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The 'Retrofit Challenge'

Introducing partnership brokering approaches to existing partnerships

What can partnership brokers learn from engineers? Not much it might seem. On the surface, engineers may even be considered the antithesis of partnership brokers. However, if an existing partnership is considering introducing partnership brokering approaches, the partnership broker needs to understand the foundations on which the partnership was built. If there are cracks, these need to be addressed before applying extra loads. If not, there will be problems later on. This paper explores case studies on retrofitting partnerships with partnership brokering approaches, and suggests four pre-conditions that need to be assessed to determine if a partnership is 'retrofit ready.'

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The 'Retrofit Challenge'¹

Reflections on introducing partnership brokering approaches to existing partnerships

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¹ This title is a play on words of what Van Tulder and Kahlen refer to as the 'fit challenge.' Reference: Van Tulder, R. and Kahlen, T. 2019. 'Creating a Better Fit: A Scoping Role for Partnership Brokers' in Scott, L. (ed.). *Shaping Sustainable Change: The Role of Partnership Brokering in Optimising Collaborative Action*, Oxon: Routledge, p. 37

Summary

I have found analogies to be a useful frame to think through my partnership brokering practice. This paper draws an analogy between engineers and partnership brokers and discusses lessons learned from introducing partnership brokering approaches to existing partnerships. The paper then explores the factors that partnership brokers need to consider to understand if a particular partnership is ready for new ways of partnering and collaborating – or in other words, whether the partnership is ‘retrofit-ready.’

Introduction – engineers and partnership brokers...

What can partnership brokers learn from engineers? Not much it might seem. On the surface, engineers may even be considered the antithesis of partnership brokers. An architect designs a structure and the engineer then applies scientific principles to build the structure considering practicality, regulations, and cost among other factors. Structures are often seen as rigid. On the other hand, there is no blueprint for partnerships – they are constantly evolving and highly contextual. Partnerships are anything but rigid.

However, sometimes, the owners identify cracks or other vulnerabilities in the structure and call the engineers to conduct an assessment. The engineer then works with trades to stabilise the structure and to make it more durable. Engineers may also be asked to help optimise structural features to improve performance, for example, modify the building to improve energy efficiency. Partnership brokers can also be brought in when problems are identified to review the partnership’s performance and work with partners to optimise the partnership.

Furthermore, engineers know it is crucial to take a comprehensive approach and look at the structural integrity of the whole rather than focusing on one member (or part of the structure). Likewise, partnership brokers also know the importance of looking at the big picture and how one challenge is often symptomatic of broader and deeper concerns, which may be visible or hidden.

This paper explores the ‘retrofit challenge’ when introducing partnership brokering approaches part-way through partnerships and highlights the importance of partnership brokers, like engineers, assessing whether a partnership is ‘retrofit ready’ before applying extra loads.²

Defining ‘retrofit’

Firstly, what is meant by ‘retrofit?’ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ‘retrofit’ as: *“to furnish something (such as a computer, airplane, or building) with new or modified parts or equipment not available or considered necessary at the time of manufacture.”*³

While retrofit is more commonly applied to construction and manufacturing, it also an apt concept for partnerships which have already been established. For the purposes of this paper, the above definition has been modified to the following: *“To **equip** something (such as a **partnership**) with **tools, skills, ideas, and approaches** not available or considered necessary at the time of **inception**.”*

² Ideally, applying partnership brokering approaches will not be seen as an “extra load” but be integrated into a new way of working. However, at least initially, like any introduced concept or activity, it will likely be seen as extra work.

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, definition of “Retrofit,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/retrofit>

Reflections on supporting partnership retrofits – balancing art and science

While the Partnering Cycle is often presented as a neat, somewhat linear process,⁴ it is rarely so. Partnership brokers are often brought in mid-way through messy and sometimes dysfunctional partnerships and relationships to work through particular issues that have been identified.

In the author's experience, the partnership broker is often not involved in the 'scoping and building' phase of a partnership. More often than not, partnership brokers are brought in during the 'managing and maintaining' phase or the 'reviewing and revising' phase. In a sense, the partnership has already been constructed when the partnership brokers are appointed to support partners to assess it for retrofit. This poses a number of complex challenges for the partnership broker who needs to balance the science of a "by-the-book" and evidence-based approach, with the art of intuition and pragmatism which might be required for a particular partnership in a particular context.

These challenges include, but are not limited to:

- Keeping partners focused on the partnership rather than operational details;
- Understanding the partnership history and political economy to tailor support;
- Establishing trust and credibility;
- Managing expectations of how partnership brokering approaches can support ongoing partnerships; and
- Ensuring an enabling environment for introducing partnership brokering approaches.

Some of these challenges are not unique to ongoing partnerships, however, there are often added layers of complexity when supporting existing partnerships which the partnership broker needs to navigate. The paper will now explore each of these challenges and lessons learnt.

Keeping partners focused on the partnership rather than operational details

In the author's experience, when partnerships are already underway and projects or activities are already operational, there can be a tendency to want 'quick wins' and for partners to be distracted by operational details rather than thinking strategically about the partnership. It is often difficult to separate the partnership from the project. In this context, the partnership broker has a key role in bringing partners' attention back to the partnership and encouraging partners to organise separate meetings to discuss operational details. In doing so, however, the partnership broker needs to consider the context to ensure they are adding value to the partnership. For example, there is no point in the partnership broker insisting on discussing the partnership if all partners want to discuss operational details. In one example, the author allowed partners to discuss operational details as a couple of partners were distracted and discussing operational details was clearly going to be a more productive use of everyone's time.

Overall, to ensure partnership discussions remain strategic, it is important for partnership brokers to: 1) meet each partner ahead of workshops to ensure consistent expectations about the workshop's purpose; 2) consider participation and if operational staff are involved, ensure they are clear about the workshop's purpose; 3) reiterate at the start of the workshop that this is a strategic discussion and request participants

⁴ See The 4-phase Partnering Cycle in Tennyson, R. and Mundy, J., 2018, *Partnership Brokers in Action: Partnership Brokers Training Course Workbook (2nd Edition)*, p. 33

hold each other to account for not raising operational issues; and 4) if operational details are still raised, use a “parking lot” to ensure these issues are captured and followed up on separately.

Understanding the partnership context and political economy

Engaging part-way through partnerships, it is challenging for partnership brokers to understand the history of interactions between partners and the underlying reasons for the state of the partnership. When the partnership broker does not understand the full picture or appreciate the work the partners have already done, it can seriously affect how they design their support. This can, in turn, have detrimental impacts on partnership discussions (for example, see case study 1). In the author’s experience, it is crucial that time and resources⁵ are invested to allow the partnership broker to work with each individual partner to explore the history of the partnership prior to bringing all partners together. This will enable support the partnership broker to best tailor their support to meet the needs of the partnership.

Case Study 1: An external partnership broker was appointed to support three partners, one of which the author is a staff member. The author and a colleague had been supporting the partnership for nine months before the external broker was appointed by a new donor. The external broker met with each partner before organising a workshop and in these side meetings, it was made clear what progress had been made.

Despite this, the broker went back to the “book” to identify roles, responsibilities, and resources which the partners had previously discussed and agreed. Partners felt this was a waste of their time and voiced their concerns in the workshop. The author discussed these concerns with the external broker at the break, and the agenda was subsequently re-arranged to ensure the workshop met the partners’ needs and helped build on existing work.

Managing expectations of how partnership brokering approaches can support ongoing partnerships

Partnership brokering is not a silver bullet as some might hope or expect. It is a long-term commitment to supporting partners to manage, maintain, review and revise the partnership as needed, and then to sustain the outcomes. Overall, ensuring partners understand the purpose of partnership brokering, what is involved, and why it matters is crucial to establish from the beginning. This is particularly the case if partners have had little input in the partnership broker being appointed. Any misunderstandings can lead to partnership brokering inputs not meeting all of the partners’ expectations and can even negatively affect the partnership’s progress.

In reality though, it can be challenging to ensure all partners have a common understanding of partnership brokering approaches as case study 2 demonstrates. While partnership brokering slide decks are often delivered as part of workshop introductions, this approach can be fraught with danger, particularly for partnerships that are already underway. In some cases, theory presentations can distance the partnership broker from partners just at a time when they are trying to establish trust and rapport and to demonstrate their value add. Partnership brokers can appear aloof and not in touch with the practical realities of the partnership they are seeking to support.

At the same time, it is important for partners to have a common understanding of the central tenets of partnership brokering and some of the principles and terminology. This provides an important foundation

⁵ For example, resources for an independent interpreter to support these conversations, if needed.

for discussions and for supporting partners to think beyond the status quo. In the author's experience, a pragmatic approach is needed which often involves less science and more art. For example, one or two slides on partnership brokering and applying a learning-by-doing approach with theory integrated throughout, rather than having a separate theory presentation.

Case Study 2: In one partnership brokering workshop the author was facilitating, the agenda was agreed by all partners (including three government agencies and the author's organisation, an NGO). A brief overview of partnership brokering was going to be provided before moving into participatory activities including resource mapping, roles and responsibilities, and identifying partnership success factors.

After the brief introduction of the partnership brokering approach, one of the partners interjected and said they did not come to learn theory. They also announced they had to leave at lunch-time, half way through a full-day workshop. After discussing with partners, the workshop agenda was modified to focus on operational details to make best use of everyone's time and the author's national colleague took over the facilitation of the workshop.

In this case, further preparation was needed with the partner to understand and manage their expectations. However, this case also highlighted the challenge of supporting partners to have a common understanding of the approach when they want to focus more on practical and tangible outcomes.

Gaining trust and building credibility

Without trust and credibility, it is difficult for the partnership broker's inputs to be effective and valued. In some contexts, there are added layers of complexity due to the partnership broker's personal characteristics which makes gaining trust and building credibility all the more difficult. For example, as a foreigner, a partnership broker may be seen as an outsider and not understanding the context, which may be considered an advantage or disadvantage depending on your perspective. Gender, age and other diversity factors can also affect how a partnership broker is perceived. Overcoming partner biases can require extra preparation time which partnership brokers need to consider as part of their preparations. For example, allocating more time to talk through the approach with partners and highlighting previous work, if necessary.

In the author's experience, it is also critical to strengthen the capacity of national colleagues who can lead the partnership brokering. They have the benefit of language, relationships, and understanding cultural nuances that an international broker working through interpretation will never be able to understand. The international broker (e.g. such as the author) can provide mentoring support to the national broker, engage in discussions through interpretation if appropriate, and observe body language of partners which still offers valuable insights. Together, a national and international broker can work effectively in cross-cultural contexts to gain trust and credibility, which is particularly important when supporting partners to introduce partnership brokering approaches. In case study 2 above, the author and a colleague automatically reverted to this approach with the national colleague taking over the workshop to manage the situation. However, a more deliberate approach to capacity strengthening over time would likely lead to even better outcomes.

Assessing the enabling environment

The partnership broker also needs to ensure there is an enabling environment for introducing partnership brokering approaches among all partners, not just the organisation that appointed them. In case study 2

above, not enough time was allocated to meet with individual partners to explore their expectations. In addition, partners were not ready to think differently about partnering nor were their ways of working adaptable to partnership brokering approaches. This underscores the importance of working with partners to explore whether partnerships are ‘retrofit-ready’ before providing substantive inputs, which the paper will now explore.

Considerations for retrofitting partnerships

Like when an engineer assesses a structure for retrofitting, a partnership broker also needs to work with partners to assess whether a retrofit is: 1) desirable, and 2) possible – or in other words, whether the partnership is ‘retrofit-ready.’ Before applying extra loads to a building, an engineer assesses the foundations and if they are not strong enough, shores them up first before applying extra loads. If extra loads are applied which the foundations were not designed to handle, this can do serious damage. It is the same for partnership brokering.

Do the partners want the partnership to be retrofitted and who decides?

Ideally, the partners should decide collectively if they want to apply partnership brokering approaches, when to appoint a partnership broker, and who to appoint. In the author’s experience, the partnership broker is often appointed by the partner who has perceived power – as either a funder or contract holder. In case study 1, the new donor appointed the partnership broker who supported the partners. This externally-facilitated process was a donor requirement to receive funding. In case study 2, the partnership broker (the author) was appointed by the author’s organisation who was implementing a four-country project. In retrofitting partnerships, it is important the partnership broker works with each partner individually to understand their readiness and openness to these approaches. Even if the partnership broker is being paid for particular deliverables within a particular timeframe, it is important the partnership broker checks in with all partners to see if they actually want and need these inputs.

Is the partnership ‘retrofit-ready?’

In the author’s experience, four pre-conditions need to be assessed to see whether partners are ‘retrofit-ready’ which are listed in their order of importance:

1. Leadership – strong and engaged leaders;
2. Resources – willingness to commit resources;
3. Open mind-set and culture – to different ways of partnering and collaborating; and
4. Systems – that are adaptable to different ways of working.

If there is supportive leadership and resources, the partnership broker can work with partners to address staff mind-set and culture, and systems. If supportive leadership is missing and/or there are not sufficient resources to support partnership brokering approaches, the partnership broker should support the partners to explore other alternatives, such as sub-contracting or grants.

1. LEADERSHIP: Strong and engaged leaders

For any partnership to work, strong and engaged leaders who are supportive of partnership brokering approaches are crucial. This is particularly critical when partnership brokering approaches are being introduced part-way through partnerships. If leaders do not fully understand partnership brokering and/or see the benefits, they do not support staff to actively participate or make dismissive commentary

which negatively affects other partners. On the other hand, where there are engaged and supportive leaders, partnership brokering can be incorporated into ways of working which can be transformational.

To ensure leaders are engaged, it is essential the partnership broker works with them upfront individually to explore their personal and organisation's approaches to partnership. This includes their willingness to commit resources.

2. RESOURCES: Willingness to commit resources

Often resources (including funding and staff time) are not allocated to partnership brokering as a specific long-term investment. In the author's experience, it is often seen as a one-off workshop or a short-term exercise. The partnership broker needs to adjust their approach to the particular partnership and demonstrate a level of flexibility, however, there are some things that cannot be compromised without having adverse consequences. For example, trying to rush a workshop and not allowing sufficient time to prepare for workshops, as demonstrated in case study 2, had undesired outcomes. It can also leave a negative impression of partnership brokering as an approach which can hinder further activities.

Overall, it is crucial for the partnership broker to work with partners to understand the level of resources they are dedicating to partnership brokering. This can be challenging to discuss early on, particularly when supporting a new partnership, but is an important one to explore. Often, more effort is required when retrofitting partnerships as the partners are considering new ideas and new ways of working, and this needs to be resourced. To have this discussion, the partnership broker may draw on their experience or that of other brokers to highlight the sort of investment that may be required to support a successful partnership.

3. MIND-SET and CULTURE: Openness to different ways of partnering and collaborating

It is crucial for the partnership broker to understand the openness of each partner to different ways of partnering and collaborating. If partners are genuinely committed to partnerships through their values, strategies, policies, and/or it is part of their "business-as-usual" practices, this is a good sign that they are 'retrofit-ready.'

On the other hand, if the partners have set ways of working which do not support genuine partnership and there is no potential for this to change, the partnership broker needs to work with partners to consider other collaboration modalities. For example, in the author's experience, one organisation may want to partner with a provincial government agency and this may be considered the most effective and efficient way of partnering. However, if the government's way of working is that all external partnerships must be managed through the national agency who works with their sub-ordinate provincial counterpart, this can create challenges. As Mundy notes, such differences in approaches between government agencies and non-government organisations can create a disconnect,⁶ and the author has found this to be the case. If after discussing their different approaches, partners cannot agree and neither are willing to change or adapt their ways of working, it is impossible for a genuine partnership to succeed.

Using the same example, partners may agree there is enough alignment in their interests to pursue a partnership together and different ways of working can be navigated. In this instance, the partnership

⁶ Mundy, J. 2019. 'Embedding Ethical and Principled Partnering Approaches' in Scott, L. (ed.). *Shaping Sustainable Change: The Role of Partnership Brokering in Optimising Collaborative Action*, Oxon: Routledge, p. 76

broker's role is to help the partners to understand each other's ways of working and to develop common principles that all actors, regardless of their systems and approaches, will abide to. In these instances, an internal partnership broker needs to engage closely to support partners to work together. It is also important the idea of partnership brokering is revisited semi-regularly (not just as part of an annual partnership health check), to ensure it is still meeting the needs of the partners, or whether another collaboration approach may be more appropriate.

Assessing how open partners are to thinking and working differently is difficult for a partnership broker to assess. However, a few questions in the initial discussions with each partner may be useful to explore to guide the partnership broker's inputs, for example:

- What does partnership mean to your organisation? Do you have any values, strategies, or other organisational documents that outline your approach to partnerships?
- Why are you partnering with the other organisation/s in this partnership? What do you see as each of the partner's value add?⁷
- How do you partner with organisations – what does this involve? Who in your organisation engages with partners?⁸
- Is your organisation and its staff open to different ways of working and collaborating? How do your systems support this?

4. SYSTEMS: Adaptable to different ways of working

In supporting partners to understand whether they are 'retrofit-ready,' it is important for partnership brokers to understand the extent to which each partner's systems are adaptable. For example, if one of the partners requires a partnership agreement template full of legalese to be applied universally, it is important to know this upfront. Otherwise, the partnership broker can support partners to define partnering principles, for example, but then the systems are not able to support the partnership's intent. This can lead to frustration and partners may see partnership brokering activities as a waste of their time.

In the example above, if there is space to adapt internal processes, then it may still be possible to implement a successful partnership. On the other hand, sometimes it may be decided that partners' systems and organisational requirements are so different that is not possible to pursue a genuine partnership. In which case, the partnership broker should support partners to identify other collaboration modalities.

When retrofitting a partnership, there is a strong need for partners to see value in partnership brokering approaches. Any barriers, institutional or otherwise, can make it challenging to implement new partnership brokering approaches and can lead partners reverting to the status quo. It is therefore imperative to understand these potential barriers and challenges before introducing partnership brokering approaches.

⁷ If the partners are partnering just for funding for example, this can be cause for concern.

⁸ If, for example, there is only one person who engages with partners, this may indicate the absence of a partnership culture.

Conclusion

If a partnership is considering introducing partnership brokering approaches, the partnership broker needs to work with partners to understand the foundations on which the partnership was built and whether it is 'retrofit ready.' Understanding leadership support, partner willingness to commit resources, organisational and staff mind-set and culture around partnerships, and the extent to which partner systems are adaptable will help guide the partnership broker's inputs and ensure they are adding value.

In the author's experience as a partnership broker and being partnership brokered (i.e. as a participant), coming into an existing partnership and applying a "by-the-book" approach is fraught with danger. Too much science and not enough art does not work. At the same time, there are "by-the-book" approaches that should not be compromised, particularly when it comes to allowing sufficient time to prepare for partnership brokering workshops. A balanced, nuanced, and practical approach is needed when working with partners at any stage, but is particularly important when supporting partners to retrofit partnerships.

If an engineer rushes their designs or instructs people to use cheap or poor quality materials in the retrofit, there are bound to be problems. This may not show now but it will in the longer term. It is the same for partnerships. Partnership brokering takes time and resources if it is to be done well. Partners may want to rush different partnership brokering exercises, but there are consequences. Partnership brokers have a duty to inform partners of the potential trade-offs to ensure they make informed decisions.

Retrofitting partnerships is complex, time consuming, and involves a delicate balance of art and science. However, if the partnership is 'retrofit ready,' supporting partners to integrate partnership brokering approaches can offer substantial benefits that can support the partnership to succeed.

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