



WEAVING THREADS:

PRINCIPLES, THEMES AND APPROACHES THAT UNDERPIN ALL OUR WORK

Those of us who work as Associates of the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) believe that partnering at its best is invariably transformational because it necessitates a move away from doing business as usual. Achieving real transformation requires a willingness to critique, to reflect and to envision new possibilities.

It also requires courage.

As a professional association, we recognize that people (and the entities in which they work) are informed, influenced and contained by their specific characteristics and traditions. They will only challenge and change (themselves and their systems) when they are ready and willing to do so. Our approach, therefore, is not to push those we work with into forcing change, but to prepare them to be ready to make changes as and when the time is right.

We aim to encourage all those we train, mentor and support to better understand their own professional strengths and weaknesses. We openly share our own experiences and give those we work with encouragement to become more reflective practitioners. We believe reflective practice is an essential pre-condition for knowing when one is ready to do things differently.

Over time, since our partnership brokering work started in 2003, some underlying principles, themes and approaches have emerged that we seek to embed in the evolving profession of partnership brokering. This short paper¹ aims to capture the threads that we attempt to weave throughout our work.²

¹ A kind of 'PBA Associates Manifesto'

² The illustration is a weaving by Eta Ingham-Lawrie whose work was hanging in the room at Trigonos where we held the original meeting and that inspired the title of this paper (www.trigonos.org)- it seemed fitting to include it.



THE WAY WE WORK AS PBA ASSOCIATES

Balancing ‘process’ and ‘project’

All our work places a strong emphasis on the partnering process so our content tends to be about process issues just as much as it is about project management. Our flagship 4-day Partnership Brokers Training is based on the notion that partnership brokers need to spend as much time in their work with partners on the partnering process as on achieving project goals if they are to build robust and effective collaboration. We aspire to being equally comfortable with both elements but see our niche as being our focus on promoting effective partnering processes as a basis for more productive partnerships.

Co-working

Our commitment to ‘co-working’ is critical – both because it allows for diversity / complementary in our approach and because it enables us to model collaboration in practice. For these reasons, we always prefer to work in pairs and teams. This often manifests as an (external) PBA Associate co-working with an identified (internal) partnership broker from a lead organization or a partnership – building on their deeper knowledge of the situation that will lead to the co-creation of a better intervention. Working this way can also build greater sustainability of any approaches being proposed and help to strengthen individual and organizational capacities.

Learning as an on-going collaboration

Adhering as best we can to some core partnering principles³, our approach is to share knowledge and expertise by enabling genuine dialogue / conversations with all those with whom we work. We aim to be open/explicit about our own frames of reference and transparent about the conceptual frameworks that we use – warmly welcoming critical comment and being genuinely willing to change our views and concepts. Differences of viewpoint are, we believe, central to the partnering process and not a hindrance or diversion. Our materials⁴ are introduced with energy and confidence, not because we know best but rather as a jumping off point for interrogating assumptions and creating new knowledge.

Growing our practice

We try our best to practice what we preach by a deep commitment to reflection, self-observation and critical analysis. We regularly ask ourselves ‘*What is needed now?*’⁵ (rather than ‘*What should I do next?*’). We know that our work, when undertaken robustly, can be exhausting as it requires us to strive continuously to meet the needs of those we work with, to be open to challenge and to be willing to change direction when necessary.

We also believe that it is important to give and receive feedback (between ourselves as Associates and with those we train and work with) as well as taking the time to reflect and de-brief after each activity is completed. We believe we should habitually question ourselves by asking, for example: *Is my work as a PBA Associate still ‘alive’? What happened that was unexpected? Which sessions could have achieved more? What should I take account of going forwards? What can I learn from what happened?*

³ Diversity, equity, transparency, mutual benefit and courage

⁴ Regularly reviewed at our Community of Practice meetings

⁵ This is a key question that we encourage all partnership brokers to ask themselves

Continuous learning

As PBA Associates, we commit to building our capacity as individual practitioners and in our various Communities of Practice by: exchanging learning and experience with our Associate colleagues; reading relevant literature to ensure our knowledge remains current; sharing our experiences as openly as we can; building our capacity to co-work effectively and seeking opportunities for peer review / feedback.



MAXIMISING LEARNING & IMPACT

Creating an environment where those we work with can challenge themselves

PBA Associates seek to create a 'safe space' in which everyone can learn effectively – which, we believe, involves taking some level of risk. Encouraging those we work with to be brave enough to step out of their comfort zone, establishing working guidelines and being willing to take risks ourselves in the partnership brokering role, are all important. This can involve exploring why those we work with may need a comfort zone to be able to operate at all.

Valuing diversity

As PBA Associates we are committed to recognizing and respecting individual differences and to building on the diverse, and addressing the sometimes divergent, values of those with whom we work. Such diversity can be in terms of gender, culture, sector, experiences, worldviews and knowledge and we encourage those we work with to explore diversity wherever possible. This can sometimes be challenging, but since we believe that 'breaking through' is fundamental to effective/innovative partnering and partnership brokering, it is critically important that our interventions offer opportunities for exploring and building on diversity.

Suitable venues

We consider carefully the choice of the venue in which we work. Is it removed from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day work? Is there good natural light? Is it in or near a natural environment that will encourage reflection? Is there sufficient room for participants to move about, work in smaller groups and mingle informally during breaks? If the venue falls short of these things (often the choice of venue is outside our control and / or the result of particularly challenging operational conditions) what can we do to compensate for things that are missing and make it work optimally?



PROMOTING CORE PARTNERSHIP BROKERING SKILLS

Reflective Practice

Just as we foster our own reflective practice, we aim to embed it in our work with others. By 'reflective practice', we mean taking the time to take a step back, think, analyse, question, critique and inform future work through a deeper insight into, and understanding of, experience. All our work aims to encourage both structured and unstructured reflective practice. Associates are all familiar with *The Imagined Conversation*⁶ and the *Reflective Practice Guidelines*⁷ that provide additional insight into this topic.

⁶ Paper by Ros Tennyson from *Talking the Walk: A Communication Tool Book for Partnership Practitioners*

Observation & Sensing

We encourage those we work with to use their senses to understand situations: what they see, what they sense (as well as what they don't see and don't sense) as these are critical to understanding the nuances of a situation. Taking the temperature of a room (or of an organisation) and developing empathy (the ability to experience things from another's perspective) are built on good observational skills, which should be evidence-based and backed up by specifics, rather than being based on potentially incorrect assumptions and interpretations.

Active listening

Linked to observational and sensing skills is the ability to really listen, to genuinely hear what someone is saying (both the spoken and the unspoken) and to accurately understand what is being said – checking things out, where necessary. This always involves concentrating on the speaker and their points, and not becoming distracted by thinking about our own responses and reactions to what is being said. It may also involve rephrasing what has been said to clarify and help convey to others the speaker's meaning and intent.

Giving and receiving feedback

We regard it as critical that as PBA Associates we are open to giving and receiving feedback. We believe this is most effective when feedback is focused on a specific situation and/or behavior, as well as the impact of that behavior.⁸ Giving and receiving feedback requires thoughtfulness and good intent. PBA Associates aim to help those we work with to understand that feedback can be a genuine gift and we seek to find the best circumstances in which to give and receive feedback ranging from formal to informal scenarios. Cultural considerations are important here, and we aim to be sensitive to this without using cultural differences as an excuse for avoiding feedback.

Keeping a focus on transformational change

PBA Associates take on the commitment to push beyond 'business as usual' so that partnerships are more efficient, innovative, sustainable, fit for purpose and far-reaching in their impact. This requires us to be courageous and to foster courage in others often in the face of uncertainty. It also requires us to hold the space for new insights, options and opportunities to emerge. This can also include providing a safe enough space for conflict to surface that may lead to difficult conversations.

Challenging and changing

Whilst we as PBA Associates are willing to accept challenges to our own and PBA's frames of reference, we also take responsibility for challenging the assumptions, mindsets and patterns/frameworks/ habits of those we work with. The intention is to help others to open themselves up to new knowledge and different ways of thinking / behaving. We commit to being prepared to challenge assumptions and frameworks, and to delve beyond the surface of what we are presented with. This may mean that some of our sessions / interventions are 'uncomfortable' but our assumption is that if everything is easy, we are probably having very little impact!

Principled Partnership Brokering Practice

PBA and all its Associates commit to working in alignment with 10 Partnership Brokering Good Practice Principles – available from the PBA website.⁹

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⁷ In the Partnership Brokers Training Workbook (2nd edition)

⁸ We use the SBI Feedback model developed by the Centre for Creative Leadership

⁹ www.partnershipbrokers.org

¹⁰ Julie Mundy is PBA's Director: Training and Marcia Dwonczyk is the Chair of the PBA Associates Community of Practice