Labs, a management consulting firm that advises executives on cross-sector leadership, and the San Francisco Federal Executive Board, which helps build cooperative relationships among federal, postal and military employees across northern California. The aim was to understand better how organizations in California's public, private, nonprofit and other sectors work together toward shared goals and to explore how to further enhance collaboration, especially with the federal government. Between October 2019 and January 2020, we jointly hosted a series of roundtable discussions in northern California to identify best practices for, and barriers to, collaboration among governments, businesses, nonprofit organizations, academia and philanthropy.

More than 70 leaders from across sectors—the majority of whom have worked in both government and private or nonprofit roles during their careers—convened

for conversations about how organizations can take collective action to address today's pressing challenges. Participants described why organizations partner, shared examples of collaborative efforts that worked well, and assessed potential difficulties around collaboration.

During these discussions, participants strongly agreed that when multiple organizations work together, they enhance their ability to address issues and achieve results. Too often, however, individuals and organizations are deterred by obstacles that can hamper collaboration.

This paper summarizes key themes from the roundtable discussions, including benefits and potential challenges of partnering across organizations, and outlines actions that could increase the number of effective partnerships in California, especially those involving the federal government. We hope these findings will help boost the ability of all sectors to collaborate with one another more often and more effectively.

About the Partnership's Work in California

The Partnership for Public Service, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization, delivers programs to improve management systems, develop leaders, increase employee engagement and help recruit top talent into federal service. With 85% of federal employees based outside the Washington, D.C., area, the Partnership aims to deepen our impact with federal agencies in communities across the country.

We are expanding our programming in California, which is home to more than 150,000 civil servants. The Partnership is contributing its expertise to bolster federal agencies' ability to collaborate across agencies, levels of government and sectors in California. This project served as a starting point for our efforts.

1 Partnership for Public Service, Slalom, "Risk and Reward: A Framework for Federal Innovation," November 2019. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Risk-and-Reward-Report.pdf>

2 Partnership for Public Service, EY, "A Roadmap to the Future Toward a More Connected Federal Government," February 2020. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Future-of-Government.pdf>

Collaboration Comes in Many Forms

For the purposes of this project, the Partnership, X Sector Labs and the San Francisco Federal Executive Board asked participants to think about collaboration broadly: any combination of organizations coming together to address a challenge. Through this lens, collaboration can occur between agencies, across levels of government or among sectors, involving a combination of participants from some or all of those entities, for a single instance or a long-term endeavor.

Whatever the nature of a collaborative project may be, organizations from each sector contribute unique strengths and capabilities. Federal, state and local governments have the reach to launch and sustain programs of significant scope on a wide scale. Businesses can offer efficiency, expediency, state-of-the-art technology and highly skilled talent to support shared goals. Nonprofit organizations are on the ground, delivering

programs to local communities and developing trust with the people they serve, enabling these entities to offer a much-needed stakeholder perspective. Philanthropic institutions can provide seed capital to underpin work, which could lead to new ideas and better practices. Academia often contributes research and data to inform the process and measure results.

Each sector may also have different motivations and considerations. A private company must think about its bottom line. The public sector focuses on fairness and equitable services. Nonprofits and philanthropic institutions pursue specific missions. Each partnership seeks to combine the strengths and align the motivations of its participating organizations to achieve the best results.

The organizations and programs referenced in this paper came from participants during roundtable discussions.

Benefits of Working Across Organizations and Sectors

Through this project, we found many reasons organizations are motivated to collaborate, including: to accomplish things they could not accomplish on their own; to combine resources and increase operational capacity; to deliver data and information better; to improve the customer experience; to reach more people; or to pay for activities they could not otherwise afford.

Organizations enter into collaborations for many other reasons as well.



Increasing impact

While individuals and organizations may be able to proceed more rapidly on their own, participants noted solutions that emerge through collaborative efforts can be more durable

and sustainable. When organizations come together, it often leads to a “force multiplier effect” for the common good, said a participant—that is, individual efforts are magnified and strengthened. Ideally, teaming up leads to a “one plus one equals three” outcome, according to another participant, enabling organizations to achieve common goals on a larger scale.

Participants also noted that addressing society’s toughest problems increasingly depends on organizations working together. No one entity on its own has all the personnel, reach, resources or knowledge to solve complicated issues such as a global pandemic, homelessness and climate change. Collaboration gives organizations and sectors the opportunity to expand their reach, share burdensome work, distribute responsibility for solving an issue, uncover and reduce duplication and overlap in their efforts, and enhance the potential for impact.



Connecting talent to issues

The structure of collaborative efforts often enables organizations to contribute resources to solve problems that cross traditional organizational boundaries. A growing trend is to

bring in people with specific skills to help solve a problem or work on a project. For instance, San Francisco’s Office of Civic Innovation started Civic Bridge to enable the private sector to collaborate better with city and county de-

partments on high-priority projects, and provide needed technical skills. The 16-week program connects private sector professionals and city employees on critical issues, such as predicting staffing needs at the San Francisco 911 call center, and increases the city’s capacity to deal with myriad challenges.

Along with providing mission-critical specialists to organizations, these programs give political cover to governments that want to innovate, and they foster relationships between public and private organizations that can lead to future collaboration.

Although a local government started Civic Bridge, not all partnerships begin the same way. For example, the Silicon Valley Talent Partnership is a nonprofit that matches highly skilled corporate employees with community projects in the areas of education, workforce development, and housing and homelessness. Code for America, Fuse Corps and other nonprofits manage fellowships and volunteer networks to deploy subject matter experts, such as technologists who find ways to tackle complex state and local government issues.

Another example is Coro’s Fellowship in Public Affairs program, which places emerging leaders in seven month-long rotations, modeled after medical school rotations, across a variety of sectors to train the next generation of leaders in six key leadership competencies and equip fellows to lead with a cross-sector mindset.

The federal government also collaborates to find talent to work on particular issues. The Department of Defense sponsors “Hacking for Defense,” a college course that teaches students to work with the Defense and Intelligence Communities, to rapidly address the nation’s emerging threats and security challenges. They are given real-world assignments to work on, such as developing new ways to counter online radicalization. The course is

offered at a few California universities and about 25 other institutions nationwide. Corporations help by providing mentors and funding for student projects.

More broadly, federal agencies can meet some of their needs for technology and other expertise by using the Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility Program—which allows personnel to move between state and local governments, colleges and universities, Indian tribal governments and other eligible organizations—to take on temporary assignments.

Salesforce, a software company that provides cloud-based customer-relationship management service tools, connects talent to issues in a different way: All employees are given seven days of paid volunteer leave each year, which enables them to dedicate time to causes they care about. This type of program can work for any company.

No matter the nature of the program, enabling subject matter experts to work outside their own organizations, and in many cases in other sectors, can benefit communities by leading to solutions to challenges ranging from figuring out call center staffing needs to streamlining application processing for government benefits and much more.



Improving community outcomes

Many participants noted that some of the most successful partnerships are place-based, meaning the efforts include many stakeholders from a municipality or region, who strategically align their efforts and resources to tackle complex local challenges. Almost every participant had firsthand knowledge of a place-based effort. Many of them talked about how working with stakeholders from across a geographical area led to successes that might not have happened otherwise. Local coordination can improve results for communities and create lasting impact, many participants agreed.

One example is Strong Cities, Strong Communities, a federal program that brought together local governments, the private sector and other institutions, providing federal resources to support work at the local level to encourage economic growth and community development. The program operated in six U.S. cities, including Fresno, California. Another example is Opportunity Zones, a community investment tool instituted via the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 to encourage long-term investments in low-income urban and rural communities. On a smaller scale, governments and external stakeholders benefited directly from local collaborative efforts to design and construct the Oakland federal building and surrounding area.

Regardless of the project they worked on, participants agreed that this style of collaboration, with its geographic focus, is one that they would like to see adopted more often.



Expanding perspectives and learning

Partners in a collaboration contribute their unique knowledge and perspectives as they work together on tough problems. By virtue of contributions

from different sectors and organizations, stakeholders can understand issues better and become more equipped to address them. After learning from one another, partners are likely to gain new knowledge, concepts and practices that can benefit their “home base” organizations as well.

Learning better and more efficient ways of doing business from one another and hearing about problems others experience can help partners understand and avoid potential pitfalls they had not considered previously. In short, when organizations join forces, they can do more—and do better.



Case Study: Place-Based Programming in Fresno, California

Fresno—California’s fifth most populous city—was one of six cities nationwide chosen in 2012 by the White House Council on Strong Cities, Strong Communities for an innovative pilot program aimed at helping cities facing population and job loss, persistent poverty, constraints in government capacity and other challenges.

The urban city, in the heart of one of the nation’s most productive agricultural regions, presented local leaders with a unique set of challenges: long-term structural unemployment, substantially less tax revenue compared to other California cities and large pockets of underinvestment in city neighborhoods.

Under the Strong Cities program, 12 federal agencies worked in partnership with Fresno leaders to implement their economic plan. State agencies, private businesses and nonprofits also contributed, including California’s Strategic Growth Council in the Office of Planning and Research; Wells Fargo bank; and the Downtown Fresno Partnership, the city’s downtown business improvement district.

Then-Mayor Ashley Swearengin, working with the Strong Cities federal participants, identified three areas on which the federal agencies could focus their technical assistance and resources: downtown revitalization, transportation, and economic development and innovation. These priorities eventually evolved into 10 initiatives that also included business development, homelessness, land-use planning, and neighborhood revitalization and housing, among other issues.

To reduce chronic homelessness, for example, the team helped Fresno implement a 10-year plan and manage the related federal funding, and got the city designated by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness as one of 10 priority communities nationwide working on preventing and ending homelessness. By late 2016, chronic homelessness in the city had dropped 51%.

Other program successes included kick-starting the city’s bus rapid transit program with \$40 million in federal funds, obtaining grants to improve roads in the city’s industrial areas, and revitalizing a downtown mall with \$20 million in mostly federal funding.

Also important was that partners developed relationships that benefit the region to this day. As new programs are rolled out—such as Opportunity Zones, a tool to encourage long-term investments in low-income urban and rural communities—there is a community of stakeholders who are familiar to one another and up to speed on local issues. From working on the Strong Cities program together, this group can mobilize relatively quickly when there are opportunities for them to coordinate on new efforts in Fresno.

“The goal of that program was to bridge the gap between the federal government and the local government, and to determine whether or not we could work together in a more flexible way to help the city realize our goals,” Swearengin said at a 2016 press conference. “That has happened in an incredible way.”

Potential Challenges

While collaboration offers substantial benefits, it can also be difficult. Real or perceived challenges can prevent prospective partners from starting a collaborative project. For the individuals and organizations that choose to grapple with these potential barriers, the issue is not whether to collaborate, but how, when and with whom. It can take significant work to find the right partners and secure adequate funding to get such an effort off the ground.



Initiating new efforts

Few individuals or organizations oppose the concept of collaborating, but inertia can keep them from getting started. In the wake of a “focusing event,” such as a public health crisis, natural disaster or other emergency, organizations come together quickly to assist affected people, businesses and communities. A sense of urgency and a quick influx of funds can motivate action. A need to adapt allows for increased flexibility, even in environments that are typically bureaucratic. However, the quickly amassed teams usually disperse when the danger subsides.

Focusing on a shared concern and garnering the energy, enthusiasm and funding to work together on less pressing projects tends to be more challenging. Without that focusing event, a collaboration might require the participation of an organization or individual who feels driven enough to accomplish a goal that they get creative about finding partners to work together, raise resources and create a sense of urgency for the collaboration.



Fostering leadership support and engagement

To partake in a collaborative effort, participants noted it is important to secure leadership support. Partnering with other sectors takes time and resources that not all leaders are willing to spend for outside activities and without that backing there may be little incentive for partners to pursue collaborations with other organizations.

In addition, the return on investment of collaborative efforts can be unclear for participants’ home organizations. Lack of an obvious and immediate benefit can make it difficult to convince leaders from those organizations

that their employees are spending time wisely by participating in a collaborative project.

When a collaboration involves taking risks or trying new approaches, most people want to know that their organization’s leadership has blessed their participation on these projects or causes, especially if they need to take time away from their regular jobs to participate. Without that reassurance, people could feel vulnerable to fallout, even job loss, if a collaborative project fails. That may create too high a risk for an individual.

Within a collaborative effort, strong leadership is key to the success of the project. This makes efforts inherently unstable as sometimes even the best-laid plans can unravel. If a champion leaves an organization, it could undermine the project unless a like-minded successor continues to drive the cause. Developing projects that can endure leadership turnover is critical and can be tricky. When a collaborative effort depends on relationships between individuals rather than organizations, it may falter if one or more participants changes jobs. Finding a way to gain support from both key leaders and the institution is important for setting up a successful collaboration.



Getting the right people in the room

Absent a central storehouse of comprehensive information on potential partners for collaboration, it can be difficult to find the right entities or individuals to participate in a project.

The biggest challenge can simply be getting people in a room to discuss their common issues and goals.

Setting up a collaborative effort requires paying keen attention to who is invited to participate. A significant amount of time and effort is needed to identify and convene a productive group of participants who come from

the right mix of sectors and organizations and have the ideal backgrounds and skills to contribute to the project.

Even if critical partners with different perspectives and a passion for the cause are invited to participate, the effort may be set back if one or more of those partners is unable to get involved due to the expense, the time involved or another issue. A group may proceed anyway, but the potential risks include blind spots, unknown biases or reduced effectiveness due to the lack of diverse perspectives. Working with a piecemeal group can hamper success or even scuttle a project. Whether a group chooses to function as a core team that calls on people with diverse backgrounds for input, or as an expanded cohort comprising people who themselves represent relevant perspectives, each group must consider, “Do we have the right people? Are we doing our part to ensure they can participate?”



Navigating cultural differences

Once at the table, people in a group must figure out how to work together productively. Generally, different sectors and organizations operate under different leadership styles, and unique decision-making and incentive structures. They may have conflicting cultures, values or priorities; different ways of speaking and writing; differing technologies or policies; and varying definitions of impact, timelines and pace. These differences can lead to conflict or introduce complications during the course of a project. At times, it can seem like organizations are not speaking the same language.

To minimize potential discord, members of a multisector group should acknowledge and address these differences from the beginning as they align on the goal they are trying to achieve and how they plan to achieve

it—possibly identifying a facilitator to help “translate” and navigate organizational differences. Even little things count. For example, will documents be distributed in hard copy or via Dropbox? Will they be written in Microsoft Word or Google Docs? Often, the answer is “both.”

Participants also brought up specific complexities that arise when working with the federal government. The government values fairness, which can lead to rules or methods that can complicate how state and local governments, businesses and nonprofits become partners. The more methodical pace of the federal government can conflict with the rapid pace of the private sector, which seeks quick wins by iterating its way to a final achievement and accepts failures as part of the process. Multiple federal agencies often work on similar issues, muddying the waters for people outside government seeking federal resources. Add the many silos that exist in federal agencies and government overall, and it can be exceptionally hard for outsiders to navigate their way to successful federal partnerships.

A neutral convener could help work through these items, but finding the right person or organization to do so presents yet another challenge.



Scaling successful efforts

Projects with successful results can be models for other organizations with similar issues or problems. But learning about a successful project and replicating its success factors in

other locations is not always easy. It takes time and effort. Then there is the matter of figuring out which parts of the project are replicable, and which parts only worked because of the specific circumstances and relationships involved in the original project. How can transferable aspects of a project be identified? How can other entities use the approach?

Recommendations

During our roundtable events, the Partnership, X Sector Labs and the San Francisco Federal Executive Board asked participants to suggest opportunities for furthering a culture of partnerships in California. The following recommendations emerged as the most promising opportunities to bolster collaboration among organizations and sectors.



Create a clearinghouse

Develop a central source of information that can help connect organizations, based on their interests, capabilities and desire to partner to achieve a goal. An organization could step forward to take the lead on building a knowledge base and facilitate introductions for individuals and organizations that want to partner on projects.



Produce a collaboration playbook

While each partnership may involve unique goals and participants, there are common success factors and methodologies that could help partners achieve their goals. Prospective partners could benefit from checklists for starting a collaborative effort and how-to guides for navigating different systems and sectors. Such a resource could start with a survey of the existing landscape, a compilation of useful tools, and a collection of stories and case studies to illustrate useful approaches.



Develop collaborative leaders

Organizations that run leadership development and fellowship programs could incorporate information on the value of collaboration and the skills required (if they do not do so already). The curriculum should reinforce the benefits of partnering across organizations, perhaps encouraging leaders to insert collaboration efforts into performance plans. In addition, programs could provide a forum for leaders who have experienced the benefits of collaboration to work with peers who have concerns about these partnerships.



Foster network building

Host informal gatherings for leaders and subject matter experts that do not necessarily involve a specific project or goal. Through casual conversations and by developing new or strengthened relationships, people who attend these gatherings can unearth unexpected ideas and experience moments of serendipity. When an opportunity for a collaborative project or goal arises, the relationships can serve as a foundation for the joint effort.



Convene communities of interest

Identify and bring together people to discuss how to increase impact through shared efforts around specific issues. Hold discussions with leaders and experts from across sectors so they can share knowledge, resources and perspectives. This format provides participants the opportunity to build or deepen relationships, and the setting to work together to design and implement shared solutions. Communities of interest can also be designed around shared interests or expertise such as customer experience or innovation. Bringing together individuals to discuss their common understanding or passion could lead to the development of collaborative projects.



Focus on geography

Design and invest in place-based programs that gather a variety of stakeholders from a community to align their work, find new ways to tackle complex challenges and bolster results. Empower local leaders to navigate the state, federal, private and social sector assets available to them. In turn, teach those stakeholders how to drill down to navigate the particulars of an area's challenges and apply their resources locally. Include concepts such as mapping community stakeholders, developing cultural competence and leveraging community, state and federal assets.



Identify facilitators

Organizations that partner can benefit from the help of a neutral third party that could assist with launching and managing the collaboration process. These facilitators can help partners articulate goals, bridge organizational differences and strengthen coordination, by setting rules of engagement, organizing planning discussions and serving as a sounding board.



Celebrate success

Celebrate and reward individuals and organizations that achieve successful results through collaboration, whether through a public recognition program or another method. Sharing news, internally and externally, about effective endeavors in California shines a light on the value of collaborations and could spur interest in new efforts both in the state and around the country.



Conclusion

In challenging times, responding rapidly and developing long-term solutions often requires the strengths and capabilities of different organizations and sectors, from the federal government's broad reach to the private sector's technology prowess to nonprofits' understanding of community needs.

As the world addresses a global health crisis, the need for cross-organization and cross-sector collaboration is at its greatest in decades.

The benefits of collaboration are too great to ignore. Across sectors, the California community seeks opportunities to collaborate with other organizations, especially when challenges appear daunting. Those who have been involved in these partnerships are interested in doing more of them—and doing them more effectively.

Partnerships can enhance organizations' ability to serve their constituents, customers and other stakeholders and help them achieve greater success in fulfilling their missions. The question now is how best to foster that collaborative culture and help organizations and sectors find one another, share their expertise and work together to accomplish goals for their communities.

A number of organizations are well positioned to carry out the above recommendations. We encourage governments, businesses and nonprofits to consider the roles they could play in implementing our recommendations in their sectors or more broadly. The success of collaborative efforts could be a model for serving communities and achieving goals and missions both in California and the rest of the country.



Resources

A Roadmap to the Future Toward a More Connected Federal Government

ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Future-of-Government.pdf

Risk and Reward: A Framework for Federal Innovation

ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Risk-and-Reward-Report.pdf

Collective Impact

ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

Cross Sector Leadership: Approaches to Solve Problems at the Scale at Which They Exist

ssir.org/supplement/cross_sector_leadership_approaches_to_solve_problems_at_scale

Leading Systems Change: A Workbook for Community Leaders and Practitioners

newleadershipnetwork.org/book/



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