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Brokering development partnerships in head-field office contexts

What role can partnership brokering play in navigating head-field office dynamics to foster sustainable development partnerships? This question is explored in the context of the author's professional experience working as an internal partnership broker for multilateral, multi-national and regional organisations in the Pacific, where the challenges of distance, isolation and smallness necessitate head-field office arrangements that can efficiently address economies of scale. The paper explores the plurality of roles for an internal partnership broker in such contexts and unpacks concepts of power, alignment and consensus in head-field office dynamics. It explores how the central principles of effective partnership brokering can be applied.

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Introduction

Since the concept of partnership brokering was first coined in 2000ⁱ, it has emerged as a distinct professional field and is increasingly recognized as a practical, effective approach in fostering sustainable development partnerships. International development practice has also evolved to consider how “doing development differently” to overcome persistent challenges or unsustainable practice considers the role of partnerships and partnership brokeringⁱⁱ. The designation of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal 17 as ‘the partnership goal’ in 2015, further cements this recognition through a global partnership for sustainable developmentⁱⁱⁱ. Partnership brokering is an effective strategy and tool for engaging with partners and multiple stakeholders and maximizing sustainable development outcomes.

In the Pacific island region, the term ‘partnership’ has traditionally been applied to all kinds of development relationships, from those of client-provider, peer-peer, connector, collaborator, or simply, an invited participant to a workshop. With the introduction of “partnerships for development” into Pacific development lexicon in 2008/09 by the largest aid donor in the Pacific, the Government of Australia, a more nuanced understanding of ‘partnerships’ was required in conversations about development. By association, a more nuanced understanding of partner intermediaries, or brokers, was also needed.

In the Pacific, partnership brokering was initially applied in 2009/10 by the Australian-funded Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) as a development strategy. PLP recognized partnership brokering as tool for establishing new relationships, from which leadership coalitions and networks could flourish. This work also leveraged the rising wave of attention to the relationship between partnerships, coalitions and networks focused on developmental change, and sought to better understand the particular conditions that enable relationships and partnerships to champion change^{iv}. PLP contextualized global models to the Pacific to understand how diverse partnership characteristics can be leveraged to pursue shared goals. One example includes the Pacific Green Growth Coalition which is an active network of leaders committed to promoting sustainable development in the Pacific region through blue and green economies. Through the use of a uniquely Pacific approach to brokering - a *talanoa* process and methodology of providing a safe space for open and frank discussion, without time restrictions – the GGC brought together persons of influence, utilized the individual and united strengths of members as well as built support for collective action^v. While not explicitly described as a partnership brokering approach, the *talanoa* or *storian*^{vi} process is now popularly applied in a range of Pacific island countries.

Despite this, however, there continues to be limited Pacific dialogue about the nature of partnership building and in particular, the power dynamics underlying development partnerships. The Pacific’s development partnerships fall into a range of categories: donor-recipient, government-civil society, multilateral-regional-local agencies (common to entities like the UN, World Bank), political-bureaucratic actors, and head-field offices (in the case of multilateral agencies, regionalized aid programs, INGOs), amongst others. This paper focuses on the latter category and asks the question: what role can partnership brokering play in navigating head-field office dynamics to foster sustainable development partnerships?

This topic is of particular relevance to the Pacific island region’s operational context, where the challenges of distance, isolation and smallness^{vii} necessitate head-field office arrangements that use economies of scale to efficiently address complex development needs. It also has wider application to large multi-national organisations, whether in the private or public/NGO sectors, that engage with a wide range of stakeholders in varying field contexts, across multiple time zones and where cookie-

cutter organizational approaches may not be effective in partnering processes. In exploring this question, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the nature of partnering in development contexts. In particular, I am interested in unpacking the concepts of power, alignment and consensus in head-field office dynamics and how the central principles of effective partnership brokering can be applied.

This paper will firstly provide a general understanding of partnership brokers, and internal partner brokers in particular. It will provide a generalised profile of head-field office dynamics in the Pacific island region, based on the author's experience. It then briefly investigates the relationship between these dynamics and issues of power, alignment, and consensus, unpacking the role that an internal partnership broker can play in navigating these dynamics. The paper will outline relevant principles of partnership brokering and strategies for effective application, based on the author's own experience. The paper concludes with final reflections and recommendations.

What is a partnership broker?

Partnership brokering entails the fostering of safe, enabling spaces for the development of successful partnerships (Stott 2019: 12). Tennyson (2019: 21) highlights the multi-dimensional role of a partnership broker, which includes facilitating, coordinating, mediating, evaluating, negotiating, coaching and proactive, comprehensive engagement. There can be different types of partnership brokers based on where they are situated in relation to a partner: 'internal' brokers are within one of the partner organisations and 'external' brokers are outside of any partner organization (PBA Workbook p24). Tennyson (2019: 24) also recognizes that there are partnership brokering roles that extend beyond the immediate partner group. This includes roles within a partner organization (to facilitate internal coherence), between the partners, and beyond the partnership itself (for awareness raising and positioning). This paper focuses on internal brokers, who are often connectors across these roles.

The many faces of the internal partnership broker

A common challenge for internal brokers is that of wearing many hats. Tennyson (2019: 22) identifies at least two hats; one of representing own organizational interests and one of pursuing a more equitable partnership across all organizational interests. Pearl (2019: 149) also recognizes the duality of roles for internal partnership brokers in relation to core job responsibilities versus the responsibility of a broker. I argue that an internal broker has a plurality of roles, incorporating both Tennyson and Pearl's profiling as well as the additional challenge for internal brokers in operating on two levels or with two 'faces' (see Figure 1). That is, one 'face' works internally in the organization brokering internal coherence, to support the outward 'face' that works externally with the partner organization(s) to broker partnership agreement. In negotiation theory^{viii}, this is often referred to as a 'two-level game' which requires strategies for simultaneous internal and external negotiations that also apply to partner brokering contexts. An internal partnership broker is therefore juggling many roles at any given time.

Within a partnership brokering framework, internal brokers are further described in terms of being reactive (typically focused on organizational mandate and coordinating partners to maximize organizational self-interest) and proactive (typically innovating and creating a partnership) (PBT Workbook p24). Extending this understanding to include the inward and outward 'faces' of a broker, an internal partnership broker can be defined beyond where they are 'located' vis-à-vis partners, but also where they are located within their own organizational structure. For example, does their position enable them to be proactive and pilot different approaches, or does their position require them to remain within established parameters?

Figure 1. The plurality of roles for an internal partnership broker

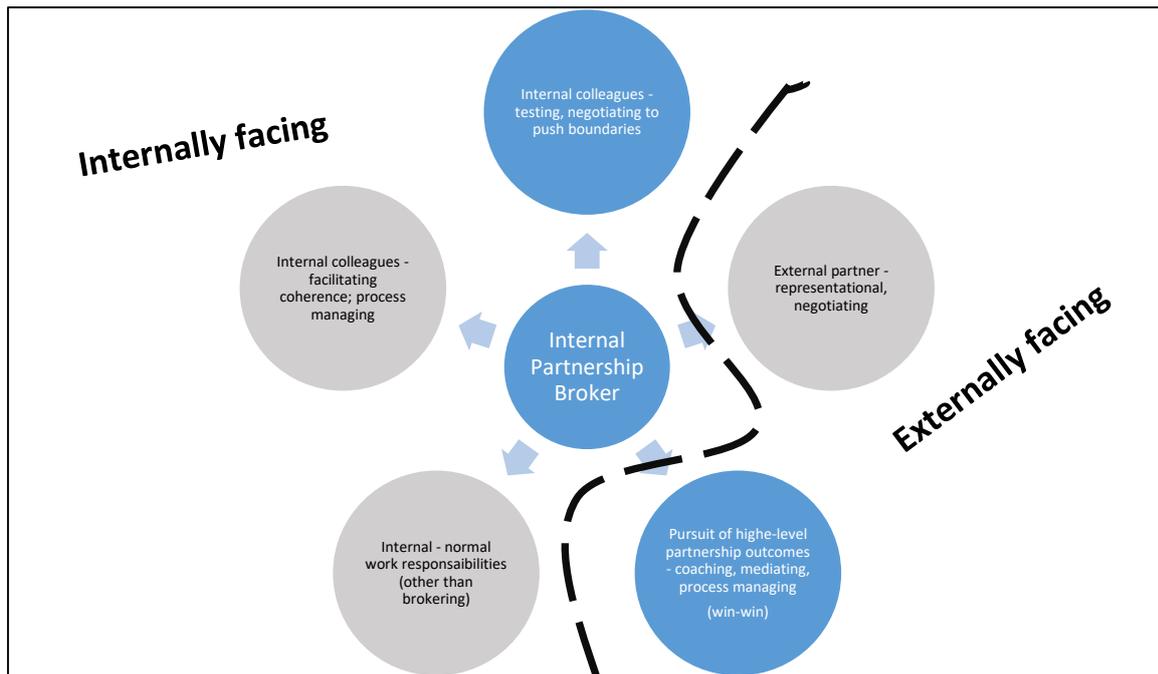


Figure 1 also shows a way to unpack the plural brokering roles based on proactive (i.e. all parts of the diagram, especially the darker shaded parts) or reactive (the lighter shaded parts) practice.

In head-field office contexts, an internal partnership broker, will have additional challenges of distance from the organizational centre (such as delays in information flow) and needing to educate the head office about a field-based partner who is unknown to them. This has implications on the skills set of an internal broker, to be a communicator, navigator (of systems and process), negotiator, mediator, innovator and so on, whether facing internally or externally. For example, in considering the ‘coach’ aspect of an internal broker, partnership brokering frameworks typically apply this in the context of coaching partners to build partnering capacity. However there is also an important element of coaching within the broker’s own organization to build capacity to understand, act and think differently in relation to a particular partnership. This links to the idea of ‘negotiation to push boundaries.’

I suggest that a deeper understanding of an internal broker’s role, and recognition of the inherent plurality of roles, are key aspects in navigating head and field office dynamics to broker sustainable partnerships with field-based partners.

Brokering considerations in head-field office contexts

In the Pacific island region, head-field office relationships in the development industry can be found within INGOs (such as Save The Children, Oxfam), regionalized aid initiatives (such as UNDP’s Pacific Financial Inclusion Program, or DFAT’s Pacific Women program) and in the private sector (such as commercial banks). Additionally, similar relations are contained within central-regional/local government contexts. Large multilateral organisations, such as the UN agencies and the World Bank, often have an additional layer of HQ-regional hub-field office relationships. My professional experience in head-field office relationships relates to all of the above^{ix}.

Head-field office relationships are typically governed by institutional policies and organizational structures, with varying degrees of decentralized decision-making, supported by representational delegations, formal and informal communication channels. A field office’s degree of autonomy in

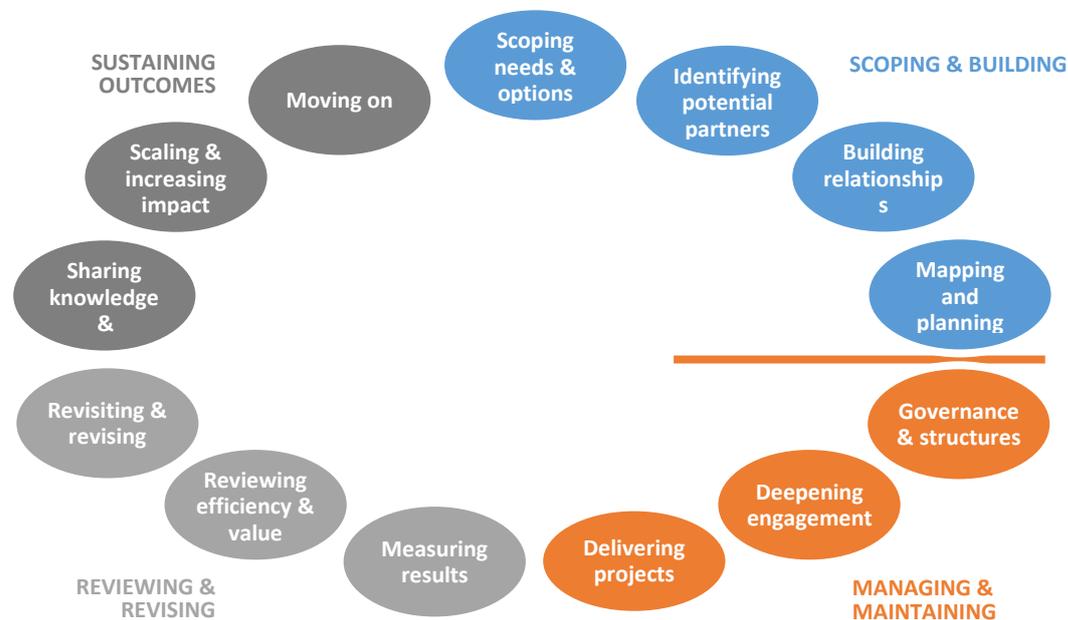
leading and managing field activities can vary based on where budget and resources are controlled and which stages in a development program cycle are deemed field-led. For example, in my current organization, I have representational authority and a significant degree of autonomy in programming my allocated budget, however final partnership decisions rest with the head office. In a partnership brokering context, these nuances have a bearing on how a partnering cycle plays out.

If an internal partner broker is based in a field office, their strategies in each of the four phases of the partnering cycle (see Figure 2) will depend on the degree of autonomy granted them to lead a partnering process as well as their position within organizational structure.

In considering the operational context, the following questions can be explored in determining the strategies for the field-based internal broker:

- What is my relationship to the partner/head office?
- Is representational mandate in the field clear?
- Is the programming/partnering mandate clear?
- What are my decision-making delegations?
- What are internal communication/knowledge-sharing channels to be aware of?
- Which organizational business processes are relevant to, and support services available for, the partnering process? (e.g. policies, guidelines, templates, advice)
- What level of flexibility do these processes have?
- What are the governance structures between the head and field office?
- Am I the right 'fit' for the issue and the partnership sought?^x

Figure 2. The Partnering Cycle (adapted from The Partnership Toolkit)



Additionally, in facing the head office, a field-based internal broker needs to consider how power is shared with, and how alignment and consensus are viewed by, the head office during the partnering

process. Dependent on the proposed partnership objectives, an internal broker may also need to consider how negotiation can “create opportunities for pushing boundaries of partners” during the scoping and building stage (Baksi 2019: 51), and how to also apply this to pushing the boundaries of internally to one’s own organization.

Power

Within the partnership brokering framework, power is largely explored in terms of how it is shared *between* partner organisations. The broker’s role is to support equitable and transparent partnering, focused on mutual benefit (see Principle 2 of Partnership Brokering Good Practice) which can often facilitate opportunities to ‘level the playing field’ in terms of partner power dynamics. However, in a head-field office relationship internal organisational power dynamics should also be explored in how they can affect field-based internal brokers, whether individually or institutionally through governance structures.

For example, in my current role as a field-based internal broker, understanding the power dynamics between my office and the head office requires good knowledge of internal policies, business processes and governance structures. Additionally, it requires understanding of any additional power dynamics within the head office itself that may affect internal agreement about a partnership. This has played out in the form of two related, yet separate, units within the head office that both have a part to play in a field partnership I was brokering over a 6 month period. One unit – the designated partnership unit – considered itself to have the final say on partnering processes and structures, while the other unit – the strategic projects unit – was reluctant to share its former responsibility for supporting partnership templates and arrangements. Field requests for support services inevitably became stalled while head office power dynamics played out. Through facilitated meetings, both separately and jointly convened, supported by regular email records to maintain transparency, I was able to bring the units together for discussion and joint brainstorming about potential constraints, risks and opportunities. This strategy required time and needed to be paced according to each unit’s readiness to tackle the tricky topic of overlapping mandates (with several informal engagements by myself via Skype behind the scenes). The added complexity of being at a distance from the head office, meant that the emphasis on transparency, information-sharing and consultative approaches were essential to building bridges between the units.

In the context of partnership brokering, power is a key consideration between partners and within partners. Good brokering practice continually observes, reflects upon and explores ways to allow for more equitable power at all levels and stages of the partnering cycle, supported by transparent communication.

Consensus and Alignment

In the Pacific island region, consensus is often considered the preferred method for reaching agreement based on cultural values of inclusion. Indeed, the aforementioned *talanoa* process typically seeks to reach consensus on issues. In practice, this can mean allowing conversations to evolve and reflect, providing time and space for everyone to agree on an issue. However, in a partnership brokering context where good practice looks for leveraging partner strengths to create a partnership in which “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”, consensus is not necessarily the most effective strategy as it can limit potential for sustainable outcomes if partners feel compromised in their interests or values.

In head-field office contexts where there is potential internal disagreement about the scope or direction of a partnership, seeking consensus is not an effective strategy either. As an internal broker

navigating head-field office power dynamics, consensus-seeking may not only delay the partnering process but may also not be realistic. Continuing my earlier example, while I initially tried to facilitate consensus between two head office-based units on basic partnering matters (e.g. seeking clear guidelines on a range of partnership structures, looking for agreement about how to blend partnership and co-investment activities, including all units in emails to share information), I realized this approach would stall external partnering when we got to the issue of scope of partnership. Inevitably either one of the units would feel compromised and could potentially use their advisory power within the business process to delay or block approaches and say “the scope is too ambitious, I have concerns”. In the interests of maintaining internal relationships, as well as to support face-saving for each unit, I elected to progress the issue of the scope of the partnership through de-prioritising consensus and instead pursuing alignment of internal interests.

In a partnership brokering context, aligning of interests relates to agreeing to disagree on certain aspects of a partnership arrangement, while continuing to agree with the overall general partnership objective(s). It is a more pragmatic approach than consensus, given that it acknowledges diversity and has a tendency to be open about risks in partnership, whilst still seeking to work towards an overarching common objective. As Baksi (2019: 57) has noted, a broker’s negotiation skills can assist with shifting from intractable positions to focusing on interests; through this alignment is possible.

Alignment is also pragmatic if there is a time pressure to the partnering process or internal business processes/support services are in a state of flux. I’ve found pursuit of aligned interests particularly practical where organizational guidelines have been in evolution with the specific partnerships that I have been brokering serving as test cases for my organization (and ultimately serving as a platform for finding internal agreement about wider organizational business processes). For example, in addressing the concerns about an overly ambitious scope of agreement, I arranged for one-on-one discussions with those concerned to dig deeper into understanding their rationale, and then to strive for a ‘good enough’ scope that they could live with.

For partnership brokers, whether internal or external, working towards alignment of interests is more pragmatic than seeking consensus.

Some useful approaches for a field-based internal broker

There are a number of brokering approaches that are relevant to working through a partnering process that is field-led. In all contexts, it is important for brokers to regularly test findings, reflect, review and adapt approaches as required.

Below I discuss the three approaches that I find myself applying the most regularly as a field-based internal broker in partnering processes, whether facing internally or externally.

1. The use of ***de-layering*** to better understand incentives of all actors^{xi}. Delayering is a process of asking strategic, open-ended questions in both formal and informal settings to gain a deeper understanding. It is usefully applied in understanding power dynamics and incentives. For example, the use of the six ‘whys’ or asking why several times during an unpacking of a relationship or situation.
 - In brokering, internal “de-layering” is as equally important as it is for external partners. It is a way to also move dialogue from that about positions to interests. IT requires myself as a broker to remain as current as possible across the latest developments – internally and externally - to ensure we can maintain momentum in the partnering process.

2. The application of the ***Situation, Behaviour, Impact mode***^{xii} to address blockages – as a useful, subtle framing for difficult conversations^{xiii}. It requires a degree of understanding and knowledge of the ‘blocker’ to the partnering process to target language/topics that will resonate with them. For example, I applied this in a blockage situation with a member of the senior executive. I approached a conversation as one of seeking guidance, rather than directly querying the blockage, due to the power dynamics of the senior executive member having the final say on the academic aspects of the partnership agreements and her known conservatism around non-traditional partnership approaches.
3. Leveraging an internal broker’s role as a ***process manager*** to nudge internal conversations towards better outcomes for the partnership. A risk to doing this is the potential for viewing brokering ‘faci-pulation’^{xiv} as manipulative and not in keeping with the PBA good practice principles.
 - For example, when I recently nudged a multi-partner conversation towards a topic of relevance to my organization, feedback from my PBA mentor was to be mindful of these potential manipulations, and to make the nudging approach more transparent (rather than covert) to ensure ethical partnering practice. This entailed a simple tweaking of a question to reference the value of the discussion to my organization, which has resonated deeply within my practice. Another example is the internal broker’s use of political pressure from an external partner to ‘force’ a decision within their own organization. The strategic and ethical use of politics and political power in partnership brokering can be a tool for overcoming partnering blocks and expanding partnering potential, however needs to be handled with caution noting the significant potential for compromising responsible, ethical brokering.

In all of the above, the potential for ethical dilemmas is ever present for an internal broker. Knowing what is the right thing to do when there is a significant difference of views between partners and within partners is especially difficult for an internal broker because the broker is balancing its plurality of roles. When should own organizational interests prevail? When should those of the partner? Are there alternative views to consider that may assist with dealing with the dilemma? How transparent is the pushing of boundaries? Am I part of the challenge? Should I back away or handover the brokering responsibilities? The distance from a head office, and the potential for less scrutiny mean that ethical dilemmas for a field-based broker may not have an easy solution, yet the onus is on the broker to maintain integrity of self and the partnering process.

Conclusion

In understanding the role of a partnership broker, and in particular that of an internal partnership broker in head-field office contexts, practice and experience suggests the need for a more nuanced conceptualization, which in turn informs selection of effective brokering approaches.

I recommend that the Partnership Brokering toolkit include a deeper reflection of internal brokers, as follows.

- An internal broker has a plurality of roles, which for field-based brokers can be compounded by distance.
- The element of distance requires consistent application of partnership principles of good practice by an internal broker, particularly where snap partnering decisions may be needed.

- An internal broker is not simply representing own organizational interests, but is also stretching and testing internal organizational interests/constraints to optimize overall partnership outcomes.
- Understanding power in partnership brokering contexts requires looking at power *between* partners as well as power *within* a given partner, particularly for internal partnership brokers.
- Good brokering practice continually observes, reflects upon and explores ways to allow for more equitable power at all levels and stages of the partnering cycle, supported by transparent communication.
- For partnership brokers, whether internal or external, working towards alignment of interests is more pragmatic than seeking consensus.
- Greater attention is needed to useful strategies that can be used in internally-facing internal brokering. Guiding questions are provided on page 5.
- Useful approaches include: de-layering, SBI and strategic process management. Responsible and ethical practice is inherent, particularly noting that field-based internal brokers are often faced with partnering dilemmas stemming from distance from head office.

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ⁱ By Ros Tennyson and Wilde (see Tennyson, Ros. 2019: 20).

ⁱⁱ See for example: The Doing Development Differently Manifesto developed through Harvard University's Centre for International Development (<https://buildingstatecapability.com/the-ddd-manifesto/>) and Harrison, Tom. 2015. "Doing Development Differently: partnership brokering in a program addressing urban poverty in Bangladesh." (<https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Partnership-Brokering-in-UPPR-261015-final1.pdf>) accessed 18/09/19

ⁱⁱⁱ See: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg17> (accessed 16/09/19)

^{iv} See: www.plp.org.fj/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PLP-Network-Analysis-Briefing-Note-2017.pdf (accessed 16/09/19)

^v See: <http://www.plp.org.fj/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/PLP-Briefing-Green-Growth-Leaders-Coalition.pdf> (accessed 16/09/19)

^{vi} A *talanoa* or *storian* approach – in the Pacific lexicon - is essentially a process for sitting around and discussing issues without too much structure, to allow for the flow of discussion (including silences) to build trust and frankness between parties. People tend to prefer to skirt the issue before getting to the point so this allows for views to be aired.

^{vii} The Pacific island region, including Papua New Guinea, is home to approximately 12 million people spread across an ocean that comprises one third of the planet’s surface area.

^{viii} See Putnam, Robert. 1988.

^{ix} The author has worked for AusAID, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the UN Secretariat’s Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific. The author currently works in senior management for a DFAT-funded Pacific regional initiative and is a member of multiple advisory boards for development initiatives across the Pacific and internationally. The views expressed in this article are her personal views and not those of any organisation.

^x See Van Tulder and Kahlen (2019: 35).

^{xi} This relates to Principle 2 of Partnership Brokering Good Practice: “Be reflective and strive for diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit and courageous practice when operating in a partnership brokering role, modelling this behavior to partners.”

^{xii} See the Centre for Creative Leadership on Feedback That Works: <https://www.ccl.org/lead-it-yourself-solutions/workshop-kits/feedback-that-works/#> (accessed 18/09/19)

^{xiii} This relates to Principle 3 of Partnership Brokering Good Practice: “Be prepared to challenge assumptions and poor partnering behavior at any stage of the partnering cycle in ways most likely to bring about constructive change.”

^{xiv} Term used to combine the practices of facilitation and manipulation in describing targeted facilitation approaches.