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MORE ART WITH LESS MATTER: A reflection on intuition as the art of brokering

This paper argues that partnership brokering can be strengthened through both a science and an art orientation and explores how creative discernment - intuition - has been critical to the author's art of brokering. Throughout the partnership process the broker is responsible for shape-shifting from coach to facilitator to mediator to challenger to finisher. This shape shifting requires active and rational discernment. At key transition points in the partnering process, however, the author also learnt the value of ceding the rational and the scientific to allow her intuition to instruct and to inform. Two case studies are provided that illustrate how at certain times a different way of seeing and discerning - an intuitive way - can lead to surprising and positive outcomes for the partnerships at hand.

AUTHOR: KATE HAYES

ORGANISATION: Independent partnership broker

BASED IN: Australia

ACCREDITED: 2016

EDITION: 2

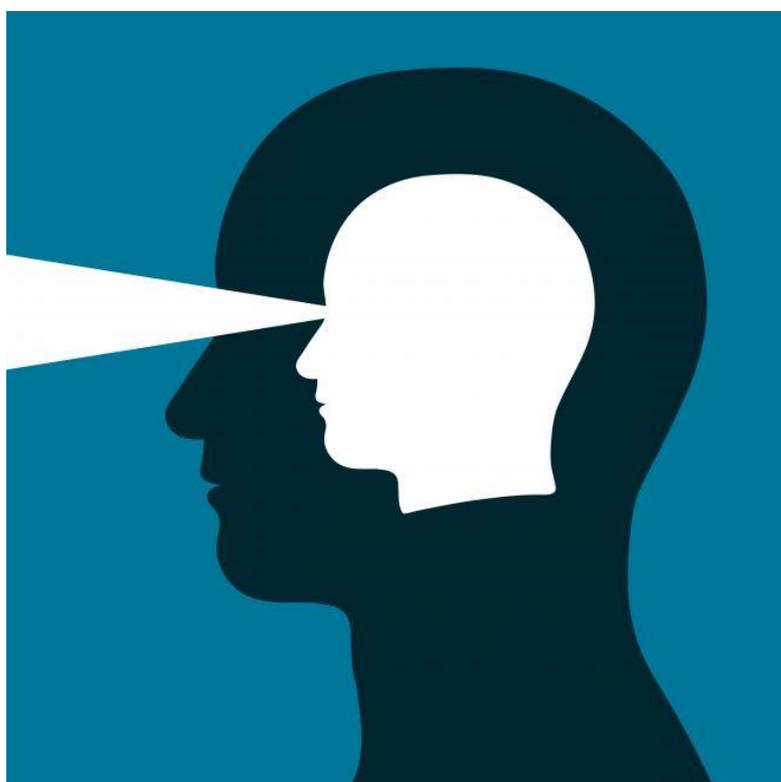
THEME: Art and science of partnership brokering

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Partnership Brokers Association

Kate Hayes
Level II Accreditation

“More art with less matter”¹



A reflection on intuition as the art of brokering

February 2016

¹ An inversion of a quote from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Gertrude (mother of Hamlet and Queen of Denmark) talking to Polonius said, “More matter with less art”, Hamlet Act 2 Scene Two

Partnership brokering as taught by the Partnership Brokers Association introduces a range of skills, tools and approaches tethered to a spine of the partnership cycle and the principles of both brokering and partnership. During my Level I, and again in the Training Skills Certificate, at various points throughout the rich and textured learning experiences a participant would rather hopefully reflect back at the end of a session, “So you are saying when A happens I should do B?” And the answer would invariably be, “it depends!”

This formal training crystallised for me that while skills can be honed, tools mastered and the approaches learned and applied, implicit to the practice of brokering is the need for creative discernment in response to context. There is an ever-present requirement to be reflecting: what is the right thing to do now for the partnership? What type of intervention is needed to ensure that the partnership keeps progressing/and evolving as needed? The broker has a profound responsibility to shape-shift from coach to facilitator to mediator to challenger to finisher at any given point in the partnering process and subsequently bring an intervention to bear that progresses the partnership (as appropriate). There is no immutable set of rules to determine when is the right time to shift between roles – nor a corresponding set of standard interventions. The broker with all their skills, tools and approaches must engage in creative discernment.

There is both an art and science to this discernment process – well recognised by the brokers with whom I have discussed it - and touched on in Level I. Similar to Van Riper’s view on decision-making (cited in Gladwell 2005, pp.125-145), it is not a matter of the analytic versus the intuitive but rather when is the appropriate time to utilise one or the other.

The science route is systematic and involves consciously analysing or assessing of all of the possible interventions and their implications in terms of relative benefits. Using this route, the broker chooses the most effective intervention based on what can be known via the intellect - drawing on a mix of personal experience and what they are observing or have observed in the partnership. For example, I would typically use the scientific approach when developing the agenda for the first partnership workshop (if it was appropriate for me to be developing it). I would work with the partners, check in with their needs and preferences and drawing on their inputs work to draft an agenda for the partners to engage with and then collectively re-draft in order to support greater buy-in. A tried and true technique grounded in all the *knowns* at that point and tempered with some in-built flexibility to accommodate change. In sum, a rational and scientific discernment process.

Conversely, the art route to discernment comes from a very different space and it employs a mix of creative insight/imagination/visioning. Wheatley (1992. pp. 41-45) in the field of leadership proposes that in some contexts, precise outcomes cannot be pre-determined and that a more holistic intuitive perspective needs to be taken. In a similar vein, Otter Scharmer (2009) argues practicing an “open mind, open heart and open will” can lead to knowing and insight about what is needed in an instant. Scharmer reflects in his *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* of “letting go to let come”. At a personal level - in my own brokering practice - I can see that letting go of rationality, to let come intuition, in my intervention discernment process has paid dividends. When I let go of rationality at certain points, my brokering practice becomes less a mind-mapped process and more a whole body-space response from which comes a “knowing”. More generally this is sometimes called a sixth sense, an aha moment, a hunch or a gut feeling. See Gladwell (2005 pp.3-47) for an

accessible introduction to the distinctions and overlaps between rational and non-rational decision making. For the purposes of this essay I will refer to this phenomenon as *intuition* and reflect that, for me, intuition constitutes a critical aspect of the art of brokering. This framing is in line with the Level One description of the art of brokering as:

1. Insight/imagination/feeling
2. Vision (of the future)
3. People skills
4. Relationship building; and
5. Personal engagement

My experience of intuition is as a mix of points one and two – an *insight* with a *future* orientation that is gained without forethought or the conscious use of reason! Increasingly when I am brokering, I have found that the rational, the logical - the scientific - has not always fully meet the needs of the moment. Be that brokering an idea, a new way of working between agencies, a new entity or a partnership for development. If I range back over my work in brokering I can identify that as I have moved through the partnership cycle, unbidden I have made decisions based on a feeling or hunch that often fly in the face of the rational but that yield positive results. Without doing my Level II I don't think I would have ever felt the legitimacy to name this ie intuition as a key aspect of my *art* when I am brokering.

I came to the Level II seeking structure, codification of an approach, an underlying theory and a community of practice and in the process gained all of these but far more importantly also crystallised that I do bring art (intuition) to my practice and that indeed my brokering practice is strengthened by my art. Perhaps for the first time I have allowed myself to own my art rather than fearing I am going to be unmasked for not always using the rational and the scientific.

My reflection throughout the Level II and beyond is that intuition is particularly useful at key transition and/or decision points within the partnership cycle to test readiness to shift and the integrity of the shift/decision. To reflect the utility of intuition, I will share two vignettes to show how allowing my intuition has steered me in an entirely opposite direction to that which rational, scientific thought would have yielded – and with good results for the partnership.

About eighteen months ago I was working as a co-broker between the Australian national leadership team of a global organisation and their counterparts in Thailand, Indonesia and Taiwan. The group was aiming to forge a regional identity that would deepen their collective impact in their social justice work. In the early stages of this endeavour the delegations came together to work out for what – for whom - and how. We had several days together following a structured and planned mix of workshop setting, reflections, break-out groups, excursions, stimulus speakers and material and one-to-one talks with each delegation. All of which we had planned with our rational discernment process. There was an amazing vibe in the room every time we gathered and an incredible accord around this regional entity being of its time and a shared recognition of the potency of what could be achieved. On Day Five I was approached by my co-broker and a number of different delegates all seeking the same thing - to land their commitments. They all registered that they were tired and they thought that where they had got to was pretty reasonable. I could feel how tired they were – I was tired - and my co broker was tired as well and also worried that we might lose the good and

positive vibe we had helped seed. My rational assessment at this point - sourcing all the inputs - both those voiced and what I could see led me to conclude that we needed to wrap this workshop. I stood before the plenary group preparing to land their commitments to date – everything logical and sound said I needed to take this step. Every box had been ticked – the structured workshop process and the empirical evidence indicated that we were finished. I, however, allowed my intuition (my art) to kick in - and I sensed that I needed to hold open the space for a little longer because just beyond us there was something really big – I could feel it. I let that sense guide me and in turn sought the guidance and permission of the collective. I acknowledged their tiredness and I pointed out how far they had come and then asked them, “Is it enough?” I asked whether this is what they wanted to take home to their teams – and asked each delegation to get together (and in their own languages) ask each other that same question, “Is where you are now – where you want to land?”

There was much discussion and then the voices came in, “We want more.” The room was buzzing and the energy revived. Early the next morning the collective recognised that they had access to hundreds of schools and that through these schools thousands of children, families and communities and that using the curriculum as an entry point (which was within their purview) that they could roll out a unit on child trafficking and seed a regional grassroots preventative movement. It was a powerful landing space and the transformative impact - palpable. Clearly, had the group finished at the rational point, key insights and subsequent action could not have emerged.

In another setting and a far more traditional development one – listening to my intuition again led me in the opposite direction of my more reasoned and rational response to a request. I was contracted by a Donor agency to broker a partnership between the Donor agency and one of the Multilateral Development Banks (MDB). As in the previous example the partners were again at a transition point in the partnership cycle – they were shifting into the *Managing and Maintaining* phase and in the process of working out the ongoing governance. My role was supporting the negotiations between the partners but also facilitating a unified position across the many different stakeholders from within the Donor agency. The MDB had taken the lead on the governance as they had become used to the Donor being fairly hands-off.

The first draft of the governance arrangements was received and not one area within the Donor agency was happy and as the corraling point, the feedback I was receiving was exceptionally negative. It was at one level totally fair enough – the MDB had essentially written the Donor out of the Governance when in the partnership workshop it had been acknowledged that the Donor wanted to work differently and to engage *enough* to ensure that it had a strategic oversight/steerage role in the program.

I was asked by the Donor to synthesise the feedback, run it back past the Donor and then send it on to the MDB – the rational logical response would have been to do just that and I tried to do that but I was *withheld* from doing it. My intuition/my gut was holding me back. It felt wrong. This sensing/knowing led me to a totally different tack – firstly I worked with the Donor team to help them see beyond this disappointment and consider what they were hoping to achieve more broadly in the partnership and how a download of negativity was unlikely to achieve it. After some deliberation and bringing the various strands of the Donor team on board it was agreed that an overview of the high-level themes (hard hitting as they were) was more appropriate in order to keep the channels open and forward focused and also that it would be beneficial to have a follow-up telecom.

A second piece of insight/intuition quickly followed and again went against what was logically and rationally expected ie provide the overview feedback, talk it over and wait for the MDB to send through a second draft. I sensed that what was really needed to shift old behaviours (from both sides) was for the governance manual to be a co-creation, an act of collaboration and so the pen needed to move from the MDB (traditional power base) to the Donor and in so doing share the power and the responsibility. In the course of the telecom, at the point that I could intuit a shift, an expansion in one of the key MDB actors I sought this outcome for the partnership. It was readily agreed and totally what no one had rationally expected to happen. This one simple act has had major and positive repercussions for promoting equity, transparency and mutual benefit in the partnership. It is still an ongoing issue as the two *systems* jar with each other but there are now teams in both camps really working for the partnership as a whole rather than the partisan positions of their agencies.

There is no doubt that partnership brokering is both a science and an art and needs the orientation of both. I would suggest, however, that at certain times the rational and the scientific should be set aside if intuition demands it. In these instances – and particularly at key transition and/or decision points within the partnership process - it is indeed a case of *more art less matter*. Letting go of rationality and letting come intuition can provide a very different way of seeing and discerning that can lead to surprising and positive outcomes for the partnership at hand. And most importantly can play a pivotal role in moving more deftly to robust and transformative partnerships – it may well be time to more fully reclaim the legitimacy of intuition and the art of brokering.

"Albert Einstein called the intuitive or metaphoric mind a sacred gift. He added that the rational mind was a faithful servant. It is paradoxical that in the context of modern life we have begun to worship the servant and defile the divine." Samples (1972)

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