

STORIES FROM PRACTICE

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Building on the PARTNERING PRINCIPLES

The partnering principles form the basis of practice for all partnership brokers. They are high level and open to interpretation – to be used as guides and inspiration. However, there is scope to add to the principles by associating them with pro-partnering behaviours. For each principle, this paper proposes behaviours and statements of intent, adding substance and specificity to help add meaning to the principles so that partners know what to do to reflect the principles in their actions. Also, a sixth principle – accountability – is proposed, to address unreliability concerns and build credibility among partners.

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Building on the partnering principles

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This paper looks at three ideas related to the partnering principles and their application. Fundamentally it seeks to build on—or at the very least propose the need for further research to build on—the partnering principles. In so doing it explores the art and science of partnership brokering and new tools to add to the partnering principles.

The ideas came about as a result of my experiences with a partnership to address a natural resource management challenge. The partners had received funding for a project and had just started to work together more intimately to deliver it. I found I needed additional resources to those that I had already managed to source to explain and bring to life the partnering principles to my partners who did not have a partnership brokering background.

The three ideas are summarised here and detailed in the paper for further consideration by the broader partnering community:

- 1) Behaviours that support the partnering principles
- 2) Statements of intent that support the partnering principles
- 3) Accountability – proposing a sixth principle

Behaviours that support the partnering principles

Five partnering principles have been identified by the Partnership Brokering Association (PBA) as fundamental to effective partnerships: diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit and courage (Tennyson & Mundy, 2019). Partnerships benefit from the partners agreeing to abide by or strive towards these principles.

There are useful PBA resources—including cartoons, descriptions, graphics and conceptual ideas—that partnership brokers can tap into to help explain and demonstrate the principles to new partners unfamiliar with the PBA framework. For example, see Baski, Russ, Luchy, Serafin, & Tennyson (2018).

While these are all very helpful and useful in different situations, I found that I needed some more words and phrases to better explain what these principles actually meant in terms of partners' behaviours and, more explicitly, examples of what they could be doing to embody the principles.

Mundy (2019) emphasises the need to find strategies to move from principles to practice and to adapt the principles to each partnership. Mundy also highlights the need for partners to consider what each principle means to them and how it can be supported in their behaviours.

Mnatsakanova (2020) explored the connection between certain types of behaviours and building trust in donor-recipient partnerships. Establishing trust is an anticipated outcome of the 'openness' partnering principle. Identifying specific behaviours that lead to trust and reflect openness in this way is a resource that can help partnership brokers better support partners to put into practice the principles. Mnatsakanova (2020) refers to 13 behaviours for inspiring trust, as identified by Covey (2018), and reflects on their implementation in partnering practice.

Of those 13 behaviours, five are character related, five are competence based, and three are a mixture of both. They include, for example, being honest and acknowledging being wrong (character), managing issues not people and delivering results (competence), and listening first for what matters to your counterpart (mixed).

Having a list of supporting behaviours linked to each principle would have helped me, in my recent experience introducing the principles to new partners, because it would have added another level of meaning and depth to the principles, and would have helped newcomers understand what they must do to demonstrate each principle in their own actions more explicitly. Or at least given them examples and inspiration from which to draw upon.

Moreover, instead of relying on my intuition about what I thought or believed might support the principles, having additional evidence that linked certain actions with the principles and related desired outcome, would add credibility to the practice of partnership brokering.

I also found that the list of behaviours discussed by Mnatsakanova, were not—at least to me—entirely intuitive inasmuch as being connected to building trust. For example, ‘listening first for what matters to your counterpart’, certainly feels intuitively right in regards to showing respect and demonstrating equity (other partnering principles), but it is not a behaviour I would have assumed would be important for building trust.

During the scoping phase of my natural resource management partnership I spent a lot of time making one-on-one phone calls to explore and better understand what potential partners wanted, to help identify who among us had common interests. This required a lot of listening. Without this step of understanding what mattered to potential partners, we would not have found the right mix of partners who had the interest, will and capacity to work with the other partners and on the resultant project. Aside from this practical purpose, I now understand it may have also helped to establish trust along the way.

In another example, at the commencement meeting of this partnership and project, a partnership brokering colleague, who I consulted, suggested that one of the ice-breaker activities could be focused around what each individual person within the partnership wanted to personally get out of the partnership. Hence, to start the meeting, I invited each partner to share what they were personally hoping to get out of the partnership. In so doing we listened to what mattered to the people in the room first. In some cases, there were clear parallels between partners’ personal aims and their organisation’s aims, but in other cases they were different. It was a simple and powerful activity that may not seem new or exciting, but aside from helping us all to get to know each other, it may also have helped us build trust.

While both these actions came about from a conscious effort to support the partners, they serendipitously may also have built trust. Imagine combining the strength of intentional practice with a list of evidence-based behaviours that have, to some extent and in certain circumstances, demonstrated that they support the principles. Partnership brokers could draw on the list, intentionally apply any they felt appropriate, then reflect on whether they were helpful or not in their specific situation and why or why not that was the case.

By no means would a list of supporting behaviours be expected to be limiting or reflect the entirety of all behaviours connected to each associated principle. On the contrary, such a list would be a starting point from which partnership brokers could build upon. A principle is a principle for the very reason it allows some scope for interpretation and exploration, and because too closely defining a principle may indeed limit its application and have unintended negative consequences.

Nevertheless, a launchpad of example behaviours that brokers can consider and present to their own partners—if only for discussion purposes—would be a helpful resource.

A list of supporting behaviours would also be a tool for the partners themselves to reflect on their own behaviours and as the basis for considering the behaviours of other partners, especially where inappropriate behaviours arise.

In Table 1, I have outlined some examples of behaviours that support the principles. Some of these are drawn from sources that are evidence-based and others are experiential and observational. They could all be tested and explored further to more rigorously consider what it actually takes to create the desired outcomes of ‘new value’, ‘build respect’, ‘establish trust’, ‘stronger commitments’ and ‘breakthrough results’—some of the key drivers behind the principles.

Having evidence-based knowledge that shows what actions and behaviours can support the partnering principles and the result they target, would be of significant benefit to the partnership brokering community.

Statements of intent that support the partnering principles

Partnering agreements can take many different forms to suit the partnership they serve such as a stand-alone Memorandum of Understanding or they can be incorporated into a contract (Tennyson & Mundy, 2018). Likewise, what is included in the partnering agreement and how it is presented can be flexible, with useful guides available (e.g. The Partnerships Resource Centre, 2014) to help partnership brokers determine what partners may like to consider in developing a partnering agreement and what information serves the healthy establishment and ongoing maintenance of a partnership.

The inclusion of guiding principles and values is a consideration, with Tennyson & Mundy (2018) stating that, to support any guiding principles, the partnering agreement should also include “specific descriptions of expected behaviours of each partner, not just sweeping statements” (page 79). This supports the previous section of this paper that explored behavioral statements linked to the principles.

A long list of behaviours may be intimidating and off-putting for those new to partnering. However, once identified, behaviours can also be aligned with a ‘doing’ statement or ‘statement of intent’ that defines what is expected of partners and how they can, or are expected to, embody the partnering principles. Such a statement of intent can be a refinement, or capturing, of the behaviours discussed and identified as important by the partners.

I found that using a ‘statement of intent’ in my natural resource management partnering agreement alongside the principles was a practical way to demonstrate commitment to an action as well as commitment to the principle without getting bogged down in the detail of behaviours. So, while a discussion around different behaviours with partners can stimulate an improved understanding about how partners want the partnership to operate and how to behave with each other—a statement of intent refines the behaviours into a simpler clarifying statement that nonetheless converts the principle into intended behaviours.

The statements of intent included in my natural resource management partnering agreement were as follows:

- We agree to listen to each other and value different perspectives (Diversity).
- We agree to acknowledge and appreciate all contributions (Equity).

- We agree to be honest and to share knowledge and insights (Openness).
- We agree to work on shared objectives and to work collaboratively (Mutual benefit).
- We agree to raise and face challenges (Courage).
- We agree to do what we say we will do (Accountability – see next section for more on ‘accountability’ as a principle).

While this may not be helpful to all partnering agreement or partners—it may be a useful option to draw upon for some partnering agreements. Feedback from my natural resource management partners on the partnering agreement indicated they were happy with the wording around the statements of intent.

Partnership brokers could obviously modify the statements to suit their own partnerships and the needs and wants expressed by their partners, but the concept of including a statement of interest may nonetheless be helpful and still reflects the need to be explicit in the partnering agreement about behaviours.

Each ‘statement of intent’ could also be used to check-in on people’s behaviour within the partnership. Are they doing the behaviour noted? Then this could be acknowledged and held up as an example of the principles in action. Or are they not doing the behaviour or demonstrating a contrary behaviour? This would provide tangible ground to start conversations about the appropriateness of a person’s behaviour. It could also be used in partnership health checks.

Accountability – proposing a sixth principle

Each of the five established partnering principles were developed by first recognising a common concern that people have when they start exploring or enter a new partnership. The principles aim, when acted upon, to help address the concern and add value to the partnership that can further support it to flourish (Tennyson & Mundy, 2018).

One concern that I have experienced that is not documented in the current principles relates to partner concern about the unreliability of other partners. Will they do their share? Are they going to do as they say they will do? Will they complete their tasks on time? And do they have the capacity to do that?

In the natural resources management partnership that I helped to start, I connected with a range of different subject experts, industry stakeholders and policy makers—none of whom I had met before nor had I been introduced to them and they had also not been recommended to me by someone I trusted. They had been identified through a broad stakeholder assessment and institutional review of capacity and responsibility. Once organised together in a partnership we represented a new mix of people who offered a unique opportunity to tackle a natural resource management issue. We submitted a project proposal and were successful in receiving funding to deliver the project, but none of us really knew each other and had never met in person before the project started.

For me, as both the internal partnership broker and project manager responsible for the contract to deliver the project, this presented a risk—and hence my concern about accountability arose. I felt a level of trust for the partners and we had built enough trust to get us to the starting point of the project, but we needed to go a step further to consolidate that trust, and to demonstrate our commitment and prove ourselves to each other.

This goes a step beyond trust and, in my view, outside the current scope of the existing principles and into the new territory of accountability.

While this may deviate somewhat into the project management component or the ‘what we do’ aspect of the partnership, it nonetheless exists as a concern and pertains also to accountability around ‘how’ partners agree to behave as part of the partnership. Framing it in another way it could be communicated as a principle that builds the bridge and intentionally crosses over from the ‘how’ we work together to the ‘what’ we do.

Blagescu & Young (2005) explore accountability in partnerships in three realms, “accountability of partners to their own stakeholders; accountability of partners to each other; and accountability of the partnership to its stakeholders”. Accountability of partners to each other is perhaps the one to focus on in relation to developing a new partnering principle around accountability.

Accountability could be reflected in partners’ behaviours such as: clarify expectations, only agree to actions that you have the time and capacity to complete, keep commitments, and deliver results to agreed standards.

Adding accountability as an optional sixth principle would help to define expectations by explicitly stating the expectations. For some it may seem obvious—but that could be said of any of the principles. Any one of the principles may seem obvious, while other principles may take more time and consideration to understand their value and how they can be brought to life. The point of the principles is to be explicit and so they can be used to clarify and confirm what is expected and to give partners the opportunity to consciously reflect and act on them.

Conclusion

In developing my ideas for this paper, I have only just started to understand the terrain around the application of the partnering principles in practice and what people before me have discovered in making the principles actionable, helping partners relate to the principles, and representing the principles in partnering agreements.

There is extensive knowledge documented in the partnership brokering community of practice and, importantly, there is much to be learnt from tapping into sources outside of the field of partnership brokering that could be used to add depth and meaning to the principles, and to substantiate the impact of behaviours. This paper just scratches the surface of what I believe might be possible regarding sourcing evidence-based knowledge that links behaviours to positive outcomes related to the partnering principles.

As with the general practice of partnership brokering, flexibility remains key. However, as a newcomer to the formal practice of partnership brokering being able to tap into pre-existing tools, summaries and clearly presented ideas has been immensely useful and I hope that the ideas presented here may be of similar assistance to others.

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Table 1: The five-plus-one partnering principles and proposed supporting behaviours and matching statements of intent

Proposed additions					
Partnering principle	Principle status	Common concern principle addresses	Result of acting on principle	Supporting behaviours	Statement of intent
Diversity	Established	Anxiety about difference	New value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure all partners have a seat at the table and are welcomed. • Listen to all partners. • Give all partners time and opportunity to express their perspectives. • Seek to understand and value all perspectives. 	We agree to listen to each other and value different perspectives.
Equity	Established	Power imbalance	Build respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify all contributions and resources (e.g. financial, knowledge/expertise, relationships). • Give all partners time and opportunity to contribute. • Seek to understand the value of all contributions. • Acknowledge all partners and their contributions. 	We agree to acknowledge and appreciate all contributions.
Openness	Established	Hidden agendas	Establish trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be honest and tell the truth. • Show loyalty to the partnership and other partners. • Share all information that affects the partnership. 	We agree to be honest and to share knowledge and insights.
Mutual benefit	Established	Competitiveness	Stronger commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute resources (e.g. financial, knowledge/expertise, relationships) to the partnership. • Collaborate, communicate and consult with partners. • Seek and respond to feedback. 	We agree to work on shared objectives and to work collaboratively.
Courage	Established	Uncertainty	Breakthrough results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise issues that may affect the partnership as soon as possible. • Contribute ideas and help solve problems. • Acknowledge wrong-doing and learn from mistakes. • Be trusting. 	We agree to raise and face challenges.
Accountability	Proposed	Unreliability	Build credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify expectations. • Only agree to actions that you have the time and capacity to complete. • Keep commitments. • Deliver results to agreed standards. 	We agree to do what we say we will do.

Source: Adapted from Tennyson & Mundy (2019) and Tennyson & Mundy (2018). Supporting behaviours list drawn from multiple sources and personal expression to make them relevant to the context of partnership brokering, including Covey (2018) in Mnatsakanova (2020) and Heath & Wensil (2019).

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