Traditionally, partnerships in YouthBuild are a way of implementing one or more components of the program by sharing the tasks with an outside agency. By now, many Youthbuild programs have been partnering for months and up to years. Like in any other program, partnerships in Youthbuild are valuable because the collaboration between a Youthbuild program and another agency brings different kinds of people and organizations together to maximize the quantity and quality of the service to the youth. However, as pointed out by the Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health, making the partnership run effectively is one of the main challenges for many partnerships. This can be attributed to the fact that each brings their own set of structure, having the collaboration flow cohesively to produce the desired results is complex, and a time consuming process in itself. What is more, the Center claims that most partnerships lack a reliable way to see how well their partnerships are doing, and how they can improve them. The lack of effectiveness can lead to the termination of a partnership, leaving the targeted benefactor of the partnership without service.

A significant step that can help avoid the lack of results or collapse of the partnership is to conduct an assessment of how effectively the partnership is running. There are several assessment tools available for assessing partnerships. Most tools have a readymade questionnaire to answer so you can proceed with the analysis of the data. But this article will focus on what needs to be analyzed in order to make the partnership run more effectively. We will start by discussing what partnership synergy is and why it is important in the assessment of the effectiveness of your partnership at this stage. Then we will provide a basic framework of assessing your partnership synergy in order to maximize effectiveness of it. The article will conclude with a few ideas on how to apply it to your partnership assessment and what to think about after you assess the effectiveness of the partnership.

What is Partnership Synergy?

Before we start discussing partnership synergy, let’s review what a successful partnership is. According to Weiss, Miller, and Lasker, “a successful partnership is one that allows the involved parties to combine their complementary knowledge, skills, and resources so they can accomplish more together than they can on their own.” When discussing partnerships, the combined influence on the collaboration is referenced as Partnership Synergy. Weiss, Miller, and Lasker clarify this by emphasizing that “the power to combine the perspectives, resources, and skills of a group of people and organizations in a partnership is called synergy.”

The importance of looking at the partnership synergy lies on its power to influence the effectiveness of the partnership. The Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health states that “When a collaborative process achieves a high level of synergy, the partnership is able to think in new and better ways about how it can achieve its goals; carry out more comprehensive, integrated
interventions; and strengthen its relationship with the broader community.” Therefore partnership synergy influences how well the partnership is functioning, and by evaluating the partnership synergy, you can detect the effectiveness of it, and come up with ideas on how to improve effectiveness of the partnership. Most programs look at partnerships as a means of getting tasks done that cannot be accomplished in-house, by looking for a partner that can supply that. So once the potential partner has been identified, the rest of the process is to develop and sign an agreement, implement the agreement, and accomplish the goals. However, there is often a barrier between implementation and results. Understanding partnership synergy will show us how well the partnership is functioning and what needs to be improved for better outcomes.

Basic Framework for Assessing Your Partnership Synergy for Maximizing the Effectiveness of the Partnership

An example of a basic framework comes from an extensive literature on partnerships and input from a multidisciplinary panel convened by the New York Academy of Medicine. According to Weiss, Miller, and Lasker, the assessment framework requires that you look into two areas of the partnership synergy: operationalization of partnership synergy and identifying the determinants of the partnership synergy.

Since partnership synergy is a product of group interaction, the operationalization of it will be to look at the extent to which the involvement/contributions of different partners improve the ability of the partnership to:

1. Think about its work in creative, holistic and practical ways
2. Develop realistic goals that are widely understood and supported
3. Plan and carry out comprehensive interventions that connect multiple program, services and sectors
4. Understand and document the impact of its actions
5. Incorporate the perspectives and priorities of community stakeholders including the target population
6. Communicate how its actions will address community problems
7. Obtain community support

During the operationalization of the partnership synergy, you are looking at how the collaborative force is influencing the different areas of the partnership as outlined above.

In addition to operationizing the synergy, the framework requires you to identify the elements of partnership that influence the partnership synergy.

Determinants of partnership synergy:

1. Resources- Money, space, equipment, goods, skills and expertise, information, connections (to people, organizations, groups), endorsements, convening power.
2. Partner characteristics- heterogeneity, level of involvement
3. Relationships characteristics- leadership, administration and management, governance, and efficiency
4. External environment- community characteristics, public and organizational policies

This time you are assessing how the parts that make up the partnership synergy are influencing it so far. The framework suggests that you look at each determinant of Partnership Synergy, as highlighted in the four areas above, and examine their influence so far. The next section of the article will provide few examples on how you can apply the assessment framework.

Applying the Assessment Framework

After understanding the assessment framework, the next step is to develop the assessment questions that you want to consider when conducting the assessment. Below are tips on how the assessment framework topics can be applied to your Youthbuild partnership assessment:

Out of the questions that you are required to analyze, each can be applied to your own partnership:

1. Has the partnership been serving the Youthbuild participants in creative, holistic and practical ways?
2. Has the partnership developed realistic goals that are widely understood and supported by every staff and participant involved?
3. Has the partnership planned and carried out comprehensive interventions that connect multiple program, services and sectors?
4. Does our partnership understand and document the impact of its actions?
5. Does the partnership incorporate the perspectives (goals or principles of the program) and priorities of community stakeholders including the youth?
6. Does the partnership communicate how its actions will address community problems (unemployment, housing, poverty, high rates of high school dropout, etc)?
7. Does the partnership obtain community support?

The framework requires you to identify the elements of partnership that influence the partnership synergy. You can approach this by developing questions around the determinants on how and why they are affecting the partnership. Below are examples:

1. Resources:
   Identify the resources that are involved in the partnership?
   How is availability of the resources affecting the partnership?
2. Partner characteristics:
   What is the level of heterogeneity in the partnership?
   What is the level of involvement by our program and partner agency?
   As of this stage, is the level of involvement by our program making sure that the Youthbuild goals and performance requirements are achieved?
3. Relationship characteristics:
What are the relationship characteristics of the leadership of the partnership?
Who is making decisions and who should be making decisions?
Which relationships are running smoothly and which are causing conflict?

4. External environment:
   What are the external environment affecting our partnership?
   How does our local government policy affect the partnership?

The questions could go on and on, but the idea is to give you few examples of how the framework for partnership synergy assessment can be applied.

What Next?
After applying the suggested assessment framework, you should be able to see how the different aspects are currently influencing the partnership individually and holistically. You can follow up by asking yourself how each area can be improved to maximize the effectiveness of the partnership. Also an important step of this process is to share the findings with your partnering agency and ask for their opinion on how the management of the partnership can be improved. One suggestion is setup a meeting with the partnering agency on a regular basis to acknowledge the achievements and exchange constructive criticism.

References:
