



# What Nonprofit Leaders Can Learn Successes and Challenges of Nonprofit-Government Collaborations in the San Francisco Bay Area

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## Nonprofits are Vital to Our Society

Throughout history, nonprofit organizations have become the foundation of our society by helping to solve some of the most challenging social issues, but they cannot do it alone (Bryson, 2006, p. 44).

It would be difficult to imagine successfully addressing global problems, such as AIDS, without the cooperation and collaboration of different sectors. Nonprofit organizations need the support of government to help develop societal solutions and create sustainable change.

Cross-sector collaborations and partnerships between nonprofit organizations and government agencies are essential to create these societal solutions and improvements.

## Why Do Nonprofits Partner?

According to Gazley (2007) there are a variety of different motivators that are unique to the nonprofit-government relationship.

- Increase financial resources
- Build stronger communities
- Avoid competition or duplication of work
- Fulfill nonprofit mission

## Challenges & Conflicts

The difficult part begins when partners encounter challenges and conflicts that they must overcome to reach success. Cairns and Harris (2011) and Donley (n.d.) identified various challenges that nonprofit-government partnerships encounter.

Often times, these challenges and conflicts can remain a part of the partnership for its' entirety. True success can, then, be measured by how the partners can work alongside conflict and still reach success and create sustainable change.

- Different cultures
- Lack of trust
- Fear of losing control
- Lack of capacity

## Critical Success Factors

Shaw (2013) did a research study that found several success factors for partnerships between nonprofit organizations and government. While a partnership could have only one or two of these to be deemed successful, having all four are vital to developing a long-lasting successful partnership.

- Common vision
- Build trust
- Clearly stated needs and responsibilities of both parties
- Ongoing communication

*Using theoretical research as a foundation, this capstone paper will provide a comparative analysis of two nonprofit-government partnerships in the San Francisco Bay Area. Based on the motivators, successes and challenges of these partnerships, this capstone will provide key recommendations for other nonprofit organizations to apply to their collaborative efforts with the public sector.*

## Sempervirens Fund: 113 Year Relationship with the California State Parks

### Context

Sempervirens Fund was founded in 1900 and is California's oldest land trust organization. It was founded by a group of conservation activists, namely photographer Andrew P. Hill, that saw it vital to protect the old growth redwood trees in the Santa Cruz Mountains from logging (Reed Holderman, personal communication, Oct 15 2015). It aims to, "protect and permanently preserve the forests, wildlife habitat, watersheds, and other important natural and scenic features of California's Santa Cruz Mountains, and to encourage public appreciation and enjoyment of this environment" (Sempervirens Fund Mission Statement)



In order to protect and permanently preserve the wildlife and nature of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Sempervirens Funds must partner with the California State Parks Department through land acquisition, conservation easements and trail easements.

### Motivators

- In 1902, the then-named Sempervirens Club aimed to preserve the old growth redwood trees in the Santa Cruz Mountains but **lacked financial resources** to make it happen (Reed Holderman, personal communication, Oct 15 2015). The organization lobbied the State government to provide key financial support and buy the land to protect it for centuries to come. This first purchase would later be known today as Big Basin Redwoods State Park.
- Sempervirens believed that by partnering with the California State Parks, they could **build a stronger community** of California nature lovers that would see the beauty in nature, learn from it and appreciate it.

### Challenges

- In 2011, Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill that proposed a shutdown of 70 State Parks due to state budget cuts. Due to the State Parks **lack of financial capacity** to protect land in California, Sempervirens Fund has had to step up to help achieve their shared vision. Holderman stated that, "we are still in this crisis period where the nonprofit partners of the State Parks have been carrying most of the load" (personal communication, Oct 15 2015).
- The California State Parks has a **different culture** in that they have a more bureaucratic and traditional way of running their agencies, whereas Sempervirens has become a more innovative environmental nonprofit organization over the years.
- Due to their cultural difference, California State Parks is **afraid to lose control**. Sempervirens Fund wants to create a more adaptive and innovative park by providing WIFI and allowing people to interact with the park with their mobile devices but the State Parks believes parks should be device free.

### Successes

- Both partners have a **common vision** of protecting the natural resources and open space in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
- Even through difficult times, there was a great amount of **trust** that has allowed them to overcome that challenge. The State Park was able to recognize that Sempervirens are strong partners that will be there even in the most difficult times.
- Having a constant stream of **communication** and being a trusting partner for over 100 years, Sempervirens Fund and the California State Parks are a prime example of a successful nonprofit-government partnership.

## Common Sense Media: Promoting Digital Citizenship in Public School Districts

### Context

Common Sense Media was founded in 2003 and is an education advocacy nonprofit organization based in San Francisco. The organization "is dedicated to helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology by empowering parents, teachers and policymakers with trusted advice and innovative tools" (Common Sense Media Mission Statement). One of their most successful and innovative programs is Digital Citizenship which helps educators and children to be safe and responsible online.



In order to achieve their mission, Common Sense Media established a partnership with unified public school districts nationwide to advance their Digital Citizenship curriculum.

### Motivators

- As technology becomes more prevalent in our lives, it is necessary to build **stronger communities** will come understand and utilize technology is a safe and responsible way. The best way to reach the largest amount of individuals is through classrooms and schools nationwide.
- School districts receive E-rate funding that only can be used for technology integration in schools. Instead of **duplicating work** by creating their own curriculum and resources on digital safety, Common Sense Media comes to school districts to provide tech resources seamlessly.

### Challenges

- Unified public school districts have a very **different culture** that has an extremely slow bureaucratic process and high turnover that makes it difficult for Common Sense Media to maintain a smooth and stable relationship.
- School districts also **struggle with their financial resources** to help execute Common Sense Media's Digital Citizenship curriculum, leading to Common Sense Media finding other methods to find support through foundation and corporate grants.

### Successes

While Common Sense Media's partnership with unified public school districts is relatively new, there are still signs of success.

- Both the unified school districts and Common Sense Media share a **common vision** of providing essential resources to teachers, parents and children. Due to this partnership, school districts are taking a major first step in providing resources on digital safety to keep kids safe and responsible online.
- To ensure **roles and responsibilities** are clearly defined, the partnership has four different legal arrangements. These arrangements allow both entities to have a legally binding relationship so they can successfully work together to provide trainings and resources to incorporate Digital Citizenship curriculum into public schools.

## Lessons Learned

Nonprofit managers and leaders can learn a lot from the challenges and successes of the collaborative efforts of Common Sense Media and Sempervirens Fund.

Nonprofits often believe that they are invincible and that they can achieve their mission without the support of governmental agencies or any other sector. The reality is that government agencies can become a true partner with nonprofit organizations. Government agencies can help provide financial support, build stronger communities, streamline work efforts, and ultimately help achieve nonprofits' missions.

Nonprofit organizations should, of course, be cautious when entering such a partnership. Research and these two case studies can attest that challenges and conflicts are very common in these partnerships. From differing cultural structures, to lack of trust, fear of losing control and lack of capacity, nonprofit managers and leaders need to be ready to tackle these conflicts head first to ensure a successful partnership.

Once conflicts are realized and resolved, nonprofit managers and leaders can truly create a successful partnership with government agencies. Key success factors include having a common vision, building trust, having clearly defined roles and ongoing communication. These critical success factors are crucial for any nonprofit-government partnership to thrive and be sustainable for years to come.

## References

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