

The Moment to Explore Strategic Partnerships

Innovation & Scale

CASE STUDY

The Power of Possibility: Sharing Technology Innovations to Better Serve Homeless Youth

“Innovation and collaboration was the answer to our challenge of helping homeless youth quickly and easily find space in a shelter. The harsh reality is that youth on the streets will be approached within 48 hours by someone seeking to exploit them, so the stakes really couldn’t be higher. Through a willingness to collaborate on shared technology, we were able to accomplish together what we couldn’t have done alone — provide youth-friendly applications to give them much faster access to life-saving and youth-affirming supports.”

— Deborah Loon, executive director, Avenues for Homeless Youth & Michelle Basham, executive director, Bridge for Youth

The Moment

There was an identified need to find a new way to help homeless youth in Minnesota’s Twin Cities find shelter quickly. It was clear that technology could be part of the solution, but with 12 separate organizations serving homeless youth in the metro area, there was little value in one organization building a stand-alone solution.

The Power of Possibility

The organizations came together to build an innovative technology solution through their collaborative, the Youth Services Network (YSN). YSNMN.org is a joint undertaking of the 12 YSN member organizations: Ain Dah Yung Center, Avenues for Homeless Youth, The Bridge for Youth, Catholic Charities Hope Street, Face to Face, Hope 4 Youth, Launch Ministry, The Link, Lutheran Social Service, Move Fwd, Oasis for Youth, Salvation Army Booth Brown House, Streetworks Collaborative, and YouthLink.

The YSN collaborative has built a new website and a web app that provide real-time information on available shelter beds, meals and other basic needs, street outreach workers, health care, a crisis line, and drop-in resource centers. The app has geo-location functionality, so youth can see where services are located; it even tells them what bus or transit routes to take to get to the services. In addition, youth



Organizations undergoing a period of innovation and expansion are by definition already considering the power of possibility: the possibility of creating new solutions or approaches or ramping up reach and impact. Boards and leaders are smart to consider whether a strategic partnership with another organization could support those efforts and unlock even greater potential for impact.

may sign up to receive text or email notification when a shelter bed becomes available, saving them from having to make the same repeated queries. Looking ahead, the technology also will help the participating organizations gauge the size of the homeless youth population and where there is a need to expand or contract services.

The Result

What one organization could not do alone — efficiently connect homeless youth with a vast array of available services in real time — several organizations accomplished together. YSN's efforts resulted not only in better access to services for youth, but also additional capacity to make informed program decisions using the data generated by the app. And none of it would have been possible without the creativity and collaborative spirit of the 12 organizations' leaders.

CASE STUDY

The Power of Possibility Moment: Scaling Services for Homeless Individuals & Families

“This is a good match, an opportunity for collaboration, and a positive move with a great potential benefit to all residents of Fort Myers Beach.”

— Tracey Galloway, CEO, Community Cooperative

The Moment

Community Cooperative, an organization located in Fort Myers Beach, Florida, providing essential meals to the hungry, identified a clear need to scale and expand its outreach to the greater Lee County area and to end homelessness and hunger in the community.

The Power of Possibility

Community Cooperative was intentional about its growth and scale efforts, which it has achieved through several successful mergers, including with a number of organizations that were struggling financially and were at risk of closing down and no longer being able to serve those who depended on them.

The Result

Community Cooperative is a strong and vibrant organization providing a wide range of services for homeless individuals in the greater Fort Myers Beach area. As a result of its merger strategy, it has been able to scale its operations and impact in the community in a way that incorporates and respects the hard work of good organizations that were struggling to survive. And it wouldn't have been possible without a commitment from all of the organizations' leaders to focus on the best way to fulfill their core purpose in service to the community.

Exploring The Power of Possibility: Does a Strategic Alliance or Restructuring Make Sense for Your Organization?

As both the Youth Services Network and Community Cooperative demonstrate, sometimes the best way to make things happen is to work in partnership with another organization. Whether a technology innovation, a need to expand and scale services, or another shared opportunity, it's worthwhile to consider if your organization's interest in growth and innovation could be best achieved through a strategic alliance or restructuring with another organization.

As your organization thinks about opportunities for innovation and scale, here are some things to keep in mind:

Board Opportunity #1: Understand your starting point.

As your organization considers opportunities to expand its impact through innovation and scale, it's important that board members and staff leaders have a strong understanding of the starting point.

- What is our core purpose? What problem are we trying to solve or what new reality are we trying to create?
- What other organizations are working in a space similar to ours? Do we have competitive advantages (or disadvantages) that should inform the way that we are thinking about the potential of a strategic alliance or restructuring? Are there organizations that have gone or will be going through major changes that might be open to partnership in a new way?
- What is driving us to innovate or scale? Why is this a good time for us to think bigger about our potential for impact?
- Are we looking to create something new (innovation) or expand or recreate something that's already in existence, either within our organization or outside of it (replication and/or scale)?
- What would happen if we didn't innovate or scale our programming?
- Do we have the resources and/or expertise we need to bring these ideas to fruition?

Answering these questions will help you understand the context for your desired innovation and scale, and may help clarify the level of urgency. It may also help you identify if your organization is in a situation where innovation and scale are essential — but not necessarily achievable — based on current resources and capacities.

Board Opportunity #2: Consider the upsides and downsides of a “go it alone” strategy.

While the business of implementing specific innovations or scale strategies tends to fall to executives and their staff teams, boards play an important role in asking good questions that help strengthen and inform those strategies. This includes asking questions about whether or not a “go it alone” strategy is the best way to serve the organization's core purpose.

- Is there an opportunity for us to innovate together in a way that we could not do alone?
- Could co-creating with another organization make this innovation or scale strategy more affordable, achievable, or rapid than it would be on our own?
- Is the innovation or scale that we seek something that could be shared or co-created with other organizations in a way that would serve our core purpose?
- Are there others who are looking to innovate or scale in similar ways, or who have already?
- Looking ahead, is it reasonable to think that we can stay relevant and keep up with necessary innovations and growth to support our core purpose without partners?
- Are there other upsides (or downsides) to working in collaboration with another organization (or set of organizations)?

It's important to note that not every strategy or tactic is ripe for collaboration, but some certainly are. Talking through whether your organization is in a situation where a joint program, joint venture, or even a merger or acquisition could accelerate the impact of your innovation or scale strategy is a valuable board-level conversation, regardless of what you decide.

Board Opportunity #3: Provide support for a collaboration strategy.

If your organization decides that there are indeed strong benefits to strategically aligning your innovation and scale strategies with another organization, board members can be extraordinarily helpful in identifying and connecting with potential partners. The level of engagement and appropriate role for board members to play depends on the type of strategic alliance or restructuring that is under consideration. Boards should take care to familiarize themselves with our general guidelines about the board's role in [strategic alliances and restructuring](#).

Across all types of strategic alliances and restructuring, board members can be very helpful in two key ways:

- **Identifying Potential Partners:** Board members often have strong networks and may be able to suggest strong candidates for partnership that are worthy of consideration. In some scenarios, this may be a part of a board-level conversation about potential merger or acquisition partners; in others, it may simply be a suggestion of a potential programmatic partner for the staff to consider.
- **Making Introductions & Connections:** Board members may be well positioned to help connect the appropriate players, if a potential partnership is prioritized for outreach by the executive or the full board. Existing relationships and trust can be enormously helpful as organizations set the stage for a first conversation about a potential strategic alliance or restructuring, so it's wise to consider how board members can be helpful. That said, board members should avoid initiating a conversation with a potential partner without being empowered to do so by the full board (in cases of mergers or acquisitions) or by the executive (in other programmatic partnerships).

Learn More About The Power of Possibility

The Power of Possibility is an effort to invite boards and executives to consider how strategic alliances and restructuring could enable their organizations to expand their impact. To learn more about the campaign, and to access more resources and guidance for organizations that are exploring the possibility of strategic alliances and restructuring, visit www.thepowerofpossibility.org.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Take time to reflect on your core purpose as an organization — what it is that you are trying to accomplish — and how those broad goals may be aligned with other organizations.
- Consider ways that your growth or scale strategies might be accelerated, co-funded, or more successful through strategic partnership with another organization.
- Board members can play a valuable role in helping to identify and connect with potential strategic partners, in addition to helping think through the broader strategy.