

Brokering Better Partnerships

Building a sustainable and inclusive world

The evidence is building for partnering as the leading delivery mechanism for social, economic, cultural, environmental, crisis management and conflict prevention programmes across the globe. The UN Sustainable Development Goals has even dedicated one of the 17 global goals to partnership. It is clear that single entity interventions, being too narrow in their approach and too restricted in their reach, are inadequate to tackle the complexity of many of the issues at hand. It is also the case that our globalised operating context is more unpredictable, complex and inter-connected than in the past, requiring more layered, adaptive and systemic responses.

Partnering is an approach best suited to complexity. If the issues we face were easy to address, partnerships would not be necessary. But it isn't (easy) and therefore they are (necessary).

Partnerships, at their best, offer a model of working that draws on the unique and diverse competencies and expertise of different communities, organisations and sectors. They do so in ways that are intentionally designed to be inclusive, mutually beneficial and that are dedicated to building sustainable solutions.

It is painful to imagine the kind of world that awaits future generations should we fail to collaborate effectively.

Partnerships and other collaborative models

There is no 'one size fits all' partnership. Arguably there are as many types of partnering arrangement as there are partnerships, and there is much to be said for every group of partners co-creating the model of partnership that best suits their purpose, capacity and context rather than adopting a set approach. It is also important to recognise that there is an increasing use of other terms for collaboration including: consortia; alliances; multi-stakeholder forums; platforms and networks. Even where those involved prefer not to use the term 'partnership', the characteristics and ways of working are often very similar to those associated with a partnership.

The collective experience of the Partnership Brokers Association suggests that the principles and processes explored below is equally applicable to other forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration and can yield benefits for anyone seeking to make a lasting and transformational impact.

Why 'process' matters

Signing an agreement to partner is relatively straightforward. However, partnering effectively is significantly more challenging than those who sign up to a partnership often realise. A partnership, according to a dictionary definition, is an on going working relationship in which risks and benefits are shared. It is true that these features may be what distinguish a partnership from other forms of collaboration, but for partnerships to achieve the kinds of goals we all hope for, this definition is too simplistic.

In our work over 15+ years, we have found the following to be a helpful guide to the kinds of attributes that are at the heart of effective partnerships:

Box 1: Ten key attributes for effective partnering

1. A **clear understanding** between the partners of the word 'partnership'
2. Agreement to a **shared vision and common purpose**
3. Account and allowance being made for **individual partners' interests**
4. The **co-creation** of design, decisions and solutions
5. Commitment to **sharing risks as well as benefits**
6. Every partner **contributes resources** (whether tangible or intangible)
7. Partners **share decision-making and leadership** responsibilities
8. Partners commit to **mutual / horizontal accountability**
9. Partners work together to develop a **principled approach** to their partnering endeavours
10. Attention is paid to the **partnering process** as well as the partnership's projects

Partnerships need more than good intentions and agreements to be successful. They require 'de-layering' for partners to understand and share their potential contributions and concerns. They also need consistent and persistent effort to build strong and productive relationships. When built on solid foundations, they can break through differences and build on diversity and that enable partners to challenge prevailing or unhelpful approaches when necessary and grow imaginative, fit for purpose, impactful solutions.

These things can only be achieved if the partners pay attention to how they work not just what they do, and they are prepared to invest quality time and effort in the partnering process itself.



Challenging and changing

Every partnership positions itself somewhere on a spectrum from the more 'transactional' to the more 'collaborative', and many partnerships move along this spectrum (in either direction) over time. At the same time, there is another spectrum at play that reflects the degree to which any partnership is inextricably embedded in business as usual, or whether it has been created intentionally to challenge prevailing norms. Navigating the boundary between compliance (collusion?) and disruption (anarchy?) is a critical issue that partners face in their day-to-day work.

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Managing the partnering process

Partnering is always a journey with a number of options and routes to a desired destination. We see the partnership process manager (whom we term the partnership 'broker') as an accomplished and active go-between who helps partners to navigate their partnering journey by assisting them in co-creating a map, planning the most appropriate route, choosing their mode(s) of transport and knowing when a change of direction is necessary.

The term partnership broker is increasingly used across the globe, but it can be problematic in certain contexts because of certain negative connotations associated with the word 'broker'. Alternative terms (apart from 'process manager') include: change leader, partnership intermediary, bridge-builder, animator, alliance builder, partnership facilitator, collaboration manager and others.

There are many circumstances where someone takes on the role of a partnership broker informally. Individuals can take on the role because they are driven by a strong sense of what is needed for the partnership to work and step up to take on typical brokering tasks out of experience or, often, gut instinct.

One doesn't have to be called a partnership broker to be one but there is (in our view) a strong case for defining and acknowledging the role.

Skills and attributes

Those operating in partnership brokering roles, whether formally or informally, need to have (or access from others) a range of professional skills and personal attributes to be successful.

Box 2: Professional Skills and personal attributes needed by those in partnership brokering roles:

- **Understanding** of the specific opportunities and challenges of partnering as a paradigm
- **Confidence** in holding space for difficult conversations and breakthrough ideas to emerge
- **Empathy** for different perspectives, values and constraints
- **Good judgment** about what is / is not possible
- **Facilitation & negotiation** skills that are suitably tailored for a partnership model
- **Communication** – specifically the ability to synthesise and communicate complex information
- **Coaching** and a strong commitment to building the capacity of partners to partner well
- **Balancing** imagination / vision for the partnership with the discipline / rigour needed to deliver it

The skilled management of partnership/collaboration processes is essential if we are to create collaborative approaches that will lead to an inclusive and sustainable world – would be partners and those promoting or funding partnerships would be wise to recognise this and invest in skills-building whenever and wherever possible.



Internal Partnership Brokers

Individuals brokering partnerships brokering when working from within one of the partner organisations can be best described as internal partnership brokers. Effectively, they wear two hats: operating in the name of their own organisation whilst also taking on a larger remit on behalf of the partnership.

The advantage of a partnership having the support of an internal broker is that this person is likely to be there for the long haul and to be familiar with the aspirations of the partners and the operating context. They are on hand to help shape the partnership, communicate its shared purpose and steer its activities. An internal broker is most likely to bring about incremental changes within the existing system.

External Partnership Brokers

There is, however, a growing number of external partnership brokers. These are independent specialists with a combination of professional skill sets and attributes (see Box 2 above) who can be called in for specific partnership support purposes. They are most commonly used on an episodic basis, though some may have a light touch, long-term relationship with a specific partnership.

A partnership is most likely to access the services of an independent external broker to drive the partnering process (scoping and building, agreement making, conducting a review or writing a case study) or when there are particular challenges to address (for example, relationship breakdown, troubleshooting or new ideas generation). They are valued for their wide-ranging experience, independence and wider perspective. An external broker is most likely to offer new ways of approaching partnership and promote more transformational practices.

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Common Partnering Challenges

Partnering is not always easy, but then a partnership that is too easy may not be achieving very much. Complexity or challenges, rather than being ignored or avoided, can be great drivers to bring about change in our behaviour and habitual ways of operating. In any event, acknowledging challenges and confronting complexity is the first step towards addressing them. There are a number of common partnering challenges that are frequently reported by partnership brokers and identified in partnership reviews and case studies – the skill is to transform these challenges into new opportunities for ‘doing different’.

Box 3: Ten common partnering challenges

1. **Lack of partnering experience**, skills and confidence
2. **Governance contradictions** – horizontal alongside vertical accountabilities
3. **The wrong paperwork** – documentation that is not fit for partnering purpose
4. **Not counting what counts** – too much focus on money and not enough on other types of contribution
5. **Poor communication** – especially when partnering ‘long-distance’
6. **Too many comings and goings** – turnover of key people and loss of ‘partnership memory’
7. **Loss of momentum**
8. **Reverting too quickly to ‘business as usual’** rather than challenging and changing the norms
9. **An ever-changing operating context** – over which the partnership has little control
10. **The ever-ticking clock** – whether in the form of lack of time to devote to key priorities or in the speed of change and urgency of need

Critical success factors

Partners with high ambitions for their partnerships push for a range of wider partnering impacts. These are usually of both a quantitative and a qualitative nature and include project deliverables. Such partnerships are successful because they succeed in working across boundaries (sectoral, geographic and cultural), distributing leadership roles between the partners, negotiating with external funders so that arrangements support rather than undermine the partnership and, wherever possible, working together to co-create ideas and new initiatives.

Many critical success factors are quite tangible in character, but there is one that is somewhat elusive and yet probably more important; a partnering mind-set. A partnering mind-set enables an individual partner to: bring a level of self-awareness; be willing to explore the unknown; work hard to turn ‘failures’ into learning and genuinely engage with each others’ interests and not just their own.



Building new approaches to effective partnering
for an inclusive and sustainable world