Advancing Collaboration with the Giraffe Heroes Project

Approach to Collaboration
The Project collaborates with other organizations and with individuals in a variety of ways. We work with the public to send us nominations of heroes and with media outlets to help us tell their inspiring stories. Because publicity is protection, our storytelling helps protect heroes whose lives and safety may be in danger from those who would like them to stay quiet.

Our overseas operation, Giraffe Heroes International, now has affiliates in nine countries, all finding local heroes and telling their inspiring stories. For example, Giraffe Heroes Zimbabwe now has over eighty people on the ground, pushing for a government that can finally provide the peace and justice that the country deserves. We collaborate with NGOs all over the world to help us magnify the voices and impacts of the Giraffe Heroes, whose stories we tell.

Our K-12 Giraffe curriculum—most of which is now available as a free web download—helps kids build lives as courageous and compassionate citizens. We collaborate with like-minded educational organizations who are also engaged in helping children with programs in service-learning, civic engagement, and character development.

We write books, give lectures, provide coaching, and other important tools to citizens of all ages who want to make a difference. We partner with educational and social organizations to advance the knowledge of civic engagement and to collaboratively share what we know. We collaborate with podcasts worldwide. Our partners are our megaphones, and they bring our words to much bigger audiences.

As technology advances, we need to advance as well. When we began telling our Giraffe stories, we started with faxes and vinyl records. Now, our reach is far greater, utilizing our website and a variety of social media channels. Social media also dramatically increases our opportunities to collaborate with other like-minded organizations. We are consistently striving for innovative online collaborations that help inspire others to stick their necks out, tackling public problems in their neighborhood, community, or the world.
Build Trust
We build trust with our audiences, with Giraffe Heroes, and with like-minded organizations and other collaborators, by being competent, honest, professional communicators, and by always following through on our commitments.

Have a Vision
The Giraffe Heroes Project knows that good ideas and good ideals are not enough by themselves to ensure success. Having a strong vision is imperative. The Project is continually advancing its vision of moving more and more people to stick their necks out for the common good — turning their ideas and ideals for a better world into action.

Part of our vision for the future is to support our print and online stories of heroes with short, compelling videos. As attention spans shorten, we recognize that people will be spending less and less time looking at written words. And so, in 2020, we are using a small grant to begin creating short one-minute videos that can be easily shared on phones and tablets, especially by young people.

Seek to Assure the Success of Your Collaborators
Other nonprofits also seek to motivate citizens into civic action, especially in the field of K-12 education. We see such organizations far less as competitors than as collaborators, and we maintain honest, friendly, and helpful relationships with them. We join them at panels and national conferences. We share our experiences and co-generate innovative ideas that benefit all of us.

Take Stock
Just last year, the Giraffe Heroes Project finished building our free, easily searchable web database of over 1,400 Giraffe Heroes stories — increasing the scope of possible collaborations. A teacher in Pittsburgh, for example, might be teaching a science class about the environment. She can access our database to find the Giraffe Heroes in her area who are doing incredible, brave things to solve environmental problems. Her students can read the stories of these local heroes and even ask them to speak to the class. We put 35 years of experience and information into creating this database, and we urge anyone interested in being inspired to utilize it. The database is on our website, http://www.giraffe.org/.

Start Small
We believe that the most successful collaborations with other organizations succeed by starting small and carefully building trust in each other’s spirit and competencies. For example, to guarantee a steady stream of nominations for Giraffe Heroes, we ask people to start by reading the heroes’ stories already accessible to them on our web database and in our E-zine. Our experience is that when people gain sufficient confidence in the power of our storytelling, they’re more likely to spend the time and effort needed to tell us about the heroes they know.

Fail Fast, and Build Rigorous Feedback Loops
Most of our collaborations in the educational world have been successful. Occasionally there is a partner who will misuse our information and provide nothing in return, or we engage in a super-hyped podcast that ends up reaching only 100 people. With decades of experience, we have learned to “fail fast”— to cut the links to a collaborative experience that’s not working and seek alternatives. Of course, it’s even better to avoid negative experiences altogether by doing rigorous due diligence from the beginning. Also, apply constructive and reliable feedback loops that allow consistent assessment of progress and results of any new and untried collaboration before multiple assets have been committed.
Consider Non-traditional Partners
Because the Giraffe Heroes Project is engaged in so many areas, most of our collaborations are non-traditional. Our partnerships range from the US embassy in Zimbabwe to the Ashoka Foundation, from a translator in Argentina to a schoolteacher in Alaska. Working for the Giraffe Heroes Project is always exciting because anything can happen. We are a living demonstration that often the very best ideas and collaborations come in from off the wall.

We aim to be more proactive in seeking potential collaborators. For example, we utilize the BBB Wise Giving Alliance’s tool to list our needs and assets. In the past, we’ve often let collaboration happen to us instead of pursuing it, which was a mistake.

Keep Your Donors Apprised of Your Collaborations
We usually communicate with our donors by sending them regular narratives of what we’re doing. After participating in this collaborations project, however, we’re inspired to include more emphasis on our collaborations in these narratives. Our donors may very well be able to suggest additional collaborations from their lists of contacts.

About the Organization
For the past 36 years, the Giraffe Heroes Project has been finding “Giraffe Heroes”—compassionate risk-takers who are largely unknown, people who have the courage to stick their necks out for the common good, in the US and around the world. When the Project tells the stories of these remarkable people through traditional and social media, others see and hear these stories and are inspired to help solve the problems of most concern to them, from poverty and corruption to poor leadership and crimes against women. The Project’s books, blogs, curricula, speeches, and trainings give activists and would-be activists the tools they need to succeed.

Telling the stories of heroes may be the oldest strategy in the world for motivating people into brave, compassionate action—and it works. As long as there are Giraffe Heroes, there’s hope.

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.