



Alliance Extra - February 2006

Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate Interview with Robert Dunn



In November, Robert Dunn became President of the Synergos Institute, bringing with him wide experience of working in all three sectors. Alliance asked him how this experience and what he describes as his collaborative style of leadership fits in with the Synergos ethos. What, in turn, drew him to Synergos and how does he see its future? And how can the various disparate-seeming elements that make up Synergos be presented as a coherent strategy to address poverty and injustice?

What appealed to you about the job of President of Synergos?

I was attracted first to the mission of the institution, because its focus, the alleviation of poverty and injustice, is really what speaks most directly to my own passions. Secondly, I was enormously impressed by the vision of the founder, Peggy Dulany, by the thoughtfulness and engagement of its board, by the talent of its staff, and by the quality of its partnerships. So, an extraordinary array of assets for one organization.

Finally, I had come to believe through my work, at Business for Social Responsibility, that the most effective way to make progress against seemingly intractable problems is to get everyone working on them together. And this is really the Synergos philosophy – that meaningful change is most likely to occur when you bring all of the stakeholders of a particular issue together to create and implement strategies to address that issue and establish a shared and deeply held commitment among them to making those strategies successful.

To what extent do you feel that Synergos's hiring of you reflects a

strategic decision to strengthen the organization's capability for influencing corporate philanthropy?

I think that was just a small part of it. I do think Synergos values my experience of working with the private sector, because of the importance of market-based solutions to many problems, and because the sector has a unique set of assets to bring to bear on the problems of poverty and inequity.

But I think it went way beyond that. I think what was more important to them was the experience I bring from having worked in all three sectors and in every part of the world, and the commitment I have to a collaborative kind of leadership, which I think is essential given the values of the organization. There was also a really good values fit between me and Synergos.

Can you say a bit more about collaborative leadership?

I knew the kind of leadership I wanted to provide at this stage in my career was collaborative, and this seemed to be a perfect fit with what Synergos was looking for. Between them, Peggy Dulany and Bruce Schearer have led the organization for 18 years. When an organization is looking for a new leader with time to be reflective about their future needs, they usually have a clear idea about what kind of a new leader they want. Bruce himself was a great collaborator, and I think Synergos was looking for someone who could continue that tradition, both within Synergos and with its partners.

What is your vision of corporate social responsibility and how does corporate philanthropy fit into it? What is your strategy for Synergos in this area?

If you go back to the Synergos mission to alleviate poverty and injustice, market-based solutions themselves hold great promise and efforts by the public sector and civil society to address these issues are more effective when they involve the private sector. Corporate philanthropy is only one of the ways companies can and do help.

What's also important is where they invest their capital, where they locate their facilities, who they hire, what kinds of products and services they offer, and how they conduct their operations from the standpoint of impact on communities, the environ-

ment, and social, political and cultural life. The private sector can also bring to bear technology, intellectual capital, leadership, employee volunteers, and influence with respect to public policy. So an organization like Synergos that seeks to help make systemic change enhances its prospects of doing so if it understands and captures what the private sector can bring to that task.

What do you feel about the U-process, now a central part of the Synergos vision for working cross-sectorally?

It's a remarkable piece of social technology, and its promise is in the way it involves people both intellectually and emotionally. By bringing people together, creating a temporary community, and enabling people to craft solutions that appeal both to the head and the heart, it has the prospect of being more successful in achieving systemic change than lots of other group processes. And that's why we are eager to apply it in a number of situations, modified as necessary, and then make it very widely available. In a sense we're open-sourcing the intellectual property of the process, and beginning to make provision to train people in its application around the world.

In general, how do you think people in the business world will respond to it? You don't think there will be any scepticism about it?

Well, interestingly, it's a process that's actually been around for many years and its principal users have been the private sector. Businesses already understand the impact it can have in inspiring groups and in significantly altering systems. I think one of the services that Synergos is rendering is taking this technology and finding a way to make it available to poor communities and their leaders for development purposes.

One of the strengths of the U-process seems to be that, if you are stuck with a problem and solutions aren't working, it's a way of making a break from them and thinking afresh. Do you see it this way?

Yes, I think that it lends itself to applications where there's widespread frustration because a system isn't working. Part of what the process does is to bring together a microcosm of the people and institutions that affect the system, who can step back

and ask 'How could we all be approaching our responsibilities differently to achieve the results that all of us have agreed are important?'

The U-process won't work unless you are able to persuade people in civil society, in the private sector, in government that there's an opportunity to use it to make good things happen. So when we introduce the process, it's always after very extensive consultations with people and when they have affirmed their belief that the process really lends itself to making more effective and lasting change possible.

The other point I would make about the process, and the reason it has proved so effective, is that it brings together and creates community among the people who are needed to make change occur. It doesn't only generate ideas and commitment, but it builds a history of collaboration among people who need to collaborate successfully to make real change possible.

While Synergos has a very simple and appealing mission, to reduce poverty and injustice, but it also contains extraordinarily diverse elements. There's the Strengthening Bridging Organizations Program, strengthening community development foundations around the world; there's the Multistakeholder Partnerships Program, looking for solutions to critical problems, often using the U-process; and there's the Global Philanthropists Circle, with its very different ethos of working with wealthy people. Do you see any difficulties in holding it all together? It's quite challenging to grasp what Synergos does when you look at the website and read about all the different elements.

Well, we are a complex organization, and we're giving serious thought how we can make it easier for people to understand what we do. But actually I think all the different programmes and initiatives tie together quite well. We are strengthening the capacity of leaders and institutions to collaborate to make breakthrough changes that impact poverty and justice. So we work with a network of donors, we work with a network of leaders of community-based organizations, and we work to strengthen the civil sector. Then, when it's appropriate, we bring them together with others for the kinds of cooperative efforts that we think hold the greatest promise of accomplishing lasting change.

We think the U-process is an extraordinary strategy, but we also believe there are problems and circumstances that don't lend themselves to the U-process and where other approaches may work better. We still want to be a catalyst for change, but we understand that that will take different forms in different situations. For example, we're involved in a very large project right now along the US-Mexican border, bringing together foundations, community organizations, businesses and governments, and we're not using the U-process because we think a different approach is more appropriate, given what we're trying to accomplish there.

The problems of poverty and injustice are so complex and sometimes seemingly intractable, and they've been with us for a long time. The notion that there's one simple way to resolve them is wishful thinking. If Synergos seems complicated, I think it's partly because addressing these issues is complicated. There's a need to get a sense from the community of what it will take to effect change, and sometimes that's stimulating philanthropy, sometimes it's building institutions to support civil society, sometimes it's strengthening the capacity of leaders. Sometimes people are ready to come together and address issues collaboratively because they've realized that they can't be successful working on their own. Our challenge is to try to identify the kinds of strategic interventions that can really make a difference in addressing poverty and social injustice.

What do you see as the priorities for Synergos over the next few years?

I'd say that we're very anxious to engage in initiatives which can have a larger impact. There have been lots of cases where people have piloted experiments that have been quite exciting but not replicable at scale, and lots of instances where global interventions have proved too cumbersome because they don't make sufficient allowance for the kinds of variations that occur around the world.

So I think Synergos is trying to identify projects and initiatives where we add unique value and that are large enough to have a major impact. For example, we're part of a new project on child nutrition in a state in India with a population of 120 million people, so it's a fairly sizeable project at the outset. But there are other Indian

states that have expressed an interest in replicating the process if its initial results are promising, so there's the prospect of extending the effort all across India. Then there are people outside India who are eager to explore the application of the process we're using there as well, based on what we learn from the initial effort.

So here's a case where the project itself is of significant scale and scope, and where it might ultimately also have a global influence. I think increasingly we're going to be looking for involvements that lay the groundwork for these kind of results. We recognize that the ability to undertake such projects very much depends on the quality of leadership and the civil society infrastructure in local communities. So we're going to continue to work to connect people, ideas, resources and institutions; and I think our challenge is to do that in ways that have greater and greater impact.

How does the Senior Fellows programme fit into all this? What do you think it's achieving? Is it working?

I think that the Senior Fellows programme is one of Synergos's greatest accomplishments. From all of my own experience leading and funding non-profit organizations, I know well that leaders in civil society rarely have the support they need to develop and to maximize their capacity, because there aren't typically resources available for them to do that. For me, one of the great strengths of the Fellows peer learning network is that it has enabled people to enhance their own leadership through the knowledge, skill and experience of colleagues. This has had great benefits for the organizations they head and the communities they serve.

In fact, this network is making it possible to attempt more collaborative problem-solving because you must have able, interested and ready partners in civil society for this to be done effectively.

Robert Dunn became President & CEO of the Synergos Institute in November 2005. He was previously Chairman and President and CEO of Business for Social Responsibility (BSR). He can be contacted at rdunn@synergos.org

See www.synergos.org