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Rebuilding Collaboration in a Competitive Environment: A Case Study

Introduction

Victorian government policies have been confusing regarding the place of collaboration in the human service sector. In the period 1998-99, the Victorian Department of Human Services requested that non-government agencies they funded rebuild collaboration-creating alliances and partnerships in the name of more consumer-friendly systems. This request was at odds with the previous seven years, when agencies marginalised collaborative processes in order to conform to departmental policy requiring them to compete within the market place.

A policy environment expecting competitive and collaborative practices to comfortably co-exist has posed considerable difficulties for agencies. This paper presents a case study of how a group of women's services in one Melbourne region struggled with reclaiming collaborative relationships whilst continuing to work in a competi-

tive environment. We believe this study provides a timely contribution to the current rethinking occurring around the provision of Human Services in Victoria.

From the early 1970s, human service organisations in Victoria recognised the importance of building collaborative relationships with other service providers. Ideally, collaboration was characterised by open communication and problem-solving. Collaboration occurred most commonly in an informal way; firstly with agencies in geographic proximity and the relationship was driven by attempts to meet local needs. Secondly, it occurred where agencies had a common client focus. The relationship was held together by the advantages of sharing knowledge, a resource base or referral process. Collaboration allowed services to maximise resources, integrate service delivery and build mutually supportive relationships that provided protection in a changing environment (Alter & Hage 1993).

However, for each advantage there have been corresponding risks. These include loss of resources, autonomy and conflict over domain. Organisations have

always had to consider whether the advantages of collaborative ventures outweigh the disadvantages. In the 1990s, paralleling economic rationalist policies in Britain and America, the dynamics of market forces and competition were used to improve service quality and meet consumer demands. Human service agencies found themselves in a competitive environment, tendering against other agencies, having purchaser/provider splits imposed and increasingly being expected to function like businesses.

Early British and American research suggests that this competition impacted on the nature of the relationships between parties (Netting & McMurtry 1994; Flynn, Pickard & Williams 1995; Handy & Winston 1998). The market economy mentality positions non-profit agencies in competitive rather than collaborative roles with other agencies. It undermines trust and promotes adversarial relationships at a time when coalition-building and inter-organisational relationships are essential in advocating for strong human services. In Australia, Ernst, Glanville and Murfitt (1997) in a study look-

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ing at Victoria's introduction of compulsory competitive tendering into local government, reported that there was evidence of strained relationships between service providers, a protective attitude to the sharing of information and recognition that agencies could no longer easily collaborate. Neville's (1999) more recent review of competition policy in the Victorian welfare sector also noted that competition damaged communication and information flows as well as co-ordination between provider agencies.

Alongside the introduction of competition policy in the early nineties, the then Victorian Liberal Government also re-structured the welfare sector. Some services were defunded and others were forced or encouraged to amalgamate to give efficiencies of scale and minimise the number of organisations that had to be negotiated with. As well, in 1998 the Department of Human Services released two policy documents, the Primary Health and Community Services (PHACS) and the Youth and Family Services (YAFS) redevelopments. The first editions flagged the possibility of services being tendered in large 'bundles'. By grouping services together in one tender specification, successful applicants needed to be large enough to service or sub contract a portfolio that once would have been provided by small community-based agencies. This concept of bundling numbers of services together to form larger organisations was not received positively by the sector and government looked to find alternative strategies to bring about the same efficiencies of scale.

Following re-drafts of the PHAC's policy, the Government continued to argue the importance of creating an integrated 'seamless service system' but with emphasis being given to formalising collaboration in the form of partnerships between services. Funding was to be directed to demonstration partnerships rather than individual organisations. In advocating this collaborative agenda, the Liberal Government was copying overseas trends. Mayo (1997) identifies that from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund through to local community sectors in Europe, partnerships have been firmly on the agenda in the second half of the nineties. Within the fiercely competitive climate of an increasingly globalised economy, collaborative strategies are being used to mobilise additional resources and identify new ways of being cost-effective.

In Victoria, the motivation for reclaiming collaboration came partly from recognising that competition had contributed to the unraveling of service relationships. However, the pressure to construct partnerships (with one organisation delegated as the lead agency) was also another way of government dealing with fewer organisations as well as creating greater control, efficiency and integration of services (Healy 1998). The consequences for services failing to participate in this agenda were not clear. Certainly agencies faced a difficult choice, particularly when, as Labonte (1997) argues, partnerships where funding coerces membership are unlikely to be sustained in the long-term, because participants may have difficulty reach-

ing agreements over shared and divergent agendas.

The creation of partnerships was in an early phase when the Liberal State Government was defeated in 1999. The newly-elected Labor Government immediately undertook a review led by Hayden Raysmith of the Primary Health and Community Services redevelopment. He noted that one of the weaknesses of the Liberal Government's redevelopment was 'the marginalisation of smaller players' as a result of the 'top-down change management process' (Raysmith 1999, p. 13). It is in this context that the following research takes place.

Case Study

Between 1996 and 1999, the researchers worked on an action research project which explored the impact of competition on a group of women's services. It had particularly focused on the nature of conflict that was created by the contract environment. The work had involved a range of data collection strategies including material from a workshop, group discussions and in-depth interviews.²

As part of that work, four agencies that had been involved in the original research were particularly interested in exploring strategies to rebuild more positive relationships between them. This work lent itself to a case study focusing on how a group of women's services in one of Melbourne's regions responded to this new funding environment, attempting to balance competition while rebuilding collaboration.

We followed Cresswell's (1998) case study structure: identifying the problem, context, issues and

the lessons learnt. Two group discussions were held with these four services, specifically exploring past tensions that had occurred between them with regard to tendering issues and what needed to be done to move to more constructive relationships. Inspired to see whether they could collaborate more closely, the participants then asked whether we would facilitate a third workshop with a broader group of seven women's services from the same region³. The aim of this workshop was to explore broader possibilities for collaboration. Four months on, in-depth interviews with workers from the four original agencies were undertaken to explore the impact of the work. We chose only to interview participants from the original four agencies because we were keen to understand whether our involvement around openly naming difficulties in the tendering process might impact on the quality of future relationships. Interviews were transcribed in full and themes generated. The credibility of these themes was tested using the process of 'member checking' (Lincoln & Guba 1985) where preliminary analyses were presented to the participants at a group meeting allowing opportunities for discussion between us and the participants. Participants also commented on the final draft.

The impact of contracting and mainstreaming on participating agencies

While the political context has been provided to broadly locate this case study, the context more specifically

around women's services needs to be explained. Women's services such as women's health services, refuges and sexual assault services have played a major role in the life of the Australian human service sector in the past twenty-five years. They have provided agency models linking the personal to the political and forced mainstream services to take women's needs seriously⁴. A key strength has been their commitment to working collaboratively with like-minded organisations. This has allowed for sharing of resources, feedback and modification around practice, projects, sharing of information and joint political action. In the 1990s, the emphasis on collaboration began to be progressively undermined as services moved to a more competitive framework.

In our original work about women's services (dating from 1996-1997) we reported that inter-agency discourse had changed from collaboration to competition (Egan & Hoatson 1999). Co-operative planning had been replaced by the development of strategies to maximise one's own tender advantage. This competitive environment had undermined relationships and intensified inter-organisational conflict. Previously, relationships between services had been built by networking. With much funding determined by quantified output there was little time for processes which built common understandings, trust and co-operation between agencies. Services reported that they operated in a more insular way, having turned inwards in order to survive. Information that once would be happily shared with

like-minded agencies was withheld because it gave the successful edge on a tender.

In 1998, interviews conducted for this case study with the group of four agencies, showed that the contracting environment had continued to significantly impact on their relationships with women's and other agencies. They reported feeling isolated, not knowing who to believe or who to trust. Many of their relationships with other agencies were distant or unproductive. Minimal contact meant they had little knowledge or confidence in each other's practices.

However, some agencies reported that they had been able to maintain at least one open, trusting exchange with another agency. This trust had been built on consistent contact and each had ensured that their tendering practice had not undermined the other. They had refused to conform to competitive secrecy, knew they could rely on each other for support, felt they had some common approaches to practice and shared a broad range of resources, roles and information. They mentioned the importance of supporting each other, particularly by writing references when tenders were being prepared.

Alongside these changes, women's services felt marginalised as government policy increasingly favoured gender-sensitive rather than gender-specific practice. This was basically a mainstreaming agenda within organisations, explicitly taking account of gender issues at all stages of policy making, program design and implementation. It represented a call for diffusion of responsibility for gen-

der issues beyond small and under-funded women's units. Baden & Goetz (1997) argue that such a shift leads to a preoccupation with institutionalisation, which no longer addresses issue of power central to women's subordination. Such an emphasis on professionalisation and mainstreaming of the women's movement can lead to a consequent lack of accountability of gender experts to a grassroots constituency and a cautiousness about their political involvement⁵.

Rebuilding Collaboration

The four agencies in the case study acknowledged that during the period of competition inter-agency relationships had been undermined. Each of the four was committed to reclaiming collaboration and open to the authors working with them to help facilitate this. Reasons behind motivation varied. Some were drawn into collaboration because they saw it as a core feature of feminist history and practice. They were disappointed by its loss and felt uncomfortable working in a competitive mode that built a cycle of conflict and marginalised the most vulnerable organisations. Others were conscious that in the government-led re-structuring of welfare there was a risk that services relating to women would be further marginalised. Collaboration was seen as a way of rebuilding strength between women's services and a defense of values that link the personal to the political and build participatory decision making.

Discussion around striving to rebuild collaboration highlighted three factors that effect the possi-

bilities of success. These were:

1. Confronting the past and laying the foundation for rebuilding trust.
2. Determining whether collaboration was advantageous.
3. Seeing collaboration as a process that needs time and commitment.

1. Confronting the past and laying the foundation for rebuilding trust

The agencies recognised that they had to rebuild collaboration in a way that paid more than lip service. They had to confront the fact that relationships had been severely damaged and that rebuilding could not go ahead without addressing the fact that trust had been undermined. To assist this, the authors facilitated sessions that allowed past conflicts to be aired. The four agencies talked about the hurt and confusion that had been created by the competitive environment. They identified instances where they felt that their sister agencies sitting at the table had behaved in a way that had either undermined or been supportive of them. Discussion around what was good practice led them to identify behaviour that was needed if trust was to be rebuilt.

From these early discussions, participants developed practice principles. They focused on the expectations of joint tendering and what needed to happen if an agency wished to pull out of tender preparation, how threats of imposed amalgamations should be handled and the process for constructively dealing with poor practice in a collaborating agency. The degree to which participants subsequently valued these principles varied. For

some, they became central to their ongoing negotiations, while for other agencies, the process of developing agreement was more important.

Alongside this commitment to rebuilding collaboration went a more objective look at how women's services had related to each other in the past. As one woman stated, they had to be careful of 'going back to old strategies' which failed to address the diverse understandings of feminism. There was greater honesty in naming the fact that beneath the earlier common language of 'sisterhood' lay considerable differences around philosophical frameworks and values. These had caused inter-organisational conflict to fester unnamed. Participants recognised the importance of understanding how each agency saw its role without expecting that everyone would work in the same way. Some women argued that this greater acceptance of diversity was a positive sign, indicating a maturing of women's services and a letting go of the myth that there needed to be consistency around philosophy and practice as a starting point.

Agencies involved in these discussions all commented on the importance of the process being facilitated by people who they trusted, that is, in this case the researchers, rather than trying to manage the process themselves. Labonte (1997) refers to the usefulness of having 'midwives' or trusted independent facilitators to 'broker' discussions. They need to be acceptable to all parties and be seen as working for that partnership, rather than for any individual interest. However, resourcing joint

working in an environment of fiscal restraint and competition can be a problem. As Charlesworth, Clarke & Cochrane (1997, p. 76) comment, those activities which are 'extra contractual' or fall outside 'core business' are likely to decline because there is no budget for them.

Once the concerns had been named, the focus was on why services might wish to collaborate. The reasons that the women spoke about were:

- Strengthening links to enhance the provision of services to women in the region and women's focus within the wider picture of the re-developments;
- Exploring possible models of co-operation in order to build on existing or past collaborative ventures;
- Discussing directions in relation to PHACS and YAFS documents.

It was recognised that any early phase of rebuilding needed to include concrete gestures of collaboration, including the development of network meetings to share information around policy changes and working together on staff development and volunteer training.

2. Determining whether collaboration was advantageous

The commitment to collaboration was influenced by how much each agency felt they stood to gain, given that they knew that effective collaboration required a major investment of time in an already pressured environment. Organisation-exchange theorists argue that collaborative processes will only be successful when the agency staff feel that the process has been of

substantial advantage (Zald 1995). Where the organisational exchange actively assists each agency in carrying out their role, there is an incentive to invest to make the collaboration work. If the co-ordinating process only gives small advantage it is less attractive.

Although the government was eager for agencies to strengthen collaborative processes, there was variation as to how quickly participants wanted to encourage collaboration between their services. Those agencies in the study that felt their future was vulnerable, were keen to find ways through collaboration to strengthen their position, while those services not feeling as threatened identified that the collaborative agenda was less urgent. Those willing to embrace the agenda recognised the need to find balance around the momentum of the process. Insufficient contact and agreement ran the risk of the collaboration fizzling out because of lack of energy. Equally, too much energy, enthusiasm or zeal by key partners could lead to pressure being put on less enthusiastic participants. Participants were aware that discrepancies around the motivation and speed of collaboration could lead to inter-organisational tension. There was also uncertainty for some services regarding whether they should collaborate around a few manageable tasks, or large portions of their work.

There were different understandings of where collaboration may lead. Some services were content with finding ways to exchange and seeing where that might progress. Their main goal was to reclaim collaboration. Others were mind-

ful of government agendas and wondered whether they should be more deliberately working towards alliances where there was joint service provision. They felt ambivalent, caught between wanting to ensure survival, but being suspicious of government motives.

A further dilemma for some was whether to collaborate primarily with women's services or develop a multi-collaborative agenda, where commitment to those services formed only a small part of the relationships needing to be established. The competitive environment had disrupted the notion of 'natural constituencies' or agencies you would normally relate to and new alliances were being contemplated. While this destabilising brought opportunities for new, creative partnerships unfettered by the past, there was also the risk of opportunism, of small organisations locked out of alliances, being left isolated and vulnerable. For women's services, the risk was that common philosophy and some shared goals were insufficient to help identify a common agenda that would provide the focus for ongoing partnership or collaboration. Labonte (1997) comments that potential partners need to have a sufficiently thick overlap in core individual organisational objectives so that a common goal can be defined.

Charlesworth & Clarke (1996) report that part of rebuilding collaboration involves letting go of some power in ways that may compromise individual agendas. They argue that building collaboration requires organisational flexibility and surrendering of a degree of control over staff time, energy and

corporate loyalty. Such surrender, in an environment of limited trust may require substantial risk taking. One woman commented, 'You have to acknowledge that you are going to get something and give something up at the same time'. The greater the organisational commitment to a fixed program or style of working, the less likely collaboration will occur if it requires key changes to programs (Zald 1995).

At the workshop where participants initially planned what might be exchanged, no one proposed a project that would involve substantial collaboration. Rather, suggestions were around small co-ordinated projects where organisations planned separate projects but made sure they integrated smoothly and avoided duplication and waste. One agency provided another service a venue and child care to run a group, in return for their clients having access to the group. Mutual training programs were to be explored and discussion also centred on the possibility of creating common assessment tools. Given that there had been tension between many of the agencies, this approach, described by one participant as 'tip toeing through the process' was quite understandable. Trust had to be rebuilt from experiences of exchange.

Participants varied in the resources and political experience they brought to the collaboration. The process of negotiating relationships requires that this power differential is acknowledged, participants make a commitment to sharing power where possible and mechanisms are agreed on to negotiate difference (Wadsworth 1997).

3. Seeing collaboration as a process that needs time and commitment

Participants recognised that successful collaboration takes time and commitment to develop. To move beyond 'tip toeing' around the edges to more substantial involvement requires a shared belief that the outcome is worth the time and resources required. Time is needed to identify a common goal, build a sense of ownership of any project taken on jointly and think through agreements about practice and difference. Collaboration therefore requires risk taking, investment and the building of trust. Morrison (1996) cautions about assuming just because the formal organisational machinery (structure, policies and protocols) is in place to support inter-agency collaboration, that it will work. Rather, he suggests that the critical test of inter-agency collaboration is the outcomes for the service users.

The midwife process of facilitating, nurturing and mediating may need to be ongoing as agendas are unpacked and each agency's motivations, interests, and goals are understood (Bowes 1997). Wadsworth (1997) argues that there may be flux (a weakening or strengthening) in relationships with persistence needed to overcome differences and contradictions between partners. Changes may occur because of developments elsewhere in the system. Participating agencies noted that the struggle to survive in a competitive environment meant that they had to be ever-vigilant to opportunities and new directions. In practice, this meant the risk that their energy may be diverted away from the collaboration. Wadsworth

(1997, p. 95) gives a salutary warning that the difficulty of working together in collaboration (and achieving change) 'is in direct proportion to the level of paradox, contradictions and inequalities of power between the partners'. These difficulties were particularly obvious when the case study participants reflected on their experience as specialist services in attempting to become part of demonstration projects.

The positioning of specialist services in formal collaboration

As PHACs and YAF's led collaboration began to be formalised, case study participants increasingly looked to build partnerships with services other than specialist women's services. However, this experience soon led them to question whether specialist services and especially women's services could successfully compete and be accepted as equal members of proposed partnerships and alliances. Partnerships brought a greater number of players into the winners circle, but there were still substantial losers, those in unsuccessful alliances or services that were not able to negotiate their way into an alliance. The women in this study suggest that a calculated weighing up of who to collaborate with occurred. The need to be competitively successful tempted services to align themselves with the most powerful larger agencies. Mayo (1997) reports however from British experience, that if a partner is significantly more powerful or has greater access to information than another then the outcome may not be a positive one for the less

powerful partners.

Early experiences of the women's services in this case study suggest that they did not have the power to gain entry into the demonstration project alliances as full participants⁶. Their functions were not identified as 'core business' and they were seen as peripheral players. When we discussed our preliminary analysis with the participants, all believed that the metaphor 'no man's land' accurately described the environment in which women's services found it very difficult to find a place in the broader demonstration projects being negotiated across the region. This experience matched that reported in a recent VCOSS paper which noted that 'most specialist providers, even those who represented medium sized agencies, felt that their philosophical and service user needs were being subordinated to those of the very large agencies' (VCOSS 2000, p. 10). The women's services in the case study believed that to have an effectively integrated system specialist services needed to be integral players in the building of alliances and partnerships.

Conclusion: Lessons learnt

Historically, collaboration has been important in Victorian state human services, enhancing service provision by encouraging agencies to share knowledge, expertise and skills. Collaborative relationships have helped maximise tight resources, integrate service delivery and build mutually supportive relationships. However, the introduction in the nineties of competition to improve efficiency and effectiveness has been at the expense of collabora-

tion. Initial research indicates that this competitive environment has tended to maximise agency self-interest, limiting contact and exchange between services.

In the late nineties, the Liberal Government in recognition of this loss attempted to improve service integration by placing collaboration back on the policy agenda. It was assumed that it could co-exist effectively alongside competition. The irony of this policy change was that while the Government sought to have agencies reclaim collaboration, it imposed the first drafts of the PHACS and YAFS proposals without first rebuilding its own collaborative relationship with the sector (VCOSS 2000).

Collaboration was now being redefined. Rather than informal resource and information sharing the emphasis was on building a strategic, contractual relationship between alliance partners that were jointly delivering a program, but in competition with those outside the alliance. This case study begins to explore the complexity of that setting and what we might learn from it for the new political environment. It highlights three factors which must be considered if the gap between policy rhetoric and operationalisation is to be bridged. These are the importance of:

- Laying the foundation for rebuilding trust;
- Ensuring specialist services have a meaningful role within collaboration; and
- Seeing collaboration as a complex process requiring time and resources.

First, the past must be acknowledged in order to lay the founda-

tion for rebuilding trust. This requires building inter-agency dialogue that names the anxiety that was inherent in organisations competing and struggling to survive and rebuilds a 'legitimised' inter-agency culture which Morrison describes as 'thinking and feeling...not just doing' (Morrison 1996, p. 136).

Second, when collaboration is sited within a broader competitive context, there are real questions as to whether it becomes a tool primarily to increase efficiency and effectiveness at the cost of small and specialist services. In this case study, the early struggle for women's services to be included in PHACS interagency demonstration projects highlights how difficult it was for specialist services to be partners, and therefore how tenuous collaborative ventures were. The Primary Health Redevelopment Review (1999) has since acknowledged that as organisations positioned themselves in the redevelopment, the process favoured the large players, with small agencies and multi-catchment specialist providers missing out. The success of the Labor Government's commitment to promote inter-agency and agency-government collaboration will depend significantly on the extent to which competition is prevented from totally dominating the policy environment.

Third, there needs to be recognition that effective collaboration is a complex process requiring time and commitment. The expectation that collaborative partnerships or alliances can be formed quickly and still work well is unrealistic. Partnerships or collaborative relationships need to be based on clearly

articulated shared interest with agreed mechanisms for negotiating difference. This case study suggests that Labonte's (1997) concept of midwives acting as brokers in the early stages of the process may have value. While the Labor Government's decision not to proceed with assigning expert consultants to alliances is consistent with a more consultative approach, they need to make sure that resources are available to help enable the alliance process. Thought also needs to be given to less competitive strategies which might enhance collaboration and service integration. These could include the re-establishment of networks built around locality or common interests, the co-location of services and the modelling of common assessment protocols.

In the past decade, agencies have been forced to be bi-lingual, to speak the language of both collaboration and competition (Clarke & Newman 1993). It is essential that the collaborative aspect of the Labor Government's agenda be given significant resources, commitment and time so that it is not co-opted primarily as a way of softening or camouflaging the competitive agenda, but because it truly brings advantages to each of the participants and most importantly the service user.

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Notes

1. The human service sector refers to social and community services provided within a mixed economy of service delivery to create the social infrastructure for a modern society.
2. This work is reported in Egan, R. & Hoatson, L. 1999, 'Desperate to survive', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol 14, No 30.
3. Initially all seven women's services in the region were asked to participate in the workshops however due to time and resource constraints, only four participated. The later workshop was attended by all seven agencies, after it was decided that we would facilitate this process.
4. Weeks (1994) defines feminist organisations as those run by women for women who organise their work according to feminist or women-centred principles of practice. They are typically small organisations, either community-based or autonomous units under the umbrella of a larger non-government organisation. Their work focuses on public education and action towards social change, as well as providing a range of services and activities for women participants or service users.
5. This agenda was reflected in the Victorian Women's Health Plan which was originally initiated by the then Liberal Health Minister in 1997.
6. Similar marginalising processes are reported by the interim report of the Ministerial Review of Health Care Networks (2000).

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