

Collaboration for Social Enterprises



Collaboration can be a good way of growing a social enterprise. **Jon Huggett** discusses effective collaborations and their similarities to jazz.

Great social enterprises “collaborate”. Yet great chief executives sometimes find that building alliances with other organisations can be frustrating, a waste of time, or even counter-productive.

Growing social enterprises, boldly building alliances where no enterprise has gone before – with businesses, charities, the public sector, and other social enterprises: canny chief executives lead this trek, and great boards can help. Yet for many this trek can lead to a wilderness of meetings and empty promises that do not help the cause. The terms “public-private partnerships”, “big society” and “corporate social responsibility” now seem to evoke as much cynicism as hope for productive alliances.

Miles Davis called jazz “social music”. From what I have seen around the world, effective social sector “collaboration” is more like jazz than symphony. Collaborations fail in the social sector because people treat them like Ludwig not Miles. In symphony there is a score, set parts, few soloists, a tight schedule, familiar tunes, and, most importantly, one person in charge – the conductor. Successful collaborations amongst social enterprises rarely have a set-piece plan, fixed roles

and one person in charge. Some seize up over power struggles, in the way that business partners can fall out over money.

Jazz can make good music without a set score, with parts evolving in real time, and leaders who are not always controlling. Twenty years ago, John Clarkeson, then the chief executive of the Boston Consulting Group, wrote in his seminal piece “Jazz vs. Symphony” that the leaders of creative teams were much more like the leaders of jazz bands than conductors of symphony orchestras – they created the music from great players, rather getting musicians to play great music.

Effective collaborations in the social sector are creative teams: great players brought together by common goals. For example, I’ve seen boards help by ensuring that partners share goals, and by building relationships. Scrutiny of the plan or structure seems to yield less fruit.

100,000 volunteers write Wikipedia, the fifth most popular site on the worldwide web, supported by the Wikimedia Foundation in the US, Wikimedia Deutschland, Wikimedia UK and others. Oxfam has worked with M&S, Turning Point cooperates with

various parts of the government, and Amnesty International has created a network of organisations from around the world.

In jazz sometimes leadership is shared, and there is no obvious conductor. Some of the best global NGOs are, in fact collaborations among national organisations, with no single global chief executive who can call the shots. Consider *Medécins Sans Frontières (MSF)*, a group of legally independent national organisations. Without a single, commanding global chief executive, the member organisations work together to deliver emergency medical care to the toughest places in the world within hours of a disaster. Collaboration is a means to an end, and not an unalloyed good. MSF was accused by other NGOs of being uncollaborative when it broke ranks in January 2005 and announced to the world it was no longer accepting donations to help its efforts for victims of the Asian tsunami.

Some social enterprises ignore exhortations to collaborate for “the collective”. If a community group works with one of Michael Gove’s free schools, is that being collaborative, or being, in the wartime sense, a “collaborator”?

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