



WEAVING THREADS

A 'MANIFESTO' FOR PBA ASSOCIATES

Those of us who work as Associates of the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) believe that collaboration / partnering at its best is transformational because it necessitates an intentional move away from 'business as usual'.

Brokering transformation requires a principled approach, and being willing to give and receive critique, be reflective and envision new possibilities.

It also requires us and those we work with to: be courageous; be available to be supportive when needed and to share our learning and experience for wider benefit.

We recognise that we, as partnership brokering professionals, are informed, influenced and, all too often, constrained by habitual behaviours and / or by the prevailing limitations of our contexts. We know that change will only be possible if we are prepared to work on ourselves and to be willing to 'seize the day' when opportunities arise to do so.

This short paper¹ aims to capture the threads that we strive to weave throughout our partnership brokering 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 (www.trigonos.org) where we held the first Partnership Brokers Training (2003) and the first PBA Associates meeting (2017) and that inspired the title of this paper.



THE WAY WE AIM TO 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 more than about project management. Our flagship 4-day Partnership Brokers Training (now available on-line) 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 approaches and because it enables us to model collaboration in practice. For these reasons, we prefer to work in pairs and teams. This often manifests as an external partnership broker co-working with an internal partnership broker to build on their deeper knowledge of the situation and to co-create a more tailored intervention. Working this way can also build greater sustainability of approaches being proposed and help to strengthen individual and organisational capacities.

Being open to challenge

Adhering as best we can to core partnering principles (diversity, equity, transparency, mutual benefit and courage), our approach is to share knowledge and expertise and to enable meaningful dialogue / conversations between different actors. We aim to be open/explicit about our own frames of reference and transparent about the conceptual frameworks that we use – actively welcoming critical comment and being genuinely willing to change our views and concepts. Differences of viewpoint are, we believe, central to innovative partnerships and not a hindrance or diversion. Our materials are shared with energy and confidence, not because we know best but rather as a jumping off point for interrogating assumptions, understanding push-back, generating insights for advancing brokering practice 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?*’ (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, willing to change direction when necessary and to work with others ever more creatively in the spirit of reciprocity which is key to our becoming more effective partnership brokers.

We also believe that it is important to give and receive feedback as well as taking the time to reflect and de-brief after any partnering activity is completed. We believe we should habitually question ourselves by asking, for example: *Is my work as a partnership broker still ‘alive’? What happened that was unexpected? How could I/we have achieved more? What should I take account of going forwards? What can I learn from what happened?*

Continuous learning

As PBA Associates, we commit to building our capacity as individual practitioners operating as part of a global network and in Communities of Practice and / or regional hubs by: exchanging stories and experience with other Associates; 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 we support others in challenging 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 alongside 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 Settings

We consider carefully the choice of the venue in which we work when we work in person. 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?

We also consider carefully how we work online – ensuring inclusion and equity in our approach and taking account of technical and other constraints that can impact the power relationships when working at distance.



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.

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 communicating (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 behaviour. Giving and receiving feedback requires thoughtfulness and good intent in line with the principle of reciprocity. 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 and that partnering and partnership are increasingly seen as pathways to doing different. 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, power relations 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 and in so doing, to help ourselves to uncover and verify assumptions and to recognise when our own behaviour is part of the problem rather than solution. 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!

MD / JM / RS / RT

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