

The role of Partnership Brokers in achieving breakthrough collaborative results

Partnership Brokers (sometimes also referred to as partnership facilitators, partnership process managers, guides or navigators) are those individuals who help partners to

- **Stay true to the strategic purpose and goals of the partnership.**
- **Design, manage and lead the partnering process and collaborative journey**, including fit-for-purpose governance.
- **Model, coach and uphold principled¹ partner relationships, communications and behaviours including attending to power dynamics and nurturing collaborative leadership and horizontal accountability.**
- **Navigate complexity, uncertainty, diversity, power dynamics and hold difficult conversations in ways that are fair, open and create confidence.**
- **Acknowledge, explore and challenge unhelpful, unethical and uncollaborative** assumptions, behaviours and systems.
- **Find the courage to reach beyond their comfort zone of “business as usual”.**

Having someone with such a mandate stops partnerships from ‘playing safe’ or getting stuck in forms of delivery that reinforce the status quo rather than catalysing urgently needed transformative change. If we fail to get beyond our discomfort and move through what Sam Kaner² calls the ‘**groan zone**’ we risk failing to overcome the critical challenges our world currently faces. Indeed, without braving uncomfortable conversations we cannot make progress on systemic issues like decolonisation/localisation, decarbonisation and economic inequity.

*“Partnership brokering gave me the courage and mandate to support people to be more radical”³
Community Partnership Broker, Africa*

Whilst every **partnership** is unique to its context, the experience of the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) has been that the partnering **process** is surprisingly universal. Furthermore, we have seen that where one or more individuals take on the intermediating role, the results are⁴:

- Better decisions and win-win solutions – increased **quality**
- Greater equity and stronger relationships – increased **social capital**
- Greater partnership efficiency and resources leveraged – increased **value for money**.
- More strategic and systemic shifts, joined up approaches and breakthrough results - increased **impact**.

Partnership brokers may be one of the partner representatives (so act as ‘internal’ brokers) or they may be an independent third party (acting as an ‘external’ broker). Both bring specific added value. An internal broker is more likely to have long-term engagement and deep understanding of the partners and partnership. An external broker brings fresh perspective and dedicated focus and may be helpful in addressing specific challenges, such as negotiating partnership agreements, facilitating difficult conversations, resolving conflicts, and evaluating collaborations.

In some partnerships, an external broker may ‘accompany’ an internal broker, working synergistically with them to help ensure rigour and prevent ‘capture’ by one organisation. Whichever the case, all partnership brokers need to model fairness and to seek to ensure fairness within the partnership.

¹ Key principles of partnership are Equity, Diversity, Mutual Benefit, Openness and Courage, amongst others.

² *The Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision-making* 2014, Sam Kaner, pub. Jossey-Bass

³ Research into supporting communities to shift power Porticus Foundation and PBA 2020-2021

⁴ Good for Business? Research on the impact of Microsoft’s investment in Partnership Brokering Training, 2012

The recent survey about multi-stakeholder partnerships revealed that:

- **79% respondents believe that a “neutral”⁵ specialist can make a moderate to significant difference in accelerating the process and creating a better, healthier, more successful partnership. Specific benefit is felt in creating alignment on a clear vision, clarity of roles and responsibilities, better governance and decision making.**
- **The level of facilitation or support by an external partnership broker is associated with self-reported effectiveness.**

Furthermore, even better outcomes are seen when internal partnership brokers (partner representatives) work together with an external partnership broker to ensure institutionalisation of partnering approaches and projects within organisations. For this reason, we have seen that donors⁶ seeking localisation and radical changes in their partnering approach are increasingly:

- Engaging external partnership brokers in the same way that those serious about peace might engage a 3rd party mediator.

AND

- Building the capacity for effective partnership brokering both internally and with their partners.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP BROKERS NEED TO BE SUPPORTED WITH:

- **A mandate** to design and manage partnership processes including supporting partner engagement to achieve the partnerships’ strategic purposes and goals.
- **Sufficient dedicated time and funding to**
 - Perform this critical process-leadership role properly.
 - Foster collaborative leadership by modelling it, motivating partners, and building partner capacity to exercise it.
 - Design and review appropriate and engaging interventions that secure progress.
 - Manage individual partner relationships as well as group interactions, that build equity and harness the full benefit of the diversity of the partners involved.
 - Reflect on, and be responsive to, what is needed, identifying and rectifying challenges when these emerge.
- **Professional development** to build skills, confidence, and courage to
 - Facilitate difficult and complex conversations that get to the core of the issues/obstacles.
 - Address damaging power dynamics and challenge ways of working that obstruct effective partnering and collaborative results.
 - Coach partners to focus on achieving the partnerships’ strategic ambitions.
- **Recognition** for playing a critical and legitimate role in transformative collaborative action.

Unfortunately, such support is rare. Despite the evidenced benefits, practitioners report serious under-investment in the partnership brokering role (both internal and external).

Principled Partnership Brokering as an approach pushes those involved to dig deeper and to take the brave steps that lead to breakthrough results. It is a collaboration game changer and a critical enabler for realising SDG 17.

Imagine a world where we empowered and resourced people on the front line to achieve transformational collaborative results...

⁵ PBA prefers “independent” as true ‘neutrality’ is impossible - we all have ‘baggage’ of good and bad experiences that influence thinking and point of view. The challenge of a partnership broker is to be fair and to be transparent about any biases they may have.

⁶ see Australia case study