

Maine thought leaders are working to drive widespread social, environmental and economic change through collaboration.

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with Jennifer Boes

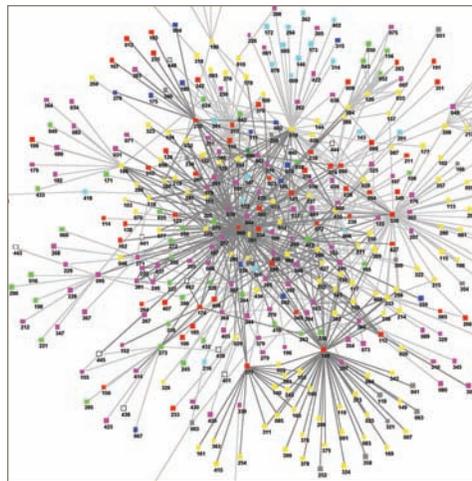
The Power of Partnering

Market-savvy businesses learned long ago that strategic alliances can save money, fast track growth and boost productivity. These companies determined that focusing on what they do best and working with strong partners to handle the balance made good economic sense.

While networks are commonplace among for-profits, the concept of using strategic alliances to affect social, environmental and economic change is relatively new. However, it is rapidly taking hold in the U.S. and around the world.

One of the strongest international examples of how the creation of networks can catalyze unprecedented progress in overcoming critical social issues is the work of Habitat for Humanity Egypt (HFHE). Recently featured in the Stanford Social Innovation Review as a benchmark example of a “Networked Nonprofit,” HFHE facilitates the construction of approximately 1000 new homes per year compared with the Habitat for Humanity average of 200 homes. HFHE has been able to achieve this level of success because it partners with other non-profits in the communities it is serving to execute and carry out its housing programs.

In the U.S., the Barr Foundation of Boston is a leader in promoting the power of networking. In addition to funding an extensive research project that demystifies the network process for nonprofits and



A graphic of connectivity and network strength from a Barr Foundation report

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other funders, it has incorporated networking into its overall mission of building a better Boston for all. The Barr Foundation participates in more than 10 collaborations with

other funders, including “green” and smart growth funding groups. It is also a founding partner in the city’s highly successful After School and Beyond program, a network that combines the resources of donors, businesses, and civic leadership to advocate for the power of out-of-school time in youth development.

At the state level, Maine thought leaders from the advocacy, funding and nonprofit communities are tapping into the principles of network theory to drive a paradigm shift.

The newly formed Maine Network Partners is building capacity for network facilitation by supporting grassroots leaders and organizations in developing collaborative solutions. They are challenging stakeholders to look beyond the boundaries of individual agencies and sectors to explore ways in which organizations can strategically align themselves to stimulate greater progress and develop more sustainable solutions.

Filling the Knowledge Gap

As is the case with many states, Maine struggles with a broad array of needs; a lack of sufficient resources to address those needs;

as well as gaps and redundancies impeding the ability of funders and nonprofits to make significant advancements. Stakeholders realize they can achieve more with less by working together. The next step is learning how to make it happen.

In addition to working with a number of developing networks, Maine Network Partners is organizing a thought leader seminar that will make key players more aware of network theory and ultimately transfer the skill sets needed to advance the development of successful networks to change agents throughout the state. The program is being created with the help of the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC), an international organization that brings intentional collaborative methodologies to the social sector. The institute will work hand-in-hand with a core group of Maine community leaders and technical assistance providers to design a program that will give them the understanding to teach other collaborators how to convene and manage highly effective networks. These “capacity builders” will share their knowledge with communities and groups throughout the state and help lay the groundwork for mutually beneficial partnerships.

While there is a strong focus on how networking could strengthen the state’s nonprofit work, there is hope that teaching a broad range of entities how to work together more strategically will link efforts underway in the public and private sectors to meet a broad range of challenges.

Maine Innovators

In Maine, there are a growing number of organizations pursuing similar goals and an intense competition for donor dollars that will only increase as the economy tightens. As a result, these orga-



The Healthy Community Coalition Mobile Health Unit in action at the Farmington Fair.

The coalition thrived because it linked resources that were already in place...

nizations are beginning to rethink the way they operate. Though they already work together in many ways, there is a growing recognition that by partnering at a much deeper level to pursue shared goals, more can be achieved with less. The significant achievements of entities in Maine that have already established networks are helping to foster an environment that supports a higher level of collaborative work.



An Affiliate of Franklin Community Health Network

Healthy Community Coalition

The seed for the Healthy Community Coalition (HCC) was planted more than 30 years ago by a local doctor and his wife in Franklin County who believed that if community members could be encouraged to take steps to keep their blood pressure under control, they would begin to see less health problems in the doctor’s office. Card tables were set up in grocery store parking lots for free blood pressure screenings and volunteers helped spread the word about the importance of maintaining a healthy blood pressure. Thanks to this grassroots effort being carried out by HCC through its mobile health unit, Franklin County now has the lowest rate of morbidity and mortality due to cardiovascular disease in the entire state.

This initial awareness campaign evolved into HCC a decade or so later when a group of concerned citizens got together and started talking about how they could raise awareness about healthy living on an even broader scale. What started out as a series of informal breakfast meetings soon grew into an organized network involving many different community sectors.

The coalition thrived because it linked resources that were already in place – Franklin Memorial

Hospital, the University of Maine at Farmington, the business community, an arts community well versed in coming together for a common purpose, and long-time residents with the community influence needed to pull people together. Knowing they were not making a significant impact on their own, each of these groups recognized a need to come together. Through a shared vision, the common good took precedence.

The HCC began to champion smaller projects under the broader vision of improving wellness. To identify the county's most critical needs, the coalition started a community visioning process, asking residents what could be done to make their families healthier and the community at large a better place. When a need was identified, a volunteer task force was convened to take on the challenge. Over the years, HCC task forces have purposefully raised awareness about concerns including unhealthy eating habits, HIV awareness, child safety, smoking, cancer, diabetes, domestic violence and homelessness.

One of the most visible indicators of the coalition's presence is its mobile health unit, which travels to every town in the community to offer preventative care, screenings and health information. By connecting with community members regularly, staff are also able to keep their fingers on the pulse of community needs. For example, the critical need for affordable dental care was heard from many who visited the mobile health unit.

Concerned community members then banded together and created the county's first rural dental health clinic.

Since 1992, the coalition has been part of the Franklin Community Health Network, a non-profit healthcare system that includes Franklin Memorial Hospital, Pine Tree Medical Practices, Evergreen Behavioral Services, the NorthStar ambulance service, Franklin Health Access, and Franklin Child Care. By evolving into a structured organization, HCC has been able to increase grant funding and establish a seamless transition from the awareness and prevention services it provides to the treatment and care offered as part of the larger system. Though the coalition now has a paid staff in addition to volunteers, the organization's board is still very much a grassroots group, upholding a philosophy of partnering, shared leadership and maintaining a course dictated by community needs.



A project of the Maine Community Foundation and the Maine Philanthropy Center

Environmental Funders Network and the Global Climate Change Collaborative

The Environmental Funders Network (EFN) was created in 2005 to convene funders in exploring how they should address the most pressing issues facing Maine's environment. It is a joint project of the Maine Community Foundation, a grant-making organization

that serves as the steward for more than 800 funds, and the Maine Philanthropy Center, an association of nearly 90 Maine grant makers that serves as a resource to the state's philanthropic community.

The network is a forum for networking and education, helping funders better understand environmental trends, challenges, and solutions as well as empowering them to generate a greater return on their investments.

EFN hosts at least two large-scale educational sessions a year, bringing together 40 to 80 funders to candidly discuss concerns identified as critical and timely. The sessions feature knowledge sharing with national experts as well as funders from other parts of the country that have experience with the issue at hand. Past sessions have dealt with land conservation in Maine's North Woods, community strategies to protect Maine's quality of place and climate change.

While the network is primarily an educational resource for environmental funders, it has also served as the catalyst for new relationships by bringing together individual donors and foundation leaders that otherwise would not have the opportunity to meet. As a result, a number of joint-funding projects have been born out of connections made at EFN events.

As the strength of the network grows and its scope expands, EFN partners are also combining resources across the network to develop tools that

will enable it to further the network's shared goal of improving and sustaining Maine's natural environment.

The issue of climate change came to light when funders began to see a growing number of grant requests around climate change but little collaboration between agencies. In order to get a firm grasp on which nonprofit organizations were involved, EFN funded the development of a Climate Change Investment Opportunities catalog. The resulting 87-page directory unveiled a surprising number of initiatives under way and a need to better coordinate them. The information in the catalog will now serve as an invaluable tool to EFN and other funding agencies outside of the network in identifying opportunities to increase overall impact.

A parallel effort to EFN's work in climate change is now taking shape, in part as a result of connections made and information presented at EFN sessions. A nascent network, the Global Climate Change Collaborative, is reaching out to funders, businesses, academia, and environmental agencies to get a grasp on what is currently being done to address climate changes and where there are gaps that need to be filled. As climate change becomes a hot button issue in Maine, funders involved with the network anticipate a race for funding, an issue which EFN has jointly identified. By recognizing needs now and setting the stage for collaboration between funders and agencies seeking their support on the front end, the

Global Climate Change Collaborative hopes to lead the charge in creating a united front in tackling the issue.



Franklin County Community College Network

Ensuring Maine residents have job skills that are marketable in the modern day economy is important to maintaining sustainable economic vitality. However, for those living in rural areas of Maine, access to educational facilities and training centers has proven to be a challenge. In fact, there was no community college presence in Franklin County as recently as 2005.

Today, residents have access to at least seven community college outreach sites and a growing selection of courses. One location is based within the former Bass shoe factory in Wilton, helping to provide new skill sets to revitalize this once-thriving industrial center in Western Maine. Another location at Mt. Abram High School in northern Franklin County has significantly reduced the commute for residents who had to drive up to four hours round-trip to the nearest community college before the network was established.

The rapid and extensive implementation of this education system was made possible thanks to a network of local business leaders, economic development officials, educa-

tors, health care professionals, and social services representatives with the desire to work together in the pursuit of common goals: (1) access to higher education for both traditional and non-traditional students; and (2) a start toward reinventing the economy of Franklin County.

The network is continuing to grow and expand its offerings by helping students with child care costs, delivering degree programs to rural parts of the state, offering scholarships, and providing work force training services to small and large rural businesses. Now that the network has established its viability, more businesses and community leaders have become involved and have asked for a community college presence in more locations. Plans to expand to other areas of the county are underway.



Maine Crafts Association

There are hundreds of talented Maine artists all over the state producing exceptional products, but artists in rural areas often find it a challenge to draw enough customers to support their craft. The Maine Highlands Guild, based in Dover-Foxcroft, was formed in 2002 to help artists in Piscataquis and Penobscot Counties connect with markets where they could sell their goods. After five years of success, the Guild determined it did not have the resources to fully maximize the market potential of its artists or provide the workforce

training needed to keep up with the business growth it had helped generate.

Collaboration was the answer, and the Maine Crafts Association, a non-profit organization with a similar vision, provided the perfect partner. A network relationship to pursue the need for training ultimately transitioned into a full merger. As a result, the Maine Crafts Association was able to achieve an increased focus on small town artists. In turn, the Maine Highlands Guild benefits from the Maine Craft Association's significant resources and larger membership.

The new organization, which kept the name "Maine Crafts Association," now works to promote and educate Maine artists statewide. By joining forces, they have the power to establish Maine as a national crafts destination. One of its biggest achievements thus far is the planned construction of a Center for Maine Crafts in the soon-to-be-completed West Gardiner Travel Plaza in conjunction with the Maine Turnpike Authority. The Center will be a base for visitors to learn about and purchase Maine-made products.

The training program it first convened to create is also in place. Eastern Maine Community College will pilot a Traditional and Contemporary Craft associate degree in fall 2008.



Rural Destination Tourism

In Maine's Northern Forest region and neighboring Coos County, N.H., remote towns that once relied on the lumber industry as a sustainable source of revenue are now struggling to regain economic balance. The region's wealth of natural beauty and history create a significant opportunity for tourism development, but most communities in and of themselves do not have the number of offerings needed to draw multi-day visitors. In addition, limited resources make it difficult for individual towns and attractions to market to potential visitors.

In 2007, four area tourism entities initiated the formation of the Rural Destination Tourism (RDT) network, recognizing a significant potential for economic growth if towns within the region were to promote themselves together through vacation themes that link offerings throughout the area. Since the Northern Forest Canoe Trail,

Mountain Counties Heritage, Inc., the Northern Forest Center, and the Innovation Network for Communities started the process, more than 20 additional partners from the nonprofit, public and private sectors have joined this burgeoning, customer-focused group. These partners include the Maine Office of Tourism, the Maine Crafts Association, outdoor adventure resorts Northern Outdoors and New England Outdoor Center, as well as ski and golf resorts Sugarloaf and Sunday River.

The group is now working on establishing a framework that will enable network partners to share visitor data and best practices as well as coordinate visitor experiences between network members. Initial initiatives include a new Web site, third party examination of shared customers, and the creation and delivery of getaway packages that make it easy for visitors to plan a multi-day vacation. A training program is also being developed to help support a consistent level of quality and customer service across the network.



Common Good Ventures

Common Good Ventures was established in 2000 to help other Maine nonprofits deliver better results by applying for-profit management strategies. Comprised of a team of experienced business people, Common Good Ventures also facilitates the development of collaborative

networks to make a greater social impact.

Common Good Ventures has always brought together nonprofit, private and public players to help improve the results of its nonprofit partners. For example, to improve the viability of sustainable farming in Maine, Common Good Ventures helped Wolfe's Neck Farm redesign its business model to partner with individual farmers, processors, retailers, University of Maine Extension, and the Maine Beef Industry Council. In the process, Wolfe's Neck Farm increased its volume 20-fold.

Over the last few years, Common Good Ventures has more consciously integrated emerging network thinking into its operations. A current illustration of this type of work involves the development of a public access referral system with the Eastern Area Agency on Aging (EAA) that could improve services to the elderly state-wide.

EAA serves an area larger than any of the other five New England states, making it essential to fully utilize partners and efficiently allocate EAA's own resources. To develop a referral system that is both efficient and user-friendly, Common Good Ventures has worked closely with EAA staff to determine: (1) the primary needs of EAA case managers and their clients; (2) currently available referral resources including the United Way's 211 database; and (3) how these resources could be improved to better serve Maine's elders. The new system will make

it easier for EAA to tap external resources and track referrals. Clients and caregivers will be able to submit their needs and circumstances online, increasing efficiency and ensuring a seamless delivery of services. Because knowledge sharing is so important for net-



A group of participants work on message maps at a recent seminar held by Maine Association of Nonprofits.

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works, Common Good Ventures is designing the referral resource as a prototype to offer to all of Maine's Agencies on Aging.

In addition to bringing together players to solve pre-defined problems, Common Good Ventures is investing in helping nonprofits with common missions start open-ended discussions and build trust to think more broadly about how they can work together. Recently, Common Good Ventures guided the state's five Area Agencies on Aging and Maine Association of Area Agencies on Aging through a process to start to answer "where could we benefit from better collaboration beyond representation in Augusta?" The five are now exploring coordinated food distribution, logistics and potentially purchasing.

In 2006 and 2007, Common Good Ventures began assisting three network initiatives: 1) a statewide collaborative of nonprofit, public and foundation players to help Maine's foster care youth succeed in school or the workforce, 2) a true community-based network to support youth aging out of care in York County, and 3) United Way of York County's pilot of a broad community network approach to improve financial sustainability for families and create healthy foundations for life. Common Good Ventures is partnering with the Maine Community Foundation to support the United Way and is nurturing natural links between this effort and the initiatives for youth in care.

Common Good Ventures has explicitly recognized the value of both improving the results of high potential individual nonprofits and identifying potential contributions from a variety of players to achieve

big picture goals that matter for Maine such as helping Maine's elders stay independent or Maine's youth become successful adults.

The Power of Networks in Driving Social Change

In Maine and beyond, a finite number of donors compounded by challenging economic conditions and numerous organizations with overlapping areas of focus have implicitly and explicitly generated a climate of competition. As a result, many nonprofits find themselves struggling to ensure priorities remain driven by the mission and not fundraising goals. This operating environment is working against one of the best prospects for change agents to make a major impact: to work together, combine resources and share best practices within networks.

Furthermore, many change agents are singularly working to achieve missions that are unachievable without strategic alliances. One organization cannot single-handedly achieve lofty goals such as conquering poverty, saving the environment or turning the economy around – no matter how much money or resources it may have. However, consider the tremendous potential for change if a strategic network of agencies were to work together over time to conquer these issues. Achieving tremendous, far-reaching results could be within our grasp.

In Maine, more and more nonprofits are beginning to consider

themselves as part of a much bigger picture, focusing less on individual goals and shifting more toward achieving their missions by working in unison with a broad spectrum of partners. While some may be reluctant to participate in a network because they fear losing control,



Volunteers and interns join forces on the Northern Forest Canoe Trail to construct a paddler access campsite. Photo by Jamie Mireau, Courtesy of Northern Forest Canoe Trail.

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efficiency, improved delivery of services, and expanded reach. They are recognizing that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Through RDT, for example, outdoor adventure companies competing for the same customer base are now working together to increase regional tourism. They understand that pooling their resources and industry knowledge can generate enough economic impact for all to thrive. Likewise, the Maine Highlands Guild determined the best move for its membership – struggling rural artisans – would be to formally join forces with a stronger group that offered a greater reach and more resources: the Maine Crafts Association.

Funders are also beginning to collaborate. In fact, many of the state's most effective networks were created with funding support provided by a number of sources that pooled money together. This is driving an important shift in how funding is allocated. In the past, an agency would approach a funding source for support of a particular issue and work toward developing a solution to address it only after a grant was received. By combining forces and working together, funders are recognizing that developing a solution first is essential to improving the return on their investments and those they support.

Under this methodology, money follows good solutions and the best solutions are generated through the partnering of multiple agencies, organizations and individuals –

not one applicant. Therefore, by networking, funders are not only increasing their own power to drive change but are also pushing the nonprofit community to look for more ways in which they might work together.

Both EFN and the Global Climate Change Collaborative have recognized the value in collaboration. Through education and networking, EFN is helping to facilitate joint initiatives between multiple donors and nonprofits. It can also help direct funding to those organizations that present viable solutions and show they have a willingness to work together toward a common goal. Taking it a step further, the Global Climate Change Collaborative is in the process of exploring the possibility of developing a network that could fuse all efforts surrounding climate change to create a strong and cohesive front to take on the issue.

Pulling the Network Together

In a network, no one organization is in charge of another. All strategic partners are involved in decision making and problem solving. Though there are no directors or chiefs, all successful networks have highly-motivated facilitators that encourage involvement, motivate partners to deliver on their responsibilities, and help establish new links through their connections. These facilitators are well connected within their communities and have a broad understanding of the resources and skill sets that can be tapped to build the network.

In Maine, network facilitators represent business and nonprofit leaders, well-respected philanthropists, community influencers, seasoned academics, and innovators from diverse industry sectors. In many ways, the trademarks of an effective facilitator mirror those of a good neighbor in a traditional New



A group brainstorming at a Common Good Ventures meeting.

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England community: they have a strong rapport with other community members, they communicate important news to their neighbors early, and they are relied upon as problem solvers.

During the early days of the blood

pressure awareness campaign in Franklin County, the town doctor and his wife were able to leverage community trust and respect forged through the doctor's family practice to drive widespread interest and involvement in their cause. Similarly, a small group of foundation leaders with well-established reputations as champions of the local environment were able to quickly gain the ear of a significant group of philanthropists and set EFN in motion.

Establishing a Framework for Collaborative Innovation

All good strategic collaborations start with a strategy. Before any collective work begins, a network needs to identify:

- ✓ What it represents
- ✓ The resources it has to work with
- ✓ What it wants to achieve
- ✓ How it will be achieved
- ✓ How success will be measured

Resources can include a wide range of assets such as human capital, expertise, funds, and data. As part of the resources audit, involved organizations should determine what they do best and then identify other partners that could contribute their own unique skills to complete the picture. The idea is to select partners strategically, choosing to align with entities that will provide a mutual benefit to the group as a whole. Franklin County Community College Network, for example, enlists educators that have

first-hand knowledge of students; businesses that know what skills are marketable; marketing experts; and economic developers who know the workforce needs of potential new businesses. Each contributor focuses on what they know and what they do best.

Overall, a strong strategy clearly outlines a network's value to individual partners and the alliance as a whole, encouraging others to invest their time and expertise. Once a clear-cut strategy is in place, a larger group of partners can be invited in, and the network can start making things happen. A solid strategy is essential to getting a new network off on the right foot, as was exemplified by RDT. Once the young network completed its work plan, the core group hosted a workshop to introduce the new network to potential strategic partners and encourage participation. The RDT concept generated a great deal of excitement among the group, and network facilitators were able to secure commitments that day enabling them to begin assigning tasks and lead partners for each.

Similarly, HCC got its start from a few active citizens talking over bagels and coffee. Because they were able to show the potential for the network based on the success already achieved by the blood pressure awareness campaign and propose a strong line up of potential partners, these facilitators were able to get a much larger group of people excited and engaged. It ultimately grew to a network encompassing a broad cross section of nonprofit, for

profit, academic, and public partners. New partners are still being engaged.

Keeping the Momentum Going

While network theory is emerging as a disciplined approach to affect-



Kate Williams, Executive Director of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, and children, out promoting the trail at Family Fun Days in Stratton, Maine.

Trust is built within a network over time by establishing rules of engagement that place a high value on transparency, honesty, and shared ownership of successes.

ing change, networks are as much an art as a science. Passion for change, shared goals and a solid strategy are the drivers of strong and productive networks. Trust, enjoyment, good communication and a common sense approach to problem solving

hold them together.

Trust is built within a network over time by establishing rules of engagement that place a high value on transparency, honesty, and shared ownership of successes. Trust combined with the enthusiasm generated by people that have fun working together makes it easy to keep the lines of communication and sight open. Just like a traditional New England community, news travels fast and ideas flow freely.

Because networks are flexible and decisions are based on the common sense of "how can we best get this done?" available resources can be quickly identified and allocated when an issue or opportunity is identified.

A great example of how quickly information can move through a network, spur action, and generate results is the HCC bike safety program. When Franklin County parents voiced concerns that children were biking around town and not wearing helmets, HCC rapidly identified network partners to head a task force to address the issue. Funding was secured to conduct bike safety training and establish a low cost/free bike helmet program. Soon after the program had been put into place, a little girl lost control of her bike and hit a tree. Her helmet absorbed the impact, and the child was not seriously harmed. Her mother credits the bike safety training with saving her daughter from serious head injury.

EFN has also used its network of funders and the relationships it has

established with environmentally-focused nonprofits to swiftly turn a potential risk into a positive outcome. During an educational program exploring the ramifications of the Plum Creek Plan, a major development proposal that would affect the future of the North Woods, a pressing need for funding to ensure minimal environmental impact was identified. EFN immediately queried nonprofits involved in the effort about resources needed over the next six months to achieve crucial outcomes related to the course of the project. A matrix was then created and distributed to EFN funders. The significant donations generated as a result helped ensure the plan was designed to meet conservation as well as development goals.

Flexibility also enables networks to constantly change and evolve in answer to community needs. Partners are pulled in as needed to help address a specific issue based on their areas of expertise. Thus, networks within the network begin to form. For larger networks, this is critical to ensuring that partners are able to deliver localized responses at a very grassroots level.

For example, the multi-county RDT encompasses county-scale and community-level networks within its larger scope to ensure the needs of individual towns and attractions are met. These include an effort led by the Northern Forest Canoe Trail to share marketing resources with Stratton and Eustis, Maine towns through which the 740-mile water trail runs, and a larger network promoting outdoor sporting heritage

in Western Maine.

Similarly, the state-wide Maine Crafts Association is encouraging the creation of local networks within its larger network because it recognizes the importance of small regional groups working together to further the work of Maine artists at



Sunrise and mist on the Upper Connecticut Lakes are a paddler's dream. Photo by Clyde H. Smith, Courtesy of Northern Forest Canoe Trail

The end result will be a culture of innovation where solutions are more important than the individual organizational interests and shared outcomes supersede profit margins.

the grassroots level.

Networks do not have to be permanent or long-term to be successful. Collaborative partners can come together to meet a specific need and then disband once the intended

goal is reached. While the formal relationship may have been dissolved after the work is successfully completed, trust remains. This past history of working together makes it easier for those involved to come together in the future.

For networks that have reason to endure, what ultimately keeps the momentum going is the ability to make things happen. As long as a group of partners continues to produce successes that can be shared by all, those involved will continue to see value in being part of the group.

Maine is a Work in Progress

The movement to drive wide-spread strategic collaborations to enable Mainers to live better lives is a work in progress. As with any nascent relationship, it takes time to build acceptance, understanding and trust. As stakeholders begin to grasp this new way of thinking about change, organizations are shifting away from tendencies to protect their own in favor of working together to make a bigger difference. Those at the heart of the movement recognize the process is emerging and complex. They know a paradigm shift will require a long term commitment but they are compelled to move forward, confident it will ultimately have a far greater impact on productivity and quality of life in Maine. It is their hope that the end result will be a culture of innovation where solutions are more important than the individual organizational interests and shared outcomes supersede profit margins.

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