



From Competition to Coopetition: *A New Path Forward for Nonprofits Serving Girls of Color*

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As a leader of an organization dedicated to empowering girls of color, you know the landscape intimately. Every grant application can feel like a battle, every funding announcement draws dozens of similar organizations into competition, and every declined proposal stings a little more when resources are already stretched thin. But what if we've been approaching this all wrong?

It's time for a paradigm shift. Rather than viewing other organizations serving girls of color as competitors fighting over scraps, let's consider embracing what business strategists call "coopetition". Coopetition is the intentional cultivation of cooperative relationships with perceived competitors. This approach isn't just idealistic, it's both practical, and potentially transformative for our communities.

The Hidden Cost of Competition

When we operate in pure competition mode, we inadvertently create inefficiencies that hurt the effectiveness of our efforts and diminish our outcomes. Organizations duplicate programming, scatter their focus across multiple service areas to appear more competitive, and miss opportunities to leverage each other's unique strengths. Meanwhile, foundations often express frustration about funding similar programs without seeing coordinated impact.

Consider this: when three organizations in the same city all offer after-school tutoring, college prep, and leadership development, none can truly excel at all three. But when they collaborate, one can become the premier academic support provider, another can focus on developing exceptional leadership programming, and the third can specialize in college and career readiness—creating a pipeline that serves girls more effectively than any single small organization could alone.

The Power of Strategic Coopetition

Coopetition allows organizations to maintain their organizational identity while amplifying their collective impact. This means moving beyond surface-level partnerships to create strategic collaborations that benefit everyone involved. Here's how it works in practice:

- **Shared Resources:** Instead of each organization hiring specialized staff, partners can share these investments. For example, one organization might employ a mental health counselor available to all partner organizations' participants, while another provides college application expertise.

- **Complementary Programming:** Rather than competing for the same grant to run similar programs, organizations can apply together for larger grants that fund comprehensive, multi-faceted initiatives. Funders increasingly appreciate collaborative approaches that demonstrate sector coordination and reduced duplication.
- **Specialized Excellence:** When organizations can focus on their core strengths instead of trying to be everything to everyone, they develop deeper expertise and more effective programming. Your organization might become known as the place for STEM programming for girls of color, while your "competitor" becomes the go-to for entrepreneurship education.

Making Coopetition Work

Successful coopetition requires intentional relationship-building and clear agreements. A great first step is to begin identifying organizations whose missions align with yours but whose approaches or specialties differ. Then engage in honest conversations about each organization's unique strengths and how you might complement rather than compete with each other.

Establish clear agreements about participant referrals, shared programming, and joint funding approaches. Create systems for regular communication and shared measurement of impact. Most importantly, approach these relationships with abundance rather than scarcity mindset—there are enough girls in our communities who need support, and there are funders looking for innovative, collaborative approaches.

The Path Forward

Our girls deserve the best we can offer, and that often means offering it together. By embracing coopetition, we can create stronger programs, and more sustainable organizations. In a funding environment that increasingly values collaboration and measurable impact, organizations that master coopetition won't just survive—they'll thrive, and more importantly, so will the girls they serve.

The question isn't whether we can afford to collaborate. It's whether we can afford not to.

