

The Key Challenges of an External Broker in the Partnership Cycle

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1. Introduction

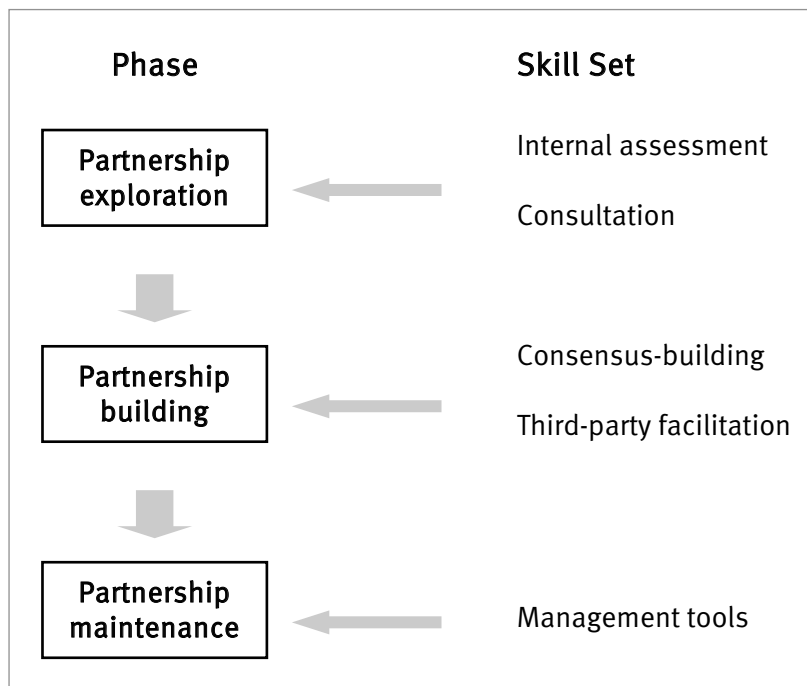
The Partnership Brokers Accreditation Scheme (PBAS) of September 2003 offered me my first exposure to systematic training in the art of brokering partnerships. In this paper, I will attempt to use the tools gained from the Scheme to revisit my past experiences in brokering partnerships, in order to find out what the key challenges were in those years of practice. Then I will seek to analyse the ways in which understanding these challenges can improve the ability to produce better and more efficient partnerships.

I have chosen to rely heavily on the works of Ros Tennyson and Michael Warner, based on the fact that the 2003 training pivoted on the thinking of these two authors. It also would appear that by focusing here on their work, there is a better chance of deepening the PBAS experience. The authors highlight the appearance of the cycle of partnership and the possible challenges that can be encountered in working a partnership through the full cycle. It is against the background of these highlights that I shall try to revisit and review my experience. However, I shall also make references to the works of other authors, from whom I drew direction and inspiration in the years of practice before my PBAS experience.

My years of practice began in April 1996 and centre on community development and community-related conflicts associated with the oil and gas industry in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Over these eight years, I have brokered over ten partnerships, involving Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited (SPDC), its contractors, relevant arms of the host government, and the local communities impacted by the activities of Shell and its contractors. Here, I will try to move across the various partnerships and the years, drawing from them examples and cases to illustrate issues considered as challenges.

The analysis of the challenges will be presented in three phases, following the thoughts of Warner as expressed in the figure below:

Figure 1. Skills needed at different phases of the partnering process



Source: Warner, 2000: 2.

2. The Birth of a Broker

'All initiatives to build a partnership are started by someone with a good idea. Usually the good idea is born within – or soon becomes attached to – an organization.' (Tennyson and Wilde, 2000: 34)

When the words of Tennyson and Wilde are applied to my past eight years, their truth is clear. My journey into partnership building began in 1996 as a reaction to the hanging of the popular Ogoni activist Ken Saro Wiwa by the Federal Government of Nigeria. My horror at this incident led to the strong desire to find another way to deal with the Niger Delta question.

I told myself that instead of complaining about the wrong handling of the conflict, I should search for a solution. This hunt led me to the work of De Bono (1985) who, in his work *Conflicts, a better way to resolve them*, introduced to me the concept of a professional third party. De Bono described the need for a third party in the following terms:

'The plain purpose of the third party is to convert a two-dimensional fight into a three-dimensional exploration leading to the design of an outcome....It is the essential nature of the third party role in the design approach to conflict resolution that creates the concept of 'triangular thinking'. The third party is not an addition or an aid but an integral part of the process.' (De Bono, 1985: 124)

The 'idea', 'design' or 'outcome' that I finally produced was a partnership approach to managing the Niger Delta conflict. I then moved to the Niger Delta Region, calling myself (in the language of De Bono) 'a de-confliction consultant'. (Today I prefer to describe myself, as do Tennyson and Wilde, as 'a broker' of the 'pioneer' category). When I reached the Niger Delta Region, I began to look for an 'initiating organisation' that would accept my ideas and provide me with the required support in building the partnership. It was in trying to persuade Shell to become the initiating organisation for the partnership that I encountered the various challenges, bringing me face-to-face with the key qualities required by a broker. These qualities must form the core of the personality of a broker for him/her to survive the challenges and build a reliable partnership.

Within the PBAS programme, I realised that the relationship between brokering and the personality of the broker had become an issue, as scholars tried to respond to the need to professionalise brokering. There seems to be an increasing demand for scholars to achieve those broker qualities that open up the brokering experience to professional analysis and development. Warner captured this demand under the Business Partners for Development programme:

'A consistent request from the oil and mining operations with which the cluster works has been for guidance relevant to the task of formulating and managing these new partnerships. This demand reflects growing awareness within the BPD initiative as a whole that the process of developing tri-sector partnerships is complex and needs to be both systematized and professionalized.' (Warner, 2000: 2)

This same issue is confronted by Tennyson and Wilde, who looked at the key skills and attributes of a broker. This approach appears more cautious: they are not quick to detail professional attributes but rather talk of brokering being both an art and a science:

'Good partnership brokering is an art, as anyone who has witnessed a good broker in action can attest. It is equally, however a science. Brokering requires as much analysis and systematic exercising of sound judgment as it does intuitive and imaginative spontaneity.' (Tennyson and Wilde, 2000:96)

Figure 2 illustrates the balancing act required between the art and the science of brokering.

Figure 2. The balance of skills and attributes required by a partnership broker

The Art of Brokering	The Science of Brokering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insight, imagination and feeling • Vision of the future • People skills • Active listening • Personal engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge, analysis and thinking • Understanding of the past • Administration skills • Precise speaking • Professional detachment.

Source: Tennyson and Wilde, 2000:96.

In the work of De Bono we find the same challenge, in his struggles between the personality of a third party and the detached attributes his work demands, especially when expressed at a professional level. In an effort to resolve this issue, he writes:

‘The third party should be effective and entrepreneurial and should show skill and flair. The third party role is not just a neutral administrative function that could be handled by a bureaucracy. There is a need for the flair of a good lawyer, although the style of thinking is quite different. Perhaps it should be the flair of an architect, which combines creativity with practicality in a design that has to be generally accepted.’ (De Bono, 1985:134)

So what have I been doing in the past eight years? Have I been practising art or science? Was I exhibiting the flair of a good lawyer or that of a gifted architect? Or was I just ‘the engineer of human souls’, as the great Russian novelist Skvorecky chose to title his ‘polyphonic’ novel? Looking back, I find it is difficult to decide. There were times when everything appeared certain and systematic, when I could subject the situation to the laws of science. There were also, though, moments when everything lost its sense of logic and everyone was losing hope, when a sudden twist in events would bring an unexpected height of success and relief. To me, the problem appears more like a dance with a hidden rhythm, one always present but open only to a few people who can tune their inner senses to the beat and swing by its laws. My experiences make me believe that brokering is more art than it is science: this is the only way I can interpret my past eight years. I also believe that brokering is not a profession but a vocation: a deep-seated calling to respond to the needs of the world. In terms of my life, the only feeling that has resembled what I feel as a broker is that which I had as a young man in a Catholic seminary. Being a broker is just like being a priest; it is a vocation and an art. Using this perspective has enabled me to understand the first challenge I encountered, and also to work out how I survived it.

3. Partnership Exploration

The First Challenge: *Who Are You?*

The first challenge I had as an independent third party broker was answering the questions: ‘Who are you?’, ‘Where are you coming from?’, ‘Why should we listen to you?’ I remember an occasion in 1996 when a community liaison officer listened to my presentations and then suggested taking me to his manager. After preliminary introductions, the manager told me that he had no time to see my presentation, but could give me five minutes to summarise what I had to say. I thanked him and went straight to the point, explaining to him that I had come with the idea of serving as a neutral third party between Shell and the communities in trying to resolve communal conflicts. He cut me short, lost all the professional politeness of an external relations officer, and literally shouted a catalogue of questions at me: ‘Do you know where you are? This is Shell! Shell Petroleum Development Company Nigeria Limited! You want to stand between Shell and her host communities? Who do you think

you are? Are you the United Nations?’ I stepped out of his office while he gave his staff a thorough dressing down, using something that appeared to be an iron brush. When the liaison officer joined me outside the manager’s office, he was bleeding all over, caught between self-pity and apologies for his misjudgement of the manager.

Earlier in the day, the thought of seeing the manager had filled me with excitement. After seeing him, I was left in low spirits. Yet something in me did not break and, as I ambled my way home, that part of me grew stronger and even began to suggest to me that I go back to that manager and try to bring him over to my side and convert him into an internal supporter of my ideas. In fact, that is what I did, although it took me two years and over eighteen presentations to numerous groups and individuals to get my first break. To make Shell an initiating organisation, I had to persuade the workforce one after the other in a period in which I had no income and no financial support from any source except my family and my friends. In those two years, I experienced the full cycle of human frustration, punctuated by high points of great friendship and support from totally unexpected sources. When I reflect back on those days, I realise that the key things that kept me going were strength of character and the unyielding sense of mission with which I approached the whole experience. It is these qualities that have brought me through the most challenging periods of my career.

A broker is called to the task of finding and holding the middle ground, and then that of transforming all parties into committed preservers of it. To find and hold the middle ground takes the aforementioned sense of mission and strength of character. To transform parties into committed preservers, creating a win-win situation for all, takes tenacity and a level of integrity which must be above suspicion. These qualities are qualities of the soul, found at the core of human personality. Any training to develop them must be obtained very early in life. My experience makes me believe that without these qualities, no broker can travel far; it therefore is necessary, before you stand up to be counted as a broker, that you ask yourself the question: ‘Who am I?’ If you do not find a deep sense of mission in you for the task you want to perform, if your character cannot go through fire, if your personality cannot withstand frustrating turns and twists, then the business of brokering partnerships from the perspective of an independent third party is probably not for you. This is summed up in the ‘good enough’ partnership broker’ of Tennyson and Wilde (2000: 100):

‘Good-enough partnership brokers may lack certain specific skills or relevant experience, and they may make mistakes. If they have certain personal qualities, they can still be highly effective in carrying out this subtle and complicated role. The good-enough broker has it within his or her power to contribute creatively to radical and global social change.’

Figure 3. Personal qualities needed by a partnership broker

- Trustworthiness and integrity
- Willingness to take risks
- Equanimity in the face of pressure
- Personal modesty
- Dedication to the principles of partnership

Source: Tennyson and Wilde, 2000:100.

4. Partnership Building

The Second Challenge:

How Well And Fast Do You Think?

De Bono has described thinking as ‘the operating skill with which intelligence acts upon experience’ (De Bono, 1985:125). I also recall the words of the late Dr Chuba Okadigbo, philosopher, politician, and former President of Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. As Political Adviser to former President Shehu Shagari, Dr Okadigbo was asked what he actually did. He answered: ‘As political adviser, my job is to multiply options for Mr President.’ To me he sounds more like a broker than an adviser.

In my experience, it is an essential part of a broker’s job either to multiply or stimulate the creative options for partners. In this, I rely on De Bono’s creative and lateral thinking methods. De Bono regards this function as a major role of the third party; he believes that the third party position is the most viable place from where to provide the probes and provocations that can stimulate thinking. This is put as follows:

‘Setting the focus is a skilled task. The way a problem is defined can make huge difference to how it is solved. The way a problem is broken down into sub-problems can simplify the thinking task and also avoid stock solutions....The third party is quite free to offer provocations of any sort and then to request the other thinkers to work from the provocation. ... The third party is in a much better position to pursue a speculative idea and to foster a tentative idea. It is not only that the third party has less at risk but also that the mind of the third party is more free to entertain ideas.’ (De Bono, 1985:128-129)

This same concept is captured by Tennyson and Wilde (2000:107) in their effort to describe the emergent class of leadership which the partnership paradigm demands:

‘We live in a world where communications systems are more efficient and far-reaching than ever before. These impressive technological advances have, however, taken us no nearer to a shared vision of sustainable global development. We need to delve beneath mechanistic and computer generated thinking to expand our imaginative capacities, in order to more creatively participate in global development – to “re-dream” our world, as Ben Okri suggests.’

In terms of the challenges that I met in my practice as a broker, most of the obstacles I met arose because I had introduced a thinking dimension completely unhindered by the fears and prejudices of the Niger Delta environment. This was unacceptable to those who, for over thirty years, had led the region in one ‘thought direction’; they vehemently blocked the way to any form of progress that challenged their entrenched position.

On being confronted with such an unprogressive attitude, the broker needs to find a way to change the perspective of those elements that are resistant to change and to move things forward without confrontation. This calls for the ability for rapid creative thinking. My own experience with Shell operations in Nigeria proved to me the importance of creative thinking to the brokering process.

When I reached the Niger Delta Region in 1996 and began talking about the partnership approach to conflict management and community development, the mood was very far away from partnership. The words of Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas (2003: 4) in their book, *Where Vultures Feast. Shell, Human Rights and Oil*, vividly describe the mood of the region:

‘This is a struggle that simply does not allow for ‘neutral’ spectators. All must choose whose side they are on – Shell and the Nigerian Government intent on holding the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta down or the victims who are struggling nonviolently to put an end to this tyranny.’

The divisions were sharp, the rhetoric extreme, the emotions violent and the actors poised in a war sequence of attack and defence. To construct a bridge across these extremes and get the men at

polar ends to walk the bridge towards each other seemed like suicide. Yet, behind this war of words and emotions lay a pattern which, if carefully read and creatively interpreted, would yield a common purpose to be built on common ground. The challenge of the third party or the broker was to find this middle ground and move it away from something that could be called 'a neutral observatory' into something that could become a melting pot of good intentions, joint actions and healing initiatives. The confidence to do this was encouraged in me again by De Bono (1985: 131):

'From the detached and superior viewpoint, the third party is in the best position to see the whole map. As a result the third party can make connections and can show how one matter connects up with another. The third party can also show how two things, which might appear different, really have much in common. The third party can also show how under certain circumstances different aims can be reconciled. The third party can make bridges. The third party can drop in a connector which suddenly brings about an insight switch of perception.'

The only way I was able to build the first bridge across this extreme divide was indeed to 'drop in a connector' which brought about a 'switch of perception'. I convinced a unit of Shell to shift its emphasis away from reacting to activists towards seeking an open and transparent way of helping people to maximise any benefits obtained from Shell operations. I then persuaded a pilot community to move their efforts away from continuous agitation towards effective application of these benefits. I showed both parties, using a conflict audit of the past few years, the time and resources they had wasted. I emphasised the fact that more than thirty years of conflict appeared not to have delivered the desired result, and then encouraged them to try another approach, one with the potential to deliver more, especially when the common interest lay in the continuity of the oil business.

I presented a design that showed that in order to achieve this change in status, Shell did not need to increase what it offered; all that was required was for Shell to reverse its current relationship with the community whereby the only results for communities from oil exploration were either loss of land or damage to environment or personal property. I demonstrated to the Shell team that this practice had given the communities a negative access corridor to benefits from the industry. The only way to increase benefits through compensation was either to give up more land or to suffer more damages, which in turn would activate the negative disposition of the person seeking an increased benefit. This, to a large extent, is what contributed to the growing negative attitude towards the industry. It has, therefore, become necessary for the companies to find ways in which the members of the community can find constructive access to defined benefits in the oil industry. One way was to give them clear access to business opportunities and employment within the industry; this was to be matched with support in maximising such opportunities.

I further pointed out that in order to make this work, what was needed was to create a system through which to make the community members feel recognised, empowered and in control of what was happening around them. Such a system would offer equitable opportunity, to the community members alongside government and company representatives, to re-discuss the relationship and to negotiate the benefits available.

When the structure of the argument was in place, I identified key people in each of the stakeholder systems, with unquestionable integrity within their respective system, and convinced them to champion this approach. I therefore had a champion within Shell, within the target community and within government. The result was the building of our first partnership, the success of which led to the building of more and more, continuously improving in format as the concept gradually spread across all Shell operations in Nigeria. The more I review this experience the more I am convinced that without the ability to generate options quickly and consistently, this model of partnership would not have emerged when it did. In order to generate this kind of thinking, it is necessary to have the liberty that a broker has to step back and think objectively through the various interpretations, supplying a breath of fresh air. A broker not armed with this capacity will have a difficult time pulling together a partnership, especially one operating in difficult circumstances. The creative thinking skill needs to be in the portfolio of a broker, since all critical turns in the life of a partnership not only will demand but also will challenge the ability to deliver in terms of creative thinking. Krause (1995: 17) offers this advice: 'Think hard about how to benefit those you serve.'

5. Partnership Maintenance

The Third Challenge: *How Well Can You Organize?*

When a partnership structure has been created and all the parties have agreed to join, the organisational effort required to make it work is the next challenge for a broker. This challenge is purely at the operational level and is concerned with the competence required to make the partnership work on a day-to-day basis. Scholars have tried to throw light on various aspects in organising partnerships and the challenges this poses to a broker. Warner (2003: 84) brings this insight to the topic, using the thoughts of the lead character in his novella:

'It seemed ... that this was all about drawing on people's core strengths, and finding a way to fit these together that visibly demonstrated their value to the others. Conversely, if there was no added value to be gained from working together, there was probably no partnership.'

Drawing from this, the broker needs to bring to the fore the core strengths of the various organisations involved in the partnership and help find a way to fit these strengths together. Thereafter, the broker should identify and secure for each partner the value to be gained from participating in the partnership. These apparently simple things require the broker to take the partnership through four minefields:

1. *'...establishing the partnership's identity as an entity separate from its constituent partner organizations...'* (Tennyson and Wilde, 2000:41)
2. Penetrating the internal dynamics of each partner organisation to help initiate communication and free up information, resources, authorisation and support for the partnership
3. *'Drawing up an effective and comprehensive partnership agreement covering all issues of accountability, power balancing, resource sharing, benefit distribution, etc.'* (Warner, 2003: 79-119)
4. Agreeing and implementing the brokering process such that the common ground is always secure. Helping the partners change boundaries as they learn to work with each other.

I have described these goals as minefields because of the myriad of problems thrown up as the broker tries to achieve them. Professor Nelson Philips of the Judge Institute of Management, University of Cambridge, enumerates some of these problems:

Cross-sectoral collaboration is extremely difficult because of:

- Different cultures
- Different systems and practices
- Often little experience of cross-sectoral collaboration
- Lack of agreement on goals
- Lack of agreement on vocabulary
- Power imbalance
- Lack of agreement on representation
- Identity problems
- Leadership exhaustion' (Philips, 2004:18-28).

From my own experience, I can add the following list:

- Overbearing emphasis on money
- Diverse and uncoordinated interest
- Competitive disposition between partners
- Obstructive institutional mandates
- Unhelpful government policies
- Lack of mutual understanding and respect
- Absence of sincerity and integrity
- Benefit capture
- Overbearing initiating/driving organisation
- Varying perceptions among partners.

Each of these problems has the capacity to destroy the partnership; what is worse is that even as the broker goes to tackle these problems, he/she faces resistance and rejection. De Bono, in highlighting the difficulties a broker might face, notes that most partners will arrive with the attitude that the whole issue is their business and that a third party is not needed. He goes on to lay down various excuses these partners will give for putting obstacles in the way of the broker:

- 'It is no business of the third party
- The third party cannot know enough about the scene
- The third party does not have the feel and idiom for the situation
- The third party has nothing at stake and does not have to live with the result
- For one reason or the other the third party is seen as favoring the other side
- The third party should be a go-between negotiator who does not seek to contribute any ideas as such
- Neither party will reveal the confidential information on which their positions are really based' (De Bono, 1985: 133-134).

It is clear that taking a partnership through these problems will necessitate a capacity for organisation and self-mastery. In my experience, this is what the broker is called to do; when the broker begins to walk this path, he or she will ultimately mature to the level expressed in the words of Tennyson and Wilde (2000):

'The partnership broker who can function equally well in all these roles is a highly skilled individual, perhaps coming close to joining the ranks of what Desmond Tutu describes as "people of stature who are ready to compromise for the greater good of all.'

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