STORIES FROM PRACTICE

CREATED BY PARTNERSHIP BROKERS. PRESENTED BY PBA.

Developing tools to assess my effectiveness as an internal partnership broker

This paper analyses how the process of reflection informed the approaches to design and test a framework for assessing the effectiveness of partnership brokering. As an internal partnership broker for the American Red Cross one of the author's key responsibilities focused on building the capacity of colleagues to collaborate well with external partners. The paper examines how understanding one's own capacities and how the process of partnership brokering is effectively adding value is positively impacting organisational learning.

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Introduction

Over the course of my partnership accreditation process, my work as an internal broker focused on developing frameworks, systems, and tools to measure the success of my organization's external partnerships. This work was not something I could do independently. I relied on effective collaboration with colleagues to ensure the approaches had buy-in, were developed in a participatory manner, and were relevant to the end users.

While I was developing indicators and benchmarks to be able to measure the success of our partnerships, I wondered, what would be my indicators of success? Could I demonstrate that my approach to collaboration with my colleagues had impact? Was I achieving the expected results as set forth by my organization's leadership? I could sense and infer when my collaboration efforts were successful – or not, but could I develop a more specific framework that could objectively evaluate my effectiveness? Could I gather data and evidence to inform areas of my work needing improvement?

The motivation behind focusing on the topic of collaboration came from this statement in the Partnership Broker Accreditation Program introductory module:

> *A partnership broker would ask her/himself the following questions: What do the partners need now to collaborate effectively, or to enhance the value of their collaboration? Understanding this, what can I do now to support them in the process?*

Purpose

This paper is a reflection on the process and approaches I used to design and test a framework for effective brokering/collaboration; to identify indicators of success for collaboration; and to survey colleagues, capturing their assessment of my work against these indicators.

Overview of contents of paper

Part 1 sets out the context of my role as an internal partnership broker, and the organizational structure in which I must collaborate. Part 2 details the process and approach I took to develop a framework, and indicators of success. Part 3 explains the development and dissemination of a survey, my analysis of the survey results, and how I might use the results to improve my work. Part 4 provides reflection on the process, my insights and conclusion.

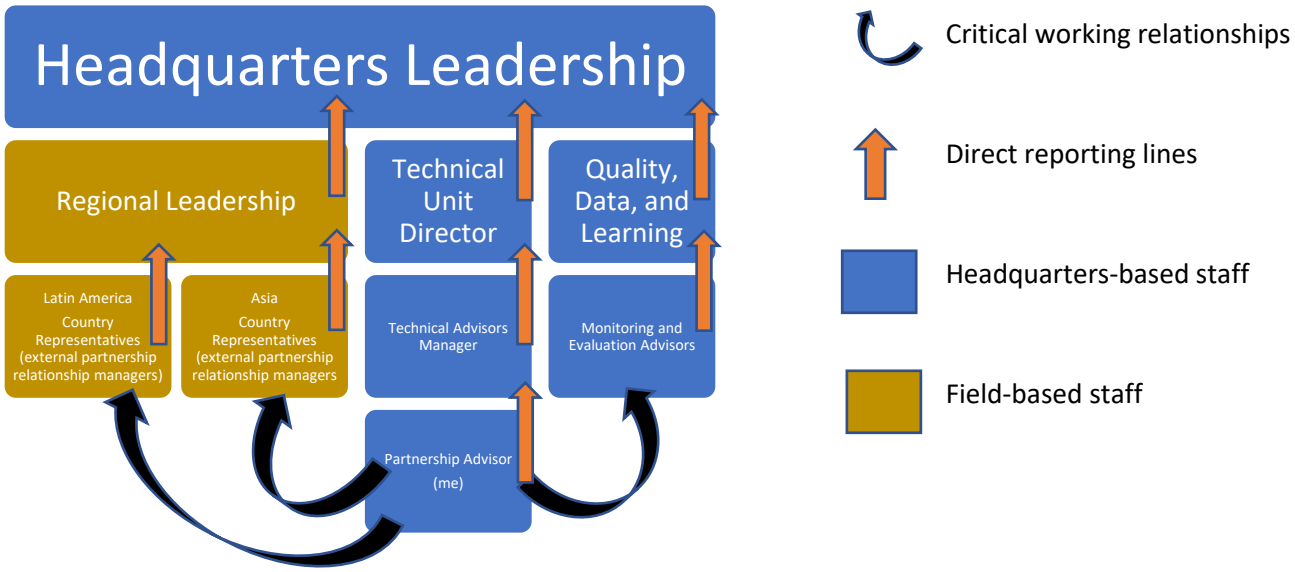
Part 1. Operating context

I work for an international humanitarian aid organization based in the U.S. at their headquarters. My organization's external partners are like-minded entities in other countries. We partner with them for the purpose of jointly building an effective global humanitarian response network. In my position as an organizational development and partnership advisor I support the development of internal and external facing partnership strategies, systems, and tools for the purpose of guiding how we engage with external partners, and how we build our own capacity and readiness to partner. I cannot do this work without the full engagement of my colleagues and other key stakeholders. I must first broker my own partnerships internally, in order to aid in the development of successful partnerships for the organization.

Critical Relationships

I am on a team of technical advisors, but alone in my focus on organizational development and partnerships. My internal partners / colleagues include two distinct groups: 1. headquarters colleagues – some of whom are in my unit; most are members of other teams with different reporting lines and areas of work; 2. Counterparts located in Latin America and Asia. These counterparts are the frontline relationship managers for our organization's priority external partners. They report into a Regional Director who in turn reports to the Executive Director for programs. I have the mandate to influence and direct my organization's relationships and plans with priority partners, but without official authority to require anything from my counterparts. Effective collaboration is key for achieving my goals and those of the organization.

A visual of how I am structured reflects the variety of groups, regions, and organizational levels I must collaborate with in order to effectively steward my organization's partnership policies and frameworks.



Part 2. The journey

This section of the paper outlines my activities and strategies for developing an "effective brokering/collaboration framework" [1] including indicators to measure the success of my collaboration activities.

In developing my organization's partnership measurement framework and indicators of success, we applied a project design approach, which I mirrored as I developed my own framework. These are the steps in that process:

1. Start with a theory of change based on assessments and sense-making of what is happening and why.
2. In the rendering of the theory of change, begin to see focus areas for change emerge and use them to hone-in on relevant, potential interventions and activities to achieve the desired change and end goals (if we do "X", then "Y" will change...).
3. With a results framework, determine areas of change and pathways to focus on; start with activities most relevant and feasible to do that will help achieve the target change.
4. To measure progress and success of these activities, develop key performance indicators for each type of intervention.
5. Use the indicators to monitor, measure, and report progress. The data collected helps understand where work is progressing, and where there is a need for adjustments.

There is an art and science to project design just as there is in brokering. The project design tools I employed to develop my framework – balance and connect the two sides of this work nicely. While a theory of change allows for reflection, insight and imagination – making sense of a complex system; a results framework can help build-in preciseness, define targeted interventions, and simplify activities with a clear direct path to follow.

The following tables explain how I see this connection of art and science and the alignment between the discipline of brokering and project design tools:

Aspects of brokering as an art:	**Project design tool alignment: Theory of Change (ToC)**
Insight, imagination, and feeling	Developing a ToC helps you explore and make sense of the context and system in which you are working; it is sometimes compared to an artist's rendering
Vision (of the future)	A ToC can help show the big picture and all possible pathways for addressing the target problem

[1] For the purposes of this paper I consider brokering to be the work that enables collaborative alliances. See *Shaping Sustainable Change: the role of partnership brokering in optimizing collaborative action, p12.*

People skills	ToC's are best developed in a participatory manner - through engagement, debate, and discussion with others
Active listening	A ToC should capture a variety of evidence/real-life experiences from practitioners to define and explain a variety of ways (how and why) change happens; it can help surface perspectives on reality

Aspects of brokering as a science:	**Project design tool alignment: – Logical/Results Framework**
Knowledge, analysis, and thinking	A logframe helps you design a relevant, logical, and sequential intervention that your organization has the knowledge and resources to implement. They are sometimes referred to as a blueprint and reflect "if-then" thinking (causation)
Understanding	A logframe builds a common understanding of goals, processes, and expectations for resource allocation
Administrative skills	A logframe is a simple format for capturing a clear link between activities, outputs, and expected results used for project management purposes
Precise speaking	A logframe helps you easily share ideas, assumptions, and communicate with clarity the intent and rationale of your approach and what you want to achieve
Professional detachment	A logframe is a practical and objective, linear plan, based on evidence (past performances, best practices)

Theory of Change

As demonstrated in the table above, using a theory of change approach allowed me to apply aspects of brokering as an art: i.e. using my insights and feelings about what the problem was (ineffective brokering) and producing an illustration of how and why I assumed it was happening. The process of creating the drawing was also a helpful reflection exercise. It helped me consider many influencing elements that affect my ability to engage and collaborate with my colleagues.

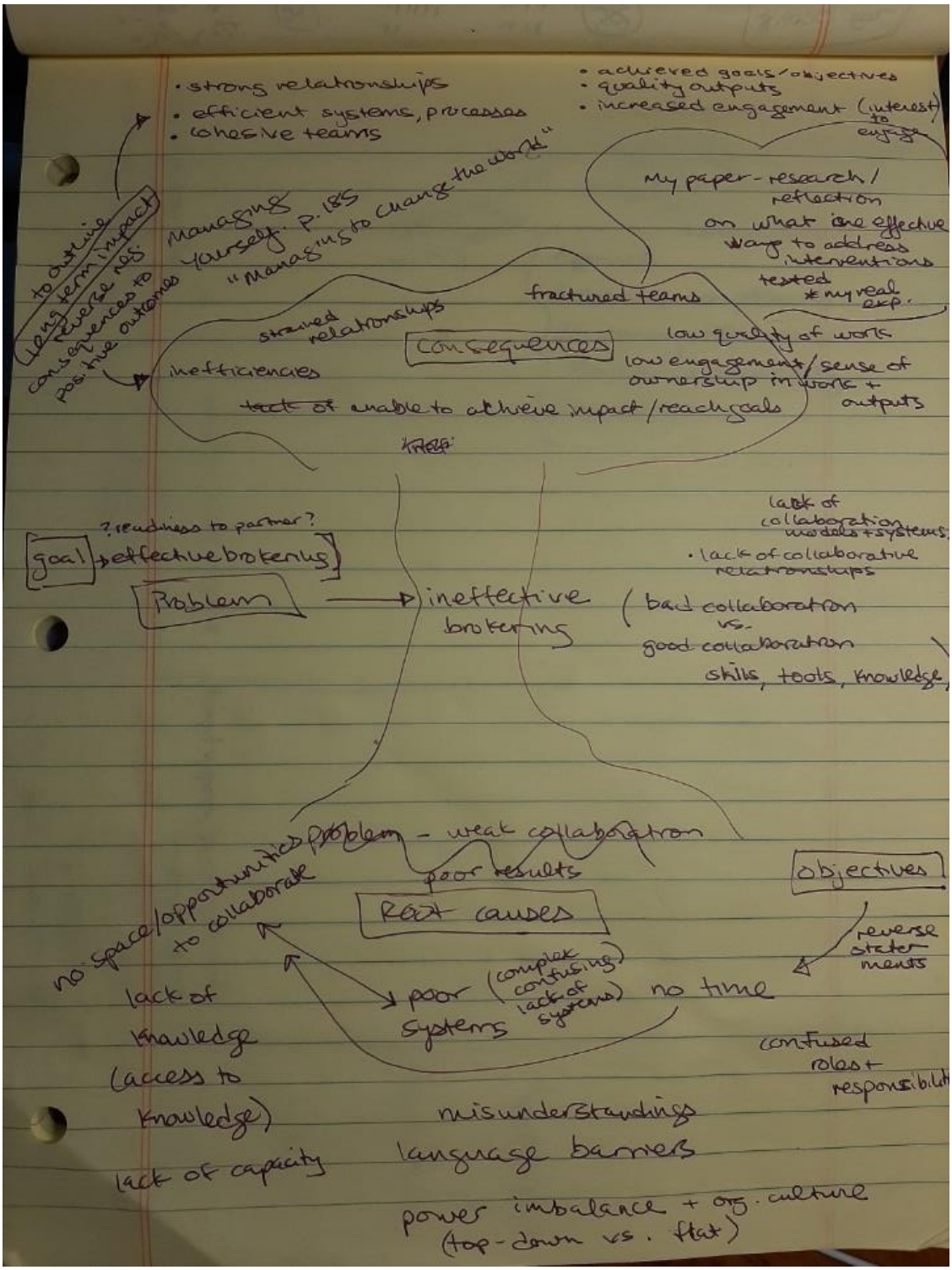
In keeping with the artistic aspects of a theory of change – I created it by applying the principles of free association writing techniques. You will see in Image 1. below that the drawing is rough. I purposefully wanted to approach it this way with as little censorship as possible and without referencing other frameworks first so that I could identify elements specific to my own personal experience. The act of drawing freely, without a template or clean lines facilitated brainstorming and making connections between the elements that were surfacing. This drawing reflects aspects of the complex system and context in which I work.

It is easier sometimes to talk about what is not working before pivoting towards positive solutions, so I began by drawing a problem tree. Focusing on the core problem of ineffective brokering at the center of the trunk. The task of drawing in root causes and consequences of the problem was done by doing my own sense-making along with drawing on conversations I had with some of my counterparts over the course of my accreditation program. We agreed on some of the root causes – lack of time, systems, and resources to collaborate; and many of the consequences of ineffective collaboration – strained relationships, inability to create and/or meet shared goals, lack of ownership of the work, etc.

Once the problem tree was sketched and filled-in, I had a clearer understanding of what was happening and our shared assumptions around why. The next step then was to use the content of the problem tree to identify potential solutions that could foster collaboration.

To turn my problem tree into a theory of change and solutions – it was as simple as changing the negative elements and statements into positives. Root causes turned into my objectives. For example: the root cause of poor systems/a lack of systems for collaboration – became an objective: To put in place effective systems for collaboration. Using the same approach with the consequences in my problem tree, I created desired outcomes. For example: low engagement became the desired outcome of increased engagement. The problem of ineffective brokering became the goal: effective brokering.

Image 1. Theory of Change



Results Framework

While the theory of change presented complexity, and many potential interventions and pathways for addressing my main goal of effective brokering and collaboration; my next step in this process was to identify specific, realistic, and relevant activities I could do to improve my brokering work. I wanted to have a concise way to communicate to my counterparts and my management how my activities and strategies logically link to immediate outputs, which in turn can lead to outcomes and achieving shared goals.

To create a results framework with a specific pathway for a change process, I considered elements from my theory of change as well as other frameworks for assessing partnership brokers, and collaboration. This way I could maintain elements relevant to my own context, while building from already tested approaches; ensuring best practices for effective brokering and collaboration were incorporated, if not already reflected in my own thinking. The key tools reviewed and adapted to enrich my framework include:

- Partnership Brokers Training Course, Level I Workbook. *Tool 10: Understanding Partnership Success Factors*.
- Brokering Better Partnerships: by investing in the partnering process, PBA Handbook 2019 (https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Brokering-Better-Partnerships-Handbook.pdf)
- The Partnering Initiative – Fit for Partnering Framework (https://thepartneringinitiative.org/tpi-tools/the-fit-for-partnering-framework/)
- Discovery in Action: 9 Keys to successful collaboration (https://discoveryinaction.com.au/9-keys-to-successful-collaboration/)

Table 1: Results Framework for effective (internal) Partnership Brokering/Collaboration

GOAL:	**Effective (internal) Partnership Brokering/Collaboration**			
#	**Strategic Objectives**	**Outcomes**	**Expected Results/Outputs**	**Key interventions / activities**
1	Ensure **Approach** is transparent, collaborative, and participatory	The partnering process is well understood by all partners	• The purpose and process for working together is well understood • Roles and responsibilities are clear • Work is jointly designed and implemented • Partners have a genuine voice at the table and their contribution is respected	Develop a RACI for each unique piece of work Clarify expectations for contributions from each counterpart Apply active listening strategies, create space for people to contribute

			• Leadership support and buy-in to process/approach	Validate people's availability to participate with direct supervisors Establish frequent and relevant communication strategies to keep leadership updated
2	Strengthen / reinforce collaborative **Behaviors & Competencies**	Partnership stakeholders are "ready to partner"	• Individuals involved have the necessary skill set • Individuals involved have the necessary mind set	Develop/provide training and orientation webinars Model desired mind set
3	Ensure work is **Efficient & Effective**	The partnership is well-managed	• Partnership has strong / appropriate communications in place • Systems in place to support partnering activities • Enough (but not too much) time is allocated to collaboration	Establish frequent email updates to all stakeholders Leverage collaboration technology (zoom, google docs, MS teams, etc.) Request deliverables well in advance of deadlines
4	Support the Partnership to delivers **Results**	The partnership is outcome and output oriented	• Partners are achieving their organizational/ shared goals • Partnership is maximizing value to each organization involved • Partnership is achieving wider impact and influence	Maintain and update the initiative workplan – and share progress/results with key stakeholders regularly Frequently communicate the connection of my work with counterparts to the

				broader organizational goals Celebrate successes and highlight wider impact when possible

Part 3. Results

With the results framework I created a logical, clear path with specific activities to follow in order to achieve my goal of *Effective (internal) Partnership Brokering and Collaboration.* But to ensure I make progress towards this goal, and the path remains relevant, I needed to develop a measurement tool that would enable me to do regular check-ins. Reviews would be for the purpose of making any necessary adjustments to my interventions if need-be.

The expected results/outputs in my framework became my key performance indicators which were then converted into questions for a survey. The survey was disseminated to colleagues and leadership within my organization – prioritizing my critical working relationships. The responses received are very enlightening and help me understand where my collaborative practices are strong, which ones may need to be reinforced or adjusted, and where there might be gaps in my support.

Below are the results of the survey, analysis of the data, and a reflection on what they imply for my practice going forward.

Area	Questions	Average Score
Approach / Governance	Was the purpose and process for working together well understood?	3.42
	Were roles and responsibilities clear?	3.25
	Was the work jointly designed and implemented?	3.33
	Was there flexibility but also clarity about constraints and non-negotiables?	3.25
	Did all stakeholders have a genuine voice at the table and their contribution respected?	3.33
	Did (the internal broker) facilitate senior management (Unit Directors and above) buy-in and support for individual participation?	2.67
Behaviors and Competencies	Did the Individuals involved have the necessary skill set for the task at hand?	2.67
	…if not, did (the internal broker) provide capacity building or further orientation?	2.25
	Did (the internal broker) prepare individuals involved to engage with the necessary mind set for collaboration (did she encourage: openness and transparency, mutuality, and sharing of the work)?	2.75
	Did Beth establish and put in place strong / appropriate communication strategies?	2.67

Efficiency and Effectiveness	Were systems in place to support collaborative activities?	2.83
	Did (the internal broker) allocate enough time to collaboration?	3.58
Results / productivity	Was the work output and outcome oriented?	3.42
	Did partners/units/teams achieve/deliver on shared goals?	2.50
	Was the collaboration maximizing value for each partner/organization/unit/team involved?	2.67
	Did the collaboration achieve wider impact and influence (across our department)?	1.92

Additional details regarding the survey:

1. The survey questions were organized and grouped by the strategic objectives of my results framework.
2. The survey was disseminated to 20 recipients, of which 12 responded.
3. The respondents were guided to answer the questions in the context of collaborating with me on the development of our organization's partnership measurement system.
4. Respondents were given space to provide comments if they wanted to add more details or reasons for their scores.
5. The scoring was based on the following Likert scale with an assigned numerical value for each:
    a. Always (4)
    b. Very Often (3)
    c. Sometimes (2)
    d. Rarely (1)
    e. Never (0)
    f. Blank responses (0)

In my initial analysis of the survey results, I was able to validate some of what I intuitively knew to be my stronger and weaker areas, but there were also some surprises:

- For example, I feel confident in my ability to set the stage and create a space for collaboration with clear governance guidance and structure – so to see scores come back on these questions towards the higher end of the scale was validating.
- On the other hand, I was surprised to see colleagues felt they had a genuine voice in the process and that they felt the work was jointly designed and implemented. In my organization, as it is focused on humanitarian response, work in general and the culture itself is rushed, fast paced, and I don't always feel I have enough time to use participatory approaches or build the necessary buy-in.
- While an average score is helpful to see patterns, I do value and will use each individual's responses – specifically those with comments. The perspectives of individuals will be important for strengthening relationships with those individuals and improving one-on-one collaboration efforts.

- Where the average score drops below a 3 – I will begin to put more focus on these aspects of collaboration to improve my work.
- Analyzing why some did not respond to the survey will also be important. Understanding their constraints or hesitation to participate will give insight into what they might need from me in order to collaborate and engage more.
- I intend to disseminate this survey again – possibly in another 3 months – to gage if there is any general improvement or change.

Part 4. Reflections and Conclusion

As brokers, we should be open to our skills being assessed if we want to be seen as objective experts tasked with reviewing and assessing others in their partnerships and collaborative initiatives. In conclusion of this paper, I consider the following questions important to reflect on[2] as they relate to this first iteration of a process I hope to continue:

- ### What happened?
  In opening myself up to colleagues and asking for their feedback – I experienced an openness on their side. Some colleagues expressed gratitude for being engaged, and others communicated an interest to continue the dialogue on how to improve collaboration across our departments.

- ### Why did this happen?
  I am convinced that by taking this vulnerable step, I built trust. This belief is reinforced by Brene Brown who also claims: *We need trust to be vulnerable, and we need to be vulnerable in order to build trust*[3]. My colleagues' interests to continue discussing and exploring aspects of effective collaboration will add value overall to the wider organization.

- ### What did not happen?
  One thing that did not happen – engagement from one entire unit. Most of the non-respondents to my survey are members of one specific team with whom I have struggled to collaborate with over the past several months.

- ### Why did this happen?
  I will need to reach out to the director of the unit to find out why responses were not forth coming. It could be as simple as other priorities taking precedent; or it could be more complex – perhaps the survey questions were not well understood; or they didn't consider our interactions and communications as collaboration; considering our general lack

[2] https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PB-Tools-for-Self-assessment-Reflection_072018.pdf
[3] Brown, Brene. *Dare to Lead,* Random House, 2018.

engagement with each other – there is also a potential lack of trust influencing their hesitation to provide feedback. The surveys were not anonymous and perhaps I need to find ways to make it so when I circulate it again.

- What can I learn from this? and What can I do with what I have learned?

I found it useful and important to follow the sequence of first developing a theory of change, then a logical results framework in order to create a survey built from relevant indicators. While there are many checklists and reflection questions brokers can use to self-assess their work – using indicators that link back to a personalized theory of change helps me tie my efforts more strongly to my own specific context and my own organization's values and priorities. As an internal broker this is important, given I am fostering collaboration in a specific culture for a specific mission. I am also not just focused on brokering external partnerships but am expected to work in ways that ensure my organization can deliver on its own strategy.

Additionally, this process has provided for me a better way to capture the science and logic behind my work as a broker. These tools are valuable in helping me speak more precisely about the strategies and activities I incorporate into my work and why. If I can measure my own results, I can demonstrate the added value of a partnership broker – not just for my organization, but for a variety of collaborative initiatives.

This process and my experience opening myself up to scrutiny has been an effective collaboration strategy in and of itself. My willingness to put myself in a vulnerable position can help level power in-balances (between headquarters and field-based staff; or between various levels in the organization's hierarchy) and build trust and transparency. Effective collaboration is more likely in situations where there is trust, respect, honesty, and openness in relationships[4].

[4] https://discoveryinaction.com.au/9-keys-to-successful-collaboration/