Client Relations: More Than Just "Business"

Partners in Your Success

Courtney L. Malloy, Ph.D. and Patricia A. Yee, Ph.D.

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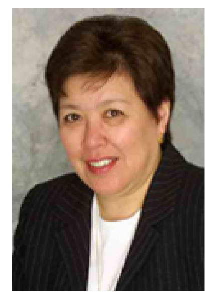
Courtney L. Malloy, Ph.D.

In our roles as evaluators at Vital Research, LLC we have worked with a variety of clients – from single researchers to government agencies, from community-based organizations to commercial service businesses, and from school districts to multi-billion dollar companies. We have worked with clients on short-term projects lasting only one week and with other clients for as long as 16 years. What we have learned in our firm's 24 years of operation is that our success in the field of evaluation depends just as much on cultivating effective client relationships as it does on our skills and expertise. We have also learned that when we approach our client relationships as collaborative partnerships, we produce more effective evaluations and enjoy more professionally rewarding experiences.


Patricia A. Yee, Ph.D.

In this article, we review the existing literature on partnership evolution to offer strategies for developing collaborative evaluator-client relationships with clients. Additionally, we share lessons that we have learned from working with a diverse set of clients in a variety of fields. We begin with a brief introduction to partnerships and our approach to client relationships. A synthesis of the literature on partnership evolution is provided and applied to the evaluator-client relationship. We conclude with recommendations that can be used to nurture effective partnerships in the field of evaluation.

Defining Partnerships

Based on the benefits of collective action, partnerships are groups of organizations voluntarily working together to solve problems of mutual concern and accomplish common goals. According to Gray (1989), partnerships offer mechanisms through which "parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (pg. 5). The research literature is rich with examples of organizations coming together to solve problems and address organizational improvement concerns. Collaboration among organizations has occurred for decades in the fields of construction, publishing, film and recording, textiles, and the aircraft industry (Powell, 1990). Partnerships have been documented in a variety of policy areas including education, environmental policy, welfare reform, public health, transportation, and prison management (Dunn, 2000; Kamieniecki, Shafie, & Silvers, 2000; Rom, 2000; Rosenau, 2000; Schneider, 2000; Sparer, 2000; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith, & Hentschke, 2004b).

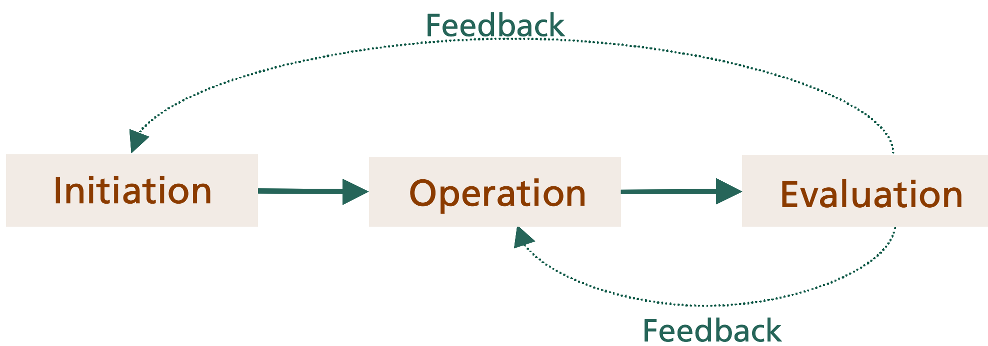
Partnerships can emerge in a variety of forms and have been termed interorganizational relationships (Oliver, 1990; Ring & Ven, 1994; Robertson, 1998), strategic alliances (Austin, 2000; Gulati, 1995; Kanter, 1994), and networks (Powell, 1990). They are typically voluntary, enduring relationships that involve resource-sharing and joint decision-making.

Our most satisfying relationships with evaluation clients result when we approach the relationship as an evolving partnership. We attempt to move beyond mere cooperation with our clients to a place of partnership where we share resources and work collaboratively with them to gather information, answer critical questions, make decisions, and solve problems. These clients view us as an integral member of their team, invested in their success; we see them as partners who contribute numerous assets to the evaluation process.

The Evolution of Effective Evaluator-Client Partnerships

From the literature, we know that effective partnerships progress through several phases as they evolve and mature (See, for example, Austin, 2000; Bardach, 1998; Child & Faulkner, 1998; Coe, 1988; Gray, 1989; Oliver, 1990; Waddock, 1989; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Malloy, 2005). A partnership is initiated when an individual or organization has a specific need that stimulates the search for a partner. Next, the work of the partnership begins: formal meetings occur and collaborative structures emerge. A partnership matures when stakeholders begin to evaluate their successes and challenges.

Drawing on Waddock (1989) and Wohlstetter, Smith, and Malloy (2005), our synthesis and application of the literature on partnership evolution is organized into three distinct phases: 1) Initiation; 2) Operations; and 3) Evaluation.



Initiation Phase

During the initiation phase, the structures and processes of a partnership are informal as participants begin to learn about each other and develop the purpose for the endeavor. Research has uncovered that a number of conditions facilitate the initiation of effective partnerships, including complementary needs and assets, compatible goals, and trust.

Complementary Needs and Assets. Organizations often decide to partner not because they have the same needs, but because they have complementary needs and assets. Research suggests that partnerships are initiated to meet a variety of financial, political, and organizational needs (Austin, 2000; Child & Faulkner, 1998; Kanter, 1994; Oliver, 1990; Robertson, 1998; Waide, 1999; Weiss, 1987; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith, & Hentschke, 2004a). Organizations often require additional *financial* resources to begin, enhance, or significantly innovate programs, which require them to seek a new partner. In some instances, organizations benefit *politically* by gaining greater credibility or legitimacy from well-established partner organizations. Other organizations establish collaborative arrangements in order to meet necessary legal or regulatory requirements that could not have been met without an appropriate partner. Finally, partnerships are often initiated to help organizations reach *organizational* goals and work more effectively toward accomplishing strategic missions. Through an effective partnership, an organization may find new ways to increase efficiency and productivity. Moreover, organizations are often able to solve problems more effectively with the aid of a partner because greater capacity is bought to bear on issues of concern (Weiss, 1987).

The reasons underlying the initiation of an evaluation relationship vary. The client may need an evaluator to meet a requirement from a funding agency or government entity. In other instances, the client seeks an external evaluator to as one way to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of an evaluation process for stakeholders. We have been hired numerous times to provide an "objective" and "unbiased" evaluation that will be perceived as legitimate by stakeholders. Also, clients initiate relationships with evaluators in order to increase their efficiency and productivity: they seek information that can be used to improve organizational or program performance.

Additionally, we have been approached to assist organizations with program monitoring activities because they simply do not have the requisite resources to accomplish the task on their own. Finally, in a few cases, we have initiated partnerships with clients because they bring unique resources that we do not have. For example, we have partnered with clients because they have special expertise or access to targeted populations in order to be more competitive for funding awards.

It is important to note that in order for a client relationship to evolve into a partnership, complementary needs and assets must be present. That is, the relationship is not one-sided, wherein only the evaluator offers capacity and expertise to accomplish the evaluation activities. The evaluator may indeed be hired because they possess assets – evaluation skills and expertise – that can meet the client's need for an evaluation. However, in order to nurture a true partnership that will last over time, the evaluator must view and approach the client as a partner that also brings essential assets to the relationship. Clients have the potential to contribute more than just the financial resources required for the evaluation. They are also often the content experts; they know the most about their organization, their program, and their stakeholders. Moreover, the client can broker relationships with key stakeholders that are essential to accomplishing evaluation activities such as data collection and report dissemination. When the evaluator-client relationship is not viewed as one in which both the evaluator and the client have complementary needs and assets, there is little hope that a long lasting partnership will evolve.

Compatible Goals. Critical to the successful initiation and evolution of a partnership are compatible goals **–** not identical, but common or mutually beneficial – that might not be achieved otherwise (Austin, 2000; Das & Teng, 1998; Kanter, 1994; Oliver, 1990; Robertson, 1998; Spillett, 1999). Successful partnerships are win-win situations in which partners view the relationship as a prerequisite to successfully accomplishing an endeavor.

In order for an evaluator-client relationship to evolve into a partnership, it is essential that both the client and the evaluator clearly understand the purpose of the evaluation and have compatible views of what the evaluation can achieve. Furthermore, both the client and evaluator must view the relationship, and the product of the relationship – the evaluation – as necessary and beneficial. This is often challenging in instances when the client is mandated to seek out an evaluator. There can be resistance to losing a portion of program funding to an evaluator as well as fear that future program funds will be lost due to evaluation findings. In some cases, clients do not deem the evaluation as necessary or useful, and only see it as another form of regulation and bureaucracy. In these instances, the client is often most concerned with producing an evaluation that will be viewed favorably by a funding agency, which is in direct conflict with the goal of the evaluator to produce a high quality, objective evaluation. In these cases, we attempt to introduce our clients to the value of evaluation and help them see the benefits of the process for program improvement. We also point out that evaluations are needed to show the positive effects of their hard work and dedication. Such an approach encourages the client to view the goals of the evaluation in a different light and move beyond thinking about the evaluation as merely an accountability-driven process.

Trust. Finally, trust is needed to facilitate the initiation of partnerships; without a mutual willingness to work together, the relationship is unlikely to evolve. Initial trust in partnerships is often established through existing networks and relationships (Austin, 2000; Waddock, 1989; Waide, 1999). Much of our evaluation work, for example has grown by word-of-mouth. New clients often come to us by referral; someone they trust has told them about our work and recommended us. Other clients hear about us through reputable networks that we belong to (e.g., American Evaluation Association, California Association of Homes and Services for the Aging).

Robertson (1998) suggests that open communication, shared values, and mutual respect among partners increases the interorganizational trust that is required to sustain a partnership. We have learned over time that in order to develop and maintain effective partnerships with clients, we must listen to them, respect their points of view, culture, and experiences, and craft evaluations that meet their needs rather than serve our agendas. Such an approach builds our clients' trust in us and enables us to nurture a long lasting relationship that is mutually beneficial.

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For example, a couple years ago we were hired by a local foundation to conduct an evaluation of a program providing direct assistance (e.g., rent, utility, car, and medical bill payments, purchase of furniture and appliances, provision of food and clothing vouchers) to working poor families and individuals in Los Angeles. We approached the beginning of our relationship with the foundation much like we approach our other client relationships: building rapport, asking questions, and listening. We treated our clients as the experts: they knew more than we did about their program and the stakeholders that would be included in the evaluation.

Once the partnership was initiated, we continued to nurture trust throughout the evaluation process. We worked closely with foundation staff to develop data collection instruments that would provide them with the information they wanted. We met with the foundation's Advisory Board for the program and with the Board of Directors to provide them information about the evaluation. As part of the program, the foundation partnered with nine community-based organizations; we relied on foundation staff to broker relationships with community partners rather than directly approaching them in our role as "external evaluator." The evaluation went smoothly because we included the foundation staff in the evaluation activities and respected their contribution to the evaluation. They learned to trust us because we viewed them as content experts, communicated openly about evaluation activities, included them throughout the process, and listened closely to their concerns and needs. Since the completion of that initial report, our relationship with the foundation has endured and evolved. They continue to seek our advise on how to improve program activities, keep us updated on changes to the program, and invite us to key meetings and events. We are viewed by the foundation as integral to program improvement; we view our relationship with the foundation as one of our strongest and most promising partnerships.

Operations Phase

In the operations stage, the real work of developing a partnership occurs: boundaries are negotiated, structures for decision-making emerge, strategies for communication and information flow are developed, and other stakeholders (e.g., data sources, program staff) become involved. A partnership between two or more organizations, in essence, becomes an organization itself during the operations phase, with members of each partner organization striving to improve the organizational performance of the partnership and meet specific goals. Like any organization, a partnership requires effective internal structures and processes to ensure smooth governance, open communication, and accountability as well as strong leadership (Waddock, 1989; Wohlstetter et al., 2005).

Governance and Communication. Explicit decision-making processes and governance structures are essential to effective partnerships. Such processes provide real forums for stakeholders to come together, make decisions, and carry out the work of the partnership (Kanter, 1994; Waddock, 1989). In order for effective decision-making to take place, it is essential to provide timely and appropriate information to all stakeholders. Partnerships must have open communication in which partners share the information needed to collaborate including their objectives and goals, technical data, or challenges (Kanter, 1994).

In evaluator-client relationships, it is essential that the evaluator and the client establish guidelines and norms for decision-making processes and information flow. Open processes will facilitate the trust and mutual respect that is necessary to sustain a long lasting partnership. We often begin our evaluations by creating committees of invested stakeholders that can help us make better decisions about data collection processes or help us construct relevant data collection instruments. Regular meetings with key staff and stakeholders as well as consistent progress reports and email updates from both the client and the evaluator ensure that the work of the evaluation is being carried out. We dedicate a large portion of our budget to decision-making and communication processes because we view them as essential to developing effective client relationships.

Approximately six years ago, we began working with a local professional school. We were initially hired to conduct a comprehensive review of the department and its curricular and degree programs. We began the process by inviting stakeholders within the professional school as well as representatives from key offices throughout the University (e.g., Provost's Office, Registrar) to serve on a committee that provided valuable feedback and helped us craft the evaluation. Such a forum encouraged the buy-in and cooperation we needed to conduct a successful evaluation, but it also helped us communicate more effectively with key stakeholders and make better decisions about evaluation activities, data collection processes, and reporting.

Accountability Plan. The operation of a partnership is most effective when an accountability plan guides the work of stakeholders. Das and Teng (1998) suggest that in order to facilitate effective operations in a partnership, the goals, structures, and processes for the partnerships must be clearly defined. An accountability plan establishes the outcomes for which each partner is responsible, outlines the constituents to whom the partner is accountable, and delineates the consequences of failure to meet established goals. In the field of evaluation, accountability plans often take the form of a letter of agreement, scope of work, memorandum of understanding, or contract. We have learned the importance of clearly specifying what we will and will not provide as a result of the relationship as well as what the client will and will not provide. Some of our most difficult relationships have been those in which roles and responsibilities have been unclear or attempts are made to modify the accountability plan without mutual consent after it has been established.

Moreover, we have also learned the importance of adhering to the guidelines established in our accountability plan in order to nurture mutual respect and maintain boundaries. For example, a few years ago we began working with a community-based organization that provided after school programs for at-risk youth. The organization received a grant to develop a new program focused on healthy eating and exercise and was required to evaluate the program by its funding agency. The budget was extremely limited for the evaluation; hence, we tried to be as specific as possible about our roles and responsibilities, most of which involved pre-post testing of students' knowledge about healthy eating and exercise. However, in the early stages of the project, the executive director frequently called on us to go beyond the scope of work and asked us to do searches for curriculum, review curricular programs and create lessons, and translate curriculum into multiple languages. We were invited to numerous staff meetings and operational meetings in which the executive director would attempt to delegate additional tasks to us. We struggled initially to set boundaries and hold the client accountable for their roles and responsibilities. Over time, frustration with the client emerged, and the relationship ultimately suffered.

Leadership. Finally, effective leadership is necessary to manage the operation of a partnership and to ensure that the work is carried out as intended. Effective leaders in collaborative relationships have three main roles: 1) architects, 2) information brokers, and 3) boundary spanners. Architects are responsible for the day-to-day management of a partnership and create the internal structures and processes that enable key players to carry out the tasks at hand. Information brokers distribute information throughout the partnership, ensuring that stakeholders receive the information they need to participate effectively. Finally, boundary spanners serve as liaisons to the external environment, providing other constituents with key information about the partnership as well as buffering the partnership from unnecessary external "noise" (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001; Wohlstetter et al., 2005).

In evaluation partnerships, architects are often the project managers responsible for overseeing the evaluation process. They tend to be involved in the key decisions and monitor the day-to-day work of the evaluation. Both the client and the evaluator often serve as information brokers. The evaluator needs to communicate regularly about evaluation progress as well as provide evaluation reports that are actionable and easily understood. The client offers critical information about the evaluation to data sources and other key constituents to enhance buy-in for both the evaluation process and results. Clients also often serve as the boundary spanner; they provide access to external data sources and broker relationships on behalf of the evaluator. In addition, they serve as the key liaisons to external groups such as the media and funding agencies.

Personnel transitions often provide substantial challenges to partnerships and evaluations during the operations phase. When key leaders turnover, partners often have to reestablish the procedures and structures that guide the work of the evaluation. It may be more difficult to obtain access to key data sources or disseminate essential information. Furthermore, potential changes to the organization or a specific program can affect the scope of work or evaluation design. For example, several years ago we worked with a foundation that provided social services to severely disabled low-income youth. The foundation received a grant to enhance their case management services, and the funding agency required an external evaluator. Our relationship with the agency began well, but soon suffered after the director of the grant left the foundation to pursue another position. Within a few months, the foundation hired and lost two more grant directors. With each new director, we started again: we worked to build trust, create new communication structures, and establish leadership roles. We struggled to gain the information we needed to begin the evaluation; moreover, we had no liaison to broker relationships with key stakeholders.

Evaluation Phase

During the evaluation phase, the full range of impacts – both positive and negative – of the partnership is reviewed. The evaluation process provides partners with opportunities to identify areas for improvement and future directions. Modification of a partnership, through a feedback loop, commonly occurs after a partnership's impacts have been evaluated. This refinement often involves revisiting the operations phase to improve the structures and processes therein or the initiation phase to redefine the goals of the partnership. In some cases, the evaluation phase results in the termination of a partnership. Termination does not necessarily indicate failure of a partnership; rather, the partnership may have simply run its course and serve no future purpose (Waddock, 1989; Wohlstetter et al., 2005). In her study of business alliances, Kanter (1994) suggests several reasons for termination: 1) A current partner may no longer be suitable because of new goals or a shift in direction; 2) Personnel responsible for managing the relationship may be reassigned; and 3) New market conditions may render a partner unnecessary or unavailable.

Applied to the evaluator-client relationship, the evaluation phase often involves a reflection on the evaluation process, the quality of data obtained, and the accuracy of results. The client must determine whether the evaluation relationship yielded a successful evaluation product that can be used for the purpose intended. The evaluator must determine whether the evaluation process was satisfying and yielded the benefits – financial and professional – that were expected. Termination of an evaluation partnership can occur for several reasons. Either the client or the evaluator may find that the relationship was not beneficial. The client may need additional services that cannot be provided by the evaluator, or funding for evaluation services may become unavailable. Many of our partnerships are built on personal connections; as a result, some of our partnerships have ended when critical leaders have been reassigned or have moved on to new positions elsewhere.

At times, the evaluation phase may occur prior to the completion of the evaluation project. For example, we were hired to evaluate a program designed to provide natural environment assessments and case management services for young children. During the first reporting period, an analysis of output data revealed that limited case management services and assessments were being provided. Such a finding is typical of a start-up program so we had little reason to be alarmed. During the second reporting period, there were few increases in outputs. We attempted to discuss our findings with the executive director but received no response or explanation. After a few months, we eventually terminated the relationship because we believed that the grant funding was not being used to provide the services intended by the funding agency. We subsequently learned that the organization had misappropriated funds from another grant in order to finance the construction of a new building.

In other instances, the evaluation phase can provide opportunities to expand on a promising relationship. For example, our partnership with the professional school we mentioned earlier has grown considerably in the last six years. Every year since that initial project, we meet with the Dean of the professional school to discuss the impact of current work, additional information needs, problems that require solutions, and potential areas for evaluation. This brainstorming session is one in which we meet as partners to generate new directions and endeavors for our relationship which lead us back to the initiation phase. We are not simply called upon as a subcontractor to collect data when necessary; rather we are viewed as a valuable external partner that is invested in the school's improvement. Our work with the professional school continues to grow; in fact, we are currently revisiting the initiation phase to work on developing a joint venture with the school.

Conclusion

Drawing on the literature base and our experiences in the field, we offer the following seven recommendations for nurturing effective client partnerships:

- Remember that your client also brings resources and expertise to the evaluation partnership.
- Work with clients that have compatible goals and view the evaluation as essential.
- Communicate openly and listen to clients.
- Establish explicit decision-making processes and communication structures.
- Create and adhere to an accountability plan.
- Ensure that leadership is present and available.
- Evaluate your partnerships regularly and modify them as necessary.

A successful evaluation endeavor requires the collaboration of the client, the evaluator, and other key constituents. In our experience, this collaboration is most likely to occur when the evaluator approaches the evaluator-client relationship as a partnership. Such an approach builds trust in the evaluation process, leads to user-friendly and actionable evaluation findings, and results in a mutually satisfying experience for both the client and evaluator.

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