

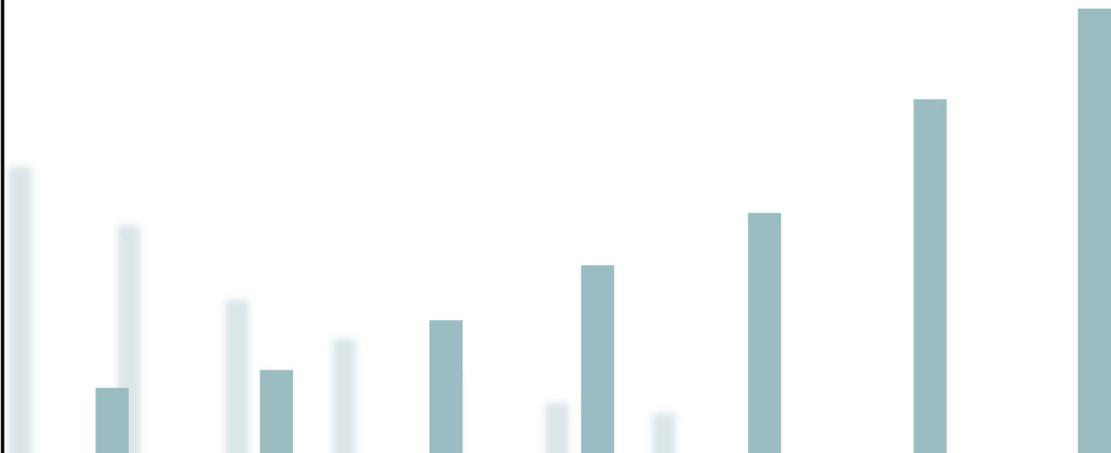
JUNE 2007

National Networks

Planning can align a national network for full impact

Alan Tuck

Nan Stone



As U.S. nonprofits continue to take on more responsibility for redressing social ills, a growing number of large networks have embarked on initiatives to raise their performance to a new level. The focus of these efforts varies. Some national network organizations strive to increase the number of people they serve. Others seek to improve the consistency and quality of programs and services across the network, or to expand into new regions, or to strengthen the network's financial health. Whatever the specifics, establishing a new strategic or business plan is almost always part of the effort—not because the objective is a new plan *per se*, but rather because the network's leaders hope that it will be the catalyst for renewed commitment and greater alignment among the constituent parts.

For example, consider America's Promise Alliance (APA), which was founded in 1997 as, simply, "America's Promise," on the theory that people from every sector could mobilize to build the character and competence of the country's youth. America's Promise sought to do this by uniting individuals and groups across the country to deliver on "Five Promises" to young people, in the form of: caring adults, safe places and constructive use of time, a healthy start and healthy development, effective education for marketable skills and lifelong learning, and opportunities to make a difference through helping others.

In its first seven years of existence, the organization received tremendous support from governments, nonprofits, corporations, and individuals throughout the U.S., enabling it to touch the lives of a great many children. But even so, its leadership agreed America's Promise was not living up to anywhere near its full potential. So in 2004 they initiated an overhaul that ultimately changed almost everything about the organization except its commitment to delivering the Five Promises, particularly for those most in need. The board of directors was reconstituted and expanded. The management staff underwent significant changes, and a new president was brought in. Perhaps most telling of all, the organization's shorthand name was expanded to America's Promise Alliance in recognition of the fact that its mission could only be achieved through the work of the alliance—the independent organizations that together constitute the APA network.

During the last few years, Bridgespan has been fortunate to engage with the national offices of a number of national networks to develop new strategic plans.

These networks include APA, Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), Communities In Schools (CIS), and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). Together we have identified a handful of simple but important practices that can help make the planning process a net contributor to achieving greater alignment among all of the network's constituencies and stakeholders. The unifying theme: *how* you plan is at least as important as what the plan ultimately says. In this spirit, we have found that gaining true strategic and operating alignment is promoted by:

- Planning from the outside in: start with the goals for your beneficiaries;
- Involving the members of the network, not simply communicating with them;
- Defining the role of the affiliates as well as the role of the national office;
- Using data to gain consensus and reach decisions;
- Ensuring that the board doesn't just approve the plan but owns it.

What we mean by national networks

The nonprofits that serve U.S. society range in size from one- and two-person efforts to large organizations with staff in the hundreds and budgets in the tens of millions of dollars. Within this rich variety, the organizations we are calling national networks comprise one of the defining elements. These networks, which are most often organized as associations, alliances or federations, are made up of independent nonprofits in many locations that come together around common issues or service models. Although not all of them have affiliates in every state, their reach extends beyond individual communities or regions. Some have grown as networks under a common name and offering common services; others—like APA—were assembled by pulling together existing and sometimes very diverse organizations that saw the benefits of working together.

Plan from the outside in: Start with the goals for your beneficiaries

The primary output of our work with national networks was a strategic plan that would guide the actions of the center and its stewardship of the overall network. But the jumping off point for this work was neither the network's strategic issues nor the role of its national office. Instead, we found it helpful to plan from the outside in, by which we mean starting with the network's beneficiaries and what, concretely, the network hopes to achieve on their behalf. This common vision is what knits a network's members together; but divergent interpretations inevitably arise as the network evolves over time. So it is immensely helpful to begin the planning process by reestablishing clarity around the impact the network aspires to have (its intended impact) and its understanding of how that impact will be brought about (its theory of change).¹ To illustrate, consider the experience of Communities In Schools.

CIS connects public schools with community resources to help young people learn, stay in school and prepare for life. Founded in 1977, the organization began in one school in Atlanta, Georgia. As word—and then proof—of its success spread, leaders in other cities and states quickly sought to open affiliates. By 2004 CIS was serving 1 million youth, in 3,000 schools, through 200 local affiliates and 13 state offices. The potential of this huge network was enormous, but so were the challenges posed by its diversity. As CIS staff members often joked, "If you've seen one CIS, you've seen one CIS."

Before CIS could establish common goals around which the entire network could align, three questions had to be answered: Who, exactly, are the primary beneficiaries of our services? What, precisely, do we want to do for them? And

¹The concepts of intended impact and theory of change are discussed in depth in "Zeroing in on Impact" by Susan Colby, Nan Stone, and Paul Carttar. This article was published in the fall 2004 edition of the Stanford Social Innovation Review and is available via www.bridgespan.org.

how, specifically, will we achieve that impact? None of these was a straight shot. Even the seemingly simple question about beneficiaries had several potential answers, since CIS had ample evidence that the impact of its programs reaches far beyond the individual students who participate in them. Given that each of those answers would imply a different set of strategic priorities, what, realistically, could CIS hold itself accountable for?

Working with the planning team, CIS national leadership took responsibility for formulating an initial set of answers to these questions. These formulations were then shared with state and local directors for feedback, testing and refinement. As a result, when the time came to secure the network's commitment to the plan, there was widespread buy-in throughout the network. CIS committed to holding themselves responsible for reducing drop-out rates for all the students in the schools where they have a presence. They also agreed that achieving this impact depends more on the process by which CIS enters a community and creates partnerships to meet the needs of local youth than it does on a specific set of program offerings.²

Given the diversity that characterized the CIS network, the benefits of starting the planning process with the beneficiaries front and center were relatively obvious. But this approach can be equally valuable in working with networks where all the parties agree on the program model and everyone is offering services in the same way. The experience of Big Brothers Big Sisters provides a brief example.

BBBS is the sixth largest youth-serving network in the U.S. and the oldest and largest youth mentoring organization in the country, serving more than 240,000 youth annually. The program is currently delivered in 5,000 communities across the country by more than 400 BBBS agencies and is often described as the "gold standard" in mentoring.

²To learn more about the CIS story, see "Communities in Schools: Propelling a National Network to the Next Level" by Kate Attea and Alan Tuck, available at www.bridgespan.org.

Despite its success, however, the number of youth in need continues to grow, and in 2006 the national office, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), initiated a strategic planning process focused on enhancing the size and reach of the entire network. The process ultimately resulted in the creation of both a nationwide strategic direction that outlined challenges, priorities and objectives for the network and a specific business plan identifying priorities, resource allocations and objectives for BBBSA.

Discussions about BBBS's goals at the beginning of the planning process revealed network-wide agreement on *how* services should be delivered: via programs that matched individual volunteers, or "Bigs," with individual children, "Littles," to provide one-to-one professionally supported mentoring. However, network leaders also uncovered a range of views on *what* BBBS should be held accountable for:

Was it strictly the impact of its services on the children? Should it also include the impact on the volunteers? A child's peers, family, or school? There was anecdotal evidence that the impact on volunteers and other parties was significant.

Ultimately, however, the planning group agreed that since the network's reason for being was its impact on children participating in the program, then that is what they should be accountable for. Establishing clarity on this point was a milestone in determining the scope and direction of their strategy, and the allocation of resources towards their goals.

Involve the network, don't just communicate with them

When the paramount goal of a network planning effort truly is higher impact, it is enormously helpful to adopt a genuinely inclusive approach throughout the planning process. The reason is simple: In every network, the members do most of the actual work of delivering against the mission, with the center providing support, guidance and leadership. Typically, network members are neither owned by the center, nor do they report to it in a command-and-control model. Individual members are often better-resourced than the center; and the network as a whole will have many times the resources of the national office.

At BBBS, for example, the national office budget is nearly \$30 million, whereas network revenue is over \$270 million. Similarly, at APA, the national office has a budget of roughly \$10 million; the nine largest networks in the Alliance have combined national budgets of about \$300 million; and the full affiliate networks of those nine networks have resources in excess of \$11 billion.

Involving the network throughout the planning process has two benefits: The quality of the decisions is likely to be better when people with field experience, who will be responsible for implementation, also participate in making them; and the likelihood of rapid implementation is increased when people are engaged throughout the process rather than being given the answer at the end.

Involving the network includes at least three steps: gathering initial input; reviewing the findings and sharing insights to build conclusions; and disseminating the new initiatives. These steps represent points in the process where it is particularly important to ensure that there is broad participation on the part of network members.

Gathering initial input

Gathering input can take various forms depending on the network's culture and the size and similarity of its members. For example, member surveys were used to collect input in the work with NCLR and CIS, because in each case the planning team was reaching out to hundreds of affiliates. In contrast, at America's Promise Alliance, where the planning process involved representatives of roughly 50 organizations from all sectors, telephone interviews were a better alternative.

Whatever method of collecting information is chosen, it is better to over-invest than to do the bare minimum, because the goal is not only learning enough to drive conclusions but also building network involvement in the answer. For example, in the work with America's Promise Alliance, we learned early on that the Five-Promise framework had strong support among the partners. Nevertheless, we continued reaching out through more than 50 additional interviews to be sure that as many partners as possible had an opportunity to reflect on the question and recommit to being part of the framework.

Before starting to collect information broadly across the network, it is valuable to sample the questions with a few representative members. Representative member guidance need not be a lengthy process but it should reach out to a real cross-section of the network: new versus old members, large versus small, established versus struggling, and cheerleaders versus critics. Such sampling can help clarify the questions and determine if something is missing. Once the questions are set, and a common format has been established, gathering input from as much of the network as possible is desirable. Not surprisingly, we have found that regardless of who actually gathers the input, a personal request from the head of the organization will increase the response rate and help build the respondents' confidence that their ideas and experience will help shape the future of the network.

Reviewing the findings and sharing insights to build conclusions

Once all the input has been collected and the results have been compiled, it can be tempting for the people engaged directly in the planning process to drive straight to conclusions and then write the plan. This is the simplest way to proceed, especially if only a small group is involved. But it also runs a high risk of ending with a plan that is owned only by that small group—a problematic outcome given that almost all of the strategic decisions will need to be implemented by the members of the network. If they are also involved in reviewing the inputs, developing the conclusions, and understanding the reasons behind key strategic choices, the likelihood for faster and broader implementation is greatly enhanced. Even when it comes to aspects of the work that are clearly the responsibility of the central staff—such as brand building—involving the network in understanding the importance of this work and how it supports their efforts is important. To illustrate, let's return to America's Promise Alliance.

As noted above, the process for involving constituents began with detailed telephone interviews of more than 50 trustees, board members and individuals who had the potential to play a critical role in the network going forward. Each of these interviews followed a guide covering 19 topics, many with sub-questions. Among the topics were three separate but inter-related issues:

- What should the national staff of America's Promise Alliance do to help ensure that all kids receive all Five Promises?
- How do the current seven initiatives map against the roles constituents identify as the most effective ones for APA to play?
- How should APA come to major decisions?

The overwhelming response to the first question was that APA should do a few things well rather than too many things at once. A laundry list of initiatives with little emphasis or continuity had diluted the impact of the alliance in the past. Going forward, the work of Alliance national staff should concentrate on building levels of collaboration among the partners, increasing joint communication to the public and policy makers, and providing research information on the needs of America's children and youth and the amount of progress achieved against those needs.

Responses to the second question were equally telling: Even though the current initiatives were consuming energy and resources at the national office, a large number of the interviewees were unfamiliar with many of them. At the same time, almost all of them identified two initiatives which they thought APA was most effective in advancing: public recognition of communities that were doing a good job for kids (through the 100 Best Communities for Kids in America initiative); and developing a framework (then called Report to the Nation) for informing the nation at large on the status of support for children and youth. Building on these initiatives, the Alliance partners also affirmed the value of the America's Promise national staff providing advocacy leadership, through its new policy affiliate First Focus.

Finally, the clear consensus was that the national staff should be Alliance-driven in its decision making, and that it should not make unilateral or bilateral decisions with just one of the alliance partners about strategic initiatives. Rather than seek to create new initiatives developed solely by the headquarters staff, the national office should use its central position to encourage, support and drive collaborative efforts by the many partner organizations.

After compiling the responses, the results were shared at a meeting to which all the APA trustees were invited. During the meeting, the trustees endorsed the

recommendation to focus national's efforts on the three areas of building collaboration, communicating to the public and policy makers, and providing better levels of information on need and solutions. They agreed to concentrate on 100 Best Communities as the primary platform for the first two efforts. And they endorsed the work of the research committee in creating the Report to the Nation (later issued as Every Child Every Promise) as an important addition to the information currently available about the needs of America's youth. Finally, the trustees voted to expand the work associated with the 100 Best Communities initiative to include specific outreach to the communities hit hardest by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Sharing the interview findings and involving the network not only improved the specifics of the final plan but also established legitimacy for the recommendations that have guided APA's work since its completion. It also made it crystal clear that any new initiatives (which are very selective) would be driven by the combined energy of the Alliance partners rather than the central staff. This process was time-consuming and at times messy. But the cauldron of involving the key network members, who have to embrace the strategy, has led to a living plan rather than a stale document.

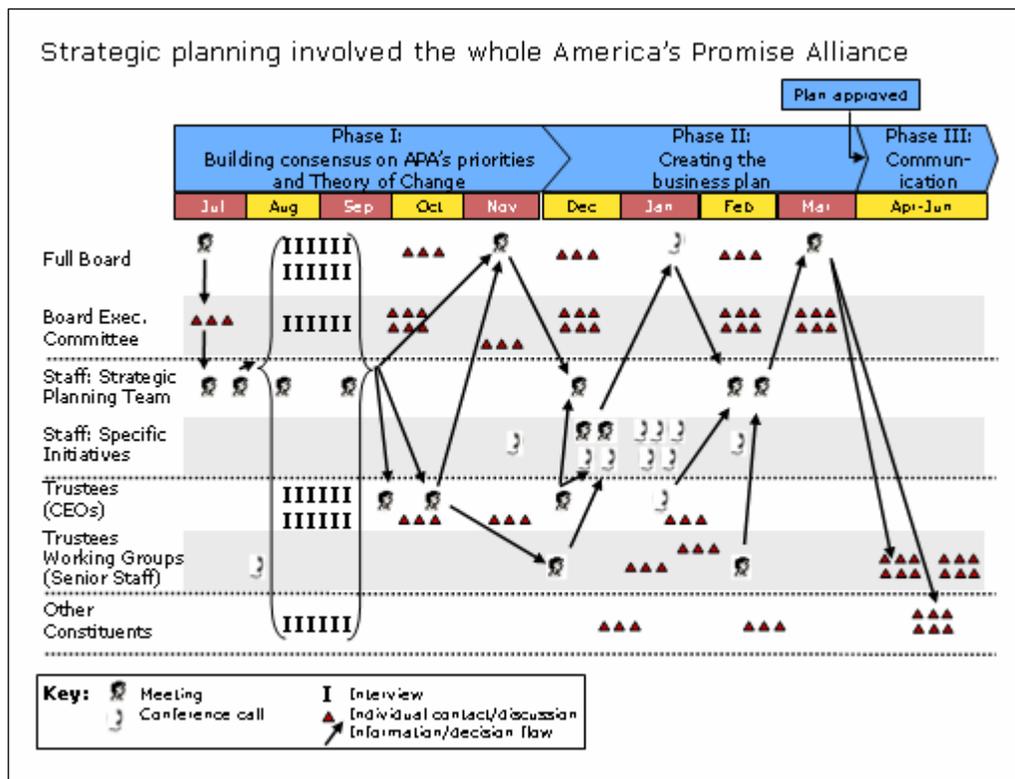
Disseminating the new initiatives

The final step in the planning process is disseminating the new decisions fully among the network leadership. If the network has been genuinely involved throughout the process, this step should be more the confirmation of a joint decision than an announcement from the central office. And by this point, the national leadership should be completely comfortable explaining not only what the new initiatives will be, but also why they are important. As a result, this is a great opportunity to cement the alignment of the national office and the members, and it is well worth leadership time to deliver the summary personally. At America's Promise Alliance, the dissemination involved presenting the plan at board and trustee meetings as well as through individual calls and presentations to leaders in many of the partner organizations. To create ongoing involvement, the CEO created an Alliance Trustee Steering Committee to serve as her "kitchen cabinet"

and help guide and monitor the implementation of the new plan. The Steering Committee, which engages actively via a conference-call meeting once a month, includes the CEOs of the major partner organizations representing all sectors.

Although the process described here is straightforward conceptually, the reality is much messier and more complicated. (See Figure A for a visual depiction of the interactive process over several months by many constituents that led to the final plan.) Taking on this level of complexity, while still keeping a network moving forward, is tough; so is being open to input from strongly opinionated colleagues who are critical to the network's ability to achieve results. In our network engagements, Bridgespan has been uniformly fortunate to work with national leaders who were willing to embrace these challenges.

Figure A: Schematic of the America's Promise Alliance strategic planning process



Define the role of the affiliates as well as the role of the center

In every network, there are at least two distinct organizations, the national office and the local service delivery organizations, and in many cases, there are three. For example, the Communities In Schools network is composed of the national office, independent state offices, and local organizations; while America's Promise Alliance has a national office, which coordinates with the national offices of many of the partners, who in turn work through their own networks. Until the role of each of the members is clearly defined, improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the entire network is likely to be very difficult. Clarity about roles helps to eliminate both the gaps that occur when no one has defined responsibility for a particular set of activities and the confusion that ensues when multiple parties are developing redundant programs or systems. Some overlap can be valuable: including explicit responsibility for fundraising in the mandate of all a network's constituent parts, for example. But the overlap should be intentional rather than something that has simply evolved over time. To illustrate, consider National Council of La Raza.

NCLR is the largest constituency-base Hispanic civil rights organization in the United States. NCLR has been at the forefront of every major policy initiative affecting the Hispanic-American community since 1968, and the on-the-ground work of its affiliates has been an essential complement to these policy successes. NCLR affiliates are independent, community-based organizations that differ vastly in size and programmatic focus. Comprising nearly 300 organizations, and providing services that range from charter schools and English-language classes to job-training and home-ownership programs, they reach more than 4 million Latinos each year.

The arrival of a new president in 2005 served as the catalyst for an initiative to clarify the strategy and enhance the relationship between the national office and the affiliates. In this process, NCLR leadership reaffirmed the centrality of both policy and programmatic work. However, they also recognized that important opportunities for synergy were being lost. Going forward, the two streams of work would need to be better aligned, with affiliates playing an increasingly greater role in policy efforts, especially at the state level.

To determine affiliates' interest in playing a more active policy role and to better understand their needs, a joint NCLR-Bridgespan team surveyed the entire network. On the policy question, the answer was a resounding “yes,” but there was less unanimity when it came to the services affiliates wanted national to provide. While all of them relied on NCLR for certain activities—its advocacy presence, its power to convene, and its role as an information conduit—beyond this core, the survey data revealed significant differences.

In response to this feedback, the planning team outlined a two-pronged membership system. The first would be General Membership. All affiliates would be General Members, and the associated services they received from the national office would be geared around the consensus items from the survey. In addition to being General Members, selected affiliates would also belong to partner groups designed to meet their specific needs: Advocacy Partners, Program Partners, Institutional Partners, and Next Generation Partners. Affiliates in these groups would not only share the rights and responsibilities of General Membership but also work with NCLR on a deeper level. In return, they would receive an enhanced set of services targeted to their current needs. The partner groups would not be static, but rather would change as affiliates' needs evolved. For example, Next Generation Partners would become likely candidates for different forms of partnership as the organizations grew and matured. NCLR would also institute a biannual review process to assess affiliates' satisfaction with the services national was providing and to ensure that affiliates were fulfilling their specific responsibilities.³

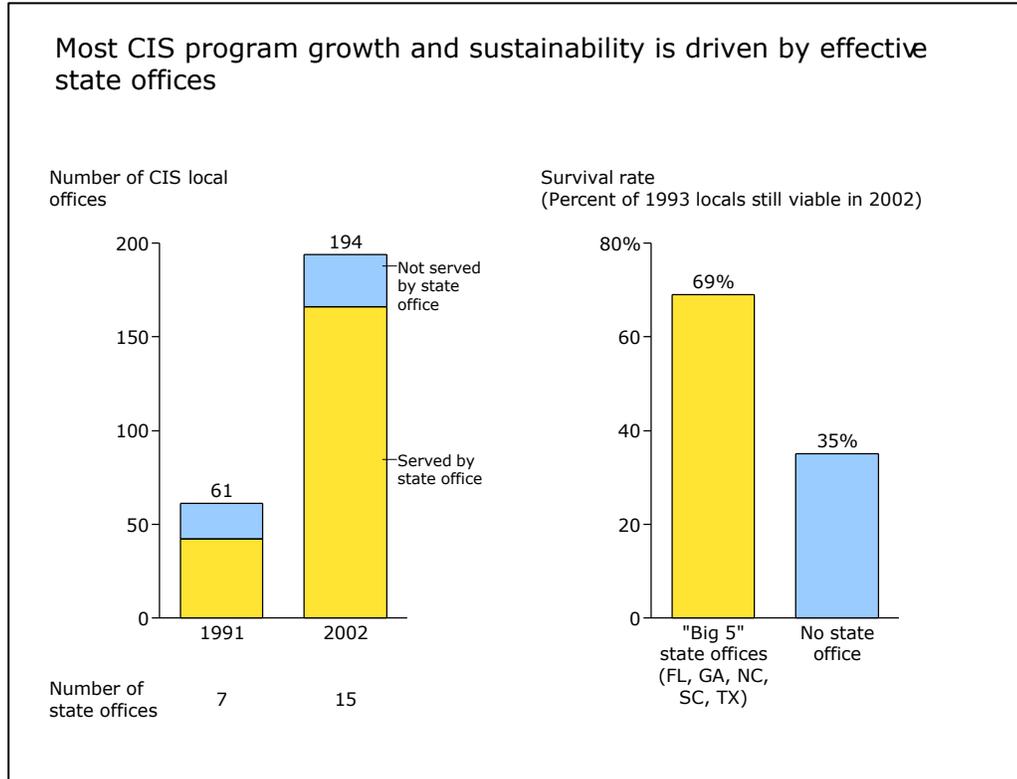
³ To learn about NCLR's experience in full, see “The National Council of La Raza: Unleashing the Power of an Affiliate Base,” by Susan Colby and Tia Martinez, available at www.bridgespan.org.

Use data to reach decisions and gain consensus

The people who truly make America's national and local service organizations work are individuals who are passionate about creating impact. Not surprisingly, such people often have strong feelings about what the network should—and shouldn't—do, now and in the future. These opinions tend to be shaped by years of experience, and they cannot be ignored; but decisions made on this basis alone are likely to be driven by nothing more than the most compelling speaker. Not surprisingly, then, when data about historical performance is added to the mix, the quality of the decisions and the degree of consensus can increase significantly.

Again, Communities In Schools provides an excellent example. The network expanded significantly between 1977 and 2004 through the establishment of independent local organizations served directly by the national office, and through a system of state offices that helped build local affiliates in their states. As CIS thought about its next phase of growth and how best to allocate resources to support it, the question of direct versus state-office growth needed to be resolved. Both options had passionate supporters, but when comparative performance data was gathered and analyzed, the discussion quickly moved beyond one opinion versus another. Over the prior ten years, more than 90 percent of CIS growth had occurred in states with strong state offices, and the affiliates in these areas were more than twice as likely still to be in operation at the end of 10 years. (See Figure B.) Going forward the primary, though not exclusive, plan for growth would be to create strong state offices which would then support the local organizations.

Figure B: Communities in Schools local office growth and sustainability



Ensure that the board owns the plan

The impetus for a new strategic plan often comes from the board, seeking a roadmap for its governance responsibilities. If the board limits its involvement to commissioning the effort and approving the outcome, however, neither the board nor the rest of the network will realize the value that can come from fuller involvement. Such involvement has at least three advantages: it builds or rebuilds board commitment; it gains the benefit of members' expertise; and it ensures consistency in the messages sent to both the network and to outsiders.

At Communities In Schools, for example, the board established a strategic planning committee to work closely with the planning team and to represent it throughout the process. The committee was comprised of six individuals who

shared a deep commitment to the work of CIS, but differed significantly in their backgrounds and tenure on the board. This diversity was important in ensuring that the many perspectives represented on the board were included in the planning effort. The steering committee reviewed, challenged, and supported every aspect of the planning process. For example, the committee was the first real testing audience for the CIS planning team's articulation of the network's overall theory of change. Based on their comments, the proposed statement was further refined and then shared with the network for additional comment and revisions before final adoption. Similar exchanges occurred throughout the planning process, with the committee's active involvement repeatedly helping to shape the work. In the seven-month planning effort there were three full meetings of the steering committee and five conference calls and multiple individual updates to the steering committee members.

Although the full CIS board needed to approve the final plan, frequent interaction with more than 30 individuals would have been impossible. The involvement of the steering committee assured the full board that their guidance and views would be heard throughout the planning process. It also let the network know that this plan would have the committed support of the board.

Board ownership of the new strategic plan was equally evident and important at BBBS. The steering committee for the planning work was made up of five national staff, four local agency leaders, and one member of the national board, who was also a long-time board member of a local agency. This group met five times over the first 12 weeks and a total of 10 times over the course of the seven-month process. Having a board member involved was useful from the outset in terms of ensuring a balanced consideration of the issues being discussed. But, as it turned out, this individual's contribution was much larger. When the national board chair stepped down midway through the planning process, this board member was tapped to replace him. As a result, when the steering committee brought its high-level recommendations to the entire national board, his participation added great credibility to the process and to the proposed strategy. He was able to endorse the plan with confidence; he was also able to defend it, answering questions and providing detailed accounts of the logic and analysis that backed it up.

In conclusion

While large networks have many common features, we believe that there are enough differences among them in purpose, structure, size and age that a single planning framework will neither fit nor resonate with all. However, we do believe there are approaches that can facilitate full alignment from the on-the-ground service providers back through the national organization to the national board. When such alignment exists, the full potential of a network can be unleashed.

To illustrate, let's return to where we started—APA. APA's strategic plan was approved in March 2006 and has provided the guideposts for actions since then. Living into a plan that was created and embraced with the full involvement of the board and Alliance partners has sparked renewed enthusiasm for working together as an alliance for change. This was highlighted in a two-day summit meeting, attended by representatives from more than 90 organizations from all sectors who care about the fate of America's children and youth. This meeting, held in February 2007 and jointly sponsored with the National Collaboration for Youth and The United Way, was prompted by the leadership of the Trustees of America's Promise Alliance. By the end of the two days, the partners had committed to reaching 15 million disadvantaged young people over the next five years with at least one more "promise." They also selected three action strategies to make that commitment a reality in concrete, measurable ways. These results represent unprecedented potential for collaboration across the Alliance to ensure that every sector of our country is engaged in a way that will affect the lives of those who are most in need.

Sharing knowledge and insights from our work is a cornerstone of the Bridgespan Group's mission. This document, along with our full collection of case studies, articles, and newsletters, is available free of charge at www.bridgespan.org. We also invite your feedback at feedback@bridgespan.org.