

Declining Relations: Understanding Cross-Sector Partnership Failure

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Discussions about decline in organizations emerged in the late 1970s (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989); however similar conversations about partnership decline and failure have only recently begun to appear (Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Ostrower, 2005). While we know partnerships face numerous challenges due to internal and external factors like complexity and instability, to date there has been limited discussion in the partnership literatures of what factors contribute to decline and failure or how to identify decline in its early stages. Given the increasing importance of these partnerships for the public and private sectors, these discussions are especially important in determining the range of actions available to managers who face disintegrating partnerships. They can also help to prevent or mediate decline.

The paper discusses research findings based on qualitative case studies and quantitative surveys of decline in partnerships between a large U.S. governmental agency and their nonprofit partners. Specifically, the study tests two decline models with the qualitative case study data and identifies other salient decline and failure characteristics through inductive analysis of interview data and secondary data sources. These characteristics formed the basis for the quantitative survey data.

The first model is Weitzel & Jonsson's (1989:94) conception of organizational decline extended to the inter-organizational level. Cross-sector partnerships, like organizations, can go through a series of decline stages beginning with blindness to the situation, inaction, faulty action, crisis, and ultimately dissolution. The second model is taken from the strategic alliance

literature where Arino & Doz (2000) identified the influence of attributional biases as a critical factor in failure. Specifically, they argue that partnership failure usually followed a manager's perception of a gap between expectations and intermediate results. The empirical findings taken from underperforming partnerships provide researchers with an early descriptive glimpse of specific factors associated with failure and decline issues in collaborations.

While considerable attention has been given to the business-nonprofit configuration of public-private partnerships within management literature, the governmental-nonprofit focus in this research offers a new view in this domain—one that fits within MOPAN's broader view of multi-organisational relationships within and across all sectors. Understanding decline and failure in multi-organizational relationships is increasingly essential as more and more public goods and services in the United States and elsewhere move into the inter-sectoral domain (Salamon, 2002). This research can inform session track #4 participants in building a “framework that identifies the critical elements for successful societal problem solving by intersectoral collaborations [and]...brainstorm critical success factors.” Alternatively, this research speaks to the interests in track #5 by addressing aspects of their inquiry into the types and means of support that are needed to enable leaders to sustain change over time.

Themed Session #4 or #5: Intersectoral Collaborative Arrangements: Effective Vehicles for Societal Problem Solving?' or Creating Collaborative Social Technologies for Profound Social Innovation.

Key words: cross-sector partnerships, collaborative social technology, decline, failure and sustainability

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