

STORIES FROM PRACTICE

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My personal brokering journey

My brokering journey spans a number of careers in a number of sectors and helps to pull together what looks like a disparate set of skills and competencies into a cohesive whole. I never anticipated that I could use all the experience I've accumulated in the various roles and sectors I've worked in to make sense in focusing on my partnership brokering work. In this paper I highlight the learning I bring from all my past work and personal development experiences and how I can apply it to my work as a partnership broker.

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I was Head of Learning and Development at the Humanitarian Leadership Academy while I was doing my accreditation. At that time, the idea that you could more proactively address the formation and maintenance of partnerships was just beginning to seep through the culture in the sector. Soon after I left to become an independent learning specialist and accredited partnership broker and I have been doing brokering and learning work ever since, mostly in the humanitarian sector. I am fascinated by the cross-over between recent developments in learning and partnership working and how rich the disciplines are for exploration and creativity.

BASED IN: Australia

ACCREDITED: 2013

EDITION: 10

THEME: Skills and competencies

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L2 Partnership Brokering

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Introduction

This paper explores my partnership brokering journey which began many years ago, well before my understanding of what this particular role was all about; my attendance at the L1 Partnership Brokering Course helped me to fit all the pieces of my varied professional and personal development journey spanning different sectors and disciplines into a cohesive whole for the first time in my life.

Communication Skills

Seven years in the radio broadcasting industry gave me foundational skills to communicate with a broad cross-section of society, however, the need to develop better listening skills was soon evident to me if I was to be good in this business and the need to adapt my communication and interviewing style for different audiences.

I experienced that listening is generally an underrated and under practiced skill and by concentrating on truly listening in any setting and being in a position to reflect what I have heard will often help to build trust more quickly than any other intervention. This is a skill that has proved challenging and elusive if I am not focussed -it has to be continuously applied if it is to be of any use and I have to remind myself that I am only ever as good a listener as the focus I put into it at any moment in time.

Producing on air debates and roundtable discussions allowed me to develop a sense of neutrality and impartiality when dealing with people on opposing sides of issues. This skill was, however, given a reality check during the L1 course when we played a variety of roles representing a consortia and where opposing views all came to the table at once. These roles helped me to recognise my own internal stereotyping and the need to continually filter these; just because I'm able to mediate and see two sides of an issue does not mean I don't personally engage in stereotyping and pigeon-holing.

Interpersonal and Psychological Skills

My most intensive and painful experience in transformational learning and inter-personal psychology was through a three-year self-directed course on counselling skills, group work and facilitation but it was the best crash course in group dynamics. We were effectively forced to face up to our own issues around race, diversity and culture. Today I recognise that this is a complex area that needs careful awareness and attention if the potential richness that diversity and culture bring is to be maximised - otherwise it is just gold waiting to be mined and nothing more.

A year of personal therapy as part of the training helped me to identify my personal issues and how they might impact in inter-personal or group settings; this has proved invaluable in recognising the need to continually monitor myself and recognise when I am letting my personal issues get in the way- on reflection, it is only valuable when I have enough insight to identify what my personal issues are and when they're getting in the way.

The two psychological principles or tools I picked up that have proved their worth in every discipline I have worked in have been:

1- *Projection*: the very idea that a person projects what he/she is feeling onto me can give me a clue to people's inner states and therefore help me to understand, be less reactive and manage that relationship better. For example, if someone makes me feel belittled or bullied in some way it is often a reflection of how small they are feeling themselves and they are often projecting that feeling onto me in order to distance themselves from that feeling.

2- *Framing and re-framing*: the tool of being able to put thoughts and ideas into a framework to help make sense of it and the use of re-framing to process these thoughts and ideas from a different lens can have transformative potential. For example, helping a group understand the different stages of group formation could save members from feeling despair when things suddenly take a turn for the worst. I can use this tool to re-frame language, behaviour and concepts to offer possible new ways of looking at the same things.

Teaching, training and facilitating

Two years of facilitating and teaching on two separate counselling courses prepared me to deal with some of the most challenging people I would have to work with. I developed skills and awareness to attempt at separating people's own issues from the group's issues and this is just as applicable in my broker work. Like listening, this is a skill I have found needs continual monitoring if I am to be effective at separating my own from a group's issues - this is again not a static skill but one that has to be continually focussed on and developed.

When I understand better where someone is coming from and I'm sufficiently present and keyed in, I am better able to determine an appropriate intervention and potentially able to steer it into a safer space, particularly if someone is challenging authority or acting out; this is often easier said than done and I need to take care not to over analyse or make assumptions that I know where someone's response comes from.

Mediation and Conflict Resolution Skills

As a broker I've built on earlier learnt skills of mediation and conflict resolution and through PBA training, recognised that careful nuancing can be done to distinguish between convergence of ideas and divergence; this can provide a different lens on the idea of diversity and finding ways of celebrating and making diversity work for a partnership rather than settling for commonality. Getting myself to a place where I'm not frightened of conflict between others will allow me to support a group that needs to express anger and discord and tease out the potential learning rather than feel the need to dampen down emotions at the first sign of trouble. In saying that, while I may not feel frightened of conflict that doesn't involve me, I've been less effective on working with dissent and any passive aggression fielded in my direction, if for example someone violently disagrees with me. I've recently started to recognise the hidden worth of dissent and how it often holds clues to a breakthrough or how it can be harnessed to bring clarity to hidden issues.

This area of work has opened a whole area of learning for me around dissent and how to work with it to enhance the knowledge it brings to a project or group. Transforming the biggest dissenters or vocal critics into critical friends or even project champions has been a new found approach that has yielded new possibilities in different settings.

Management and Education Skills (Strategic and People)

Over the years, I occupied a range of roles working in five different sectors and these have aided in steeping myself in a new work culture each time with its own language and ways of operating; this has been hugely helpful as a broker to understand the contextual differences in different professions and sectors as well as their institutional constraints. It has necessitated my occupying a humbled position as a new person on the block each time I join a new sector and allowing others to teach and educate me.

My Masters in Training and Continuing Education exposed me to learning around organisational development, reflective learning, change management, appreciative enquiry, systems thinking and other related areas; this highlighted the plethora of paradoxical processes and approaches that can be mined for different uses but has also pointed me to the dangers and traps of using fancy sounding new models without a good enough grounding on how they should be used. Exposure to new thinking has given opportunity to practice new facilitation styles and methodologies in safe settings and be inspired by writers such as Peter Senge, Donald Schon, Paolo Freire, Carol Dweck, and more recent contemporary theories of learning, but in recognition that none of them offer complete solutions - they need to be carefully weaved into my own work.

Active Reflection

Due to my energetic and activist personality, the quiet reflective part of myself has often been neglected; the recent journaling process for my L2 has uncovered many ways in which I have been able to actively reflect on my practice and formulate new approaches particularly out of necessity when finding my usual vocal and assertive approaches have been rendered ineffective in certain settings. Without this, my interventions would have remained quite linear and my approaches at times quite blunt.

Adding the word 'active' to reflection brings the transformation I feel is possible from reflection; otherwise reflection remains just that, a reflection without so much as an insight or a pointer to a new way of seeing or doing. I have been extremely taken with how the journaling process has altered how I selected my approaches and it has given me new insights on subtle influencing strategies through actions rather than words. It has also given me more space to explore the grey areas in between polarised positions which often hold a wealth of interesting data and possibilities. For example, the issue of 'to build' or 'not to build' a collaborative group to manage the consultation for the Academy offered much more thought in the grey areas than in the polarised opinions that some people held.

Looking back on my richest learning experiences, they have invariably been during therapeutic and management supervision, 360 feedbacks, and debriefs, all of which point to reflective activities, but most importantly to reflections which have had a profound impact on me and ultimately changed how I approached things.

Only through my journaling process have I been able to reflect on the ways I did manage to influence collaboration on my project. I fear without this process I would have overlooked the number of subtle ways I was able to input and this would have also perhaps been a lost opportunity to spot a major growth area for me as a broker. As a result, it has motivated to explore active ways in which I

can incorporate reflective activities into all of my work and go back to meditation and Chi-gong for ways of centring myself.

Brokering to Date

My experiences of brokering in the humanitarian sector have led me to learn layers upon layers of new things in each of three new partnerships, but not without first having learnt some hard-earned lessons about proper planning, preparation, true collaboration, decision making and the importance of relationship. The cost of cutting corners on any of these has been to fall short on meeting project objectives and witnessing a massive toll on the relationships involved. If there is to be an advantage to work in partnership over working on one's own, then the investments have to be made in order for the partnership to bear fruit - I have learnt this the hard way.

My most recent work with the Academy has highlighted the complexity and variety of issues each partnership brings and how each situation necessitates thinking through a unique approach. There are very few off-the-shelf approaches I can use without first tailoring it carefully for the group I want to use it with as each partnership is unique and will require different approaches. This holds the spectre of failure over every new approach I utilise as there are no guarantees that what worked for one will work for the other; this helps to keep me alert and never complacent about what I do.

Summary

The culmination of the skills I've gained in differing disciplines have, I feel, given me a wide reference base to draw from. As I look over the disparate but not disconnected things I've done in my life, I feel it complements the role of partnership broker as I can turn to numerous sources and experiences to support me to deal with each new encounter I find myself in. By being as open and un-defensive as possible I can continue to learn from and make more connections with what I already know. Insights I've gleaned particularly over the past year are not so much on the accumulation of knowledge and new sources and information but how to more expertly apply the things I've already learnt in new and different settings; each new skill I develop holds with it the danger of complacency and thinking I've mastered it more than I have. Weighing up when it's ok to experiment with a new approach and when a tried and tested approach is the only course of action is something I need to continually ask myself.

Another most important re-occurring insight is the need to be and stay focussed. The complexity and numbers of dynamics going on in any group at any given time necessitates utmost presence and attention to people and the subtext going on. My personal state will be of utmost importance the moment I come into contact with people so as to ensure an approach which is untainted from my personal issues and agendas. My aim is to ultimately support a process which enhances collaboration and meaningful engagement and raises the bar for a new kind of collaborative working.