

# STORIES FROM PRACTICE

CREATED BY PARTNERSHIP BROKERS. PRESENTED BY PBA.



## Showing Up to Partnering: The courage to journey into unknowing

Courage as a response to uncertainty is part of the partnering practice. Exposing one's vulnerability in the face of the uncertainty of a particular partnering situation and how it might unfold irrespective of 'best laid plans' takes courage. The author expands on the idea of courage as a core value for partnering by exploring what it takes to practically embed it into one's practice and how to build a capacity for courage in others. The paper explores the costs and risks of going beyond business-as-usual in search for better solutions and a better understanding of the challenges.

**AUTHOR:** KYM BURKE

Kym is a practising artist, and her passion for bringing people together to improve social and environmental outcomes spans over 20 years working across community, government and business sectors. Connect with [Kym on LinkedIn](#).

**BASED IN:** Auckland, New Zealand

**ACCREDITED:** 2019

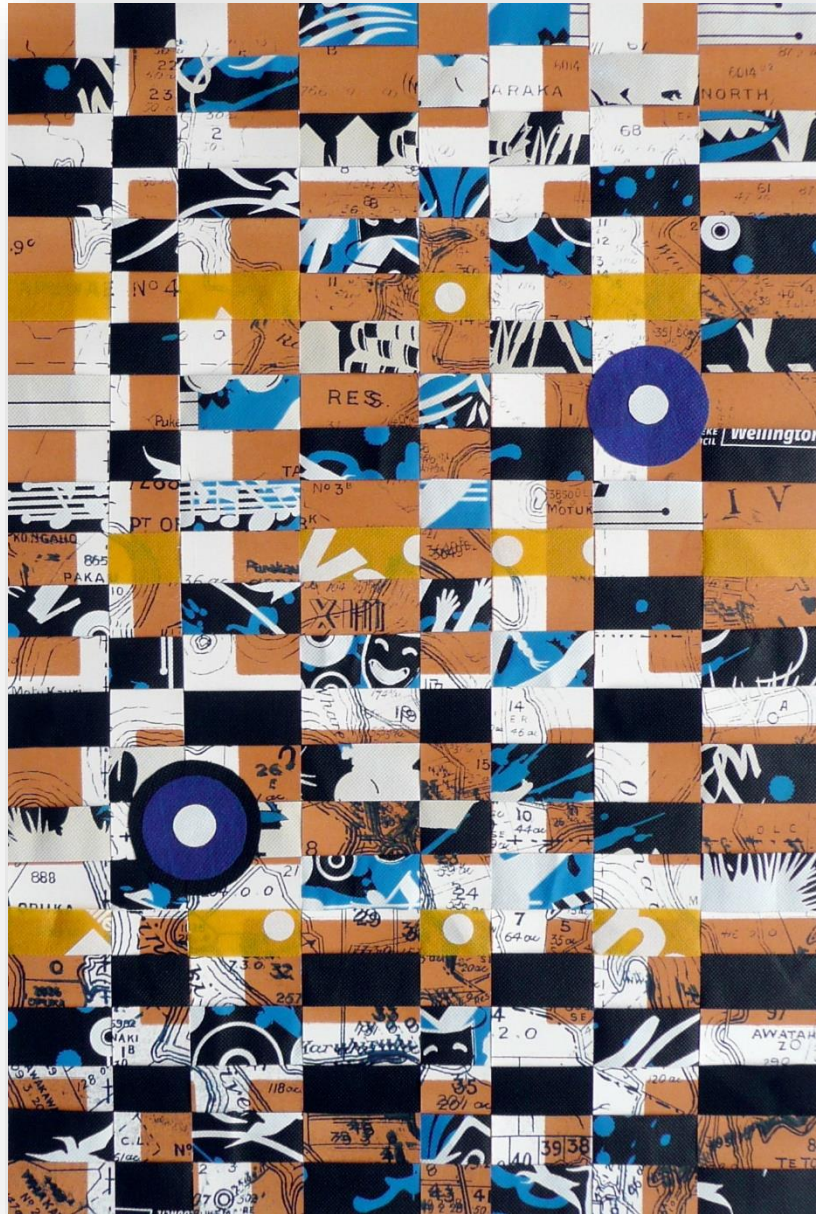
**PAPER EDITION:** 14

**THEMES:** Courage, Capacity Building, Art & Science, Independent Partnership Broker

© Kym Burke, 2019

# Showing Up to Partnering

## The courage to journey into unknowing



Kym Burke 2019

Partnership Brokers Association Accreditation

## Introduction

This essay forms a part of my accreditation with the Partnership Brokers Association. In it I explore the partnering principle of courage and reflect upon this in my own practice working with several multi-stakeholder collaborations and partnerships. This is all to seek greater insight into my role as an external partnership broker. Developing a personal perspective and meaning around what it takes to practice courageously and encourage others. I also seek the insight and experience of both partnership brokers and those exploring courage in a wider context.

## A Personal Journey

Five years ago I left a secure job to go out on my own professionally. Despite being a single parent and sole income earner, I knew that I had to take a risk to live a more authentic life. Just prior to this and for various reasons, I had lost a lot of self-confidence and a sense of apprehension and self-doubt pervaded my life. During this time, I reflected on my life's work. Some years earlier I had been involved in initiatives that built collaboration and partnerships across communities. While it was hugely challenging work, it also resonated with me in a way that nothing else had and I longed to do this work again. As my sense of purpose continued to wane, I came upon the realisation that my personal wellbeing is very much connected to my contribution in the world. I considered the risks and decided that continuing to offer less than what I knew I could give was more detrimental than having the courage to step out into the unknown and follow my heart and gut. I quit my job a week later.

Becoming an independent external broker wasn't the easy choice. It has come with personal and professional challenges – difficulties in ensuring a continuity of income, a significant lack of collegial support, and learning on the go. But it also allows me the freedom to take up work that aligns with my values, to follow my intuition and seek out new challenges. I willingly take on these challenges because assisting others in what I refer to as 'building bridges for better futures' has restored my sense of purpose and created 'break-through' results in my own life.

## Brokering Context

Currently I broker collaboration and partnerships in a community / not for profit / local government context. These have all been focused on the achievement of improved community and/or environmental outcomes in relation to particular communities of place (place-based). Recently this has included scoping and building collaboration and partnering capacity between organisations and local groups, and reviewing and revising an established partnership. In this regard what follows is entirely contextual. I can only talk about my own experience and reflections as an external partnership broker. But my hope is that my experience in dealing with the challenges of external brokering will resonate with other brokers, including those operating in quite different contexts.

## Courage as a Partnering Principle

Courage has been identified as one of the core principles of partnering by the Partnership Brokers Association [1]. It is described as leading to *'break-through results'* and is a recent addition to the partnering principles, joining diversity, equity, openness and mutual benefit. The principle of courage was added by the PBA Trainers Community in 2016 in response to the experience and challenges of practitioners and partnerships globally [2]. As a part of professional practice partnership brokers are encouraged to *'promote, embed and role model (the principles) throughout all their engagement with the partnership'* [1]. While little has been written specifically about the principle of courage within the context of partnership brokering, examples and reference to courageous practice is implicitly woven through-out the literature.

### What is Courage?

Courage has been described as *'the ability to control your fear in a dangerous or difficult situation'* [3]. It refers to someone not allowing fear to stop them from taking a difficult action. Psychologist Leon Seltze points out, *'It's a profound and paradoxical truth that courage isn't really courage at all unless there's some fear attached to it'* [4]. Brene Brown has been studying the links between shame, vulnerability and courage for over twenty years. She believes that courage is *'the willingness to do something even when there are no guarantees of the outcome'*, to step out into the unknown [5]. She also proposes that one can't get to courage without *'walking through vulnerability'* [6].

The dictionary defines vulnerability as *'the quality of being vulnerable – able to be easily hurt, influenced or attacked'* [7]. Vulnerability is connected to uncertainty and risk and has been traditionally seen as something to be actively avoided for fear of being judged or failing. Brown however, believes that vulnerability is at the core of *'meaningful human experience'* and we need to move from seeing vulnerability as a weakness, to seeing it as a strength. [5].

### Partnering as a Courageous Journey

In the context of collaboration and partnering, showing up and engaging, starting a new relationship is a courageous journey of sorts. While the PBA provide a map by way of the Partnering Cycle [1], Tennyson also describes partnering as *'a kind of adventure into the unknown'* [2]. Starting out on this *'adventure'* is an act of exposing oneself to uncertainty and risk, and as such *'requires courage, conviction and imagination from those involved'* [8].

There is a suggestion that in journeying towards transformative partnering, the broker is the hero. As an external broker who may join the partnership at various points throughout the journey – I see the collaborators or partnership as the necessary hero. The role of the broker is to assist and support the hero, providing encouragement and guidance along the way. The broker may take on different roles at different stages

throughout the journey including the archetypal characters of the herald, mentor, ally, and trickster. Whichever one, the broker can *'inspire with courage, spirit and hope'* [9] - which is the meaning of encouragement'.

### Showing Up to Uncertainty

In the early stages of collaboration and partnering, once the adventure is in motion, it seems that uncertainty for the parties involved is a shared or common factor. Tennyson reflects that, *'perhaps the only thing that all partners have in common at the start of the process is their uncertainty about each other, the partnership itself, and what it will demand of them.'* [1]. Despite this uncertainty parties are willing to show up. Brown believes that courage is the willingness to, *'show up and be seen with a whole-heart'* as well as ask for what you need [6]. Working with place-based organisations and people in voluntary positions, I am always thoroughly grateful that people show up. That they have the courage and are willing to come to the table, even though they may be uncertain of the outcome or the other parties.

For the broker, being prepared at this early phase and understanding context can reduce uncertainty and inspire courage. Seeking insights into agendas, relationships, perceived challenges and opportunities can assist in preparation for initial discussions and the development of strategies to address issues as they arise. In recently reviewing a partnership, I recognised in early discussions with individual parties that there were tensions and a power imbalance between the organisations. Understanding this context enabled me to organise the steering group meetings at a neutral venue. This was encouraging for the parties who understood that this would put the discussion on a more even footing. In this instance having context addressed some uncertainty for the parties and engendered courage and more comfort in being open and expressing their needs.

### Being Present in the Process

The act of 'showing up' also requires a presence that goes beyond physical appearance to engaging and participating in the process fully. Disability advocate Judith Snow reflects, *'Our presence is the fundamental gift that we bring to the human community'*. She considers presence to be the foundation of all other opportunities *'of everything that is meaningful'* [10]. Also reflecting on presence and mindfulness Anne Wilson Schaef in her book 'Living in Process' writes *'when we participate fully, we can only*



*be in the moment*'. She argues that in that moment we bring the accumulated wealth of our past and are fully mindful that our actions have implications for the future [11]. Tennyson believes that the unique role of the broker is to ensure that *'the partners engage fully with the here and now so that they are able to be courageous and 'seize the day''* [12]. This may include modelling presence, actively seeking input, or gaining agreement on limiting distractions such as technology. Sometimes in my own practice, where appropriate, meetings are opened with a karakia (prayer). From an indigenous Māori perspective this is said to influence favorable outcome [13], and also these few moments can draw people into the present – a threshold that helps them leave other parts of their day behind.

Being present also requires having a level of comfort with 'not knowing'. In my own practice being prepared is important - and also being prepared to change. Zen practitioner Peter Ralston says that in western culture not knowing is synonymous with ignorance and seen as a bad thing. He believes that we *'don't make the connection between this state of openness and the wonder it generates, which is so necessary for learning'* [14]. As each collaboration and partnership is unique, one of the key roles of the broker is to not only provide tools and guidance, but also promote and have a level of comfort with 'not knowing'. This requires the broker to walk alongside the partnership on their own unique learning journey. Perhaps it the courage to be present with openness and wonder in those moments of unknowing – a genuine state of enquiry - that leads to truly break-through results.

### Unknown 'Other' and Culture Change

Uncertainty and unknowability not only relate to exposing parties to uncertain outcomes or processes, but also influence and shape behaviour. Particularly in the early phase of scoping collaboration and partnering individual representatives come to the process with their own interests and world views. Typically, they are not - at first – open to gaining an appreciation of the interests or cultural understandings of others. Inevitably conflict may be present either implicitly or explicitly. In working with place-based community groups and organisations there can be dynamics and ways of communicating which may or may not be helpful to collaboration and partnering. One of the key skills of the broker is to create and hold spaces that encourage openness, equity and diverse views. Akachukwu Nwankpo speaking on the challenge of the external broker says the role is to find and hold the *'middle ground'* and then transform *'all parties into committed preserves of it'* [15]. A part of this could also be seen as the process of creating partnership culture. Judith Nichol describes this as the development of 'emotional capital', partnering assets that *'go beyond physical outputs to knowledge and beliefs including adaptability, self-control, empathy, optimism and courage'* [16].

When I first engaged with organisations in one community, there was a lot of shaming and blaming as a part of the local discourse. The culture didn't encourage collaboration and people were fearful of coming together and being exposed or humiliated. By exploring context and building rapport with individual organisations I encouraged them to engage in an initial collective discussion. I wasn't sure how things would evolve and though I was nervous, I knew that I could 'show up', be present, and hold a safe space for discussion. It took courage on the part of the participants to engage and share their 'truth' also. Over several meetings the participants were able to acknowledge difference, identify commonalities and most importantly agree expected behaviours such as respecting diverse views, active listening and focusing on ideas and not people. This was encouraging and gave people the confidence and courage to return and further develop collaboration. This process has begun to change local discourse and the wider perception of a community in conflict, to a community of collaboration.

Seltze says in a conflict situation the essential challenge has less to do with fear or courage as it does vulnerability. Judy Ringer is an Aikido practitioner and management coach who says '*The moment of conflict holds such promise*' [17]. Aikido is a martial art where one practices being vulnerable in the face of impending conflict, while holding the intention of doing no harm, having compassion and finding an amicable resolution. The way of Aikido has been described as the '*practice of partnering*' [18]. Deborah Fisher says, that Aikido embodies a paradox that is relevant to social practitioners because '*its purpose is to transform conflict into cooperation*' [19].

I have seen many acts of compassion in the Dojo (training hall). This can simply be stepping to one side of a challenge, which speaks to being non-defensive or not taking it personally. Defensiveness shuts down possibilities and puts relationship in a power struggle. It can also mean blending with the incoming energy, reframing and moving with it, opening up new possibilities and keeping everyone safe in the process. The value in this practice is its physical nature – vulnerability and courage can be embedded in a way that goes beyond an intellectual understanding. The same could be said for partnership brokering, a practice of holding the 'middle ground' with a whole heart and finding the 'promise' in those moments of conflict.



## Getting Comfortable with Discomfort

Susan David, in her studies on self-awareness and emotional agility believes dealing with difficult or negative emotions *'builds resilience and requires us to show up to life'* [20]. Brown also talks about courage over comfort and says, *"lean into the discomfort of the work"*. For myself, partnership brokering is not always comfortable. Sometimes I am asked to work in collaborative or partnering situations that are perceived as being explicitly tense. Initially I might feel a reluctance to being exposed or making myself vulnerable to conflict and strong emotions. And then I remember that I have faith that humans long to be connected and work together toward positive change. I think as a broker it helps to have a relentless optimism in the potential of people and partnership.

The partners too will experience discomfort along the journey. International partnership broker Rafal Serafin argues that this discomfort could be *'seen as a signal or indicator that something new is, or can be forged, that a breakthrough may happen'* [21]. In a simple way I often notice this discomfort in group process when, as a facilitator I ask a question, then *'let the silence rest'*. Most recently while exploring a new opportunity with a collaborative group I asked, *'and what would that look like?'* .....one thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three, one thousand and four..... all eyes were on me – four seconds isn't long, but people were looking at me with an embarrassed desperation that was palpable. Then someone put forward an idea, the floodgates opened, and the parties co-created a unique concept. In those few moments of discomfort people were fully present. Several members came to me afterwards to share their awareness of, and in that moment, and how it transformed their thinking.

Upon reflection, it is not only creating silent spaces that leads to transformative thinking, it is also the question that is dropped into that silence. The right question can be powerful and hold a deep and reflective *'unknowing'* space, where our unconscious *'accumulated wealth of experience'* is awakened. Author and activist Fran Peavey talks about *'strategic questioning'* as a tool to use in times of uncertainty, conflict or confusion [22]. She also describes the *'unaskable question'* – a question that challenges the values that an issue rests upon. These questions are *'open'* and encourage a fuller dialogue that Tennyson says *'searches for what lies beneath'*[8]. They also seek a common ground which Peavey believes enables parties to *'co-create a new path from the present situation'*.

## Sharing the Tensions

For the partnership broker courageous practice is also in part holding and sharing a number of tensions. Encouraging collaboration and partnering with a *'spirit of innovation'* while also assessing and sharing in the different appropriate levels of uncertainty, unknowability and risk; making this explicit as the situation demands. Vulnerability and risk are in and of themselves challenging concepts – particularly



where parties are risk averse or would prefer others to take all the risk. Mundy in her paper on risk management comments, *'Risk arises from uncertainty'*. She proposes that the benefits of risk management include greater openness and transparency; increased chance of achieving objectives; and reduction of unwelcome surprises [23]. Serafin also makes the point that in partnering and collaboration, it is the sharing of risk that matters, that *'sharing risk leads to sharing responsibility'* [21]. Clearly risk management and accountability are important aspects of partnering. Mundy also adds that risk management does not equal *'not taking risks or stifling innovation'* and says that would be contrary to the spirit of multi-sectorial partnerships which, *'by their very nature are often created to enable innovation'* [23]. These tensions also speak to the 'art and science' aspect of brokering – *'analysis and the systematic exercising of sound judgement'* and simultaneously *'intuitive and imaginative spontaneity'* [24].



Addressing risk in my own brokering practice, I raised with a partnership the risks of not inviting to review discussions a third-party contract management team which had influence on partner activities. The partnership was of the view that the party in question, because of its complexity and aversion to risk, would stifle innovation and require additional clauses and processes. This would mean that they would be acting beyond their mandated role – in effect, transferring not sharing the risk. This would have been

contrary to the motivation and purpose of the partnership to be flexible, open and responsive to the needs, circumstance and opportunities of those involved. The broker too must also be prepared to share the risks and vulnerabilities in nurturing a partnering culture. Holding the tension between risk and innovation, certainty and uncertainty, knowing and not knowing.

### Reflection and Self Awareness as Courageous Practice

Deep reflection speaks straight to the heart of vulnerability and courageous practice. In reflective practice I experience the shame of not living up to my own or other's expectations. It is simultaneously a welcome insight, as well as a third-party scrutiny which exposes self-doubt and anxiety. For me it's a whole of body experience. Pushing into vulnerability makes my heart beat fast – it's a fight or flight response and it

definitely is not comfortable. For this reason, I recognise that it is also definitely a significant part of developing courageous practice. Brown says that *'rumbling with vulnerability'* is the fundamental skill of *'courage-building'* [25]. Tennyson also in discussing reflective practice says, *'a good reflective practitioner increasingly knows how to ask themselves the right questions'* and *'genuinely explore the real answers-even if they are painful'* [8].

This reflection also applies to the partnering journey. Hanes points out that there is an *'ever-present requirement'* to be reflecting on what is right for the partnership at different stages of the process [26]. Dieleman writes of her experience of encouraging reflection with a partnership that the new awareness that developed from the process *'led to a sense of feeling comfortable'* and brought things *'out in the open'* [27]. In reviewing a partnership recently, I raised with the parties that there were differing views from internal stakeholders on the value of the partnership. Some people felt that the partnership was foundational to their work and others thought it was a transactional relationship that had been neglected.

While it was clear that some felt vulnerable engaging in this reflection, I gently encouraged open dialogue. The parties were able to reflect on both these points of view and consider what it would take to *'breath life'* back into the partnership. More than this I recognised that the process itself went some way to further developing the partnerships *'emotional capital'*. All of this highlights the importance of reflection as a tool for courageous partnering practice, both for the broker and the partners.

## Key Learnings

Through the process of reflecting on the principle of courage I have identified some learnings and insights that I will continue to apply to the deepening of my own brokering practice. These may resonate with others.



- **Show up** – with your ‘whole-heart’ despite never being fully certain of what each interaction and process will bring:
  - Understand the context and seek to reduce uncertainty where possible.
  - Be grateful when others ‘show up’;
  - Encourage partners to ask for what they need.
- **Be present** - to whatever arises and encourage the partnership to do the same:
  - Model presence and take a moment to draw people in;
  - Seek to engage people fully helping them to ‘seize the day’ by drawing on contextual knowledge and the ‘accumulated wealth’ of human experience;
  - Encourage openness and ‘not knowing’ as a state of enquiry that can lead to learnings and breakthrough results;
  - Be prepared; and be prepared to change.
- **Change culture** – support openness and diverse views and hold the line on behaviour that is unhelpful:
  - Model behaviour;

- Hold the middle ground and encourage the partnership to step into it;
  - Assist the parties in developing emotional assets that embed healthy partnership culture;
  - See conflict as a moment of promise and practice blending with challenge and transforming it.
- **Sit with discomfort** - lean into the discomfort of the work:
    - Acknowledge and feel the fear and vulnerability and continue to ‘show up’;
    - Have a relentless faith in the human desire for connection and the positive value that collaboration and partnering can make;
    - Use uncomfortable silence and open questions as tools for awakening insight, innovation, and break-through results.
- **Share tension** – assess and share in the different appropriate levels of uncertainty, unknowability and risk:
    - Manage risk while also encouraging a ‘*spirit of innovation*’;
    - Acknowledge and encourage partners to sit comfortably with the tension of knowing and not knowing, certainty and uncertainty.
- **Reflect courageously** – in my own practice - even when it feels like this threatens the very foundations of my courage:
    - Allow voice to the fear of not being good enough or not getting it right;
    - Ask the hard questions and be vulnerable to the real answers;
    - Be present to those doubts with compassion and understanding rather than judgement.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the principle of courage as a value that is important in the process of partnering and partnership brokering. This exploration has been based on reflections from my own experience as an independent external broker building collaboration and partnering with community groups, localised organisations and local government. It has also drawn on the experience of other brokers and those considering courage in the wider context

The value of courage is woven through many aspects of collaboration and partnering practice. This includes the courage to show up, be seen and be present; hold space for culture change and the development of emotional capital; being open to moments of deep questioning, silence and ‘unknowing’; encouraging the partners to sit with the tensions of certainty and uncertainty, risk and innovation; deep reflection and exploring one’s own vulnerabilities.

The process of developing this paper has been in and of itself been a journey. At times it has been challenging and made me feel vulnerable and exposed to my own self-doubt and the impending wider critic. Simultaneously I feel I have gained real insights into my own brokering practice, the partnering principles and the discipline and professional practice of partnership brokering as a whole. I will continue to 'lean into the discomfort of the work' with new insight and understanding of courageous partnership brokering and partnering practice.

## References

- [1] R. Tennyson, *Partnership Brokers in Action*, Partnership Brokers Association, 2017.
- [2] J. Mundy, *Brokering Better Partnerships*, Australia: Partnership Brokers Association, 2017.
- [3] C. Dictionary, "Cambridge Dictionary," 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/courage>. [Accessed 2019].
- [4] L. F. Selter, "Psychology Today," October 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/evolution-the-self/201510/courage-in-relationships-conquering-vulnerability-and-fear>. [Accessed 2019].
- [5] B. Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability," TedxHouston, June 2010. [Online]. Available: [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en). [Accessed 2019].
- [6] B. Brown, "Daring Greatly: Why Vulnerability is Your Greatest Strength," March 2013. [Online]. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fi0IEOBDRpQ>. [Accessed 2019].
- [7] C. Dictionary, "Cambridge Dictionary," 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/vulnerability>. [Accessed 2019].
- [8] S. McManus, *Talking the Walk*, The Partnering Initiative, 2008.
- [9] Merriam-Webster, "Merriam Webster Dictionary," 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encourage>. [Accessed 2019].
- [10] P. a. M. O'Brian, *Writings of Judith Snow*, Toronto: Inclusion, 2015.
- [11] A. Wilson-Schaefer, *Living in Process*, Random House Australia, 1998.
- [12] R. Tennyson, *Shifting the Power*, Global Summit on Community Philanthropy, 2016.
- [13] U. o. Otago, "Māori ki te Whare Wānanga o Ōtākou," [Online]. Available: <https://www.otago.ac.nz/maori/world/te-reo-maori/karakia-prayers/index.html>. [Accessed 2019].

- [14] P. Ralston, *The Book of Not Knowing*, Sheridan, 2010.
- [15] A. Nwankpo, "The Key Challenges of an External Broker in the Partnership Cycle; Cafe Conversations," in *Cafe Conversations*, Partnership Brokers Association, pp. 93 - 104.
- [16] J. Nichol, "The Power of Emotional Capital in Partnership," *Betwix and Between*, vol. Number One, no. Number Two, 2013.
- [17] J. Ringer, "Finding Balance - what Aikido can teach us about conflict," *The Systems Thinker*, [Online]. Available: <https://thesystemsthinker.com/%ef%bb%bfinding-balance-what-aikido-can-teach-us-about-conflict/>. [Accessed 2019].
- [18] R. Strozzi-Heckler, "Two Rock Aikido," April 2016. [Online]. Available: <http://tworockaikido.com/news/2016/4/9/the-aiki-way-the-practice-of-partnering>. [Accessed 2019].
- [19] D. Fisher, "Emergent Futures," 2016. [Online]. Available: <http://openengagement.info/deborah-fisher-aikido-and-power-2/>. [Accessed 2019].
- [20] S. David, "TedTalks," *TedWomen*, 2017. [Online]. Available: [https://www.ted.com/talks/susan\\_david\\_the\\_gift\\_and\\_power\\_of\\_emotional\\_courage?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_david_the_gift_and_power_of_emotional_courage?language=en). [Accessed 2019].
- [21] R. Serafin, *Professional correspondence*, Unpublished, 2019.
- [22] F. Peavey, "Strategic Questioning: An approach to create personal and social change," Context Institute, 1995. [Online]. Available: <https://www.context.org/iclib/ic40/peavey/>. [Accessed 2019].
- [23] J. Mundy, "Risky Business: Removing Barriers to Effective Partnerships in Development," in *Cafe Conversations*, Partnership Brokers Association, pp. 105 - 118.
- [24] R. Tennyson, *The Guiding Hand: Brokering partnerships for sustainable development*, United Nations Department of Public Information, 2000.
- [25] B. Brown, *Dare to Lead*, London: Vermilion Publishing, 2018.
- [26] K. Hayes, "More Art with Less Matter: a reflection on intuition as the art of brokering," *Stories from Practice*, 2016.
- [27] R. Dieleman, "Balancing the Art and Science of Partnership Brokering," 2019.
- [28] Wikidiff, "Wikidiff," 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://wikidiff.com/encourage/courage>. [Accessed 2019].

Cover Image: **Literature, Art and all That Good Stuff, Kym Burke, 2017**