

# STORIES FROM PRACTICE

CREATED BY PARTNERSHIP BROKERS. PRESENTED BY PBA.



## How partnership brokering is central to creating sustainable change

This paper explores how partnerships and internal brokering is key for creating sustainable change within organisations in particular business. Through the lens of Tempered Radicalism, the author is analysing the skills and strategies that have guided her work as a sustainability profession and identify similarities between partnership brokers and sustainability managers. A peer survey shows that over 80% are brokering as part of their day-to-day work. There is huge potential for both professions to learn from each other and collaborate.

**AUTHOR: DAWN BAGGALEY**

Dawn has worked in the sustainability field for almost 20 years in New Zealand, the UK and Denmark. She is currently Head of Sustainability at NZ Post where she is responsible for the organisational sustainability strategy covering people, planet and prosperity. Dawn also serves as a board member for the Sustainable Business Network, Business 4 Social Impact, and the independent technical advisory panel for Toitu (Envirocare).

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# How partnership brokering is central to creating sustainable change

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## Introduction

During the last decade, there has been a significant growth in the number of sustainability roles created within organisations in particular businesses, with the aim of changing the organisation from the inside to be more sustainable. Whilst these roles exist to create change they are not always enabled to do so as effectively as they might be; they typically have limited resources, may not be widely accepted or valued by colleagues, do not necessarily have a visible and active mandate from senior leaders, and the organisational culture is resistant to change. To be successful, sustainability practitioners deploy a range of strategies importantly they must build alliances and partnerships within their organisations and externally, if they are to scale their impact. A sustainability practitioner therefore has to also be a partnership broker.

In this paper, I want to analyse the role of sustainability practitioners primarily through the lens of being a Tempered Radical (Meyerson, 2003) shedding light on the skills, tool and strategies they use and how brokering is essential to creating sustainable change. Through this analysis and a short survey of sustainability professionals, I will identify the similarities between the two professions and the importance of brokering to achieving sustainable change.

## My role and context

For over 15 years, I have been working as a sustainability practitioner and unofficial partnership broker, with the aim of creating change within business so that business operates in a socially and environmentally sustainable way. I have primarily operated within large organisations, seeking to influence senior leaders and Boards to drive top down change as well as encourage bottom up action to deliver sustainable impact. For long periods of time I have worked as the sole sustainability practitioner or as one of two people seeking to drive change across large organisations. I am guided in my work by the idea of being a Tempered Radical. Action research and reflection are also important tools for me – I studied for my MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice at the University of Bath, using action research as the pedagogy. I am supported in my work by a generous and knowledgeable tribe of sustainability professionals operating across different businesses and organisations all of whom are willing to share their experiences, ideas, successes and failures to help each and all of us achieve sustainable outcomes for a better world.

Based on my personal experience, my ability (and my organisation's ability) to collaborate and partner internally and externally is critical to my success. I have also observed that successful partnering and collaboration requires a set of skills and capabilities that are not widely recognised or valued within many businesses. For these reasons I was drawn to the Partnership Brokers Association training and discipline to build my capability and approaches to partnering and collaboration so that I might be more effective in driving sustainable outcomes.

## What guides me as a sustainability practitioner – the skills, tools and strategies?

### A Tempered Radical

I first came across the concept of Tempered Radicals (Meyerson, 2003) whilst studying for my MSc Responsibility and Business practice from 2006 to 2008. A Tempered Radical is someone who 'works within the system to change the system'. 'They want to fit in, and they want to retain what makes them different. They want to rock the boat and stay in it' (Meyerson, 2003). Tempered Radicals are often described as operating on a 'fault line'. They build credibility within an organisation so that they can influence those within it to change – building their organisational capital. They speak the business language and work hard to show how they/sustainability can support their colleagues to achieve their objectives. Tempered Radicals are pushing conventions to create change; how hard they can push can depend on the culture of the organisation they are operating within and the mood without.

Push too hard and they may lose their credibility with others; don't push hard enough and they can lose credibility with themselves and their own values and identity. Personal authenticity is a motivator and guide for Tempered Radicals.

Tempered Radicals hold on to a vision of a more sustainable future whilst continuing to operate at the heart of the paradigm they want to change. It's a constant balancing act. It can feel slow given the urgency of the problems such as climate change and inequality. It can be lonely as they are often treated as outside the dominant culture and are few in number.

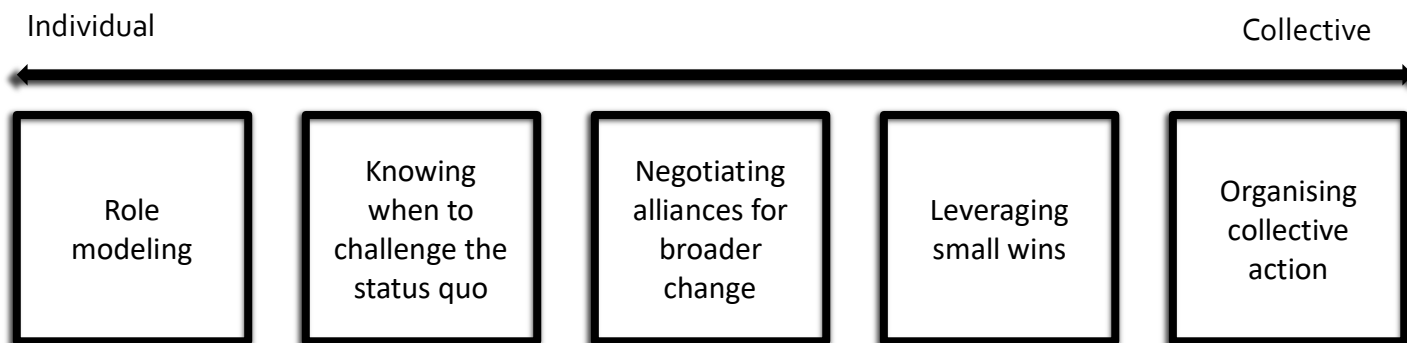
Systems and organisational change is not the smooth templated process that is often portrayed to us through organisational storytelling and management blogs/magazines but a continued and fragmented process of random events. Tempered Radicals therefore deploy a number of strategies, working on multiple fronts across a spectrum of individual to collective action (refer table 1). These strategies include, acting locally and authentically, seeking out and leveraging small wins, building affiliations and collective action.

For Tempered Radicals, there is a trade-off between individual action which is less complicated, and collective action that can have a much greater impact but requires agreement to purpose and approaches. Debra Meyerson in her book, references the research of Sharon Kuntz (1994) for effective collective action to enable commitment to a common purpose. They include:

- Clarifying the issue or purpose to galvanise and support action with clear sub goals that reflect the goals of the different participants
- Identify and challenge the cultural norms and encompass diversity of leadership and culture within the collective
- Actively seek support from others who identify with the core issues/sub goals

As Tempered Radicals, Debra Meyerson would also encourage us to practice stepping back to see the bigger picture, looking inward to take stock of our personal motivations, be aware of others interests, needs and objectives, and to use third parties to provide support and bring new perspectives and skills. A Tempered Radical view offers a different model of everyday leadership; one that is inclusive, realistic and inspiring which can be at odds with the dominant leadership narrative within organisations (lone crusaders leading transformational change). Successful Tempered Radicals know themselves, pay attention to details, favour action, look for opportunities, forge connection and create learning by framing local events in terms of their broader significance.

**Table 1 – Tempered Radical strategies**



My sustainability practice is also guided by other theories and frameworks. Meg Wheatley– co founder of the Berkana Insitute and author of numerous leadership books – has inspired me. Meg advocates for letting go of ego; “shrink your ego and let go of the belief that you are the brightest and most creative in the room”. Believe and trust that other people can be creative and entrepreneurial and that they are motivated by a greater sense of purpose. Face into the reality of not knowing what to do in a world of uncertainty and turn to others for the answers. This can create the space for a collective intelligence and wisdom of the crowds that pulls together multiple perspectives. I have often held this front of mind when engaging with others. This might appear easy but I have found that it can be challenging as I stand back to allow the space for many voices to be heard, and for recognition that this is a purposeful strategy and not that I lack the knowledge or skills within my discipline.

Building on this idea of ‘shrinking your ego’, there is another important strategy in sustainability and that is knowing when to bring others in. It is often hard to be a prophet in your own land. Sometimes another voice albeit saying the same thing can be more effective and resonate strongly with your audience. There are also times when you have put considerable effort into preparing the ground for others to be successful – supporting them in gaining recognition for their efforts is empowering and creates useful allies.

Self-reflection and action research is another important practice for me. Admittedly my practice can wax and wane, but it is never far away. My MSc study was designed as a process of disciplined inquiry and self-reflective learning. I was required to take my learning into a series of practical investigations within my organisation and community, engaging in cycles of action and reflection and sharing my learning with fellow participants. This active reflection assists me to stand back, be aware of my motivation and the needs of my ego, as well as my impact on others. It also allows me to keep my personal values and drivers front of mind, helping me to maintain my personal authenticity and integrity. Sharing lessons from my practice is also a vital element that comes from action research practice. As previously mentioned, sustainability practitioners are generous in sharing their knowledge and experiences and are willing collaborators. Through mutual sharing and support, we can help the whole ecosystem to advance faster for the greater good.

Below in table 2, I have attempted to summarise the key skills and attributes that I draw from these theories and practices.

**Table 2 - Summary of a sustainability practitioner’s key skills and attributes**

• Influencer	• Ability to hold a vision	• Facilitator
• Credibility	• Comfortable with uncertainty	• Shrinks own ego/lets go
• Negotiation	• Self-reflective	• Builds strong networks
• Resilience	• Tests assumptions	• Shares information openly
• Personal authenticity	• Seeks diversity of views and opinions	• Leadership
• Perseverance	• Understands different interests/perspectives	• Coaches
• Courage	• Action orientated (action inquiry)	• Innovative

### Sustainability practice and partnership brokering

I observe many similarities between the two professions. The proposition that brokers are tomorrow’s leaders aligns strongly with Debra Meyerson’s view that a Tempered Radical offers a different model of everyday leadership that is inclusive, realistic and inspiring (Meyerson, 2003). The Partnership Brokers in Action course workbook (Tennyson & Mundy, 2017) states “brokers can be

seen as embodying a new style of leadership – sometimes characterised as ‘servant leadership’ – that is particularly suited to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is a definition of leadership that has shifted from meaning ‘figurehead’ to meaning ‘facilitator’.” The attributes of servant leadership align with attributes of leadership for sustainability:

- Capacity to create clarity in the midst of complexity and uncertainty;
- Skilled at convening and facilitating diverse groups;
- Willingness to take risks for the benefit of others/greater good;
- Ability to inspire others with their vision; and
- Modesty with regard to own achievements so that others are genuinely empowered.

Similarly, when referencing the five key skills of a partnership broker, four have strong overlap with the key skills of a sustainability practitioner. They are facilitation, negotiation, coaching and reviewing (in the form of action learning and self-reflection).

Furthermore, of the seven important attributes for good brokering (Tennyson & Mundy, 2017) four are common attributes with sustainability professionals: getting inside different perspectives; demonstrating clarity of purpose and focus; support rather than dominate in the way you behave; and be ready and willing to let go when the time is right. Finally, brokers are encouraged to reflect, openly share information and knowledge, coach and mentor, be courageous, innovative, determined and persistent. Again, all skills and attributes required of a successful sustainability practitioner.

There are many other parallels between the two professions:

- The skills of brokers and sustainability practitioners are not always widely valued;
- They offer new leadership models/styles;
- We often work alone or are few in number;
- It’s a balancing act for both roles – ‘betwixt and between’ or operating on a ‘fault line’ – bring similar challenges and opportunities; and
- Values and personal integrity are critical to both, yet our own agendas need to be kept in check.

### **Do other sustainability professionals broker as part of their work?**

In a survey I sent out to the sustainability community<sup>1</sup> in New Zealand (refer to appendix), I asked if partnership brokering either internally or externally was part of their role. Of the 34 responses I received, 15 said it was a key part of their role and 12 said they occasionally acted as brokers. That’s almost 80% of respondents actively brokering. In response to the question asking what type of brokering they engaged in, 23 practiced internal and external brokering, 6 mainly internal and 5 mainly external. (see table 3 below).

That is a significant percentage acting as brokers to create change and impact by creating alliances and collective action. The fact that so many respondents said they practiced both internal and external brokering indicates how important partnering is to achieving sustainability goals and outcomes.

A couple of quotes from survey respondents emphasises this point:

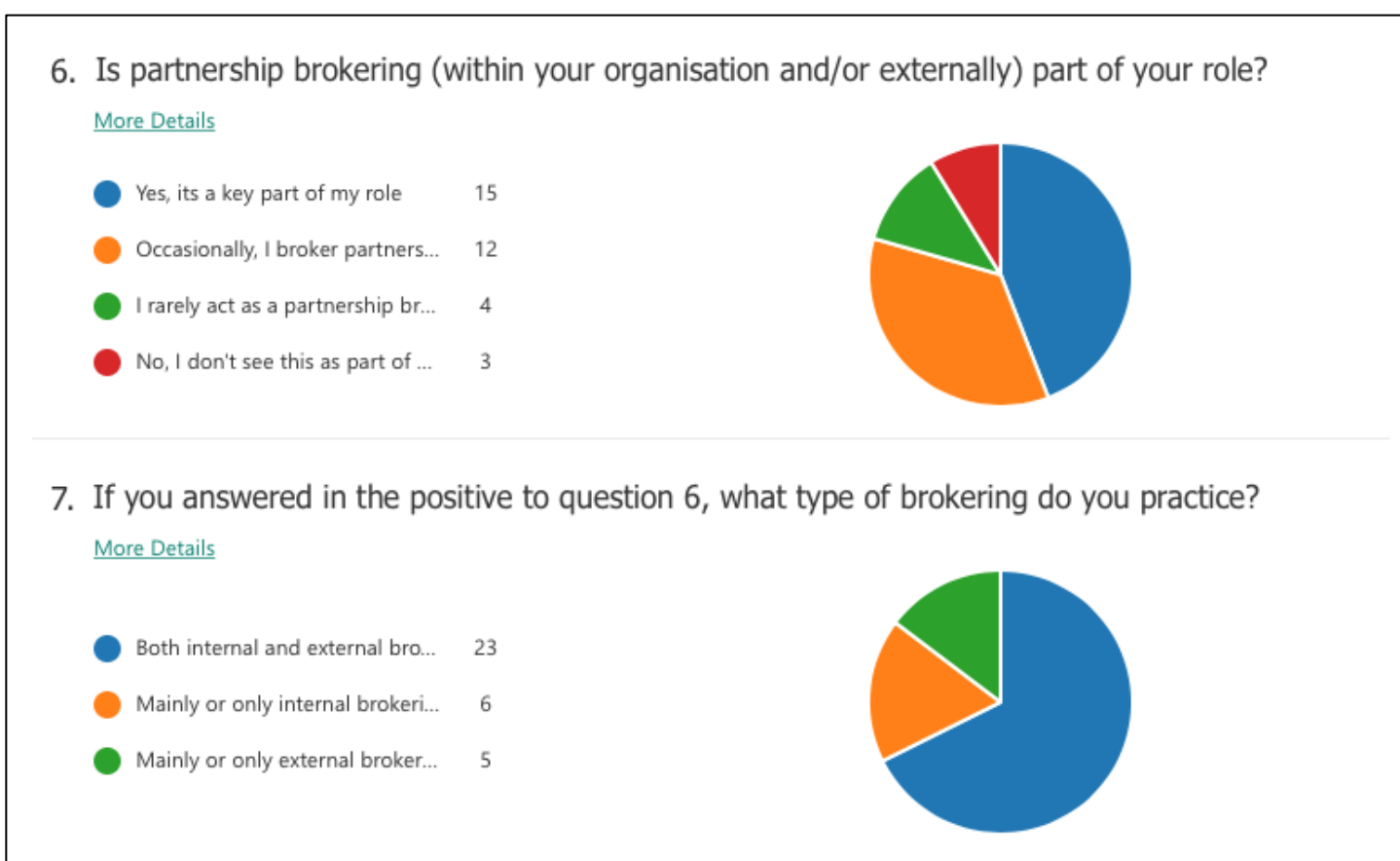
*“I expect the line between influencing and brokering is probably quite thin sometimes. And given so much of our time is spent facilitating this is important to recognize. Just thinking ....perhaps the scope of our reach just expands more into brokering as the scope of one’s role expands”*

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<sup>1</sup> This group included sustainability consultants and environmental specialist though the majority are sustainability professionals operating within an organisation.

*"I did the level 1 Partnership Brokering course quite a few years ago and I did think that much of it was very similar to what we did every day.*

**Table 3 – Responses to survey questions regarding respondents brokering practice**



## Conclusion

My experience during my mentored practice echoes the Tempered Radical strategies and the findings of the survey – I spend a significant amount of time brokering in my role. This was reflected strongly in my logs in particular the time spent on internal brokering to create alliances with different parts of the business and the necessity of doing this in order to build successful external partnerships. I am brokering in multiple directions at anyone time.

My conclusion is that a Sustainability practitioner is also a partnership broker, operating as an internal broker creating cross-organisational alliances and also reaching out externally to partner with other organisations. It is only through these alliances and partnerships that they can deliver sustainable change and impact. This means that there is a significant and growing cohort of unrecognised brokers out there, who could benefit from being aware of the PBA skills, tools and approaches. An opportunity exists

to include some form of a partnership brokering training into sustainability training programmes and to raise awareness through sustainability networks and conferences. Given the alignment of skills and attributes sustainability professionals are well positioned to become successful and skilled brokers, if they aren't already!

Further questions arise from this paper that I did not have the space to cover such as, can the Tempered Radical framing assist internal brokers to make greater sense of their role? It seems to me that this would be worth exploring in more detail with a group of internal brokers. I can see how an internal broker might identify with the language, identity and strategies of a Tempered Radical and how this might help them to further understand the nature of their role. The tools and strategies a Tempered Radical deploys may add value to the role of an internal broker.



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