

Parry Agius

Level 2 accreditation:  
Final Paper

# Introduction

---

Am I a partnership broker and if I am, how would I describe myself?

If I was working as a tradesman on a factory floor, I would never have had the wide range of experiences my current job has given me over the past 15 years. My work is very unlike a tradesman who works in isolation or as part of a project team controlled by a project manager or by commercial realism.

I consider myself a partnership broker because of the years of experience in working with individuals, people, groups and organizations in achieving informal agreements. My work has taught me how to work with people from different backgrounds, with leaders and coal face workers in a cross cultural setting and in very complex, politically intensive environments. I have developed skills to manage situations, manage people and problem-solve. I was able to build on my communication and conflict resolution skills and inspire people to find solutions through cooperation, coordination, strategic thinking and partnerships.

My role as a partnership broker has set me apart from other specialized skilled based services such as social workers, geographers and lawyers whose training is based on their discipline. I faced personal challenges that moved me out of my own comfort zones into the unknown. I had to build my skills based on real life experiences. On many occasions I had to manage on instinct, work unsupervised and my own devices. There were also numerous times where I had multiple roles because I was the driver or left to drive the program to completion with continuity being the key to success.

# Roles and skills

---

In my early years as a community worker, my work often took the form of “verbal agreements”. By helping to establish these agreements I introduced vision, direction, action plans, feedback processes and resources into a program framework. In the later years of my career when I held different roles, agreements became more formal; for example funding agreements and program agreements. Today they are called partnership agreements.

In my mature years, my work has been felt internationally and across national, regional, state and local levels, including both urban and remote communities. I am passionate, have drive and enthusiasm and enjoy working with people in the roles of service delivery and as a receiver of services. In my work I have worn many hats, including: strategist, diplomat, coordinator, manager, facilitator, organizer, negotiator, mediator, coach, steward, innovator and ambassador.

At school I was a leader and an organizer and throughout my career I deliberately placed myself in positions to assist people and organisations. Until recently, I did not realise the roles I undertook were part of or connected to that of a partnership broker. I saw these roles in isolation to each other. At other times the roles were running parallel with each other and or in a combination depending on the circumstances and issues affecting progress. Today I am able to understand the various roles I played, keeping in mind the vision/objective and the desired outcomes I was hoping to achieve. My work has not always been easy and I have had my fair share of frustrations, rejections, delays. My aim has always been to remain focused and positive in such an environment. If I became negative, people around me would do the same leading to negative messages and actions that might jeopardize our program.

I sit on national and state government advisory boards, on industry sector advisory boards for the sake of progressing my agenda and working with other people’s agendas in a very complex and political mine field because democracy doesn’t always favour the minority when people’s self interest agendas are concerned. I have learnt to deal with frustrations and remain positive in the face of rejection. As an example, my way of getting into wearing the shoes of the person opposite me at the table is to buy in the experts who have a high profile within their own industry sectors who help me to understand the sector, help create relationships, and connect me to the powers that be of those industry sectors. With their help I am able to turn my language (my industry, my meanings, my work background) into theirs so that communication and relationship building has the best opportunity for success.

The common denominators across all my roles are working with people and community, leaders and governance, internal and external conflicts, personal interest, politics and ego.

In the developing stages of a partnership, I experienced difficulty in trying to bring people who had the resources to engage with those who did not. At times this infuriated me as I wanted them to get past their “own” needs. PBAS has made me realise that all parties to a partnership bring something and want something in return.

I employ a wide range of skills when I engage with people who are trying to work in partnership. These include:

- Visual and verbal communication skills
- The ability to work with interpreters
- Changing power imbalances in people’s perceptions by introducing ideas and options/pathways
- The ability to translate complex matters into laymen’s terms,
- Creating big picture and forward thinking
- Developing future planning, vision and mission
- Immense patience and great listening skills
- Scoping and project mapping

As a partnership broker I also see my role as being the person that can create and influence change. I instil hope in people; create the desire for people to take the lead and assist people to engage through learning, mentoring and coaching. I connect with people and communities, both large and small. I have the ability to respond at the level people communicate. I have developed my understanding and empathy, listening skills and observing people’s interactions. I can evaluate and review people’s and organisation’s progress in their “living” situations (lifestyles) without being attached or lose objectivity. My view of objectivity is to demonstrate my independence, ensure that I can develop well defined arguments without unsubstantiated evidence. I have seen on many occasions where open bias has deflected potential supporters away.

An example of how I work is in the area of native title. Native title is a new legal concept (1994) to Australian law and initially the application of it was black and white. In the early years many tribal groups and people on behalf of tribal groups lodged

native title claims, resulting in numerous overlapping claims. I have been able to organise a consistent approach through working partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders involved in native title claims. I have the ability to create relationships in a hostile and intense divergent environment by engaging with key leaders of tribal groups and peak representative body's leaders by showing the big picture and what they could get from being involved in a structured framework. This approach has led to Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal people looking at less evasive and more non-adversarial approaches to reaching settlement.

From my perspective, Aboriginal people gained enormously from being directly engaged as part of the partnerships. They developed skills and experiences that are transferable to many circumstances and situations.

## Confirmation of PBAS

---

At first, PBAS Level 1 confused me as I came to PBAS from an external set perspective, a set approach as I was trying to box PBAS; partnerships, partnerships skills, element of partnerships against my own tools. As the program advanced I was able to make sense of PBAS and learned that what I doing on the ground was PBAS without knowing it. PBAS showed that I was doing partnership building my entire career. When I look at myself as individual broker or as a broker on behalf of my organisation, PBAS confirmed that we were developing partnerships in a cross-cultural setting. In particular, we were working together to deliver outcomes framed by complex land law and intense national policy debates.

Much of the work was with people who had leasehold title over crown land, didn't understand the concept of native title and were by default in a defensive frame of mind. They disagreed with the assertions that tribal groups were saying about their connection to land, including their tribal identity and their rights and interests. PBAS help me to realise that my role included building 'internal partnerships' with the Board of directors and staff of my organisation. This is only possible because they believe in and accept my leadership, my vision, and my approach. On this basis I was able to create partnership between myself (CEO), the Board and my staff to partner with the external players. The PBAS approach has shown that my skills and the roles are transferable and can be used where people and organisations come together to create solutions to problems through partnerships. There are limits to the PBAS model. One example would be with a native title claim over Australian Department of Defence land because they want exclusivity and don't want other land users to have rights over the land they use.

PBAS was able to frame for me the difference between "real" partnerships, where people are interested in finding joint solutions, through joint processes and joint plans, aspired by joint visions. This is different from those partnerships that are driven by one party having power and the other party being subordinate. Such situations exist within Australia and examples were highlighted by other fellow PBAS Cohorts during the residential programme earlier this year. These imbalances of power leave no choice for the less powerful to be anything but subordinate in the relationship. For example the federal government provides funds to community governed bodies (NGOs) and in return the NGO through an "agreement" must produce outcomes. The government promotes this as positive partnerships. This is not real partnership because the government is dictating the terms, the timetable, and conditions of the relationship. Generally the Aboriginal leadership approach to these power imbalances is to use a range of tools from democratic and political lobbying action. More recently, a cooperative approach has developed on the basis of mutual respect and mutual benefits.

The PBAS partnership cycling process is part of my practice, but was not labelled as 'partnership' in the beginning of my career. We considered ourselves as facilitators, motivators, and advocates of joint and common aspirations. We were following a community framework model of group work. However, when the State government came to us suggesting the need to negotiate native title rather than litigate in the Federal Court and the High Court of Australia, I immediately said this could be done. My confidence was based on an intimate knowledge of the tribal groups, and my experience of the tribal leadership as to how they think and what would be needed for the groups to make informed decisions. What were missing were information, a vision and a plan and a framework. Instead of dealing with each of the groups individually, I brought the tribal groups together as a large group representing the state/province. The process required time (14 months), financial resources (\$2.5m), 6 meetings (total of 30 days) and 30 tribal nation groups participation (450 reps). There were also an additional 20 consulting experts to assist me. My task was to lead, engage and influence the tribal groups to make an informed decision to negotiate native title through agreement processes based on a state-wide framework. Carrying out my task involved both personal and professional levels, including overseeing the facilitation of workshops and meetings. As a broker I had to present information in layman's terms and so that representatives could understand and following logical arguments.

Throughout the process I had to walk a very fine line because of my personal and professional relationships with the tribal

groups. I could not show favouritism, mate-ships in any public form, as these actions would be misinterpreted. I had to maintain my professional role as CEO of a leadership organisation for native title that wanted partnerships, because many wanted their day in court regardless of the cost and potential for negative determination by the court. The process of creating partnerships between the 30 tribal groups was open and transparent, so that the groups were able to see and be part of the brokering process. A number of brokering tools were used, such as progress reports, feedback, record of meeting outcomes (reflection), think tank workshops (imagination & insight), being able to see and hear from experts & consultants (tools & frameworks, competencies, and skills). Throughout the 14 months we used debriefings to reflect on our observations and learning.

Equity and transparency and mutual trust were vital in keeping participants actively engaged in the process as conspiracy, mistrust and jealousy was everywhere in the beginning. I was able to reduce this by establishing processes for regular feedback, sharing records of meetings, following up on agreed actions, and reporting back to the groups about progress. In addition we also brought in guest speakers to re-enforce statements, as well as separating out facts from myths.

## **PRA / SWG Partnership**

---

I also acted in the role as partnership broker between the Resources Industry, Professional Resources Association (PRA) (not real name) and its Strategic Working Group (not real name).

I saw the Resources PRA SWG as a formidable lobbying group because its membership is connected to powerful very active mining companies that are of international and national standing and are very successful corporations for their shareholders. The PRA wanted to seek the support of the "united" Aboriginal nations across Australia for resources exploration and mining because it made good "commercial" business sense to do so. Otherwise it's a very expensive legislative process for land access and its combative space. To do this some PRA members approached Aboriginal people with national and province identities, hence the establishment of the Strategic Working Group (SWG).

For my part, I understand clearly why I was asked to be on the PRA SWG forum because of my State (province) practical engagement in the issues and attitude on resources and because of my relationship with the local Aboriginal nations and the governments. For example, the government approved of three resources mines but have legislation in place that refuses to allow for a "license application" for resources repository. The local Aboriginal communities, supported by the conservation movement, refuse mines and a repository on their lands. There are mixed views in wider community because people want a strong economy and people want a strong healthy state in both land and people. Incidentally, this would be a great multi-sector partnership project. Knowing that I work in cross cultural setting, cross sector environments, cross geographical communities, the pressure is often constant and intense; the air is sensitive and unbalanced. I have to demonstrate to people that I am interested in them, show that I am keen to hear their issues, hear their stories, hear their success and at the same time understand how they think, work and do things. Developing and demonstrating trusting and respectful relationships and that your word is your word I was able walk into the lion's den and able to move about with integrity and decorum even if there is no alignment to my views

## **PBAS Scoping, Identifying and Building Phase**

---

The most critical and outstanding aspect that stood out in the scoping, identifying, building phase of the PRA partnership development was the “gap” (wide as the Mississippi and Amazon Rivers) between the different expectations and perceptions of what the PRA wanted and what the newly formed Aboriginal leadership wanted. I saw no evidence of a partnership or a framework agreement present that could ensure maximum effectiveness. There was no-one (broker) independently managing the partnerships and or suitable operating systems and processes in place that could move the partnership with capacity. There was no broker that could adopt a range of behaviours and or under take on different of types of activities on behalf of PRA & SWG in the formation and development of the PRA and the SWG. The PRA and SWG leaderships came together based on an individual and personal friendships and key connections. Initially I went into the process with limited information that came from telephone briefings (expectations) from the Aboriginal leaders who have been involved for a couple of months. I needed as much information as possible to determine how I fitted in the overall scheme. But more importantly, I needed to know how I could contribute to building an important partnership between the PRA and SWG leaderships and move them from an introductory or exploratory phase to project design, development and implementation.

Prior to my first meeting of the PRA, I went with the flow and participated in an internal subcommittee meeting as a participant with 3 of the existing Aboriginal leaders. I spent a couple of hours doing some “scoping” ground work, on what we wanted from the process and from the relationship. From my point of view these two hours set the scene for me and gave me an overview of where we were going and why. As the newest appointee, I listen to what the members wanted and how they wanted to get there and what they hope they would achieve. At the same time I was analyzing how this fitted in with the South Australian context. I did not see my views were different to what they expressed and wanted, it was as if we all had a common bond and a common interest to ensure the PRA would do the right thing when working with the Aboriginal community. I even took over the white board to scribe the discussion points showing to the Aboriginal leaders that I have something to offer, that I am able to turn concepts and ideas into pictorial views and that I was able to critique their views into a structured framework. I was able to inspire and facilitate interaction. We wanted PRA to succeed and our communities are also beneficiaries of the PRA success. We identified stakeholders and examined how they could assist the process. We never thought that PRA would not be able to deliver, but assumed they could do so. From our own view we examined the initial blockages within PRA, as well as the external blockages.

The workshop process helped me understand where the Aboriginal leadership wanted to go and how to get there. I also noted and observed the strengths and weakness of each of the leaders and how the three leaders worked together as a team (given their backgrounds). It is here I saw a need for an internal “broker”. One of activities I took on behalf of the Aboriginal leadership was facilitating group discussions and encouraged participation to develop specific outcomes for what they hope to achieve by being part of PRA. The group also wanted to test the ability and sincerity of PRA to deliver. As a result the Aboriginal leaders, including me, developed a plan complete with vision and goals, objectives and strategies, along with a rough timetable in accordance with the PBAS partnering cycle which incidentally reinforced my learning over the years in dealing with potential partner relationships. We also agreed on who would present our perspective of the partnership; even though it was not called a partnership meeting.

I personally felt very confident of the result, and I was comfortable working with my own people who I have not worked with before and who are people of power and influence in their own right. I think in some circumstances it's better to let the other guy be the leader and in other situations I am able to take the lead, because I see the need to do so. I looked forward to presenting the plan to the PRA Board and left the workshop with some vigour and enthusiasm hoping for a proactive working relationship.

At my initial meeting of the PRA, I walked into the room with the other professional Aboriginal leaders, hiding (an internal “confidence” battle and as a tactic when to be humble) behind their high profile. I also observed the PRA members at the table, knowing they are CEOs, Managing Directors, and General Manager with enormous reputations and expertise as leaders, in making money, and managing successful companies. The presentation of the Aboriginal leader's plan to the PRA Board was overwhelming because I don't think the PRA was expecting such a comprehensive plan in such a very short time and no direction or model to fall back onto. As we exchanged information I got the impression from the positive nods, discussions and the questions that the PRA as an Association could deliver on some 15% of the Aboriginal leaders plan, but not on other parts. This is where in the newly formed relationship the “gap” surfaced. It was at this stage the relationship could have tilted and self implode on its self. However the personal key friendships kept the doors open.

What was evident was that the Aboriginal leadership priorities were different to the PRA, as were the PRA's expectations. For example, the Aboriginal leaders were able to secure a position on the Board of the PRA. This was a great result, a great

compromise and it showed some willingness of the PRA to deliver. However Aboriginal employment and business (supply chain) opportunities (contracts) for Aboriginal people could not be achieved by the PRA; it was up to PRA member companies on the ground to engage locally. PRA could not interfere with the policies of member companies and their commercial operations. I along with the Aboriginal leaders walked away from the meeting feeling very positive and at the same time feeling internally deflated and somewhat critical of PRA.

We went for a coffee and had a debriefing session; to assess the situation and re-evaluate the importance of why were involved and show some tolerance to PRA. For me this session was effective as we were able to get out frustrations out in the open and examined what was successful and what that meant for the vision, the reasons why were part of the PRA. This coffee session reaffirmed why it's important to stay in the process and created the ability to re-examine the priorities and resources issue thoroughly at future meetings. However the personal relationships between PRA leaders and the Aboriginal leaders were somewhat some strained.

Over the next month or so I took on an additional role of being the go between the Chief Executive Officer of the PRA and a couple of the members of the Aboriginal leadership. I viewed and made comments on documents and engaged in open conversations with them so as to keep progressing matters and maintain relationships. Over time relationships are positive. If I examine why this result occurred, I would state the Aboriginal leadership at its workshop created a one sided plan. They did not have sufficient collective information and views from the PRA or a draft PRA strategic action plan that would have informed the development a "cooperative" draft strategic plan. The missing information included PRA goals, their aspirations, a copy of their constitution and their thinking about effective working relationships. The most critical piece of missing information was the extent of how the PRA resources would be used towards the process. The resources point is important because PRA relies on membership fees from its member companies, while the Aboriginal Leaders are CEO's funded by governments. I think the Aboriginal leadership had a perception the resources industry is very resourceful and influential and could move mountains, which government has failed to do.

If I were to repeat this exercise with a different "representative" industry body and a different Aboriginal leadership I would remove as many assumptions as possible (my own included), and rely on fact wherever practical. I see a set of questions that would internally guide me:

- Have I done adequate research to be informed?
- Do I know the resource capacity of the industry body and key stakeholders?
- Will anticipated aspirations outstrip capacity?
- How to deal with time constraints by the players, given they were CEOs of significant corporations

In concluding, the horses have bolted and financial resources are limited. The teaching and learning of PBAS was neither on the radar nor the need for a broker. However the partnership now has strong footing because of key personal relationships by individuals that have made the partnership successful and unity is ever so present. As a member of the SWG I have a role to ensure there is open, active and sustainable communications relationships and where practical import the PBAS partnering cycle into the current process because the PRA and the SWG are about to move into developing projects and programs to engage with supporters of resources and supporters for refusing resources anywhere near their community. I believe that I have employed PBAS teaching into the PRA SWG by undertaking different types of activities and behaviours, but I am fully aware that if internal operating processes (sub committees), time and resources are not in place the key relationship between the individuals will find it hard to maintain the current vision and drive. My role as a "non approved and defacto" broker is to ensure the SWG is on track with its vision and mission and within a framework agreed upon by the PRA and the SWG.

On a personal level, managing emotions and feelings is easy for me to do as I work by a particular saying "I don't own the problem", something I reminded myself of through the training workshops. As a result I am able to remove my personal attachments, emotions and feelings from the situation, even when I care about the outcome. This allowed me to concentrate on managing and keeping a professional eye on both the bigger picture, having an overview of tasks, mechanisms, timetables and progress and processes. This isn't to say the process was always easy for me. I used confidants to assist me to debrief, to express my frustrations, my anger, and to work with me on my highs and lows all behind close door. There are times when it's strategically effective to allow emotions to be publicly expressed but I normally follow the lead of the people in the partnership that I work with. For example, in a lobbying environment, lobbyists (representing partners) engage in private with key stakeholders to advocate their perspective on pertinent and relevant issues close to their heart.

From a PBAS perspective I use these same skills to encourage people into a partnership framework or to think about developing a partnership framework. These are also the necessary skills to ensure a partnership remain proactive and

effective. As a partnership broker, I have the ability to remain calm and objective, hold a poker face, and advocate positions clearly and concisely. I get great pleasure being part of the motivating tools people use to master their own futures for example, working with the leadership of tribal groups to create a whole of tribal vision and direction for themselves. Personally, I feed off the joyful celebrations people have when they achieve for themselves both small and significant milestones. These successes are even more satisfying because in much of my work anger, despair and frustrations are ever present.

In conclusion, my capacity to engage and employ a range of tools and skills is backed up by experience in helping people to engage, maintain engagement, and build a working partnership. PBAS has helped to clarify my particular strengths, weakness and threats and opportunities in creating partnerships. My current view of the role of partnership broker is someone who can encourage proactive engagement around and within a framework, and build and maintain relationships that promote continuous and positive progress. PBAS has assisted me to acknowledge my capacity, and re-enforced that I am on the right track. I no longer worry that I am a loose cannon, but know that I'm working to assist people in need.