



Meaningful partnerships among organizations can be transformative. Through a thoughtful approach, careful planning, implementation and management, partnerships can convert initiatives into solutions and be positively impactful. Evidence from previous AmeriCorps-funded programs reveals that successful partnerships require a consistent investment of time and commitment. See the “About this Tip Sheet” box for more information.

Success is attributed to five common characteristics:



This tip sheet offers lessons for organizations seeking to establish and maintain meaningful partnerships in their communities by providing action-oriented recommendations.

Aligning Partners' Goals and Objectives

Partnerships establish the foundation for creating meaningful change. However, partnerships are only effective if the parties agree on similar goals and objectives. Successful partnerships are grounded in philosophical alignment, shared values, and similar desired outcomes with clear recognition of what each partner will gain from investing time and energy in a collaboration.

What your organization can do:

- Articulate your organization's mission, objectives, and desired outcomes.
- Understand your partners' missions, objectives, and desired outcomes.
- When possible, choose partners aligned with your program's mission and approach.
- Seek ways to align partners' objectives and desired outcomes, even when alignment is not easily recognizable.
- Identify how you and your partners can help one another achieve mutual goals and objectives.

Identifying Complementary Skills, Resources, and Capacities

Partnerships add value when each partner brings skills, resources, and strategies that complement or reinforce one another. Successful partnerships expand the number and range of capacities that contribute to achieving a shared objective. To establish effective partnerships, assess the capacities the project needs to succeed, be realistic about capacities within the organization, and identify partners with capacities that fill needs.

What your organization can do:

- Identify the capacities and resources you need to accomplish your goals.
- Compare the needs with an honest assessment of your own capacities and resources.
- Identify the capacities and resources potential partners offer.
- Look at other programs for ideas about how partnerships can add value.
- Enhance value by selecting partners with complementary or reinforcing skills, resources, and capacities.

Establishing Roles and Operationalizing Partnerships

In the most successful collaborations, partners explicitly agree on what is to be accomplished, the role each partner will play, and the activities and outputs each partner will contribute to the collective goals. Written records provide immediate clarity about how each partner will contribute to the collective effort.

What your organization can do:

- Establish each partner's role in achieving agreed-upon goals.
- Record roles and expectations formally, with contracts or memoranda of understanding, or informally with meeting notes that capture decisions and role assignments.
- Deepen partnerships through supporting roles.

Building Relationships and Establishing Trust

Successful partnerships have flexible, approachable partners that inspire trust. Asking questions such as, "Can I work effectively with this partner?" and "Can I trust this partner?" are as important as asking, "Does this partner have the capacities required to do the work?" While partners may find it difficult to be honest when problems arise, trust is necessary for partnerships to work. Organizations often underestimate the time it takes to build deep relationships with partners.

What your organization can do:

- Invest in frequent personal interactions, proactive information exchanges, and small-scale accomplishments over time.
- Invest staff time and resources in building and maintaining relationships and nurturing collaboration.
- Identify partners with "soft skills" that facilitate problem solving and build trust, and apply those skills throughout the life of the partnership.
- Build partnerships over time by identifying opportunities to interact and share information.
- Engage in open and honest conversations about challenges and solutions, and celebrate successes.

Revisiting and Reassessing Partnerships

Partnerships are never static. Revisiting a partnership's expectations periodically provides the opportunity to reassess the value of continuing the partnership and whether the roles, directions, or level of formality need to be adjusted. Ensure the opportunity cost of engaging in the partnership does not outweigh the benefits of investing the resources elsewhere.

What your organization can do:

- Periodically revisit and reassess the partnership's shared objectives, goals, roles, and expectations.
- If partners diverge, reinforce shared goals, revise roles and expectations, or disband the partnership.
- Apply lessons learned to the future of the partnership and to other partnerships.

About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 250,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. Learn more at <https://americorps.gov/>.

About this Tip Sheet

This tip sheet was based on research sponsored by the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation that collected data from four grantee intermediaries from the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) 2010 and 2011 cohorts with extensive experience forming and sustaining partnerships. The [SIF issue brief](#) was originally developed by ICF (authored by Lara Malakoff, Janet Pershing and Janet Griffith) and published in 2014 as a deliverable of the SIF Classic National Assessment and synthesized for this document. If you have any questions, please reach out to evaluation@cns.gov.