

Paper presented to the Care Alliance 20 Year Anniversary Event 15 September 2015

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you at this very special event marking the 20th Anniversary of Care Alliance. It is a great achievement and one for which you should be rightly proud of.

It is often cynically and somewhat tragically said that for most groups and societies in Ireland, the first item on the agenda after being established is about the split. We in Ireland are particularly bad at coalescing and collaborating with each other. We put independence and organisational identity ahead of the many benefits to be had from coming together, combining resources, energy and commitment under national alliances and federations. We jealously guard our own turf and will fight tooth and nail to prevent others moving into our space and stealing some of the limelight.

While small may be beautiful, it very often can be weak, under resourced and easily dismissed and disregarded. Looking at civic society organisations in Ireland and comparing them with the situation that prevails in other countries, you cannot be but struck by the lack of strong and cohesive national organisations, alliances and federations in Ireland that have the strength in numbers and the political influence to have their voices heard. When you look around Irish society and try and identify those segments of society who are well organised and can command the attention of politicians and civil servants you think of the Irish Farmers Association, IBEC and ICTU. But where are the strong and coherent voices advocating for the sick, the disabled, the homeless, the mentally ill and the elderly?

A number of years ago, before I joined Carmichael Centre as CEO, I was a management consultant and one particular assignment has stuck with me. I was engaged by Atlantic Philanthropies, who at the time were investing significant sums in the elderly sector. They wanted to look at the structure of the elderly sector, and in particular, the not-for-profit organisations operating in the sector. The elderly sector like so many civic society sectors in Ireland, is characterised by 100s of small, well meaning, passionate organisations. Yes many of them individually do good work and provide much needed services. But they are disjointed, lacking in political influence and quite frankly, can too easily be ignored and plámássed by politicians and public servants. This contrasts greatly with the strong and large representative bodies for older people that exist in countries like Denmark, Belgium, USA and the UK. Atlantic wanted to explore ways of creating a strong and more effective voice for older people in Ireland. It was willing to look at different organisational models and provide funding support to encourage collaboration and mergers in the sector. Unfortunately, to-date these initiatives have yet to bear fruit.

Yes things are improving. We are getting better at putting joint proposals or campaigns together. A number of initiatives at forming alliances and collaboration have survived and are growing and slowly building up strength, recognition and reputation. The Care Alliance is one such example. I am sure all of you remember 10 – 15 years ago, when the role of the family carer was invisible and its value and its criticality was ignored by public servants and government.

Significant strides have been made through individual and collective efforts of individual members and by the Care Alliance to provide an important forum and mechanism to leverage and enhance the work of individual carer organisations and to advance the cause of the family carer. I was surprised, no astonished to learn that there are over 100 members of the Care Alliance. That certainly provides a strong platform. But it can also sow the seeds of discontent and a fear of a loss of prestige or influence for individual members if the focus, goals and structures of the Alliance are not clear.

A successful national alliance or federation must be clear about its unique role and function and how this relates to the individual and collective needs of its members. It should not duplicate or directly

compete with its members. At times, negotiating these boundaries can be delicate even fraught. It must complement and leverage the work and aims of its members. It must add weight and authority to the work it does and this can be achieved through the strength of its representative role and by the quality and relevance of the work it takes on and the outputs it delivers. It needs to engender and sustain respect, trust and support amongst its member base.

Research on the success factors for effective collaboration would suggest that having the following in place increases the chances of success and survival from that dreaded phenomenon of the “split” and alternative and competing alliances and networks emerging.

These factors are:

1. **Trust**
2. **Senior Management Support**
3. **Ability to meet performance expectations**
4. **Clear Goals**
5. **Partner compatibility**

And in any list of success factors, I would also add **Communication**.

Trust has to be earned, nurtured and sustained. It is hugely empowering when it is present. But terribly difficult to regain when it has been broken.

The senior managers and boards of the member organisations must proactively support and engage in the alliance. The warning signs start flashing when the senior management of member organisations start to undermine and ignore the Alliance or Federation organisation. They stop attending events, they criticise and carp. They establish or actively participate in alternative structures. They promote the notion that the alliance is only for the big guys or for the small guys depending on your perspective and agenda.

The alliance or federation must have the leadership, skills, structures and resources to deliver the performance expected of them. Too often the wrong people without the necessary skills are put in charge of the federation. It is starved of resources and lacks the necessary structures and authority to meet the performance expectations.

Having clear goals is a given but it is surprising, even alarming, the amount of times when organisations, particularly, alliance and federation type organisations, do not have clear goals and roles. They are poorly defined and communicated. They are often conflicting. They are not agreed, accepted or bought into by its members.

The fifth success factor is partner compatibility. The members of the alliance must have some common connections that makes sense for them to come together. They need to have some common or mutual goals that they recognise can be better achieved by collaboration and working through an alliance or federation type structure. Competition amongst members is okay even healthy, but problems start to emerge where that competition threatens the collective goals of the alliance and the behaviour or actions of the individual members is unacceptable to the other members or undermines the alliance.

I also add in communication as a critical success factor in all aspects of life be it business or personal. Good communication or poor communication always features when things go well and when they don't. It can be hard to know if you are doing enough communication or if you are doing it right. But if you are not doing enough and are not doing it right, problems will inevitably emerge. So you

have to keep checking with your stakeholders to see if your communications are working and are appropriate.

Looking at critical success factors is always a good idea. It is good to evaluate to see what you need to have in place and if it is working. Learning from failure is also a powerful and often painful way to improve and avoid future failure. There are many potential factors that can contribute to the failure of an alliance type structure and I have mentioned a number of them already. But if I was to boil it down to the three biggies, they would be;

1. Poor Leadership
2. Collaborating on everything
3. Impatience

Poor leadership can exist in the alliance organisation and amongst the member organisations. This will give rise to a poor strategic vision, lack of clarity and agreement about strategic goals. Poor structures, systems and communication.

A tendency for collaborating on everything is an extreme way of saying that too many and inappropriate goals and responsibilities are assumed or delegated to the alliance or federation. The role and activities of the alliance need to be appropriate and complementary. When it starts taking on roles and responsibilities that are best done by the individual members, it starts to create disaffection amongst its members.

The third common reason why alliances and federations fail is impatience. It takes time and hard work to build trust, legitimacy and effective structures. There is no silver bullet or magic wand.

This brings me back full circle. We are here today to mark 20 years of the Care Alliance, a representative organisation of over 100 members that is attracting increased funding in difficult times for the sector, so it must be doing very well on the leadership, goals, member support, performance, trust and communication fronts.

I would like to conclude with 2 quotations or wise sayings that I think are appropriate to this event. The first one is a quotation from Henry Ford. And he said that "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress and working together is success"

Care Alliance are certainly in the success category and that is due to work and leadership of Liam O'Sullivan and the board of the Alliance and it is also due to vision and commitment of its member organisations to having an effective alliance organisation.

The 2nd is an old seanfhocal which says: "Fiche bliain ag fás, Fiche bliain fé bhláth, Fiche bliain ag meath, agus Fiche bliain gur cuma ann nó as" Which translates as "Twenty years a growing, Twenty years a blooming" which really applies to Care Alliance having completed its 20 years a growing and can now look forward to the next 20 years of blooming. The 2nd half of the seanfhocal translates as; 20 years a fading and 20 years that don't matter.

The Care Alliance are a long way off the 20 years of fading stage and I wish to congratulate them and wish them every success for the 20 years a blooming.

Thank you:

Diarmaid Ó Corrbuí CEO, Carmichael Centre