

Collaborative Governance Demands Finesse

Bryant Park, a nine-acre commons nestled behind the New York Public Library in midtown Manhattan, was known in the 1970s as “Needle Park” because of the drug traffickers and crime it attracted. Deserted by day, it became dangerous at night.

Today it is a glittering showpiece within New York’s park system. It took two decades, and collaboration between the public and private sectors, to work the transformation. Area businesses paid a special tax to fund a nonprofit restoration corporation. City government provided financial support and gave the restoration corporation a major say in the park’s future. Although it remains a public park open to all, rents and event fees now sustain its operations. And Bryant Park has become both a coveted brand name and a study site for urban planners from around the world.

This successful endeavor is an exemplar of “collaborative governance,” an approach in which government boosts its impact by tapping the expertise, energy, and resources of the private sector (both profit and nonprofit) to solve vexing problems.

The intriguing story of Bryant Park’s resurrection is one of dozens recounted in *Collaborative Governance: Private Roles for Public Goals in Turbulent Times* (Princeton University Press), a new book by Harvard Kennedy School colleagues John Donahue MPP 1982, PHD 1987, Vernon Senior Lecturer in Public Policy, and Richard Zeckhauser, Ramsey Professor of Political Economy.

Using case studies from education, health care, public works, the environment, and national security — from charter schools to hospital evaluations to nuclear waste cleanups — the authors show the breadth of existing collaborations in the United States, many successful, others not. They tease out the common themes and principles of collaborative governance and offer practical guidelines for making these alliances work.

“Collaboration has the potential to unleash the energies of people and organizations across the sectoral spectrum,” they argue.

Although it shares some features with familiar models such as contracting and philanthropy, collaborative governance is a distinctive approach that hinges on government players guiding private actors without fully controlling them according to Zeckhauser and Donahue. They call this defining feature “shared discretion,” and warn that finding the right balance of authority, delegation, and flexibility is key to a successful partnership.

Evoking a circus metaphor, the authors envision a government official not as a paper-shuffling bureaucrat but as a dynamic and skilled ringmaster who coordinates many diverse people and tasks, much like the big-top director who keeps the acrobats and elephants moving but gives them room to shine on their own. Donahue now chairs the school’s Master in Public Policy program, and he aims to incorporate more collaboration-relevant material into MPP education.

“This would make government more exciting work because it’s a new way of thinking,” Zeckhauser reflected in a recent interview. Added Donahue, “Collaborative governance is a way of economizing on public-sector talent and also developing more of it by making the work more fun.”

To be successful collaborators, managers need both “soft” and “hard” skills that include empathy, emotional intelligence, and analytic acumen; they also must continually evaluate the project, the authors contend. “One chronic problem of government is that it has a hard time making adjustments, and you never get it right the first time,” says Donahue. “Collaboration more or less compels reassessment.”

Although the book targets government officials, it’s an interesting read for anyone because of the wide-ranging examples and the authors’ narrative style. “Aha” moments abound as one learns about the Academy of the Pacific Rim, a successful Boston charter school that emphasizes character development and academic rigor and requires all students (nearly 60 percent of them African American) to learn Chinese or Japanese. Or about the evolution of Chicago’s Millennium Park from an urban eyesore to a cultural and tourist magnet, thanks to political vision and considerable private resources. Or about the U.S. Coast Guard’s post-9/11 approach to protecting ports by giving commercial parties leeway to develop security plans well suited to individual harbors.

Collaborating on a book about collaboration came naturally to Donahue and Zeckhauser, who have worked together since Zeckhauser was the younger scholar’s thesis advisor, some 30 years ago. Both have been “nibbling around” this subject for years and were inspired to produce a book by longtime HKS supporter Frank Weil.

The pair refined their ideas during lunches or walks around campus, and they revised their manuscript using e-mail or document-sharing software. “It would be hard to find any given paragraph and know who wrote it,” says Donahue. “And we’d have a hard time recovering the history of the ideas,” adds Zeckhauser.

— by Debra Ruder