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The Power of Collaborative Solutions: Six Principles and Effective Tools for  
Building Healthy Communities

by Tom Wolff

Jossey-Bass, 2010, San Francisco

Reviewed by Bill Berkowitz

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Any book with “collaborative solutions” in its title should offer something different. Collaboration is not a new idea, having been around at least since child-rearing began. And collaborative solutions in the civic world are well known to most readers of *NCR*'s pages. They rest on a simple proposition: many sectors of the community working together are usually more effective than actors going it alone. The devil is in the details, but basic enough so far.

Tom Wolff's The Power of Collaborative Solutions does in fact give us something different and new, in two major respects; one in its practical teaching, the other in its specific content. Both are distinctive, making this book well worth the attention of any community or civic affairs leader. But first to place the book in some context:

Wolff is a community psychologist, one of a small but vigorous group applying principles of psychology to strengthen community life. For the past 30 years, his focus has been on creating and consulting to local, community-based, multi-sector coalitions joining citizens and professionals. He acts primarily as a practitioner, up close and on the scene, rather than as a scholar studying from a distance. The qualifications he brings to this work are impressive.

In The Power of Collaborative Solutions, Wolff argues that current community helping and service systems are broken: they are fragmented, duplicative, overprofessionalized, deficit-oriented, culturally insensitive, blaming, competitive, disconnected from the community – a far-ranging indictment. Wolff then distills the lessons learned from three decades of experience into six key principles for building healthier systems and therefore healthier communities. In slightly condensed form: we should encourage true collaboration as the form of exchange; engage the full diversity of the community; promote active citizenship and empowerment; build upon community strengths; act on the basis of a common vision; and engage spirituality as a compass for social change. A separate chapter elaborates upon and illustrates each principle.

While the diagnosis and most of the remedies may seem familiar to many, the book's arguments are strong, the prose inviting, and the illustrations particularly instructive. This book derives from hard-won achievement, with clearly-labeled and exportable lessons meant to be applied in practice by others. To bring home the lessons, the text is accompanied by practical tools and worksheets, on indicators of collaborative success, creating a common vision, force-field analysis, evaluation questions, coalition member assessment, and half a dozen others. Those interested in the day-to-day how-to's of collaboration will be well rewarded here.

What adds to the practical impact is the book's personal tone. Wolff is self-disclosing and heartfelt; but more than that he is a storyteller, with first-hand stories to tell. At least one extended community story concludes seven of the book's eight chapters. Wolff's characters – real community workers – come to life on the pages. So, for example, we read how low-income parents with troubled family histories are trained to become Master Teachers of Family Life; how a college administrative assistant strengthens community relations by collecting children's books from the faculty and placing them on her front porch for neighborhood children to read

and borrow; and how French-Canadian and Latino residents of a poor neighborhood in a poor town come together to eat and talk about what they like about their neighborhood, while the newly-elected 28-year-old Asian-American female Mayor listens attentively and follows up responsively. The stories themselves show how collaborative solutions emerge, and have practical lessons of their own.

But it's another distinctive feature that makes this book most thought-provoking and original, and that has to do with its emphasis on spirituality. Wolff's position is clear:

“. . . The answers to our biggest problems, in human society and in individual desire to work for change, may best be addressed by calling not for more money but for each of us to remember, and work from, our highest spiritual essence” (p. 198).

And:

“Spiritual principles can help us and our communities move toward sharing abundance, honoring the natural environment, [and] promoting social justice. . . .” (p. 225).

This type of thinking is rarely found in community or civic practice, nor in its training curricula.

What are spiritual principles, and how can they be put to use? For Wolff, four key spiritual principles are appreciation, for what is; a sense of interdependence of all beings; acceptance, of everyone's humanity; and compassion, for all others. These principles are not inherently religious; they transcend religion; they join the self to something larger. And “[they] need to form the foundation of all of our work in building healthy communities” (p. 201).

Through personal community examples, Wolff shows how each of these principles can be applied to address deficits in helping systems and create better outcomes. One might claim that appreciation and the others are not necessarily “spiritual,” but rather common moral and ethical guidelines for behavior in private as well as professional life. In a way, though, the labeling doesn’t matter; the impacts of application would be the same.

That said, Wolff’s exposition here is a significant contribution to our understanding of civic work, and his narrative on spiritual principles (by any name) breaks new ground. It’s especially valuable in reminding us that in-the-trenches community action involves not only technical knowledge and psychological skills, but also personal strengths. Civic work calls upon our full humanity; it draws upon the best we have to offer as human beings. Not only that, since the utilization of spiritual qualities requires no special expertise – we are all spiritual by nature – the base for action is broadened. More of us can be properly included in the work. The discussion of spirituality by itself makes this book worth reading.

Two cautions, however. One can fairly question whether these spiritual principles make a positive difference in actual civic practice. One may radiate appreciation and compassion, score in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile; yet to what extent will that help create a better collaborative solution or outcome, compared to someone who is all business and attends only to the task at hand? We’d like to think that spiritual and other of Wolff’s principles do lead to better outcomes; anecdotal evidence suggests so, and very likely they do. But I think the best present answer is that we can’t be entirely sure. We lack sufficient empirical data, even though the collection of that data is beyond the scope and intent of Wolff’s book.

A related and equally challenging question is to what extent collaborative solutions will do the job that’s needed. Collaborative solutions – even those forged by the best principles – and

effective solutions are not necessarily the same thing. Other ingredients are required. Someone must drive different sectors together to craft a collaborative solution in the first place. Once crafted, some mechanism must be in place to implement it, to monitor its implementation, to evaluate it, to make appropriate modifications, and to sustain operations if it is indeed effective. Those tasks go beyond formation of the collaborative solution itself. They call for strong leadership, and perhaps not collaborative leadership either.

Effective community work may be facilitated by collaborative solutions, but those solutions alone may not be sufficient. We do need the power of collaborative solutions, and we need to capitalize on Tom Wolff's ideas and lessons. But we also need strong leaders prepared to act with vision and determination to help create the conditions that will put collaborative solutions in motion. Collaboration, and leadership, are the yin and yang of effective community work. Their balance and blending will be essential to counter the all-too-prominent challenges now pulling at the fabric of civic life.

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