

Eyes on the Process:

A Story of Statewide Collaboration, Planning, and Prevention

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Abstract

Based on a year-long qualitative case study, this article contributes to the small but growing empirical literature on prevention planning efforts by chronicling the planning year experiences of the West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being—a collaborative, statewide effort to develop a comprehensive statewide prevention system. The group’s focus on people and relationship-oriented *processes* rather than project *outcomes* was a key to its success in obtaining a State Incentive Grant despite a lack of shared understandings among participants about substantive and organizational issues. The sustainability and replicability of the partnership is discussed in relation to the high human and organizational costs of such an extensive, ambitious, collaborative planning endeavor.

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At first we were less than excited about conducting evaluation research for a collaborative, statewide prevention planning project. We envisioned long, tedious meetings with administrators in dreary institutional settings. However our first encounter with the partnership, at a retreat held in a state park lodge, challenged our initial impressions. Under the frost and snow, we could see the beautiful grounds as we arrived on a cold, sunny February morning. We noticed a sense of peace and quiet -even in the parking lot - and entering the lodge we felt the warmth of the big stone fireplace in the lobby as well as the personal warmth of the lodge staff. People from the planning group began to arrive, seeming energized and excited about the project.

Entering the meeting room itself, we were enthusiastically greeted by Prevention Resource Centerⁱ (PRC) staff who had played a major role in organizing the retreat. The room featured a large oval arrangement of tables and chairs. Name cards had been placed in front of each chair. In addition, there were all the amenities – water glasses, pens, pencils, agendas, paper, candy, gift bags, and even marshmallows for throwing at fellow group members who were too long-winded! As people gradually arrived there was a feeling of familiarity, camaraderie, and respect in the room.

Thus began our year-long case study of the West Virginia Partnership for Community Well-Being. As a team of three qualitative researchersⁱⁱ, our goal was to understand the group's collaborative planning efforts. We were hired as outside evaluators, but following Stake (2004), instead of judging the quality of the effort from

an external position, we tried to experience the project through the eyes of the participants, taking pains to be responsive to their ideas about the merits and shortcomings of planning year processes and outcomes. Like Mullen and Kochan (2000), we studied the project “from the inside out” (184), hoping to understand participants’ perceptions and experiences. We were participant-observers in four day-long quarterly partnership meetings, two multiple-day partnership retreats, and seven workgroup (subgroups consisting of partners and PRC staff) meetings, each of which lasted a few hours. In addition, we interviewed 18 partners and seven PRC staff members who worked with the project. Following Gabriel’s (2000) advice to quickly get evaluation findings into the hands of practitioners who can use them, every three months we provided formative feedback based on preliminary analyses of data generated during that period.

There has been little empirical study of sustainable prevention efforts, and according to Johnson, Hays, Center, and Daley (2004), “the literature is void of planning models that have practical application to professionals in prevention” (147). Attempting to fill some of that void, this manuscript chronicles the planning year experiences of the West Virginia Partnership for Community Well-Being – a collaborative effort to develop a comprehensive statewide prevention system. After introducing the project, we discuss the group’s focus on people and relationship-oriented *processes* rather than *outcomes* in relation to their success in obtaining a State Incentive Grant despite a lack of shared understandings about substantive and organizational issues. Finally, we discuss the sustainability and replicability of the planning process, especially in light of the leadership role played by the PRC.

Partnering Up: The Process Begins

It all began with the receipt of a \$450,000 planning grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, specifically through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP). The purpose of the grant, obtained by the Prevention Resource Center (PRC), was to develop the capacity and infrastructure to more effectively compete for a State Incentive Grant (SIG) to develop a comprehensive statewide prevention system.

Following planning grant guidelines stipulating the formation of an advisory body, PRC staff identified individuals representing prevention-related organizations in the state, including state agencies such as the Department of Education and the Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, state higher education institutions, and local community and faith-based organizations. In addition, two young people were invited to become involved. At the first meeting of the advisory body, participants expressed commitment to the people and communities of West Virginia, to prevention as a broad concept, and to collaboration as a viable means of improving the life circumstances of West Virginians, especially those living in areas with fewest resources and greatest needs. The group named itself the West Virginia Partnership for Community Well-Being and decided to hold a two-day retreat and then quarterly meetings throughout the planning year. Their two inter-related purposes were to obtain a State Incentive Grant and to design and implement a statewide prevention model that would close gaps and reduce redundancies.

It quickly became clear that while there was general agreement that resources and outcomes were important, developing a viable, sustainable collaborative *process* was even more important, especially to the PRC staff who guided the planning year efforts.

As one PRC staff noted in one of the first interviews we conducted, “There has to be some real tangible things that come out of this . . . [but] it’s not about the money; [it’s] about the process. . . trying to model what we want our communities to do and that is to work together and work smart.” In addition to viewing the process as a model of collaboration, participants saw it as an educative, developmental process that should not be rushed. One PRC staffer described it as “a learning process . . . that everybody’s going to have to think through. It just takes time.” Along the same lines, in an interview immediately following the planning year, Carl Young—also with the PRC—spoke of the group’s process in developmental, organic terms, likening the PRC’s role in it to that of a gardener.

As a gardener you don’t make anything grow. . . .The best you can do is . . . create good conditions that are right to provide for optimum growth. . . . So what your job becomes as a gardener is a steward of the environment—the context—and that’s really the role the PRC needs to play in this process.

Melinda Newsome, also a PRC staff member, perceived genuine commitment among the partnership to the focus on process: “Folks at the table, for the most part, are sincere about honoring process and doing it right, even if it takes awhile.” Partner Hank Thomas, among others, confirmed this, noting that coordinating prevention efforts is a challenging endeavor—one of those “things [that] just have to kind of take their own path. . . . and go through a process to move forward.” On the other hand, some partners worried that allowing the process to develop naturally may have hindered the group’s progress in formulating and achieving goals. We revisit this tension between process and outcomes in addressing leadership below as well as in a later section on shared vision.

Leading the Process—From the Bottom-up, Top-down, and Outside-in

Leadership of the planning year process is difficult to nail down. Like other coalitions wherein organization leaders come together and share leadership as they work toward common goals, the WV Partnership included high level administrators who shared leadership with each other in an egalitarian, democratic manner much like the model of innovative leadership described by Mullen and Kochan (2000). We are not aware of turf or ego issues that constrained the partners as they decided collaboratively about membership, by-laws, and so on.

However, in addition to sharing leadership with each other, the partners shared leadership with the Prevention Resource Center whose relationship with the WV Partnership has been understood by participants in various ways, and even been the source of tension within the PRC, as the collaborative effort evolved. In our first formative feedback to the group, we noted that the leadership of the partnership was complex—with the PRC staff providing considerable guidance on the basis of their prior experience with and knowledge about the grants—both the planning year grant they had obtained and the State Incentive Grant they were hoping to be awarded at the end of the planning effort. We also noted that PRC staff may have had more experience with the process of cross-agency collaboration itself. These factors, among others, led participants to view the PRC in a leadership role. As one partner put it, “We look to the Prevention Resource Center as the lead.” She went on to say that “the idea behind this whole grant is that it’s shared ownership. . . but the PRC applied for it, set up all the meetings, and so on.” A PRC staff member who shares this perspective explained that “ultimately we [the

PRC] are responsible for this. . . . If it doesn't go well, we're the ones responsible. . . .The PRC needs to [be in control]. . . . The partnership's role is advisory.”

Other participants, however, believed the partners—not the PRC staff—were in charge of the WV Partnership; it was the partners who initiated and planned much of the first retreat and who might at some point even serve as a governing board for the PRC. As one PRC staff member explained early in the year, “The PRC staff work for the [partners]. . . . We can try to guide them based on grant guidelines . . . but . . . those people kind of tell us what to do.” Still others expressed confusion about the nature of the PRC's role in the partnership. For example, partner Bill Kushner said, “I'm unclear about the comprehensiveness of the PRC's role.” At the end of the planning year, participants had not fully clarified these roles; they had not reached agreement about “who is responsible for what” in their collaboration (Burk & Keeley, 2002).

To the extent the PRC staff played a leadership role in the partnership's evolving process, they often did so in an informal, nondirective, nonhierarchical manner consistent with their philosophy of working from the bottom-up, top-down, and outside-in. Driven by strong commitments to community and to helping people help themselves, PRC staff were experienced at using a non-traditional, capacity-building approach—a kind of participatory leadership focusing on “empowerment rather than power and control” (Kezar, 2001, 88)—in their prior and ongoing work with communities throughout the state. In this fashion they facilitated the work of the partnership, assisting with everything from developing new relationships among individuals and organizations to preparing for meetings and retreats, keeping minutes, leading discussions, negotiating compromises,

keeping the group moving and on track, drawing partners into active engagement in the process, and ultimately writing the proposal for the State Incentive Grant.

The quantity and quality of the PRC's work was not lost on partners who spoke highly of the exceptionally capable PRC staff, applauding their commitment, their hard work, and their knowledge and skills. Charles Estep, for example, was "really impressed with the . . . hard work the PRC has done to pull these things together between our meetings." Partner Sally Berry spoke of the "professional, intelligent [PRC] staff . . . [whose] great expertise . . . [and] input is very valuable." One partner identified the "superb" PRC staff as a major strength of the project and another noted, "You don't get practitioners much better than these folks."

PRC staff did a huge amount of work during the planning year. One PRC staffer jokingly commented that before the grant they had full-time jobs and with the grant, they each have at least two full-time positions which is "really hard. . . . The massive amount of work . . . takes its toll . . . and puts a lot of stress on us." PRC staff spoke about being "consumed with just getting our jobs done" . . . and the need to "scale back. . . because it is killing us." Acutely aware of the heavy PRC work-load, one partner expressed concerns about what she perceived as a lack of acknowledgement for PRC contributions to the partnership: "They are doing a great job. They are very professional. I think they're working their butts off and . . . getting no recognition. . . . Behind the scenes they're doing the work so why not share it and why aren't they getting credit for it?"

This perception and concern may be related to two factors, (1) the nature of the leadership practiced by the PRC, and (2) the resources required to adequately support the initiation of large collaborative projects. The leadership practiced by the PRC, especially

during the first half of the planning year, was a form of what Chrislip and Larson (1994) call collaborative leadership—leadership that concerns itself with “promoting and safeguarding the collaborative process . . . rather than [taking] unilateral, decisive action” (127). As will be more fully discussed below, PRC staff attempted to engage partners in the planning process—to encourage them to accept increasing ownership of and responsibility for the project. To this end, PRC staff tried not to speak too much or draw too much attention to themselves at meetings – to open spaces for partners to play more prominent roles in the process. This is not unlike the “collaborative leadership strategies” Padgett, Bekemeier, and Berkowitz (2004) recommend in their discussion of how to “maximize the involvement of multiple stakeholders” and “facilitate the effectiveness of partnerships” (257) or Kezar’s (2001) view of participatory leadership that is designed to capitalize on “the wealth of expertise throughout an organization” (85).

For a variety of reasons, the PRC’s leadership may have become less collaborative over the course of the planning year. Time constraints constituted a challenge to the collaboration. Perhaps the best example is that the State Incentive Grant proposal was written entirely by PRC staff who, faced with grant deadlines, could not complete a draft in time for partners to review prior to submission. It was less a decision to act unilaterally than a necessity to meet a deadline that was short to begin with.

Also, our formative feedback to participants midway through the planning year may have played a role in the changing leadership approach. In the report we noted that partners appreciated the PRC’s work on the project and that “at least one partner believes the partnership is under-utilizing and under-recognizing the knowledge and expertise of PRC staff.” The following partner interview excerpt was included in the report: “The

PRC's wonderful staff . . . is kind of hushed at times. . . They have great expertise. . . Sometimes I feel it is not as readily given for some reason. . . . Every bit of knowledge they have . . . should be brought to the table. . . . Their guidance is important.”

Later we learned that some PRC staff interpreted this to mean that partners wanted the PRC to work faster. As one PRC staff explained, “some of us felt like, ‘Well, if the partnership thinks we’re holding back, then we need to cut loose and run as fast as we can’.” According to another PRC staff member, the feedback also was interpreted to mean that partners wanted them to act more decisively—perhaps even unilaterally—in order to accomplish tasks and move the group forward: “That one thing [in the formative feedback] hurt us . . . the thing about some of the partners [saying] that they thought that the PRC was holding back and wanted us to take more leadership. . . [Some PRC staff] took that as a license to go [overboard] on this [idea] that they [partners] were just advisory and we [PRC] needed to do all the work and make all the decisions.” These differing interpretations may have resulted in the PRC doing even more of the work and making more independent decisions which in some cases was uncomfortable for participants. For example, PRC staff and partners attending a workgroup meeting toward the end of the year were surprised and upset to learn that *other* PRC staff had made decisions without consulting them.

You could see on the partners' faces and in their body language and even from the things they said that they didn't agree and really didn't want to do that. . . . If you are doing collaborative work, you kind of have to work collaboratively. . . . That situation just didn't seem to be that way.

We intended to benefit participants by providing current information in the manner of non-traditional, participatory, research methods Gabriel (2000) recommends, especially for evaluating community partnerships related to prevention. Unfortunately, the feedback itself seems to have contributed to and been a part of increasing confusion about the relationship between the PRC and the partnership and growing tensions within the PRC.

Another factor to consider is the administrative resources and support needed for large-scale collaborative endeavors such as this one. Prevention initiatives often are funded with inadequate attention to the necessary administrative support structures (Steckler & Goodman, 1989). Likewise, on the basis of a systematic literature review and a series of substance abuse prevention “think tanks,” Johnson, Hays, Center, and Daley (2004) stress the importance of strengthening administrative capacity during the initial implementation period of prevention innovations when the need for human services is critical. The planning grant provided financial resources to support the work of the partnership during its first year, but difficulties in obtaining those funds from the governor’s office, lack of time free from responsibilities for pre-existing grants and projects, and the time and work involved in locating, hiring, and training new staff left the PRC under considerable internal strain that increased as the planning year progressed.

Confusion and conflicting perspectives about the relationship between the PRC and the partners notwithstanding, the hard-working, skilled, committed individuals (both partners and PRC staff) who participated in the WV Partnership accomplished a major goal – the award of a five year, 2.3 million dollar per year State Incentive Grant. The planning year efforts leading up to this accomplishment featured a people and relationship-focused process.

Honoring People and the Relationships Between Them

In both community and state contexts, sustainability is enhanced when there is collaboration (e.g., Johnson, et. al. 2004). At the same time, collaboration across agencies and organizations is often difficult. As Burk and Keeley (2002, 2) note, “Any two agencies that must work together with a common purpose have challenges that include differences in perceived missions, leadership styles, “turf” issues, and cultural differences between organizations.” These challenges are multiplied when people from a multitude of organizations come together with a common task. During the planning year, the WV Partnership met these challenges by putting their energies toward getting the “right people” to the table and developing and nurturing trusting, respectful, reciprocal relationships among them. The goal was to lay a strong foundation for developing shared understandings and a willingness to work together in more than a superficial way—as people and as organizations.

“The Main Thing is People”

The collaboration literature speaks clearly about the importance of getting key stakeholders to the table and actively engaging them in the collaboration process. Yeattes, Ray, List, and Dugger (1991), for example, stress the importance of “soliciting community leaders” to serve in leadership roles in collaborative projects. Also, Mattessich and Monsey (1994) reviewed research on successful collaborations and found eleven studies emphasizing the importance of including representatives from stakeholder groups. Other than mutual respect, understanding, and trust (which also was supported by eleven studies), none of the other nineteen factors influencing the success of collaboration was supported by as much empirical research.

As noted in our first feedback to the group, WV Partnership participants (partners and PRC staff) agreed that membership in the partnership should be broadly inclusive. Also, the climate of the early partnership meetings, warm and inviting with attention to “creature comforts,” was conducive to members feeling welcomed and included. Other signs of the desire to include everyone in the process were frequent invitations—from PRC staff, the retreat facilitator, and some partners—to participate, to make decisions, to express views. There seemed to be a genuine desire to include all group members’ perspectives. Especially at the first retreat, there was considerable time and attention given to each organization represented—in terms of explaining who they are and what they do. While some individuals said very little during the first day, by the end of the second day there was more widespread participation in discussions and individuals began to use language that reflected a sense of involvement and ownership, for example, saying “we” instead of “they” in referring to the State Incentive Grant.

Three-quarters of the way through the planning year we noted continuing efforts to ensure a broad, inclusive membership in the partnership. For example, considerable time was spent at quarterly meetings discussing who or what groups might be missing from the partnership and making plans to invite additional individuals to join the effort. The nature of discussions—open, fluid brainstormings of ideas—suggests a desire for this to be an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a once-and-for-all naming of partners.

In statewide collaborative partnerships, it is important but often difficult to involve “nontraditional stakeholders. . . such as historically underserved and minority communities” (Padgett, Bekemeier, & Berkowitz, 2004, 257). The WV Partnership struggled with this as well. Over the course of the planning year, efforts were made to

involve two groups in particular – youth and community members. As partner Hank Thomas cautioned, “There’s a danger in . . . state level people sitting around and making decisions without consulting folks that have to actually put it in practice.” Likewise, partner Mike Graham stressed the importance of including young people in the partnership, commenting, “I really think we need youth involvement . . . If we don’t, then it’s just like the adults trying to tell the kids what to do. . . . and there’s so much [research] out there about peers working with peers, peers educating peers. [It] gives it more credibility”. As a result of the group’s concerns, the Community/Youth Workgroup—including several partners and PRC staff members as well as additional community member—was formed and became one of the most active and productive partnership workgroups.

Attempts to involve community and youth representatives paid off. At the beginning of the year, PRC staff members and partners representing state agencies were the people most actively involved in meetings—sharing ideas, voicing concerns, and making suggestions with representatives from community organizations and youth partners tending to be less actively involved. There was a shift in this balance over the course of the planning year. During the third quarterly meeting the partners who participated most actively were youth members and two representing community groups. While one PRC staffer saw this shift as a major success of the partnership’s planning year, another noted work still needed—expressing her desire for the two young people on the partnership to become more actively and meaningfully involved and for the notion of youth leadership to become a more “integral part” of the partnership, rather than something people just “give lip service to.”

Also, several partners were concerned that only one of the state's two major research universities was involved in the project, referring to a long-standing rivalry between the two schools.

It's almost like a missed opportunity . . . to coalesce this whole prevention system across the state and wouldn't it be great if we could put the olive leaf out and say, "Come on, let's try to do this together?" . . . How will we truly be able to move forward and do this if we don't bring all the players to the table?

Despite these struggles, participants agreed that "the really good folks" of the state are "our most precious resource" and took tremendous care to find, develop, and maintain relationships with the "right people." In the case of the WV Partnership, the "right people" meant individuals in non-appointed but high level leadership positions in their own organizations. It also meant people who "get it," as one PRC staffer put it—people who are committed to prevention and to the state and who also understand and value collaboration and are open to learning and change. According to the PRC's Cassie Unger, the partners are an exceptional group of individuals.

This is a phenomenal group of folks. . . . They have influence and respect in their areas of expertise. . . [Some] . . . work for very little and they do it year after year after year and you're never going to get them down. . . . These are folks that have . . . turned down [other positions] to stay here. It's the commitment. . . to the state, to the people of the state.

Partner Sally Berry is a case in point. In spite of a significant recent increase in her work load because of federal and state budget cuts, she remains passionately committed to collaborative prevention work: "There's no money. . . but my heart's in this stuff. My

heart's in coordination. My heart's in planning. My heart's in legislation. My heart's in making the system better.”

“Relationships Have to Come First”

Most partners had positive personal and/or professional relationships with one or more PRC staff members and/or with each other prior to the formation of the WV Partnership. We heard story after story about prior connections among participants—about how they had worked for and with each other professionally, been each other's Sunday school teacher, ushered in each other's weddings and so on. As Carl Young put it, “We [PRC staff] have relationships with just about everybody in that room and I think that helps. Plus, . . . many of them [partners] have relationships [with each other] outside the context of us being involved in it at all.” These prior relationships and experiences provided opportunities to work together, develop trust, and perhaps even share power, as PRC staff member Alan Keener explained it: “If you have worked on projects together, and been challenged to do something, it's a team effort and that develops that sort of bond and that trust. And then you are willing to share some of your . . . power maybe.”

Another PRC staff member noted the importance of relationships as the foundation for the partnership, contrasting West Virginia with other states where a lack of attention to relationship-building resulted in failure to develop successful, sustainable collaborations.

Other places failed [because] they didn't have a foundation of relationships. They got money and when the money was gone, the relationships were gone. And many of us have had relationships with these folks for many, many years and those are

relationships that are grounded in working together and knowing each other's families The foundation of this whole grant *is* those relationships.

Likewise, for Cassie Unger, relationships are the most important part of her PRC job and they are the reason individuals came to the partnership table.

The most important part of my job is the relationships I have with other people in the state, with other people federally, and with the staff here. . . . Products I produce are secondary. . . . The relationships have to come first. . . . The people who are at the table [as partners] are there because of the nature of their roles [*and* because] we have relationships with them and we have worked together on things. . . . It's based on trust.

While it takes time for trusting relationships to develop, this group may have had an advantage because, as partner Marty Thompson noted, "We're a small state and everybody knows everybody. . . . A lot of us knew one another; we [had] worked together. . . . We had developed a lot of trust We just totally jumped in. . . . That's part of our Appalachian culture." Along the same lines, partner Anne Kimble talked about people in this state as "really good social capital builders," as adept at building a "web of connections. . . that builds trust . . . and makes it possible to get things done based on the fact that you can trust other people to do what they say they're going to do."

Interestingly, Anne came into the partnership with few pre-existing relationships with other participants. It can be difficult for newcomers to enter groups with tight social bonds already formed, but individuals coming into the partnership with less developed connections seemed to feel relatively comfortable, as Anne noted: "It's been very good for me because I don't know the players. . . . I don't think that people from the other

agencies really know me and know what I do. . . . It takes time. Part of it is that I'm still searching for a way to connect and fit." Similarly, Carol Kress, a partner who knew few others at the beginning of the planning year, was optimistic and enthusiastic about the possibility of developing new, mutually beneficial connections with individuals and organizations. "I'm excited, most of all, to learn who the other folks are around the table. . . . That's exciting to me to do the networking . . . because [now] I have more resources. Plus, I get to tell them what we do and can help them out maybe."

The fluidity of group membership, with continuous adding/changing of partners and workgroup assignments, helped to avoid the exclusivity that can result when dense networks and strong social capital exists within a group (Portes, 1998). Another reason newcomers like Anne and Carol felt comfortable in the group despite having fewer prior relationships, was that a great deal of time and attention was devoted to relationship-building, particularly in the early months of the planning year. At the first retreat, for example, lengthy personal introductions and a Native American Medicine Wheel activity invited participants to talk about their personalities and values, enabling them to get to know one another better and trust each other more. Also, the meeting rules or "considerations," stressing the importance of listening to each other, and the "acronym police", ticketing individuals for using short-hand communication that might exclude those unfamiliar with the jargon, created an inviting, inclusive environment and facilitated the development of comfortable, trusting relationships. Participants appreciated the team-building that occurred. Partner Bill Kushner, for example, spoke of the retreat as a "vital and necessary piece of quality time that needed to take place. . . to

get people feeling comfortable not only with the other people around the table but figuring out . . . how they can fit into the process.”

According to Padgett, Bekemeier, and Berkowitz (2004), successful partnership formation includes the “fostering of trustworthy interpersonal relationships among participant-representatives” (253). Likewise, Foss, Bonaiuto, Johnson, and Moreland (2003) identify the building of trusting relationships within one’s own organization as well as across organizations as the first task in establishing new partnerships. In light of this, as well as our own observations and interviews, we believe the partnership’s planning year accomplishments may be attributed, at least in part, to its success in developing, maintaining, and strengthening relationships. Not unlike what Burk and Keeley (2002) learned from their study of a successful collaborative effort in an Appalachian community in Pennsylvania, it seems that while other factors played a role, “the close cooperation, respect, communication, and trust [between participants] . . . [was] the foundation upon which all else was built.” (72)

However, this focus on relationship-building took time and attention from tasks such as the development of a shared vision. Some participants believed the emphasis on relationships slowed the group’s progress too much, as partner Will Kuhn’s comments about a team-building exercise illustrate: “In retrospect I don’t think it was a waste of time because I learned a lot about everybody in that room and I’m sure everybody learned a lot about me . . . [but] sometimes I think we stretch things to the Nth degree. And maybe we should speed up things a little bit. “

Shared Vision: “That Part is Still Unclear”

Including a broad range of stakeholders and encouraging the development of trusting relationships among them facilitated the collaboration process and set the stage for what may have been the hardest part of this endeavor—the construction of shared understandings related to the statewide prevention system the group hoped to build as well as to the roles and responsibilities of the partnership and the PRC. At a broad level there was shared vision within the partnership from early in the process. At their first meeting partners agreed to work collaboratively to obtain a State Incentive Grant (SIG) and, regardless of their success in getting the grant, to create a comprehensive statewide system to promote community well-being. Also, they agreed to focus on providing assistance for communities with highest needs and fewest resources.

This general agreement should not be downplayed. Several participants spoke enthusiastically about the timing being right for a SIG because, as PRC staff Cassie Unger noted, “all those people [now] have the same vision; they want the same thing; they’re committed. We really have gotten to that point. . . . We’re all working for the same cause, and shar[ing] information and talk[ing] to each other.” Similarly, Patty Lofland, also with the PRC, spoke about the importance of taking advantage of this opportunity because, “We’re actually all talking the same language. . . . Folks in the state government are hearing from their folks in federal leadership that it’s okay to sit at the table [together]. . . . We’ve never been on the same page [before] The time is now.” Beyond this moment of broad agreement, however, shared visions—about prevention or the role of the partnership—had not clearly emerged, as partner Bill Kushner explained toward the end of the planning year.

I think the shared vision thing will probably emerge. . . . I mean we can come up with a shared vision of communities staying healthy and free of substance abuse and enjoying wonderful prevention strategies. . . . But in terms of a shared vision for what the partnership is all about. . . That part is still unclear to me.

Bill was not alone in his lack of clarity. Many partners, and even PRC staff, spoke about their confusion throughout the planning year. Relatively early during the year, partner Anne Kimble was uncertain about the nature of the project.

[I'm] not too clear yet about what are going to be the specific proposals that . . . will be the guts of the SIG grant. . . . We're still identifying the players and getting the outlines of what exists right now . . . I don't have a clear idea yet of what are going to be the activities or programs that we're going to want to fund with the additional dollars.

Such confusion continued as the planning year progressed. About halfway through the year, Laura Ingram, one of the most active partners, observed:

Some people are still trying to figure out what it is all about . . . Everybody has their own way of looking at it. . . . [We] didn't come away from the retreat with any definition of prevention. . . . We are all still kind of confused and trying to figure out what the heck are we doing [It is] still . . . flying all over the place.

Leonard Nichols, another actively involved partner, speaking with us near the end of the planning year, admitted, "I still get a little confused . . . [about the grants] and the confusion continues to grow . . . I *think* we have a vision but my vision is still a little foggy . . . I know what the end goal is but again, I'm a little confused about how to get there." Likewise, partner Hal Moore, at the end of the planning year, talked about

how difficult it had been for him to understand the project, even though he had been involved since early in the year.

I'm still trying to grasp the whole scope of the project. It has taken a long time for me to just get the whole context and I'm not sure I understand all of the ramifications or where this can go. . . Things are still fairly vague and cloudy. . . I'm beginning to understand the actual project . . . but I don't think it's a shared vision yet; . . . But that doesn't mean that the project can't move forward. . . . I don't sense ownership at this point in time because I'm still trying to figure out what it is that's trying to be accomplished.

Confusion extended beyond the partners to the PRC staff, one of whom referred to the "ambiguity" that existed in both groups, saying, "I don't think *anybody* knows." Another, speaking with us midway into the planning year, agreed.

What's missing . . . right now is . . . understand[ing] of what this is all about. Even here, in our own shop, we've got to try to make sure we are all on the same page. I think that's probably [our] first task here [at the PRC] is to make sure that we all have a common understanding of how we are to proceed . . . and then the partnership itself needs to be on the same page.

The lack of clarity was not a result of participants downplaying the importance of shared vision. Early in the year, partner Charles Estep stated that it was "Practical" that the group develop a "clear vision, mission, and stay in focus of that. . . [We need to have] clearly defined goals and not divert off the track in meeting those goals." He spoke about the need to "narrow down the exact goals and objectives and activities," saying the main questions the partnership needs to answer are: "What's our focus going to be? What's

our mission? Where are we going? How are we going to get there?” PRC staff also viewed the development of a shared vision as a critical step in the group’s process.

Some attributed the confusion to varying levels of prevention-related experience or knowledge. Partner Sally Berry, for example, said, “I don’t think everybody’s in the same place. . . . Some people . . . know it like the back of their hand and there’s some that are still not really sure why they’re [in the partnership].” Others spoke of conflicting beliefs—for example, about addiction and the extent to which it is seen as a disease, on the one hand, or as a result of particular psycho-social, or even social-structural factors. One partner worried that such conflicts could be problematic in making decisions about distributing monies to communities if the “big SIG” was funded.

Still others saw the confusion as a result of differences in discipline or organization-related terminology, as a PRC staff member’s comments illustrate.

[We’re] just speaking different languages. . . . What is prevention? What are we going to call it? . . . Let them [partners] have a conversation. . . and they’re going to be like, “Oh, we’re just calling it different things.” And the light bulbs are going to go on. You just have to allow people time for that to happen – to say, “Oh, you’re calling it this and I call it this, but it’s still the same thing.”

Along the same lines, partner Hank Thomas spoke of “continuous struggle” to create shared visions, but also noted that “other people think like I do. . . everybody is talking the same talk. . . They might call it something different but . . . it’s all the same process. . . . We are all talking the same thing.”

Another factor salient to this issue were the official—but shifting—SIG guidelines. For example, at the beginning of the year, grant guidelines specified a focus

on youth, but later in the year the guidelines changed, requiring a lifespan approach—from “womb to tomb,” as it was often referred to. Also, at least one partner worried about a possible “mismatch between what the grant [was] asking for and what the vision of the [partnership] is.” On the one hand, partnership participants were trying to develop a vision using an open, creative process with minimal constraints. On the other hand, grant guidelines had to be followed in order to enhance the probability of funding.

The biggest concern I saw was were we going to focus on substance abuse [exclusively] or were we going to focus on . . . total health and the question has been bantered a little bit. I think I heard that if we’re looking towards this grant, that it has to be in the substance abuse realm but the . . . [partnership] still kept health as the main focus with the idea that if you don’t address *all* the dimensions of health then you’re not getting to what substance abuse *prevention* [is all about] There may be a mismatch there between what the grant is asking for and what the vision of that group is.

Regardless of the reasons for the lack of clarity, participants agreed that shared understandings were important, as noted above, and there is wide agreement about the importance of shared vision in prior research on effective collaboration (e.g., Mattessich & Monsey, 1994; Reilly, 2001; Campbell, 1999). Failing to construct shared visions may jeopardize a collaborative process in a number of ways, for example, by distancing participants from the process. Partner Gill Brown is a case in point; he was surprised that by the middle of the planning year “No one really knew what it is. . . . Everybody is like, ‘Well, you’ve got to do [this],’ but we don’t really know what we’re doing it for.” He cautioned that the lack of understanding might cause individuals to withdraw from the

collaboration process, as he had done at times. “I really don’t understand so I just remove myself from that. . . . You might lose some people.”

Whereas participants agreed that attention should be directed to this issue, some viewed the need more urgently than others. Those who viewed the development of shared vision as something that would evolve naturally as a result of the group working together over time were not inclined to rush the process. Partner Hank Thomas, for example, commented that the partnership was “finding its way along and developing a mission.” He was confident the “agenda” would eventually become “well-defined.” Similarly, PRC staff Carl Young noted: “It takes awhile to develop that, It was ambitious to try to have a vision after a year.” These views are consistent with the partnership’s focus on allowing its process to develop naturally and perhaps also with Senge’s (2000, 78)) notion of the value of emergent rather than pre-designed purpose.

Others, however, lamented the lack of time and energy devoted to the construction of shared understandings. In their view, a factor constraining the development of shared vision was the lack of explicit attention to that goal—a failure to tend that part of the garden, if you will. One PRC staff member believed the PRC had not “spent enough time with the partnership talking about shared vision, about what that means, about what our expectations are and what theirs are. . . . I don’t think we’ve done a very good job of informing the partnership and the workgroups about what we’re doing. . . . We need to kind of have a conversation with the partners about what our responsibilities are and what theirs are and kind of flesh all that out.” Likewise, partner Bill Kushner, while pleased with the general “information flow,” in the partnership,

would have liked “more substantive feedback [from the PRC] all along the way. If we’re going to be any kind of an advisory or even governance structure, we need that.”

The partnership’s struggle with constructing shared understandings is not surprising. According to Phipps (2004), “collaborative planning has its challenges. Cocreating a clear and challenging vision and developing shared meaning . . . may cause stress for those newly involved in shared leadership” (87). This kind of “collaborative, facilitative leadership [involves] . . . providing context in which all interested parties, the leader[s] included, can together create a vision, mission or purpose they can collectively uphold” (Kegan, 1994, 322). However, as Avery (1999) notes, collaborative leadership works best when there is an equal emphasis on both “business results” and “meaningful experience.” Avery cautions against letting “one focus become more important than the other, lest you invite failure” (37). Perhaps the WV Partnership’s focus on process – especially emphasizing people and relationships—meant a lack of attention to shared understandings about goals and strategies—their “business results.” A more balanced focus may have resulted in fewer participants feeling uneasy about the delay in developing shared understandings and accomplishing goals.

On the other hand, the partnership’s focus on process seems to have laid a firm foundation for the future development of shared understandings. In other words, the process fostered trusting relationships and a collaborative culture that may provide a strong foundation for consensus building, developing authentic shared visions, and a comfortableness with learning, change, and growth. To the extent this occurred, it is consistent with Senge’s (2000, 78) argument that “Purpose is emergent. It can never be specified by design.”

Sustaining, Replicating, and Inquiring: The Process Goes On

It is fitting to end this story – about a planning effort focused on *process*—in a non-conclusive, problem-posing rather than problem-solving manner, in the spirit of Richardson’s (1998) advice that qualitative research writers “view their work as process rather than as definitive representation” (360). To that end, we close by summarizing what we have learned and reflecting about what we still do not understand and hope that we, and others, will continue to study.

While at the close of the planning year, the WV Partnership had not achieved shared understandings about important substantive and organizational issues, it *had* achieved the first of its two major goals, the procurement of a State Incentive Grant. There is no single, best way to interpret the group’s planning year experiences, but we believe the partnership’s successes are related in large part to its people and relationship-focused process. Ironically, that very focus also may be the group’s major challenge as it makes its way through its second year and begins to implement the State Incentive Grant.

It is noteworthy that the material, human, and social capital that played critical roles in the WV Partnership were provided or facilitated largely by the Prevention Resource Center. Material resources were available to the partnership as a result of the planning grant obtained by the PRC. Information and skilled services were provided to the partnership directly by PRC staff throughout the year; and pre-existing social resources—in the form of trusting relationships among the “right people”—were strengthened through the facilitative efforts of the PRC staff. This observation raises important questions about the WV Partnership as well as about similar collaborative efforts. Could this collaborative planning group have come together, established an

organizational structure, and obtained a five year, 2.3 million dollar per year, State Incentive Grant without a PRC or similar organization? And what are the costs to that organization – of sustaining such an intensive effort?

Judging by Johnson, Hayes, Center, and Daley's (2004) sustainability planning model, the WV Partnership is sustainable in that it—in combination with the PRC—constitutes an infrastructure with capacity to support itself and to develop a sustainable innovation—in this case, a comprehensive statewide prevention program. However, the WV Partnership's people and relationship-focused process, that seems to have laid a strong foundation for the creation of a sustainable statewide prevention system, may have been unduly hard on the people who shouldered most of the burden for it during the planning year. As the year drew to a close, several of the enthusiastic, eager PRC staff who greeted us at the lodge on that snowy February day over a year ago, were frustrated and discouraged. They spoke of workplace tensions that were not evident the prior year. Ironically, the tensions were related, in part, to stressed relationships and declining trust among the PRC staff members themselves. As one staff member noted towards the end of the planning year, "We're pretty fractured at the PRC. . . . We have a lot of trust issues. I think friendships have evolved into alliances. . . all the stuff we really hate but [now] we find ourselves enmeshed in." The roots of these tensions predate the formation of the WV Partnership, but internal organizational difficulties intensified during the planning year.

Having participated closely in this effort, we are concerned about this turn of events and believe it is an important issue to explore in future research—with the WV Partnership—and with other collaborative planning efforts. Honest, thoughtful accounts of what it takes to successfully carry out the administrative work of collaborative projects

would provide invaluable information and insights for those preparing to undertake such endeavors in the future. Such accounts also would be helpful in making judgments about the suitability of a collaborative approach which is, as Reilly (2001) notes, a “fragile and tedious” process that should be used selectively because of the resources needed for its success.

Also, we wonder about the extent to which the WV Partnership’s process-oriented approach—that was purposefully flexible, open, non-prescriptive, and anything but formulaic—can be replicated in other states or, on a smaller scale, in local and regional communities in West Virginia. While many would welcome and find rewarding, as we did, this relaxed people and relationship-oriented approach, without a PRC to guide its development, how can other communities hope to engage effectively in this kind of collaborative planning?

While we are uneasy about recent tensions that have emerged, it is gratifying for us to be a part of this process-honoring work. As people deeply committed to West Virginia, to strengths-based social reform, and to inquiry as an *opening* rather than *closing* process, we are enthusiastic and hopeful as we, along with the partners and PRC staff, move into the next phase of this important endeavor.

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ⁱ Names of individuals and organizations have been changed to protect the privacy of participants.

ⁱⁱ Tracy LeGrow, Anne Swedberg, and Linda Spatig were the three members of the research team during the planning year. Over a twelve-month period (February, 2004 – February, 2005), we collected and analyzed data and began to disseminate formative feedback to the partnership. At the beginning of the second year of the project, when Tracy left to fulfill a graduate internship, Paula Flaherty joined the team, assisting with the development of this manuscript as well as the collection of year two data.