

THE LEE INSTITUTE

Collaborating for strong communities

Inter-Organizational Collaboration around a Shared Topic

People working to strengthen their communities, no matter what the issue—health, housing, education, environment, jobs—are all trying to do the right thing and make a positive impact. Most people are on the lookout for where to get more leverage—through grants, board leadership, donors, technology, etc. One way to find leverage could be right in front of you, but may feel beyond your reach: developing collaboration with other people and organizations that share your interests and have similar goals. For some, the prospect of collaborating with other organizations may seem too time-intensive, requiring a relinquishing of autonomy and possibly a lot of compromising.

At The Lee Institute, we believe that collaboration across organizational lines to achieve a shared goal can be a high-leverage strategy where each organization's interests are met and the community experiences a big win. Together, organizations can achieve results unattainable by any single organization going it alone. We believe that when the right people are gathered together, provided with solid data and guided by a fair and inclusive process, they can accomplish amazing results for themselves and for their communities.

The Lee Institute has a broad base of experience when it comes to building collaborative responses to community issues. Here are a few examples:

System of Care

Mecklenburg County Area Mental Health contracted with The Lee Institute for more than four years to serve as project manager for its ambitious initiative to build a “system of care” (SOC) for children with severe emotional disturbances and their families. The SOC philosophy is a nationally recognized strengths-based approach where youth with emotional issues and their families work as equal partners with local agencies to help them be successful at home, at

“Leadership is creating a path toward an unpredictable future—an act of creation... Leadership is shifting the context within which people gather, naming the debate through powerful questions, and listening rather than advocating, defending or providing answers.” Peter Block

school and in the community. With Lee's early support to launch a successful pilot, the County was awarded a \$9 million grant to take the SOC to scale. As project manager, Lee's responsibilities centered on the development and support of an infrastructure of cross-organizational, multi-disciplinary teams to support the cultural, practice-based, and policy changes necessary to grow and sustain this model.

Infant Mental Health

The Lee Institute has worked for more than five years with a multi-disciplinary group of about 25 professionals to bring the social and emotional health needs of children birth through five to the attention of parents, child serving agencies and civic leaders across Mecklenburg County. The Lee Institute was retained to provide the ZFive group with the organization, collaborative processes and strategic thinking to move the group's goals forward. With project management from The Lee Institute, ZFive has produced provocative reports bringing attention to the emerging field of infant mental health (IMH) and challenging the status quo; developed a first-time list of IMH providers serving Charlotte-Mecklenburg and posted the database on its website www.zfive.org; implemented a mentoring program that has trained more than 25 licensed professionals to work with young children; launched a peer consultation program and embedded IMH specialists in Youth and Family Services to support case workers in addressing young children's social and emotional issues.

Workforce Development Sector Analysis

The need for services to prepare and connect job seekers with employment has never been greater in our community, particularly for those with barriers to employment, such as the lack of marketable skills, disabilities or criminal backgrounds.

Foundation For The Carolinas, recognizing these challenges, jointly awarded a Catalyst Grant to Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont, Inc., the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Board and Jacob's Ladder Job Center, Inc. in 2010. Together, these organizations hired The Lee Institute and Carol Morris Consulting to explore opportunities for strengthening the workforce development sector based on the experiences, perspectives and needs of employers, job seekers, case managers and workforce development leaders across Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Lee Institute and Carol Morris Consulting researched ways to create a more integrated and effective system focused on the community's non-profit and government workforce development sectors and the needs of adults with barriers to employment. As an outgrowth of the original sector analysis, we are now supporting a cross-organizational leadership team to implement the report's recommendations and to unify the sector around common standards and practices.

The Lee Institute Approach

Our approach is informed by what we know works.

Recruitment. We start by recruiting people onto the collaborative team who represent their respective organizations and who are passionate leaders offering diverse perspectives on the issue at hand. We like to find people with a natural affinity for connecting with other people.

“Social fabric is created one room at a time....It is only when we are connected and care for the well-being of the whole that a civil and democratic society is created...The small group is the unit of transformation.” Peter Block

Logistics. We handle all organizational aspects of convening the group and make it as easy as possible for people to fully participate in terms of scheduling, agendas, materials, meeting summaries and refreshments. Being highly organized saves time for everyone.

Common Purpose. We invest time up front to get the group off to a strong start by interviewing key stakeholders in advance, surfacing and honoring vested interests, developing a charter to clarify purpose, roles and group norms, and determining a decision-making process that works for the group.

Shared Ownership. We are committed to cultivating a sense of community in our facilitation so that the group’s members honor the experience and strengths everyone brings to the table, develop positive relationships with one another, celebrate even small successes and deal with conflict openly and productively. Shared ownership is key to successful implementation of the group’s decisions; members are more inclined to drive needed change and hold each other accountable when they have participated actively in the planning stages and have built healthy relationships with one another.

“In order to succeed, every phase of collaboration, from conception to implementation, must be accomplished by people who reflect the broader community through a credible and open process.” David Chrislip

Skilled Facilitation. Groups that are digging into difficult community issues will inevitably face difficult conversations. An experienced, skilled facilitator anticipates these challenges and welcomes the growth opportunity that conflict can bring to a group. By helping the group to think creatively, making it safe for people to dissent, focusing on the interests behind people’s positions and sensitively guiding its members to find agreements, groups forge new partnerships and find solutions that would never have come about without the collaborative process. Transparency builds trust.

Please let us know if you would like additional information on Lee’s projects or approach. Also visit our website at www.leeinstitute.org for additional examples of our work.