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## Maintaining the mojo of the internal partnership position

Are you an internal partnership broker wanting to sustain the dynamism and variety of your job? This paper gives you an analytical tool to categorize what you're doing, what mindset you're drawing on, the skills you're using and at what dosage to keep the mojo going. It also includes a practical suite of suggestions to reset these categories with your colleagues and supervisor to embed your role in making your organization a better partner with stronger partnerships.

**AUTHOR: LISA BURLEY**

Lisa has worked with research-based organizations across the global south and Northern Canada to strengthen the partnering function. She currently brokers partnerships among the international donor community for large research programs.

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# Maintaining the Mojo of the Internal Partnership Position

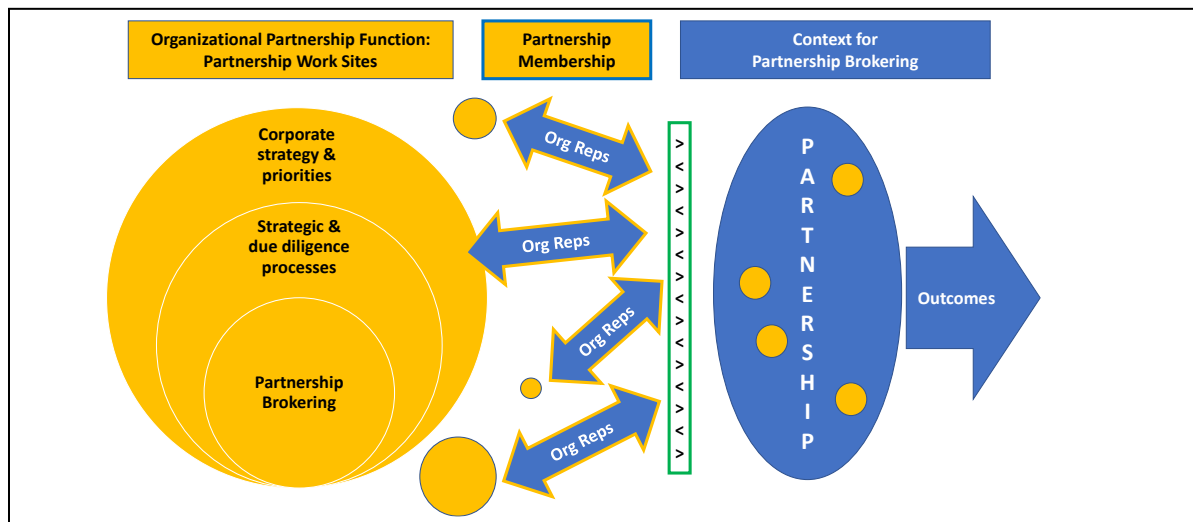
by Lisa Burley, originally submitted in Nov 2021, revised Feb 2022.

## 1 Introduction

The proliferation of Internal Partnership Positions in many organizations across all sectors promises stronger partnerships and associated outcomes. However, the push and pull of competing priorities, hierarchies, and the primacy of organizational interests create a full fashion line-up of hats the Internal Partnership Position must wear to be effective. These hats represent different orientations on how skills and competencies are used and delivered. This paper explores risks that can arise if these hats do not each get sufficient show-time, thereby compromising the original intended driver of making healthier and more impactful partnerships.

This paper looks at partnership brokering as a worksite nested among others within the organizational context. It draws on my experience as a trainer to target and strengthen organizational supports directly linked to better partnering where I worked with numerous research organizations and networks across the global South. It also draws on my experience in the Internal Partnership Position where I've worked in a range of models: a centralized unit; as part of a decentralized model embedded within a team; from a surfer to work with most promising partnership opportunities to being assigned to teams struggling with partnership brokering.

This paper explores the main worksites of the Internal Partnership Position and associated responsibilities and competencies to elucidate the risks at hand. The paper suggests a need for broadening training on partnership brokering by situating it among adjacent worksites within the organizational context with a practitioner focus on different skill and competency requirements. It includes a series of questions for those in the Internal Partnership Position to identify and manage the risk at hand. The mental map upon which the paper is based is represented below.



The right side of the flow chart depicts the partnership context in blue, consisting of its members in yellow circles and the impact the whole collaboration aspires to make. The narrow green rectangle with arrowheads in opposing directions represents a kind of two-way filter where contributions from members or organizational representatives flow in and learning from the partnership flows back to enrich members and their home organizations. Not every partnership member will take on the role of partnership broker, but for those that do AND occupy the Internal Partnership Position, they jetty from one universe to another, changing hats at great speed to tend to the demands from worksites within their organizations. These partnership worksites are depicted within the home organization on the far left and termed the organization's partnership function.

## **2 Worksites of the Internal Partnership Position**

Based on my experience, consultation with others, and drawing lightly on a model suggested by deMan and Lusivon (2014), I propose a model for an organization's partnership function consisting of three main worksites. In the lower centre is the partnership brokering worksite, which is perhaps the most known among the partnership brokering community and focuses on individual partnerships. The outer layer that envelopes everything is the organization's broader strategic plan where partnerships are referred to in the aggregate. The middle serves to socialize and embed partnership elements of the broader strategy throughout the organization and to connect it with individual partnerships through various strategic and due diligence processes.

### **2.1 Worksite: Partnership brokering**

In terms of context and based on my experience, representatives from different organizations, social movements and communities come together as partners and create their own micro-culture partly driven by the nature of the cause that unites them and by the dynamic of their relationship. In this space, the partnership broker role is critical to sustain and evolve these micro-culture drivers and usher the group through the stages of the partnership journey via coordination and facilitation. Throughout the lifecycle of the partnership, this role may migrate among partners and between representatives from the same organization so that the Internal Partnership Position may share the responsibility with other colleagues and/or partners. In this sense, the partnership space offers some fluidity to set out roles and responsibilities that may range from a perfect reflection of home hierarchies to something that is only roughly aligned. This can result in offering greater or lesser responsibilities than home-base.

Partnership brokering is rich in terms of the skills and competencies it requires; among them figure the following:

- Leadership is strong yet muted, often situational and service oriented, and done from behind rather than in front of the group to support synergy and sharing to ideally move forward cohesively on a foundation of equal footing among all partners.
- Requires high degrees of creativity, innovative and solution-driven team thinking, a glass-half-full attitude.
- Relies on emotionally intelligent group facilitation, listening to what is said and gestured, consistent observation of partner dynamics and comfort levels, striving to identify and reveal ambiguities in a way that maintains comfort levels and reach what works for the whole.

- Requires significant preparation for meetings, follow up, tracking progress, bringing in useful information, cheerleading efforts towards next steps, and bringing in right-sized lessons learned so they're easily grasped and digested in a learning-by-doing context.
- Incentives are driven by maintaining healthy relationships within the partnership as it strives for effectiveness.

## **2.2 Worksite: Corporate strategy and priorities**

Turning to the organizational space, strategic plans often prioritize partnering given its vital linkage to achieving intended outcomes. In this space, partnerships are often thought of in the aggregate and seen through the lens of strategic objectives.

I've had the opportunity to work with many organizations where I've found that some may, or may not, set their path forward with variable degrees of consultation and planning with other organizations and partners critical for the delivery of intended outcomes. Some may, or may not, consider the external environment, trends, and forecasts important for seeding all things necessary for delivery of intended outcomes. Similarly, a good look within to self-assess their own partnership implementation capacity may or may not accompany the strategic planning process. As a trainer, a good portion of the workshops I delivered focussed on planning a customized approach for participant organizations to explore these facets. An Internal Partnership Position, even if shared with other responsibilities, would be advocating for consultation, environmental scanning, and internal assessment to tighten the sails of the strategic plan.

In terms of strategy uptake across the organization, particularly in larger organizations, the Internal Partnership Position often plays a contributory role in various corporate committees to voice the partnership perspective when relevant. Basically, the Position strives for a whole-of-organization approach to partnership which implies efforts to coordinate and keep all those who need-to-know in-the-know as the strategy launches into and continues with implementation.

Timelines for implementation of corporate strategies are often driven by internal organizational pressures, rather than those of external partners. Upon implementation, the Internal Partnership Position would likely be tied up with merging internal and external timelines, advocating for partnership preparation and outreach in efforts to materialize the partnership aspirations of the broader strategy. Depending on the size and level of formality of an organization, this could involve elaborating partnership action plans and subsequent reporting against them on progress.

If the above were some of the responsibilities, what would be the skills and competencies required of the Internal Partnership Position to fulfill them and how do these compare to the brokering worksite?

- First off, the space for manoeuvring is bound within the organization's organogram that sets out clear hierarchies and job descriptions which contrasts to the more fluid brokering space. Promoting partnership issues when relevant in various forums requires being critically observant and articulate to situate issues to reach leadership; this does not involve, as it does in the brokering context, situational leadership.
- There are established decision making forums that need to be accessed and protocols (even if tacit) to package information. All of this is within a dynamic of competing priorities. So, where the broker role is central and critical in the partnership space, in the corporate context the

Internal Partnership Position must understand and respect the bigger picture, acquiesce to their spot on the agenda and be patient with the need to repeat messaging in various forums and receive feedback that may be prolonged.

- Like the brokering space, vigilance and preparation are required to capture and make use of windows of opportunity to bring forward partnering issues, cleverly piggy-backing or at least aligning with other related items high on the agenda.
- Also like the brokering space is the need for emotionally intelligent engagement based on consistent observation not only of participant dynamics but also power dynamics. In the brokering space great efforts are made to maintain an even playing field among partners; in the corporate space power differentials are part of the landscape and the Internal Partnership Position must gracefully skate up and down hierarchies that include working level staff to senior and executive management.
- The central thread throughout aggregate partnership action plans and progress reports is the suite of the organization's strategic objectives. This requires skill with maintaining a focus within defined parameters which at times contrasts with the brokering environment where flexible contours seek to reveal ambiguity.

### **2.3 Worksite: Strategic and due diligence processes**

This is the sandwiched worksite where overarching organizational strategy finds its way to individual partnerships. While partnerships are critical for outcome delivery, it is important to note they soak up an organization's human and financial resources. This is the worksite that gathers information used to assess the strategic value of a partnership, and to make resource decisions associated with it.

Here, the organization seeks to balance being prudent and intentional yet bold and opportunistic regarding partnership initiation and ongoing commitment. The effort of the Internal Partnership Position in this worksite is marked by providing insights and information necessary to place the fulcrum that balances all these *weightings*. And weightings differ according to many contextual factors.

This space, at the beginning of a partnership, is where the hat exchange takes on additional speed for the Internal Partnership Position. I have found that the strategic considerations around placing the fulcrum often rely on solely on internal sources without partner consultation. While the Position seeks to package information that indicates alignment with strategic objectives, there is the pull of bringing in the critical perspectives of partners. After all, the placement of the fulcrum sets out organizational drivers for engaging in the partnership, and these directly inform the level of commitment to it. This commitment level may or may not easily calibrate with other partnership members, resulting in greater or fewer resources, the deployment of either junior or senior staff to the partnership, regular or irregular meeting attendance, active or passive engagement. Further, organizational drivers can change over the lifetime of the partnership with associated changes in commitment, with either stabilizing or destabilizing effects to the partnership. All these would be / should be on the mind of the Internal Partnership Position.

In larger and more formal organizations these weightings are explored through a series of process documents, often templated, that answer questions such as:

- We've never worked with this organization before: what's it about, its history, governance, principles partners portrayal in the media, any risks?
- There could be a partnership opportunity: how is it strategic and related to existing work we're doing? Does it build upon existing work or open new doors? Are these doors the right ones?
- The partnership is coming into focus: what are the objectives and intended outcomes, how does it respond to our strategic interests, do partner relationships reflect our partnership principles, what are the expected resources, any risks?
- If there is an exchange of resources: what terms will mediate the flow of resources over the duration of the partnership?
- The partnership formalizes: what kind of agreement will work best, what provisions are required, negotiation with the partner might require a lot of internal consultation within each partner organization to ensure the ability to deliver on all the terms of the Agreement
- The partnership agreement is signed: who are signatories, do they need a run down on the negotiation process to understand concessions made from both sides, have risks and opportunities changed over the process of developing the partnership?

Templates are often seen as simple partnership process documents, and while they are this, they also serve as tangible reflections of the value and meaning ascribed to partnerships by the organization's top leadership. These values are drummed in across an organization through the repeated use of templates where framing answers to the same lines of inquiry are done again and again (Ethirja et al 2005; Kale and Singh 2007). Templates provide clear parameters on how to conceive every individual partnership, however diverse all of them may be, and in so doing download the tone-from-the-top on the value of partnership to the organization.

What are the skills and competencies required of the Internal Partnership Position in this worksite and how do they compare to the other two worksites?

The main skills here are strong business writing, the ability to package ideas and perhaps most essential, to be able to analyze different partnerships through the same filters and avoid ambiguities. A firm grasp of the conceptual anchoring behind the templates is critical, derived from the strategic objectives of the organization or in other words the organization's self-interest. This is the same anchor that grounds the elaboration of partnership action plans, reporting against them, and the clever connective tissue created by the Internal Partnership Position to situate partnership issues alongside others on the agenda and/or within corporate forums and discussions.

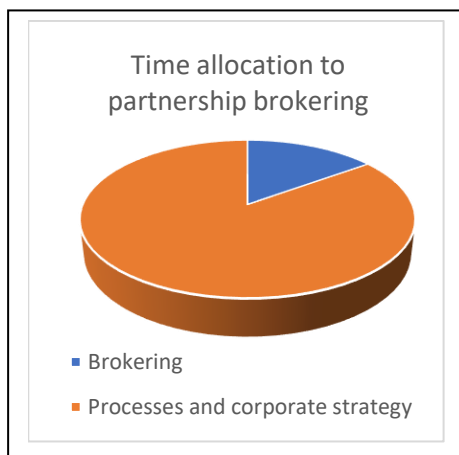
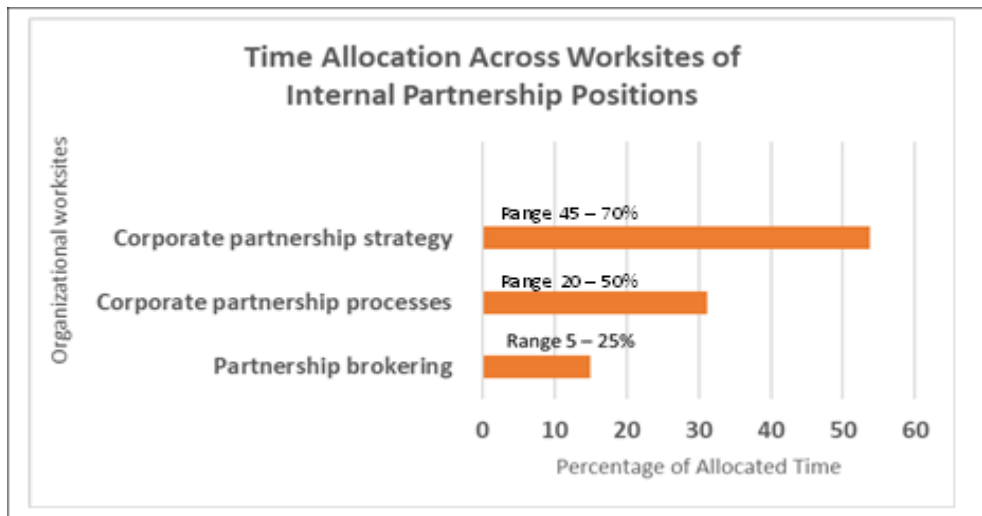
This contrasts to the information needs in the brokering context, which are not always clear, but need to be discerned through vigilant observation. The central question often being, what are the needs of this partnership right now? Do they need information or guidance and what is the best way to package and convey the message? Is it a document, or is it a song, perhaps a sculpture or a metaphoric story to, for example, crack open awareness among partners and reroute momentum headed for a stalemate to a place of co-creation and continuity? In this context ambiguities and assumptions are sought out so they can be made explicit and in so doing further promote the forward trajectory and partner relationships.

On the surface, skills may be similar and perhaps complementary, however the conceptual frameworks that drive their use, their users, and their utility show differences. There is promising potential for the Internal Partnership Position to balance the win-win for its home organization and the partnerships in

which it engages. Are time and effort to these two “worlds”, the organization and its partnerships, drawn upon with sufficient frequency so that conceptual frameworks remain fresh and evolve?

### 3 Deployment of Internal Partnership Position across worksites

What is the right dosage of each worksite for the Internal Partnership Position to reach the sweet spot where they contribute to partnerships and enable their organization to maximize opportunities and minimize risks? The following table is a rough estimate of time allocated among the worksites in a large organization that prioritizes partnering through a decentralized model. To boil things down findings indicated that for every hour spent on brokering, two were spent on process work and an additional three hours were spent on corporate strategy. About 15% of the Internal Partnership Position time was for brokering, and this drew from a range where the lowest time allocation was as 5%.



The side diagram brings greater visualization of the time allocated to brokering in this specific organization. This anecdotal situation gives pause to reflect on the extent to which corporate strategy and partnership processes can dominate conceptual framing. And we know that this framing focusses on the self-interest of the organization, not on brokering real partnerships.

Continuing with the anecdote, this very low time allocation to brokering raises the risk expressed by the axiom, “if you don’t use it, you lose it.” While this example is not representative, it does give pause to consider the likelihood of a threshold for

the time allocation to brokering under which the ability to switch conceptual gears slackens. So, while there maybe some time dedicated to brokering, its quality may come into question.

In sum, the time allocation to all three worksites can serve as an indicator for the extent to which the Internal Partnership Position is enabled to contribute to making partnerships stronger. By the same

logic, would this threshold also have a bearing on the ability for the Position to capture and bring back learning to strengthen the partnering function of home base?

#### **4 Filter of contribution-out / learning-in**

I refer to the mental map diagram earlier in the paper; the long narrow green rectangle containing arrow heads in opposing directions and in this section, the focus is on learning-in. Claessens 2021 indicates that “... *transformation in working in an Alliance implies that the participating organisations irreversibly change (improve) their individual ways of working as a consequence of the collaboration: they improve policies, practices and systems based on joint learning, internal and external advocacy.*” In her focus specifically on donor agencies, Sirisena 2020 calls on these organizations to build internal partnering capacity that embraces a broad scope from staff competencies to flexible terms and conditions in contracts and procurement. The point here is that there are big expectations and great opportunities for organizations to learn from their partnerships. The ability to learn and/or their absorptive capacity to do so however appear to be a critical factor.

As early as 2003, research conclusions from Draulans, deMan and Volberda put forward that it is the ability of the organization to manage partnerships that is the most important success factor for the partnerships in which they engage. Ethirja (2005) explains that the partnership function and its associated capabilities are essentially part of an organization’s assets with the potential to strengthen organizational performance.

The proliferation of the Internal Partnership Position appears to be a step in the right direction, however, based on my experience, a journey lies ahead to foster the full potential of the Position. This is a strange phenomenon; why is this so? Pearl 2019 writes about her experience in the private sector where she elucidates the differences between partnership broker and project manager skills and recommends to “*move fluidly between the two roles ... while at the same time increase awareness and perceived value of the internal brokering role to achieve the greatest outcome for the partnership.*” Pearl endorses the central argument of this paper, that without a strong brokering role, partnerships are not attaining full outcomes. She also points out that the greatest hurdle for strengthening the brokering role is a lack of awareness and perceived value of it.

#### **5 Conclusion and suggestions for the Internal Partnership Position**

Partnership principles and discourse could mean that an organization sees partnership as a tool to achieve strategic objectives, or as a necessity to be impactful. The subfield of strategy evaluation suggests that it is at the level of praxis where the organization can most clearly see its own reflection (Patrizi 2011). And from this point of introspection, begin to make internal adjustments to align this reflection to what the organization would like to see. Strengthening contributions to partnerships and its absorptive capacity to learn from them can lead to better organizational performance with partnership and stronger outcomes. The practical efforts of the Internal Partnership Position and their time allocation among worksites offer great potential for reaching these stronger outcomes.

I believe that partnership broker training has a critical niche and serves as an anchor for any discussions at the organizational level. I would suggest that this training consider having participants profile their

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organization's worksites including the conceptual orientations of each one, compare them to identify balances and tensions, and identify if and how the organization learns from its experiences to strengthen the overall partnership function.

To my colleagues who fully or partially occupy the Internal Partnership Position, below are a few suggestions to move forward into being the change you'd like to see in your organization. The main outcomes sought through these several suggestions are three-fold: strive for balance between organizational self-interest and contribution to partnerships; identify and strengthen the absorptive capacity of your organization to learn from its partnerships; and strengthen awareness of the added-value of partnership brokering and organizational learning from it.

#### Working with your supervisor / management

- Establish worksites with your supervisor / management. The model I used to breakdown worksites is indicative and making your own to fit your context would be wise. I suggest writing a good description of the activities in each worksite, the conceptual orientation it requires, and what each worksite aims to contribute to, and learn from partnerships. If everyone is being honest, there will likely be several blank spaces – which is great, these set out the breadcrumbs for the journey forward.
- Have your supervisor / manager indicate their ideal allocation of your time (and that of others) across the worksites. Compare their ideal to your own tracking results with a view to discussing opportunities and risks and setting benchmarks journey forward.
- Document your specific contributions to strengthening partnerships, and to strengthening your home organization's partnering function. This provides concrete examples of what these two rather abstract things mean and will be helpful for management and others in similar positions.

#### Self awareness of the conceptual orientation

- Be cognizant that while in the brokering role, your conceptual orientation is in fact brokering. Focus on the areas of tension, however minute, between what's good for the partnership and what's good for your home organization.
- Ensure you are prepared for all exchanges, and that your internal team is equally prepared. Internal preparation meetings can be very helpful to set the partnership tone, establish expectations for the meeting and what should be avoided. Ensure meeting follow up is clear with next steps and timelines.

#### Assess internal process requirements

- A simple SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis can be very helpful
- What principles and objectives does the suite seem to reflect? How does this square with corporate strategy, organizational learning, and the partnership ethos?
- Is partner engagement and feedback part of these processes? If not, why not?
- Turning now to each individual process, what was the original purpose? Is it being met? Why or why not? Are there redundancies among processes? What could change? Which conditions enable and bottleneck closure? What could be some alternatives?

- About how long does each process take to complete? What is the general time frame for securing review or approval? Propose alternatives?
- How does each process directly contribute to the partnership? What modifications could strengthen its contribution to the partnership?
- How does each process and the suite in general contribute to organizational partnership learning? How could it contribute based on modifications? If there was learning, how would partnership practice change?
- While you can probably answer all these quickly, consult others, create a group of critical friends to build awareness of strengths, weaknesses and potential that could be reached through modification.

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