



## Advancing Collaboration with Dress for Success

### Approach to Collaboration

DFS is in nearly 30 countries around the world and has over 150 affiliates. Collaboration is core to the organization's operations and has been central to DFS' ability to expand to its current global footprint. The organization operates under a licensing structure, which has been very helpful to scale rapidly as well as support local adaptation and customization within each market served. The ability to be flexible has become increasingly important for them since they work in different contexts with different communities around the world.

Collaboration in this context requires clarity around roles and responsibilities. For this purpose, they have licensing agreements and policy guides for their affiliates, helping DFS set expectations regarding the use of the brand, the mission statements, and other relevant aspects. A couple of

times per year, they collect data from the affiliates to measure affiliate performance and to better understand and respond to affiliate needs as well as those of the women they serve.

DFS also has strategic partnerships with corporations, who provide most of the charity's funding. These corporate collaborations are the strongest when the partnership defines and meets the needs of both entities, and when there are multiple tiers of relationships at the local, national and global levels.

As a piece of advice for the sector, Wendy recommends embracing collaboration as a potential game-changer. The goal is to make sure it aligns with the organization's mission so that each partnership becomes a tool for furthering the pursuit of that mission.

## Application of the 9 Considerations for Collaboration

### Build Trust

Trust is absolutely critical. For there to be trust, partners need clear expectations in terms of what each party contributes to the collaboration, and how they are going to interact, among other vital aspects.

### Have a Vision

Vision guides organizations, but must also embrace an understanding of what the community being served needs. A few years ago DFS went through a process where they asked their clients about the challenges they face when engaging in DFS's services. They learned that program participation barriers occur due to transportation, healthcare, and time away from family or other responsibilities. These findings led them to formulate different methods of service delivery, making it easier for women to participate in DFS's programs. With this vision, over the last couple of years, they have been working on digitizing portions of their content and adapting the programs to let women work on themselves at their own time and pace.

Another important trend they have seen is the changes in the workplace that have taken place over the last years, which stem from many jobs transitioning to automation due to technological advances. DFS is highly interested in addressing these workplace variances, which undoubtedly leads to new collaboration opportunities.

### Seek to Assure the Success of Your Collaborators

In Wendy's opinion, this approach is fundamental because seeking to ensure the success of all collaborators is the best way to increase the whole pie. Through collaboration, you can create something more significant together than what you can achieve by yourself.

### Take Stock

This can happen in two ways. Determine the tasks you can share with others and also have a good sense of the things that need to be accomplished but are not your core competency and could be done by someone else. Both ways of taking stock can create opportunities for collaborations.

### Start Small

In general, DFS's partnerships begin small. New affiliates are generally launched by one person who identifies an opportunity in the community. Similarly, new corporate partnerships often start with a specific focus and broaden as the organizations work together to expand the partnership strategically after the first initiative. In Wendy's opinion, starting small allows you to evaluate if you have the right partner and make sure that you are aligned on the collaboration goals.

### Fail Fast, and Build Rigorous Feedback Loops

DFS's affiliate network model is an example of scaling. When they initially approve new affiliates, there is a sequence of touchpoints and markers around the expectations on what must be achieved. This structure helps ensure that partnerships are progressing in a way that is understandable by both parties, and both can intervene when there is a divergence. It is essential to have those mechanisms that serve as a checks and balances system. It helps affiliates stay aligned with DFS's mission and expectations.

### Take a Portfolio Approach

In Wendy's opinion, this approach should start from looking at what you want to achieve and the opportunities available for your organization. Collaborations are part of an arsenal of tools that organizations have for the achievement of their goals. A portfolio of partnerships allows organizations to fail in some while moving forward with others.

## Consider Non-traditional Partners

It is common for organizations to stay in their lane. This laser focus approach means looking for relationships in their natural environment, with people and organizations that are working on similar topics. However, charities must perform a more in-depth analysis of their varying needs. They may find some are best met by collaboration with non-traditional partners.

## Keep Your Donors Apprised of Your Collaborations

In Wendy's opinion, collaboration is beneficial to funders because funders are interested in the financial sustainability of the organization. Collaborations allow more efficient use of resources.

## Future Collaborations

For future collaborations, DFS would like to partner with organizations that have a presence in the entrepreneurial and digital space. Both areas are growing and shaping the future of work, which means that the women the organization serves must be prepared for the challenges and opportunities that come from these emerging spaces.



Wendy Longwood,  
Chief Operating Officer  
Dress for Success

## About the Organization

Dress for Success (DFS) is an international nonprofit, and its mission is to empower women to achieve economic independence by providing a network of support, professional attire, and development tools to help women thrive in work and in life.

**Disclaimer:** All participants were interviewed about past collaborations through the framework of the 9 Considerations for Collaboration. Naturally in some organizations, not every one of the considerations are applicable to their circumstances.