



# Animating Alliances

*What does it take to make these forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration efficient, effective and transformational?*

Ros Tennyson

This material is adapted from a publication available from [www.animatingalliances.org](http://www.animatingalliances.org)  
a new initiative of the Partnership Brokers Association

# Position statement!

*Despite the growing number of types of collaborative approach, there is still a sense of uncertain experimentation surrounding the possible models and structures that will service the needs of multi-stakeholder initiatives.*

*Indeed, many initiatives seem to fall rather easily into a pattern of perpetuating 'business as usual' approaches even though this way of working is really nothing like business as usual.*

*Exploiting the collaborative space for going beyond business as usual requires motivation and courage on the part of all those involved.*



# Some key questions worth asking

- *What forms / structures lend themselves best to an Alliance model?*
- *What is 'leadership' in an Alliance model?*
- *Who shapes, steers and assesses the Alliance's work?*
- *How can engagement of Alliance members be deepened when everyone seems to be 'time-poor'?*
- *How are acceptable decision-making and accountability processes established that still leave space for innovation and nimbleness in a rapidly changing context?*
- *How do members of an Alliance reach alignment over key issues such as: What is an acceptable level of risk? What is a reasonable 'return on investment'?*
- *What may be required in terms of re-thinking existing mental models and mind-sets to ensure such Alliances work optimally?*



# Options for New Collaborative Structures



UMBRELLA



FLEXIBLE  
ORGANISM



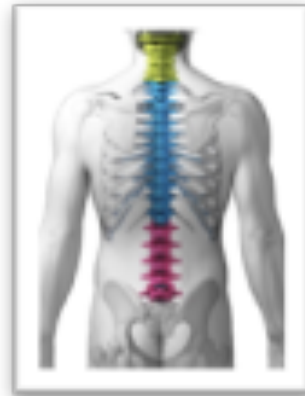
HUB & SPOKES



CONTAINER



INTERCONNECTED  
WEB



BACKBONE  
ORGANISATION



SELF-ORGANISING  
GROUP

# Others – yet to be invented?



Where does your 'alliance' fit – what structure / operating model is it?  
Is it fit for purpose?

# Common Challenges for Alliances:

- Members interests vs shared mission
- Who pays and what do they pay for?
- Power issues – visible and invisible
- Who is accountable to whom, and for what?
- Governance arrangements – do they work optimally?
- Structure vs flexibility
- Leadership within a collaborative model



# The 'secretariat' function

*Most of those involved in Alliances are busy people with many other calls on their time. Often their Alliance commitment is a very small part of a complex portfolio and sometimes they have to justify even the relatively small amounts of time they spend on Alliance business to their line managers who are more concerned with other organisational priorities.*

*This means that, despite genuine enthusiasm from those representing member organisations at the Alliance table, it tends to fall to the Alliance's central coordinator / administrative hub to follow through and deliver on agreed actions.*

*This issue has been the source of considerable tension around the question of whether the central function is that of 'servant' (providing support services) or 'leader' (with an explicit role in shaping and driving the work).*



# Characteristics of a good 'animator'

energy / enthusiasm • high-level facilitation / listening / speaking / synthesis skills  
flexibility of thinking • understanding of group dynamics • patience / persistence  
efficiency / rigour / reliability • capacity to 'hold space' • trust-worthiness  
confidence in challenging poor behaviours or fixed mental models and... a good  
sense of humour



And there is something else that a good animator has: that is the courage, capacity and willingness to carry both risk and anxiety on behalf of the Alliance they are seeking to animate





# 12 Suggestions for How to Animate Alliances

<p><b>1</b> <b>Membership</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clarify how an organisation becomes a member, who decides and on what basis they do so</li><li>• Push members to share their specific (underlying as well as explicit) interests in being part of the Alliance</li><li>• Find ways to encourage members to be clear about any of their organisation's 'non-negotiables'</li></ul>
<p><b>2</b> <b>Model</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establish the minimum core requirements needed to provide reassurance to members (bearing in mind these may be different) in how the Alliance will operate</li><li>• Suggest that the appropriate model is 'grown' over time, as Alliance members become clearer about what will serve both their interests and the mission best</li><li>• Help members to arrive at a good balance between 'control' (in exercising due diligence) and 'flexibility' (to enable innovation)</li></ul>
<p><b>3</b> <b>Mission</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Decide whether the Alliance can establish one over-riding mission and / or whether it can embrace several</li><li>• Explore the diverse aspirations and expectations of Alliance members and agree how this diversity will be acknowledged, appreciated and managed</li><li>• Test out the levels of discomfort or challenge that different Alliance members can tolerate with regard to a mission that challenges the status quo</li></ul>

<p>4 Assumptions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask questions about what members assume about each other – and give them a chance to find out whether (or not) their assumptions are correct</li><li>• Create a culture of curiosity in Alliance meetings and communications to support a ‘de-layering’ of assumptions and pre-conceptions</li><li>• Re-visit members’ views about what constitutes the ‘added-value’ of the Alliance – as compared to acting alone – on a regular basis</li></ul>
<p>5 Actions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Define the role and remit of those responsible for coordinating / managing / guiding the Alliance</li><li>• Ascertain which Alliance members are willing to step up / go the ‘extra mile’ to assist in brokering / animating / shaping the work on behalf of the group</li><li>• Consider how best to support and acknowledge the animator(s) so their efforts get positive reinforcement or timely challenge (whichever is appropriate!)</li></ul>
<p>6 Accountability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Figure out, in this relatively loose model, what accountability actually means</li><li>• Make mutual accountability a central tenet of alliance-building</li><li>• Re-frame accountability as a way to challenge and change practice for the better rather than simply a mechanism for judging performance</li></ul>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>7</b> Permission</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Establish what authority those coordinating / managing the Alliance have</li> <li>● Agree which types of decision can (and cannot) be taken by member representatives on behalf of their organisations</li> <li>● Clarify who can act or speak on behalf of the Alliance</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>8</b> Protocols</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Question the deployment of any protocols and procedures that fail to support the Alliance as an experiment (i.e. those that settle for ‘business as usual’)</li> <li>● Consider how mechanisms and systems can best be co-created in ways that are fit for the aims and purpose of the Alliance</li> <li>● Commit to trialling and testing out new approaches until they feel right</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>9</b> Processes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Invest the necessary time to evolve the best way of working together and build further capacity for collaboration where it is needed</li> <li>● Create a culture of inclusion, openness, respect so that questions / challenges about the Alliance or the behaviour of any of its members can be addressed frankly</li> <li>● Give space for the unexpected and encourage Alliance members to seize new opportunities</li> </ul>

<p><b>10</b> Risk</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand what constitutes an acceptable level of risk for Alliance members</li><li>• Explore where confidence / courage needs to be built to push for change</li><li>• Decide in what circumstances it is better to lose an Alliance member (or even to discontinue the Alliance) rather than continue with an arrangement that is antagonistic or adding little value</li></ul>
<p><b>11</b> Reward</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider the 'return on investment' sought by each member of the Alliance</li><li>• Assess the intangible (i.e. influence) as well as tangible (i.e. project results) outcomes as they apply to the members as well as to other stakeholders / beneficiaries (if different)</li><li>• Regularly check out how far and in what ways members are engaged / satisfied with the Alliance</li></ul>
<p><b>12</b> Results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure that the Alliance is task and target focused (and not drowning in processes and protocols that do not add value)</li><li>• Explore whether members agree on what 'success' looks like in terms of evaluating the Alliance's activities and impact</li><li>• Take full account of how other key stakeholders and beneficiaries of the Alliance view its activities and impact</li></ul>

*Alliances have the ability to be flexible, inclusive and responsive in the way they operate. If they are appropriately structured and are well animated, they can challenge current practices, trial new ideas and model different approaches that are based on collaboration not separation.*

*When old approaches have become unproductive and formulaic, Alliances (at their best) can indeed help us to evolve new possibilities.*



# About the author:

Ros Tennyson is the Founder of, and currently Strategic Advisor for, the Partnership Brokers Association ([www.partnershipbrokers.org](http://www.partnershipbrokers.org)). She has been a pioneer thinker, trainer and writer on partnership matters since 1992.

The entities that she has worked with over the past 4 years that have informed the publication that provides the material for these slides include:

CDAC-Network

Global Alliance for Community Philanthropy

Start Network

World Economic Forum

With grateful thanks to Maria Hayes (PBA's artist in residence 2012-2018 )  
for this illustration of an unanimated alliance!

