

TOM WOLFF

The

POWER

of

COLLABORATIVE

SOLUTIONS



Six Principles and Effective Tools for
Building Healthy Communities

FOREWORD BY NEAL R. PEIRCE

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"Wow! This is an amazing book, and I literally couldn't stop reading ... not something one normally says about a book by a professional in any field. This is a truly transformative book and a must-read for anyone concerned with overcoming the limits of the possible through collaborative action. Tom Wolff crafts a path to change that is at once visionary and achievable. Interweaving poignant stories and hard facts, he reminds us of what's at stake—and shows us the dramatic difference we can make by committing to bold new visions of collaboration and community."

**—Meredith Minkler, professor of health and social behavior,
University of California, Berkeley, and coauthor,
Community-Based
Participatory Research for Health (Jossey-Bass,
2008)**

"If you want to bring about sustained positive change in your community, read this book. The stories will inspire you, and the lessons will shine a light on your leadership path."

—Tyler Norris, founding president, Community Initiatives

"Why collaborate? Because that's how to make change now and in the future. Here you'll find not just theory, but also the hard-won, down-to-earth detail on how to make collaboration work where you live and act. If you are a practitioner or an academic looking to energize and strengthen your collaborative skills, Tom Wolff's *The Power of Collaborative Solutions* will pay dividends many times over."

—Bill Berkowitz, professor emeritus of psychology, University of Massachusetts Lowell

"Tom's passion for social justice is equaled only by his courage and commitment to progressive causes. Tom has a tremendous fount of knowledge and he knows just what to do with it and how to help others use it. He makes quick connections to practice and research and vice versa. His kind and commonsensical manner means that his intellect is accessible."

***—Linda Bowen, executive director, Institute for
Community Peace,
Washington, D.C.***

The Power of Collaborative Solutions

Six Principles and Effective Tools for Building
Healthy Communities

TOM WOLFF

FOREWORD BY NEAL R. PEIRCE

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FOREWORD

FOR YEARS we've all known about the kind of irrationality in our society that Tom Wolff dissects and deplors in this book.

Whether it's asthma or obesity, youth violence or polluted rivers, domestic violence or burgeoning jails and prisons, our responses to such issues have been late and ineffective. We've had overwhelming evidence that coordinated steps at early prevention can make a profound difference in outcomes. Commonsense early steps await us—steps that could, if we'd only embrace them, provide less disease, fewer ruined lives, and less expensive governance.

In addition, we've all witnessed the competition within and between governments: the fragmented services, the jealousies, and the “siloed” agencies that all too rarely talk, more rarely with each other—even though it's the same citizens and physical places their work affects. Their failure to reach out, to create partnerships, makes it all the less likely our society can take cohesive, timely, effective steps to address the burgeoning problem sets of these times.

The same is true for the country's foreign relations. The earlier and the more constructively the United States works to protect the globe's natural environment, encourage development of economically lagging countries, and help nations restrain population growth that goes beyond their sustainability limits, the more promising will be the long-term prospects for the United States—indeed the prospects of all humanity.

Tom Wolff analyzes our behavioral problems and hits the right notes on our shortcomings, the attitudes and practices

that “make us as we are.” He follows that with a searing judgment: we change our ways, or our children and children’s children will bear the heavy cost of dysfunctional systems, lost lives, and a darkened environment.

Having said that, it’s we Americans, among peoples of the world’s more developed nations, who may find the transition to collaboration, to more careful and thoughtful long-term thinking, especially excruciating. The core of the problem may be that we’ve had it “too good for too long.” We lived through an “American century” in which inexpensive energy, amazing supplies of fertile land, endless automobility, world-dominant corporations, and decades of burgeoning suburbs made us think, quite literally, that both limitless nature and good fortune were our birthright.

In that mind-set, it was all too easy to tolerate gross inefficiencies, overlapping and uncoordinated government and private programs and agencies. To allow environmental degradation, laggard schools, and lost generations of minority (and in fact many majority) youths. We Americans were the cocks of the roost—didn’t our politicians keep telling us so? Our resources (we assumed) were infinite. Why worry?

So now comes a twenty-first century with trends, conditions, projections of high-cost energy, limited resources, environmental degradation, accumulated debt, and sharpened foreign competition that suggest we as Americans will have to scramble as hard as our Depression-era ancestors. It may be increasingly difficult, without fresh thinking, attitudes, and consensus, to keep our economy functioning, to provide an adequately trained workforce, to protect our increasingly endangered environment, and to ensure that we stop “throwing away” the lives of so many millions of our own children through sheer lack of attention and caring.

Social deprivation can now be predicted by the Zip Code a person lives in. There are stories of prison experts saying they can measure future incarceration demands by the number of students enrolled in third grade today. Talk about red flags for a society!

So where do we start? Tom Wolff has a number of suggestions. He'd have us curb our inclination to blame the victim and ignore the often critical social determinants that lead to severe problems. He'd have us focus on peoples' (and communities') strengths, not their deficits. Start collaborating—widely, systematically. And moderate our proclivity to excessive professionalism that forgets the imperatives of common sense. In each area, he lays out a variety of intriguing—and promising—new approaches and solutions to our dilemmas.

But he doesn't stop there. Rather suddenly, like an unanticipated spring shower washing away discouragement and darkness, he writes of the gain (and new freedom) awaiting us in such spiritual principles as love, compassion, acceptance of others, and deep listening.

We're reminded, in short, that our inner selves, our comprehension of the world and people around us, need to be reattuned for relationships—and a world—that far more fully meets human need.

We need to admit, honestly, that by noncollaboration we've compounded our challenges and that the price has now loomed too high—that our country's term of "effortless superiority" on the world stage has run out.

The message here is that we need to admit our weaknesses; to become more of a family and less lone rangers; and to value each other, from the poor in our own communities to the fast-expanding ranks of struggling slum dwellers across continents.

Are we up to that? In the answer may lie the fate of our civilization.

Neal R. Peirce

Chairman, the Citistates Group; columnist,

Washington Post Writers Group; editor, Citiwire.net

To my loving family: Peggy, Rebecca, and Emily
and to the communities who allowed me
the privilege of working with them

PREFACE

THIS BOOK reflects the evolution of my learning through my life. It draws on what I have discovered by exploring what it means to be a spiritual being on this earth, as well as on the experiences I have gathered in the many roles in which I have found myself: as family member, participant in many communities, clinical psychologist, community psychology practitioner, social change agent, and more.

The core of my learning is that in all those settings I cannot realize my visions alone, nor can anyone else. Like many people, I often find myself acting as if I have to be completely self-contained and self-sufficient—but there are always others to help. In my grandiose and inappropriate moments, I feel that my job is to change the world. As a consultant, I work with many who carry a similar burden—they don't delegate, they don't collaborate, they work alone. Why? Because they feel it is "their job," they don't trust others to do it "right," and they have not figured out how to collaborate successfully.

I was once meditating in Sedona, Arizona. I sat under a gnarled cedar tree next to a cenote, a water-filled limestone basin sometimes considered to be a sacred or magic spot. As I looked up into the tree, its branches appeared to me as the heads of wise, old men, and I sensed them clearly saying to me, "You are not alone." For many years, I have wondered about that moment. Did I really see and hear something? Regardless of the answer, I have grown to understand what a crucial message *we are not alone* is, not only for me but for all of us. If we can believe that we are not alone, both in terms of other people and also spiritually, then a world of opportunity opens for us.

Our lives happen in complex settings, and we need the hands and hearts of many people from across our communities to help make meaningful change happen. We cannot create significant community change without engaging others, building community, and moving forward together. Any effort at change involves actions at the personal level but also requires changes in our community settings.

This is why I call myself a community psychologist. Community psychologists believe that

- We need to focus not only on individuals but also on communities.
- Human strengths and problems are best understood and changed when we view people within their social, cultural, economic, historical, and geographic cultures.
- We need to pay explicit attention to and respect the diversity among people and settings.
- We can enhance well-being and promote social justice by fostering collaboration where there is division and empowerment where there is oppression.
- We are committed to promoting equitable distribution of resources, equal opportunity for all, non-exploitation, promotion of peace, active citizenry, liberation of oppressed people, greater inclusion for historically marginalized groups, and respect for all cultures.[1](#)

I learned to cherish and foster these beliefs through my growth in life as a human being and as a professional.

I began my career as a clinical psychologist. My first jobs involved clinical work with students on college campuses, where I began to see clear connections between the strengths and stresses of the campus environment and the problems that compelled students to ask for help at the

Student Mental Health Center. Were the dormitory difficulties that a student reported to me during my eleven o'clock appointment a result of his or her psychopathology, or did those problems come about because of the structure, functioning, and norms of the dorm?

As I moved into directing the consultation, education, and prevention programs at a community mental health center, I saw the ways in which similar correlations played out in a different, larger community around issues such as domestic violence, child sexual abuse, deinstitutionalization, and the stresses experienced by isolated rural elders. Here I also learned to understand the complex networks of formal helpers and informal support networks that made up the settings in which people lived their daily lives. I started to deeply appreciate how dysfunctional our helping systems were. Sometimes the key players did not know each other, often they did not trust each other, and rarely did they find ways to work together. This is where I started my earliest ventures into promoting collaborative solutions.

The observations that I made caught my attention. My early experiments with encouraging collaboration stirred my interest. The results tickled my imagination: What could happen if we could truly promote collaboration? What if this work could lead to competent helping systems and an empowered and mobilized citizenry? Wouldn't this represent the best of a deeply rooted and competent democracy?

With these thoughts in mind, I began to narrow my focus, putting my energy into the ideas, and then the practice, of building geographically based community coalitions. I did this through my role as the director of community development for the office of community programs at a state medical school and later as a consultant on a wide range of issues to local, state, national, and international organizations. I adopted a vision of building healthy

communities through collaboration as the hallmark of my work.

When I began to work as a consultant, I was able to develop a much broader set of experiences, through work with local groups far from my home base and with national organizations, and ultimately in conversation with people in other parts of the world. I helped the Institute for Community Peace manifest its community-based violence prevention and peace promotion efforts in ten communities, rural and urban, spread across the United States. I consulted to the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services on a system of quality-improvement networks regarding kidney disease that covered the whole country. At the same time, I was able to continue my involvement at the grassroots level by working in small neighborhoods with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, in mid-sized cities with substantial Latino populations, and with coalitions of African-American women committed to addressing racism as it manifests in the disparities in the incidence of breast and cervical cancer in Boston.

I also learned as a citizen and resident active in my own communities. My long history of political engagement started with the McCarthy for President campaign in 1968 and continued to include a decade-long stint as chairman of the Leverett, Massachusetts, Democratic Committee. I was also an elected member of the local school committee. My local organizing included working with the Belchertown Betterment Committee and moved on to encompass the Leverett Affordable Housing Committee. My most fun collaboration involved organizing a community-wide effort to rebuild the playground at Leverett Elementary School. We pulled together hundreds of community members to design and build a wonderful play structure. The most discouraging local effort was my involvement in the Leverett School Building Committee, during which we lost eleven

consecutive votes to build an extension to our community's school.

Taught by this wide variety of experiences in a broad range of communities, I began to discern some of the patterns that allow communities to work together to solve their problems and to build healthy communities. That is what this book is about.

More recently, I have observed a dramatically rising interest in the processes of community building and collaboration in local and national media, professional publications, and local problem-solving sessions. This increased attention emerges from the need to find collaborative solutions to community problems, the (unnecessary!) failure of many attempts to build collaboration, and the new energy around collaboration that comes from people's experience with the Internet and from collaborating tools such as wikis.

I am especially committed to those grassroots processes in which we place the people who are most affected by the issues at the center of problem solving and community building. I therefore have focused on empowering communities, which is where this type of work can occur. In this book I offer tools and concepts that people have successfully used to resolve some of the most difficult and personally affecting problems that they have faced, as individuals and as communities. Glimpses of what other individuals and groups have accomplished enrich this book. I hope that the stories of their struggles and successes will inspire you to make your own lives and communities better and will also give you ideas about how to make the necessary changes happen.

The apparent intractability of the problems and the hurdles involved in bringing together disparate elements of a community are initially daunting. However, with vision, persistence, and dedicated application of simple-to-understand ideas, you can achieve success, as many other people and communities have.

A history of failed good intentions can make these breakthroughs all the more satisfying and exciting. The solutions that occur from this process truly cannot be achieved by the methods most communities are currently using: we *cannot* do apart what we can accomplish together. *The Power of Collaborative Solutions* shows exactly how to make this shift toward success.

The Power of Collaborative Solutions is timely—because we need solutions to serious social problems *now*. The process is innovative because it includes the full broad spectrum of community members, offering methods of rediscovering democracy and of educating and empowering all citizens to be capable participants in their personal and community lives.

This book, like the work it encourages, is based on a broad and deep vision of community. I hope that in these pages:

- Grassroots leaders will find both encouragement and methods they can use to address community issues.
- Community residents will discover the inspiration to tackle the local issue that they have been mulling about, whether that is building a new playground, reducing violence, improving the schools, or finding a way to help and be helped by the isolated elderly members of their neighborhood.
- Professionals in the helping system will be encouraged to address the dysfunctions in that system and to make their existing coalitions far more effective and enjoyable.

- Community problem solvers will see the strengths of a collaborative approach and will find new tools to help them reach their goals.
- Anyone who designs systems for communities will see the urgency of working across “silos,” thinking of the community as a vital whole rather than an assembly of parts.
- Teachers and students will encounter principles, stories, and tools to invigorate their classes and keep their ideals alive when they take theory into the real world.

There is a strong spiritual component to my journey and to the work of community collaboration. Seeking collaborative solutions calls on us to engage communities with acceptance and appreciation, to work with various groups with deep compassion, and ultimately to understand our deep interdependence on each other. When we pursue our spiritual purpose in this work we come to understand that indeed we are one, and that we can do together things we cannot do apart.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK is possible only because of the ongoing editing, support, encouragement, and direction I received from my very talented editor, Deb Robson. Deb has been the editor of most of my writings for years, and she applies a sharp eye to my writing and a wonderful ear to what will sound good. Her judgment is superb and her style gentle enough so that I can hear her. Deb held my hand as we entered the world of publishing and led the way. She has been there chapter by chapter in the writing and rewriting of *The Power of Collaborative Solutions*. The resulting product is greatly enhanced by her capacity to write in a clear and engaging manner. I am deeply indebted to Deb for all of this, as will be you, the readers.

Many people have been my teachers and colleagues as I learned about collaborative solutions. This includes those people whose writings have deeply influenced my thinking—George Albee, Saul Alinsky, Alice Collins, Leland Kaiser, Jim Kelly, John McKnight, Meredith Minkler, Julian Rappaport, and Seymour Sarason. I have had the pleasure of meeting and, in some cases knowing, all of them. As an experiential learner, I learn best by doing, so my most critical teachers are those who worked with me as colleagues in social change ventures, including Suzanne Cashman, Cathy Dunham, Steve Fawcett, Vince Francisco, Robert Gallant, Arthur Himmelman, Judith Kurland, Greg Meissen, Tyler Norris, Dan Rothstein, and Ted Slovin. Four people stand out as my partners, teachers, and mentors in social change adventures over decades. I am especially grateful to them: Bill Berkowitz, Gillian Kaye, Carolyn Swift, and Linda Bowen.

To these dear friends I am deeply indebted for all that they have taught me, for the highs and lows we have gone through together, and for their ongoing love, inspiration, and support.

None of this would have been possible without the welcome that has been given to me by communities across the country and around the world. I have been honored that they have wanted to work with me, and I have been privileged to be welcomed into these communities and often into the homes of their members. These are the very caring and skilled people who do all the hard work on the front lines in their communities that is described in these pages: Geri Alten, Nashira Baril, Al Bashevkin, Rebecca Bialecki, Camille Carter, Barbara Corey, Babatunde Folayemi, Kathleen Hardie, B. L. Hathaway, Betty Medina Lichtenstein, Dave Musante, Mary Lou Pettit, and Dolores Thibault-Muñoz.

My spiritual journey has been guided by my dear wife, Peggy; my friend Ted Slovin; Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, who led me back to see Judaism as a spiritual practice; my Spirituality and Social Change Support Group; and Ellen Tadd, my long-time spiritual guide and teacher.

Thanks to Jesse Wiley, Nina Kreiden, and David Horne at Jossey-Bass for honoring the value of this work and for perceptive insights that have helped shape it and bring it to completion.

And my deepest gratitude for ongoing joy and support to my loving wife, Peggy; to my dear children, Rebecca Blouwolff and Emily Wolff; and to Joshua Blouwolff and the delight that is Jonah. They bring the light and make the sun shine in the morning.

THE AUTHOR

TOM WOLFF, Ph.D., is a community psychologist committed to issues of social justice and to building healthy communities through collaborative solutions. A nationally recognized consultant on coalition building and community development, he has a lifetime of experience training and consulting with individuals, organizations, and communities across North America.

Tom has learned the hard way what it takes to achieve community change. He has been a professional psychologist in practice, has run large mental health agencies, has built statewide systems of grassroots healthy community efforts, and has consulted nationwide to organizations addressing an array of issues. His dissatisfaction with the traditional helping system led him to create a wide range of community innovations and to work with many types of communities—urban and rural, majority and minority.

He's passionate about looking at issues from a community perspective and empowering local communities to solve their own problems. His writings combine theoretical understanding with rich stories and on-the-ground experience.

Tom has published numerous resources to help communities solve their own problems. His writings on coalition building include *From the Ground Up: A Workbook on Coalition Building and Community Development* (with Gillian Kaye, 1996), *The Spirit of the Coalition* (with William Berkowitz, 2000; American Public Health Association), and "Community Coalition Building—Contemporary Practice and Research," Special Issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2001). He has been a partner in the

development of the Community Tool Box (ctb.ku.edu), a website with seven thousand pages of practical resources on community health and development.

Between 1985 and 2002, Tom founded and directed Community Partners, a technical assistance and training program affiliated with the University of Massachusetts Medical School. It provided guidance and support in coalition building and community development.

Tom is a fellow of the American Psychological Association, which granted him its 1985 National Career Award for Distinguished Contributions to Practice in Community Psychology and its 1993 Henry V McNeil Award for Innovation in Community Mental Health. In 2000, he received the For the People Against the Tide Award from Health Care for All for his “outstanding efforts to energize and educate local communities in areas of health care justice.” He has held academic appointments at the University of Massachusetts School of Public Health, the University of Massachusetts Medical School Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, and Wellesley College’s Stone Center.

He presently runs Tom Wolff & Associates (www.tomwolff.com). Consulting clients include federal, state, and local government agencies; foundations; hospitals; nonprofit organizations; professional associations; and grassroots groups.

1

Why Collaborative Solutions?

HOW OUR HELPING SYSTEMS ARE FAILING US

ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, the New York City Police and Fire Departments had difficulty coordinating their actions because they were operating on different radio frequencies. Urgent messages between emergency professionals could not get through as they dealt with the tragedies at the twin towers. It seems that this is a metaphor for many of our modern approaches to community problem solving—we are struggling because groups that need to work together are on different frequencies, both figuratively and literally.

In the late 1980s, I heard Ann Cohn Donnelly, former director of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, tell a story of being a young social worker and getting a request from one of her inner-city parents to come to the woman's house on a Saturday morning. Donnelly arrived and found a room filled with people like herself. The mother of the family announced, "You are all social workers working with our family. I am going to leave the room. It would be really helpful for our family if you would talk to each other."

Then there was the time I was working with a rural community coalition that was addressing issues of hunger

and homelessness. The coalition members gathered the leaders of six local churches to find out what the religious groups had been doing to alleviate hunger among homeless community members. We asked who was serving warm meals during the week. Representatives of two churches raised their hands. We asked when these meals were served. The people from the first church said, “On Sunday, of course.” And the people from the second, rather sheepishly, said that they also served food on Sundays. In this small community, neither group knew that the only hot meals being served to homeless residents were served on the same day. One of the churches agreed to move its hot meal to the middle of the week.

Here’s another story. In a poor former manufacturing city in Massachusetts with a population of about forty thousand, we held a meeting of representatives of the existing community coalitions. These coalitions had been formed to coordinate activities on various topics. Coalitions such as these are often created out of goodwill, but the number of independent groups can proliferate due to external pressures—for example, state agencies that require coalitions dedicated to single topics. That was the case here. In this meeting, with ninety representatives of community agencies and city departments, we identified more than thirty-five coalitions working in a hodgepodge manner across the community. This array was confusing and wasteful. Similarly, a colleague has told me that in Mexico City there are more than ninety HIV programs. Duplication of effort seems rampant.

Too often we work as individuals rather than as part of a community or of a community of helpers. It is an “I” world rather than a “we” world. As a result, our approach to community problems is often ineffective.

This is not just a community problem. It happens in our individual lives as well. On a daily basis all of us encounter many ways that our world disconnects and makes our survival harder. People don't talk with each other. People won't work with each other. Your physician won't speak to your specialist or your acupuncturist. Your child's teacher doesn't speak to your child's therapist or privately hired tutor. Your plumber can't make time to talk to your contractor. This lack of collaboration in our world hurts us all.

I recently had a painful swelling and clicking of a finger in my left hand. My personal physician diagnosed this as a "trigger finger" and didn't think he could do much to alleviate my discomfort. He referred me to a surgeon, who suggested a cortisone shot or surgery. My holistic chiropractor suggested a regimen of supplements and tied the new symptoms to other systemic problems I was having. My acupuncturist treated my difficulty and cured it! But none of these people ever talked to each other.

Community Solutions Demand a New, Collaborative Approach

Our communities and our world face such complex problems that we no longer can solve them by gathering a few experts in a room and letting them dictate change. We need new ways to find solutions. Many of us now understand that the emerging problems that communities face have such complex origins that we can only fix them if we use comprehensive community problem-solving efforts rather than single-focus approaches. We need to meet and communicate and partner with each other, and we need to include representatives from all parts of our communities.