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Abstract

Cross-sector partnerships are capable of achieving solutions to large scale societal problems, which when successful, are well-publicized. Partnering organizations not only reap reputational acclaim but garner valuable organizational benefits. Membership within successful partnerships would undoubtedly be considered a competitive advantage, yet several of these successful relationships have chosen to forgo this valuable position. Instead of retaining intellectual property, partnering organizations are sharing successful processes and practices with peers and competitors. This research examined three examples of best practice cross-sector partnerships to identify relationship success factors, how they involved other organizations and why they shared successful social responsibility initiatives with others.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, cross-sector partnerships, nonprofit

Introduction

There are many motives for entering into a relationship with an organization from another sector. Such motives define the rationale for private sector involvement in societal issues and determine the level of commitment an organization is prepared to invest. While some relationships are based on a simple philanthropic exchange between a for-profit organization (FPO) and a nonprofit organization (NPO), others are deeply integrated and exhibit higher levels of commitment, engagement and interaction between partners (Austin, 2000a, 2000b). Those FPOs enacting their social responsibility agendas through partnering with NPOs may find exponential value in integrative (or social) partnerships (Austin, 2000a, 2000b; Berger, Cunningham & Drumwright, 2007). Such social partnerships encourage sectors to share resources, knowledge and skills as they work towards societal issue resolution.

Social partnerships, through cross-sector collaboration, produce important societal value through initiatives that raise awareness, encourage positive behavior and invest in solutions. Such partnerships are applauded as necessary intervention where the public sector has failed, or requires assistance, to meet social and environmental needs (Austin, 2000a, 2000b; Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Waddock, 1988). Investment in societal issues, particularly towards those in which FPOs are aligned, or equipped to do so, can provide much needed solutions whilst presenting the FPO with a competitive advantage (Porter & Kramer, 2006). If clear reputational advantages can be gained from the uniqueness of CSR initiatives (Porter & Kramer, 2006) enacted through cross-sector partnerships, it remains unclear why some FPOs would not only share information about successful initiatives, but invite other members of the private sector to participate to the point where the initiative is left unbranded.

This research first sought to examine the motivational drivers of social partnerships and how they aligned with the desire to be socially responsible, innovative or gain a competitive advantage. Furthermore, this research explored how such relationships evolved and achieved their well-publicized success. This paper addresses an unfamiliar notion whereby members of the private sector actively seek to involve other FPOs in their CSR programs and practice. In doing so, are these pioneering organizations losing their competitive advantage or is there more to be gained from sharing social responsibility best practice?

Data Collection

Three Australian-based case studies were purposefully selected for investigation based on information-oriented criteria which demonstrated maximum variation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). All involved members of the private and nonprofit sectors and had demonstrated success in cross-sector partnership implementation and achievement. Variation occurred in relation to the social issue they were targeting plus the duration of the relationship. This ranged from two to 27 years at the time of interviews.

Following organizational consent, semi-structured interviews were held with representatives of all core
organizations; including top level management, middle management and employees who performed in a variety of roles. Only participants able to offer a retrospective account or able to provide supportive evidence of their respective partnership’s formation or evolution were included in the interview schedule. As partnerships’ evolved so too did the number of additional partners; as such, several additional partner organizations were included in the interview schedule. In total 38 semi-structured interviews were held across the three cases. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency of themes and questions.

Background documentation including organization web pages, annual reports, sustainability reports and, publications documenting historical information were used to support evidence gained through interviews. Such secondary information was used to further triangulate data (Yin, 2003). Data were coded and contrasted against theories pertaining to collaboration including CSR.

Discussion

Many motives were sought and realized for the three cases involved in this research. This paper focuses on four critical core motives; employee engagement, access and insight into new markets, significant social value and, resource dependency.

Firstly, the desire to obtain a competitive advantage was aligned to the motive, ‘employee engagement’, whereby companies sought to provide opportunities for staff to become involved in activities harboring social value. The value in providing such opportunities is supported by literature whereby motivation, morale, retention and recruitment are improved (Austin, 2000a; Berger, Cunningham & Drumwright, 2006; Cardskadden & Lober, 1998; Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Samu & Wymer, 2001).

A second motive, ‘access and insight into new markets’, also complemented the desire to obtain competitive advantage. Whether this improves the level of awareness of a societal issue or extends the market reach for an organization, this strengthens an organization’s visibility (Austin, 2000a; Kanter, 1999; Rondinelli & London, 2002; Samu & Wymer 2001; Van Huijstee, Francken & Leroy, 2007).

Common to all cases was the third, broader motive to create ‘significant social value’. Statements such as “you have to think about how you are assisting the communities that you work in” (FPO a) and, “I think [FPO b] genuinely wants to help the community that it operates in...we want to do something that makes a difference” (FPO b), represented those interviewed about the genuine desire to ‘give back’ (FPO c) to the communities in which they operated. Such views were corroborated by organizational vision statements. This evidence supported the rationale that organizations were involved because they had a genuine desire to be socially responsible.

The fourth common motive, ‘resource dependency’, provided an insight into determining why organizations were prepared to forgo the competitive advantage of being uniquely associated with these innovative initiatives. The partnership process itself promotes resource sharing, with each sector inputting some form of organizational value ranging from knowledge and skills to financial investment (Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Waddock, 1991). Sharing resources to innovatively and adequately address societal problems was recognized by all sectors.

Once operational as partnership initiatives, those addressing societal problems were expanded or replicated to achieve additional success; such progression reinforces Glasberger’s (2007) literature on scaling-up. Additional partners were invited to participate which subsequently extended available resources for partnership initiatives. Multiple partners sharing resources thereby creates a sustainable platform for a CSR initiative to succeed. Thus, the invitation of new partners becomes an essential mechanism to partnership growth; collectively the expanding network creates an expansive solution.

Far from losing their competitive edge, several organizational benefits were revealed from inclusivity. In particular, organizations are positioned as leaders in best practice and strengthen their internal and external reputations. It can therefore be hypothesized from the findings of this research that there are clear reputational advantages to sharing successful initiatives that outweigh ‘uniqueness’. Additionally, there is reduced NPO dependency on a sole FPO through inclusivity. Multiple FPO partners also provide an opportunity for the original FPO to withdraw and seek an alternate portfolio, allowing contribution to resolve other societal issues.

In conclusion, CSR programs and the underlying ethical values that drive organizations, regardless of sector, to become involved in large scale social initiatives cannot be isolated to a single motive such as maintaining a social
licensure to operate or to achieve competitive advantage. Instead, this research provided important insights into the complexity of motives and values that drive organizations towards collaboration and inclusivity. Rather than single organizations assume sole responsibility to find solutions, resource sharing, through expansive and evolving cross-sector partnerships, provides a more efficient model to enact positive societal change.

References


