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Exploring the links between partnership brokering and effective leadership

The contribution made by a good partnership broker, particularly an internal partnership broker, can often be overlooked and/or is undervalued. However, there are strong parallels between the qualities demonstrated by a good partnership broker and key attributes of leadership. For example, the best leaders lead through influence, not the power of their position, and they are open to new ideas, criticisms and different perspectives. This paper argues that a good partnership broker has extensive leadership capabilities and can therefore frame their 'offering' (ie their skills and expertise) in this context.

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Introduction

In a recent performance appraisal from a client I received an ‘adequate’ rating for ‘demonstrating effective leadership and management’, a fairly unspectacular assessment and one that was below the ratings I received for the other performance criteria in the appraisal. The supporting commentary did not identify any specific issues with my performance in this area, suggesting that perhaps I was given a more modest rating due to either a) a lack of visibility of my performance against this criteria, or b) a lack of understanding of the importance of the contributions I’ve been making.

The main role I’ve been playing on this contract, which involves delivering training in Monitoring and Evaluation and Program Logic, has been as a relationship/contract manager with the client. In other words, I have been acting as a partnership broker, rather than as a technical specialist or lead trainer as per my colleagues. And the ‘adequate’ rating comes despite my organisation investing considerable resources (time and money) in recent months on improving the relationship with the client, with me at the forefront of this effort. It also comes despite some good achievements being made, including developing a set of agreed partnership principles, clarifying the roles and responsibilities for the joint delivery of the work, and clarifying and streamlining the existing communication channels between the two organisations.

As I reflected on this ‘adequate’ rating for my work on the contract to date I began thinking about partnerships and partnership brokering in the context of leadership. What competencies can and should I be demonstrating in my capacity as a partnership broker that would support a higher performance rating for ‘effective leadership and management’? Does partnership brokering and leadership go hand-in-hand or are they mutually exclusive? What qualities does an effective partnership broker demonstrate that are consistent with key attributes of leadership? For me, as someone who has a longstanding interest in partnerships, a strong belief that working in genuine partnerships can lead to improved outcomes in my field of expertise (international development), and an interest in developing into a fully-fledged partnerships broker, these are important questions.

Different leadership models and the attributes of a good leader

There is extensive material available on the topic of leadership. A quick search of the literature throws up numerous articles on the key attributes of a leader, different leadership models and styles, and the profiles of individuals who are considered to have been great leaders. As I was quickly scanning and reflecting on some of these, I was struck by how much the concept of ‘leadership’ has evolved in recent times. For example, a traditional view of leadership holds that a single individual or small group of individuals have control and power because of the position they hold in a hierarchical structure. Collaboration is limited, and creativity and innovation are the domain of a select few, most of whom have been around longer than anyone else and who are therefore at the top of the hierarchy¹. This model of leadership has worked well for the manufacturing sector, where senior executives analyse

¹ “8 Differences Between Traditional and Collaborative Leaders”, Perspectives on Innovation: InnoCentive Blog <http://blog.innocentive.com/2013/11/21/8-differences-between-traditional-and-collaborative-leaders> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

the market and make decisions while the ‘workers’ focus purely on performing discrete functions of a broader production process².

However, one of the key arguments today is that the best leaders lead through influence, not the power of their position³. Other attributes of good leadership include openness and transparency (particularly with regard to decision-making processes), and being receptive to new ideas, criticisms and different perspectives⁴. A consistent theme is that collaboration is essential for good leadership. In the modern-day corporate workplace, ‘collaborative leadership’ is increasingly being adopted as the new leadership model, with a focus on team building and the distribution of power and responsibility, rather than a traditional hierarchical structure⁵.

There are strong parallels between this new model of ‘collaborative leadership’ and ‘servant leadership’ – a phrase coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 but a practice that goes back to biblical times – which emphasises that a good leader is one who shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform to the best of their abilities⁶. I should note here that the concept of servant leadership is closely aligned with my personal values, including to recognise the inherent worth of every individual and to encourage and empower others (rather than to gain power and influence at someone else’s expense). I am particularly interested in servant leadership because I see it as a legitimate alternative to the commonly held view that wealth, power and status should be the priority over all else.

Reflections on the parallels between leadership and effective partnerships

Reflecting upon the traditional and collaborative models of leadership and the attributes of a good leader revealed to me several links between good leadership, effective partnerships and the qualities of an effective partnership broker.

- 1. The key aspects of the collaborative model of leadership mirror the characteristics of an effective partnership.** At the highest level, a good partnership between two parties should be based on principles such as equity, shared responsibility, mutual accountability, and transparency⁷. Furthermore, a commitment to collaboration is critical to the health of a good partnership, both in terms of innovation for new ideas and problem solving but also in terms of resolving differences. The similarities of these principles to the characteristics of the collaborative model of leadership are striking. A collaborative model of leadership harnesses the collective capacity of ‘the whole’, where individuals are empowered to generate new ideas and solve problems irrespective of their position or level in an organisational structure⁸. In this sense there

² “8 Differences Between Traditional and Collaborative Leaders”, Perspectives on Innovation: InnoCentive Blog <http://blog.innocentive.com/2013/11/21/8-differences-between-traditional-and-collaborative-leaders> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

³ “How Leadership Has Changed”, Stephenson, C, Ivey Business Journal, July/August 2011 <http://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/how-leadership-has-changed/> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

⁴ “How Leadership Has Changed”, Stephenson, C, Ivey Business Journal, July/August 2011 <http://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/how-leadership-has-changed/> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

⁵ “8 Differences Between Traditional and Collaborative Leaders”, Perspectives on Innovation: InnoCentive Blog <http://blog.innocentive.com/2013/11/21/8-differences-between-traditional-and-collaborative-leaders> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

⁶ “The Servant Leadership Approach and Humanitarian Collaboration”, Hockaday, D, The Journal of Partnership Brokering, Issue 4, November 2014 <http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/journal/the-servant-leadership-approach-and-humanitarian-collaboration/> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

⁷ These are among the key partnership principles identified in the Level 1 Partnership Brokers Training.

⁸ “8 Differences Between Traditional and Collaborative Leaders”, Perspectives on Innovation: InnoCentive Blog <http://blog.innocentive.com/2013/11/21/8-differences-between-traditional-and-collaborative-leaders> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

is equity, there is shared responsibility, and there is transparency around decision-making, the exact same characteristics of an effective partnership.

- 2. The 'traditional' model of leadership is anathema to genuine partnerships.** It is interesting to note that a traditional model of leadership, where decision-making is centralised and power and control are held by only a few individuals at the top of a hierarchy, actually works against the establishment of effective partnerships. This observation is also noted by David Hockaday in the *Journal of Partnership Brokering*, where he writes “...conventional patterns of leadership (that arise from role or status) are more likely to undermine rather than enhance the sense of shared responsibility so central to any form of collaboration”⁹. Such a model of leadership reduces the role of ‘the team’ to operationalising the decisions of the select few considered to be ‘in power’. In this sense there is no equity and no sense of shared responsibility and accountability for decision-making.

- 3. The attributes of a good leader are consistent with those of an effective partnership broker.** While the qualities of a leader are many and varied, there are a number that consistently apply. For example, a good leader is considered to be someone who is an effective communicator, empathetic, exercises good judgement, and someone who is creative and solutions oriented¹⁰. Someone considered to be an effective ‘servant’ leader might have up to 10 different attributes including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community¹¹. Again, it’s interesting to observe how many of these traits of a good leader, servant or otherwise, equally apply to the attributes of an effective partnership broker. For example, the Partnership Brokers Association itself notes that the key competencies of a skilled partnership broker include communication (articulation and presentation), facilitation, empathy, and coaching and capacity building, among a range of others¹². In this sense, it could reasonably be argued that someone who is an effective partnership broker is also effectively demonstrating the qualities and traits of an effective leader.

Lessons applied to my professional practice

As outlined earlier, a large part of my professional practice over the past three months or so was spent in a relationship management role. A large part of this was spent trying to restore the health of a relationship that was highly fraught and not satisfactory for both parties. Over the course of the three months there were some excellent achievements, many of which came as a direct result of applying tools and techniques from the Level 1 Partnership Training. For example, one of the first exercises I completed with my counterpart was a review of the skills and capabilities that each party was contributing to the partnership. This led to a subtle adjustment in the power imbalance in the relationship because it quickly became more than just about who was contributing the money. The second breakthrough related to the joint development of (and eventual agreement upon) a

⁹ “The Servant Leadership Approach and Humanitarian Collaboration”, Hockaday, D, *The Journal of Partnership Brokering*, Issue 4, November 2014 <http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/journal/the-servant-leadership-approach-and-humanitarian-collaboration/> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

¹⁰ <http://www.fortunegroup.com.au/characteristics-good-leader> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

¹¹ “The Servant Leadership Approach and Humanitarian Collaboration”, Hockaday, D, *The Journal of Partnership Brokering*, Issue 4, November 2014 <http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/journal/the-servant-leadership-approach-and-humanitarian-collaboration/> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

¹² The Partnership Brokers Association website, <http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Appointing-a-Partnership-Broker-Feb-2016sm.pdf> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

communications protocol, which articulated the roles and responsibilities of each party and the agreed lines of communication between those involved in the joint delivery of the services. The communications protocol has become the key handover document when staff leave and will be an effective tool to manage the risks associated with new staff who may have different ideas, priorities and management approaches.

However, in order to determine which strategies to employ to improve the partnership, I found it was crucial for me to understand the state of the relationship between the parties when I began. This necessarily meant appreciating the factors which lead to the breakdown in the relationship. My reflection upon these factors has uncovered a striking correlation between the breakdown in the partnership and a failure of collaborative and servant leadership. This correlation strongly suggests that effective leadership is critical to a healthy partnership.

My observations on the state of the partnership and the factors that contributed to the situation are as follows:

1. A breakdown in trust meant that collaboration was no longer possible.

The engagement started enthusiastically and there was considerable optimism for the future on both sides. However, some key staff (of the client) left and their replacements had a different approach to engaging and had different expectations of performance. Over a period of time, our staff began to feel as though verbal agreements that had been made were no longer being honoured. Furthermore, the contract started to be used as the main management tool. Staff felt they could not be open and transparent about risks and issues that were affecting the partnership because they feared it would be held against them. This breakdown in trust had a significantly negative impact on the extent to which the two parties were able to collaborate effectively with each other on a whole range of issues.

Franklin Covey notes that *“Trust is the bedrock of collaboration, and without trust collaboration is merely cooperation, which fails to achieve the benefits and possibilities available to true collaborators...”*¹³. If trust is the bedrock of collaboration, and if collaboration is central to the notion of effective leadership in today’s society, then I think it reasonable to conclude that the breakdown in the relationship was also reflective of a failure of leadership.

2. There was limited delegated authority for decision-making at the operational level, which meant that minor issues were not dealt with in a suitable or timely fashion.

The client has adopted a traditional model of ‘leadership’, with an extremely hierarchical structure and little delegated authority to staff below senior levels. This means the process of engaging even on the most basic of administrative or contractual issues is highly inefficient. For example, the process that was undertaken to finalise an agreed ‘communications protocol’, where partnership principles, roles and responsibilities, and lines of communication were all clarified, took almost three months to be signed off once the document had been drafted because the decision to agree to the approach was not delegated to the staff who were actually involved in the day-to-day running of the project. The problem with not delegating responsibility for decision-making was that it meant issues which arose at the operational level could not be adequately addressed at that level. This difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that the partnership had no agreed process in place to escalate disputes or grievances. Minor disputes therefore went unresolved and our

¹³ <http://www.franklincovey.com.pe/speedoftrust/collaboration.html> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

staff felt as though their concerns were not being heard or taken seriously. This added to the tension between the two parties and contributed to the breakdown in trust I mentioned earlier.

Transparent decision-making processes and adequate dispute resolution processes are both critical elements of an effective partnership, but they are also key elements of effective leadership. Their absence was reflective of the deficiencies in the leadership model which had been adopted for the particular context, where perhaps a more collaborative model of leadership would have been more appropriate.

3. **Individual behaviours were often inconsistent with an appreciation of the ‘bigger picture’.**

The actual quality of the services we were (jointly) providing was high, reflected in the very positive feedback we were receiving from the beneficiaries of the services. However, the relationship with the client was characterised by blurred roles and responsibilities and poor facilitation and coordination at the middle-management level, with a number of staff simply adding administration burden rather than value by virtue of their engagement. Despite the quality of the services being delivered, the partnership suffered because not only was the performance feedback that was provided generally negative, it was also generally of little or no consequence to the actual delivery of the services.

One of the critical roles of a partnership broker is to keep partners focused on the big picture¹⁴. Similarly, one of the key traits of a good leader is an ability to see and appreciate the big picture¹⁵. So again, as I reflect on the circumstances that led to the breakdown in the relationship, I would argue that a key contributing factor was actually the absence of effective leadership.

There have been other engagements I have been part of in which I have been able to observe good leadership and effective partnerships going hand in hand. For example, I previously worked as a partnership broker and relationship manager for a program in Asia, and it was actually my involvement in this program that demonstrated to me there was a ‘better way’ of achieving development outcomes than a traditional master-servant style of engagement between a donor and an implementing partner.

In this situation, the program director committed considerable resources up-front (time and money) to support the donor and the partners to attend a joint training course in developing and managing effective partnerships, and then provided additional resources for the donor and each individual partner to develop a bilateral partnership agreement (via a two day workshop) prior to the program starting. High level principles including equity and transparency were discussed and agreed between the partners, expectations of behaviour were clarified, and indicators of success were drafted. The investment of resources ‘upfront’ to proactively establish the foundation for a long-term engagement, as well as the other approaches adopted here, are critical for an effective partnership. These strategies are also *all* closely aligned with the features of a collaborative model of leadership.

¹⁴ The Partnership Brokers Association website <http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/What-do-Partnership-Broker-Do.pdf> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

¹⁵ “How Leadership Has Changed”, Stephenson, C, Ivey Business Journal, July/August 2011 <http://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/how-leadership-has-changed/> [Accessed 24 October 2016]

Conclusion

The literature suggests that the traits of an effective leader in today's society mirror the traits of an effective partnership broker. And the key features of an effective partnership – including equity, transparency, and shared responsibility – are strikingly similar to the key attributes of a collaborative model of leadership. These parallels are borne out in practice and have been evident in my own professional practice in particular.

As I reflect on my work during the period of professional practice, I would argue that the poor health of the relationship when I started the role was actually symptomatic of a failure of leadership, both at the individual and the organisational (structural) level. So I would then argue that by successfully addressing many of the core relationship and management issues, not only have I shown qualities consistent with being an effective partnership broker, I have also been able to demonstrate qualities consistent with a good leader.

The process of this reflection on leadership has given me a much greater insight into my own strengths and capabilities, and will be very helpful in shaping the way I 'sell' my skills in the future. I certainly feel more confident that I can frame my skills and expertise in the context of leadership, something I would not have felt comfortable doing until now.

I also feel encouraged that in working towards becoming a more effective partnership broker I will also be building on attributes that are consistent with those of a servant leader. David Hockaday makes a similar observation, noting that *'...brokers are important because they can adopt different roles depending on what the collaboration needs. Sometimes the collaboration may need listening, empathy and awareness from a perceived neutral and independent broker, and sometimes a collaboration may need more directive action such as propositioning, stewardship and persuasion – all tenets of the servant leadership approach'*¹⁶. So does an effective partnership broker also demonstrate qualities of leadership? I believe the answer is emphatically yes. More than this, as partnership brokers such as myself seek to understand and implement the qualities needed for effective leadership, we will enhance our professional practice and improve our ability to create and facilitate healthy partnerships.

¹⁶ "The Servant Leadership Approach and Humanitarian Collaboration", Hockaday, D, The Journal of Partnership Brokering, Issue 4, November 2014 <http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/journal/the-servant-leadership-approach-and-humanitarian-collaboration/> [Accessed 24 October 2016]