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FINDING BALANCE

Navigating Leadership and Brokering by Adapting Styles and Culture: A Community Leader's Journey

This was the first time in the 7 seven years of leading my organization that I had been accused of being “partial, controlling, trying to influence a process and even being corrupt” by my colleagues. The context was a fellowship programme that we had launched for the first time. We decided on creating a group of mentors from within our team to mentor a bunch of youth members from our youth groups to take on the role as thinking and dynamic leaders as they implemented action projects of their choice in their field areas.

We had decided that the selection process would be decided and implemented by this group of mentors. My role would begin by trying to orient the group post-selection. One issue that emerged from this process was that some of the young participants, despite being highly committed and passionate about working with their communities, had limited skills in expressing their thoughts in writing. As a result, many of them did not make it into the top 20. During earlier discussions on the evaluation process, it was agreed that if such a situation arose—where passionate young leaders failed to make the cut—an additional process could be considered to include them.

After extensive discussions, the group, including myself, decided to introduce the additional step to enable those ranked from 21 to 42 to access another opportunity to demonstrate their abilities through focus group discussions. Since the orientation day was already fixed, time constraints left little room for informing the participants, and a date for the focus group discussions was set. Due to the short notice, some participants could not attend as the timing was inconvenient, while a few were unable to join because they had run out of phone data.

Concerns were raised within the group that these participants should be given a fair chance again. However, some, particularly senior members, argued that due to time constraints, the process should conclude, and we should proceed with selecting an additional five participants and end the process. This led to a lot of discussion and differing opinions. I suggested that if a second chance was being considered for those who missed out due to time constraints, it should also be extended to the two participants who were unable to join because of data issues. Some members agreed with this suggestion, while others opposed it.

This is how it all began...

It was the last day of my field trip in Birbhum. My colleague, Ruma, and I had left the local club where I was staying, at around 9 am and we were on our way to our local office at Kirnahar Town. Already, the streets were bustling with people and a number of autos and totos plying with more than full capacity. Ruma asked the toto driver to stop in front of a sweet shop. The smell of freshly made cottage cheese and sweets filled my nostrils, suddenly making me realize how hungry I felt.

I waited with eagerness, clutching my holdall, looking forward to the team meeting and breakfast. It had been a good energising trip, seeing the work that has been going on. I was eagerly waiting to meet the team, give them feedback, and also address issues that had been playing in my mind for sometimes. My phone suddenly buzzed. I opened my phone to see an angry and frustrated whatsapp message from a colleague in a group chat. She wrote, “I want to say a few words about the fellowship. We are managing the system ourselves. If the results don't match our expectations, we are talking to you to negotiate and asking for a re-evaluation. I didn't quite understand the meaning of this. Yesterday, Ruma and you mentioned on the phone to finalize the list and close it. If the desired candidate doesn't come through, why will the process be repeated? This feels like the situation of the Trinamool Party. I posted in the group to close this now. But privately, there was negotiation with you after a discussion. Different things are being said at different times, and I'm making decisions accordingly. Later, decisions are changing, and either I or the South 24 Parganas team has to be prepared for it. I keep hearing that there have been discussions with you. Does this mean that in any situation or task, negotiations can be made with higher authority, and the more access someone has to that authority, the more opportunities they get? There is a sense of bribery starting within the team, something that never existed before. One more thing: after hearing all this, you might say, "I have said strongly that you all take the final decision that you think is right." No one has given any answer. Di, everyone here works under you, and you are paying them. Very few people have the courage to challenge higher authority and to challenge the one who has been advising them’.

It was a lot to take in, process and deal with. I was shocked, angry, hurt by my colleague's comments and very disappointed with myself. Honestly, my thoughts were- 'how can they question my intention? I give space to everyone and now they have overstepped my boundary; here I am trying to talk about building equity within the team and encouraging my team members to challenge authority but when faced with it, I am completely thrown off balance!' Sitting inside the crowded Toto, clutching my bag on one hand, I started typing with the other. I said, "I can see that you are very angry and frustrated but there seems to be a lot of assumptions behind these accusations.

I would ask you to read it again." I did not feel much relief after that and I called my colleague and said the same thing. I sensed that what had transpired the night before had led many to have the same feeling and thoughts. I also told her to share her message in the bigger mentors' group but then without waiting for her, I posted the message in the group and responded by saying that the team should go ahead with their decision.

The post led to reactions from many senior people who agreed to feeling pressurized and disappointed. The Birbhum team responded with anger and hurt and declared that they are protesting against the accusations and are withdrawing from the process. There was utter chaos with angry and sarcastic messages being shared.

I was feeling at a loss about how to manage a situation where a floodgate of emotions had opened. I myself was feeling many of conflicting emotions at the same time. I embraced my feelings and stayed with my thoughts and decided not to respond or interact. By the end of the day when the stalemate ensued, I became anxious and realised that I had to deal with this to break the deadlock and handle the conflict. Holding myself in check I went through the day and decided to call a meeting with the senior mentors a day later.

I decided to use reflective questions to guide the discussion. I looked at the reflective questions as a tool to understand my own emotions, thoughts and assumptions. I realized that what lay behind the anger of my colleagues were feelings of not being acknowledged and being overridden by power. I framed the following questions for the meeting.

What were the concerns/issues that made you angry and irritable? What were some of the assumptions behind such thought and feeling? How effective was the communication in putting the underlying issues in the open? What could have been different? How was equity being built in the whatsapp group when seniors and juniors had different points of views? What is the ultimate goal of this process- is it the process itself? or is it the strengthening of inclusion and opportunities for the young people? Or both?

The stalemate broke when the open conversation led the mentors and me realize our positions. I clearly understood that some senior mentors felt extremely pressured due to the lack of time and the fact that the process was getting extended and they had to devote more time. They were also questioning whether the first process of evaluation that led to the 20 names was totally wrong? That meant that I was questioning their ability and their decision and hence conveyed less faith on them. The process of selection was something that they were doing from scratch and something that was very new and very important for them. While it was very easy for me to feel that the process is a means to a goal but for the team the process itself was important and a learning exercise that I had actually failed to acknowledge. The mentors were able to understand each other's perspectives, competitive spirit and importance of working together.

It was an important learning to make sense of 'when to intervene and when to let it be' and the realization that balancing it depends on how comfortable I am as a leader allowing people to do things differently and not my way. One way of establishing respect and equity is also acknowledging one's own assumptions, judgments about people and allowing others to reflect on theirs too without assigning value judgements. One's ego and confidence were also something to be aware of.

However, one question popped up in my head when I began reflecting on the meeting. While navigating through the groan zone and managing conflict, were there underlying assumptions in the reflective questions that I was posing as a broker? Can reflective questions be consciously framed to serve as a tool to facilitate an outcome predetermined by the broker from before? The only way to find an answer to this would be to ask the members of the meeting whether they felt manipulated at any point.

That would mean, we are in for another story.

Introduction

Reflective journaling has helped dispel many of the comforting myths that leaders like myself often create for themselves. Leadership can be a solitary path, especially when striving to cultivate a culture that challenges established norms and exposes uncomfortable truths. Although I have always seen myself as a fair and evolving leader, I have recently made a deliberate effort to shift away from a 'directive' leadership style. My aim has been to empower my colleagues to make their own decisions and take ownership of their roles. I am working to integrate principles of partnership and collective decision-making as core elements of our organizational culture. This paper explores how an organization lead can adapt their leadership styles to integrate partnership brokering principles and roles not only to support individuals and teams but also to shape the culture they are helping to build.

A significant realization for me was that a major barrier to achieving equity within my organization was the emphasis on a solution-based approach—centred on quick problem-solving and action. As a community-based organization with over 90% of team members embedded within the communities they work with, I have often relied on my experience and intuition to offer solutions. While this approach worked well during the initial seven years of our NGO's journey, it is becoming increasingly challenging to manage the complexities of human dynamics, individual contributions, and the need for true collaboration. The drawbacks of this approach have begun to surface openly. Our organization is struggling with creative thinking, and deeper reflection has become more of a task and therefore a burden rather than a welcome exercise. This focus on finding immediate solutions sometimes have alienated team members by imposing answers without their full participation.

My frustration has also been growing as I recognized the shortcomings of a solution-oriented mindset in fostering lasting change. Although many solutions have addressed immediate problems, they have often missed the underlying causes, particularly in complex situations where quick fixes tended to overlook systemic issues. This urgency for rapid results has built a culture that has constrained free thinking and hindered opportunities for learning and growth within the team.

Reflective thinking helped me understand that while immediate solutions can seem efficient, they don't necessarily lead to sustainable change. The real challenge lay in balancing these quick fixes with the need for collaborative, self-reflective discussions. It became clear that a shift was needed—from a solution-focused approach to one rooted in dialogue. This transformation isn't just about changing the way we address problems or make decisions; it required a deeper cultural shift that redefined how relationships are nurtured and how the organization functions as a whole. One thing is apparent; we need to 'de-culture' ourselves and give meaning to the values of the organization like collaboration, inclusion, diversity, equity etc that we have created together.

This paper presents 5 major tensions I found myself grappling with as a leader while trying to bring in my practice as a partnership broker into my leadership style.

Tensions in Leadership & Brokering Role

One: Balancing Solutions vs. Dialogue

The complex interplay between leadership responsibilities and the role of an internal broker, often seen in organizational settings creates multifarious pressures and tensions, pulls and pushes. Sometimes they seem to be at loggerheads creating enough confusion, mistrust and despair among the leader. On the other hand, a clearer understanding of these dynamics, can create a more cohesive environment that leverages the strengths of both leadership and brokering characteristics for greater effectiveness and success.

Leadership often faces a tension between the need for quick solutions and the desire to engage in meaningful dialogue. A solution-based approach can feel efficient and outcome-driven, often providing a sense of control that can be comforting. In contrast, a dialogue-based approach that a partnership broker encourages, while slower, fosters a collaborative environment where participants contribute to the problem-solving process. Here, the leader as a broker

act more as a facilitator than a director. In this dynamic, leadership is about asking open-ended questions, encouraging active listening, and enabling teams to arrive at solutions collectively- more akin to an involved but facilitative role of a broker.

The transition from one approach to another would therefore mean that the leader becomes open to embrace discomfort, relinquish some control, and trust that the process of dialogue will lead to more sustainable, innovative, and inclusive outcomes. Such a deeper insight is possible when one is ready to look inward and have an honest dialogue to understand the person behind the leader, the insecurities, the fears, the prejudices, the ambitions and the resilience that make the person a leader and a personality.

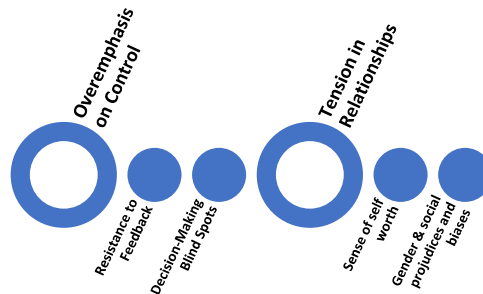
Understanding the Leader as a Person: Exploring Ego, Empathy, and Power Hierarchies in Leadership and Decision-Making

What I found useful was the understanding that balancing the dynamics of **ego**, **empathy**, and **power hierarchies** is essential for leaders striving to create inclusive, effective, and sustainable organizations. These elements influence how individuals interact, make decisions, and collaborate within teams and organizations. Exploring them in depth helps clarify the balance leaders must strike to foster healthy relationships and promote open communication.

Ego in Leadership and Organizations

Ego refers to one’s sense of self, identity, and self-worth. In leadership, ego can have both positive and negative influences. A healthy ego is associated with confidence, clarity, and the ability to assertively make decisions. However, an inflated or fragile ego can obstruct effective leadership by fostering defensiveness, resistance to feedback, and an overemphasis on personal success or recognition.

Impact of Inflated Ego in Leadership



Overemphasis on Control: An inflated ego often seeks to control outcomes, resist delegation, and dominate discussions. This stifles innovation and the open sharing of ideas, which can be detrimental in dynamic environments.

Resistance to Feedback: When a leader’s ego is too closely tied to their role, they may perceive feedback as a personal attack, leading to defensiveness or dismissal of valuable insights.

Decision-Making Blind Spots: A leader’s ego can create blind spots where they overlook input from others, overestimate their own abilities, or cling to their personal perspectives despite contrary evidence.¹

Tension in Relationships: In environments where ego dominates, interpersonal tensions can arise, as team members feel undervalued or overruled, leading to disengagement or conflict.



Understanding How Leaders Relate to Empathy

¹ [4ac6b4c1e809b345b942556561fcc31a.jpg \(720x720\) \(pinimg.com\)](https://pinimg.com/4ac6b4c1e809b345b942556561fcc31a.jpg)

Ego and empathy represent two contrasting aspects of human psychology that influence interpersonal relationships, decision-making, and leadership dynamics. While ego can drive ambition and self-confidence, empathy fosters understanding and connection with others. Ego and empathy are essential components of human interaction, each offering unique benefits and challenges. By understanding and balancing these elements, individuals can enhance their relationships, improve decision-making, and foster a more collaborative environment in both personal and professional contexts. Understanding their interplay is crucial for effective communication and collaboration.

Empathy is the ability to connect with and understand the feelings and perspectives of others, even when they differ greatly from one's own. It is a crucial leadership quality that enables decisions that consider the needs and concerns of the entire group. However, while this concept is straightforward in theory, in practice, the understanding of empathy often shifts towards simply listening to find common ground and responding from a place of compassion, rather than truly engaging with and understanding perspectives and emotions. Empathy is often seen as an innate quality, but it is also a skill that leaders can actively develop and strengthen.

The Role of Empathy in Leadership

- **Building Trust:** Empathy fosters trust. When leaders take the time to understand and acknowledge the emotions and challenges their team members face, it creates a sense of safety and mutual respect.
- **Enhancing Communication:** Empathetic leaders are better listeners, which enables them to fully understand the viewpoints and needs of others before responding. This improves both interpersonal and organizational communication. This involves both kind of listening- internal and external. It is important to take cognisance of the range of thoughts and emotions that the conversations are generating within oneself and also what is being said and what lies underneath of words being spoken.
- **Promoting Inclusivity:** Empathy allows leaders to consider the perspectives of individuals who may be marginalized or overlooked, ensuring that decisions reflect the interests of all stakeholders, not just those in positions of power.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Empathy helps leaders approach conflicts from a place of understanding rather than judgment, allowing them to mediate disputes and seek solutions that address the underlying emotional needs of the parties involved.

Developing Empathy in Leadership

Empathy, in practice, sometimes can mirror or reinforce existing power hierarchies. Instead of challenging or redistributing power, empathy may be expressed in ways that are shaped by the dominant power dynamics already in place. Leaders, for instance, might show empathy selectively or in ways that do not disrupt existing inequalities. This can reinforce traditional power relationships instead of creating more equitable structures.

- **Active Listening:** It is common to remain stuck with the initial stages of listening – downloading. Empathy can be developed by practicing active listening— being fully present, genuinely focusing on what the other person is saying without preconceived notions or judgments and being curious to understand the speaker's perspective, asking clarifying questions, and reflecting back what is heard to ensure comprehension. It also means listening in to the internal emotions and dialogues being generated parallelly while listening outwardly.

For example, one of our community leaders had been experiencing severe domestic violence at home and had frequently sought the support of her team members, who were always willing to help her. She was also voted as the most inspiring team member during our annual retreat. However, when she chose to seek legal support from another organization working against violence on women, without informing the team, it caused a wave of disappointment and shock among the members. Many felt as though they had failed her and were unworthy of her trust. The emotions expressed by the team ranged from irritation to disappointment and hurt.

However, by practicing empathy, the team was able to understand her perspective. She may have wanted to maintain a level of discretion about her personal struggles and sought objective support from outside to handle her situation. It also became clear that she was trying to create a boundary between her personal and professional life. This understanding helped the team accept and appreciate her decision, realizing that it was her way of navigating a very difficult situation.

- **Perspective-Taking:** Empathy involves stepping into another person’s shoes. Actively seeking to understand how others might experience a situation differently based on their backgrounds, emotions, or roles in the organization is essential.
- **Emotional Awareness:** Enhancing one’s own emotional intelligence is significant—understanding own emotional responses and learning to identify and respond appropriately to the emotions of others.
- **Reflective Circles:** Embedding reflective circles every month with the team can be a way to encourage communication and openness.

Tensions of Leadership and Partnership Brokering

Two: Balancing Clash between Process and Outcome

The tension between leadership and partnership brokering often stems from the different priorities placed on process versus outcome. As leaders, we often focus on achieving goals and meeting deadlines but as partnership brokers, the emphasis is on the importance of building relationships, ensuring inclusivity, and creating long-term value. Navigating this tension requires a delicate balance between pushing for results and respecting the integrity of the partnership process. By embracing empathy, flexibility, and open communication, leaders can become more effective in fostering successful partnerships that yield both immediate and long-term benefits.

- **Process vs. Results-Oriented Thinking**
The example shared in the beginning brought to light this tension. While as a leader I was focussed on the outcome of the fellowship process based on my strategic vision and organizational goals, the team was defining success of the collaboration by navigating through the process itself where they felt they had an equal voice in shaping the direction and goals of the collaboration. This clash created friction, and as a leader I struggled with relinquishing control and being accountable to my team partners in the democratic processes that we had created. I kept pushing towards the outcome by extending the process when the tree team was ready to bring a closure to it.
- **Short-Term Wins vs. Long-Term Impact**
Leaders are often judged by their ability to deliver short-term wins or tangible outcomes. Successful partnerships may not yield immediate results but are built on trust and shared goals that will benefit all parties over time. As leaders we must balance the pressure for immediate gains with the patience required for lasting, systemic change by focussing more on process.
- **Adaptability and Conflict Management**
Partnership brokering is inherently adaptive, requiring flexibility to adjust to evolving circumstances and the needs of various stakeholders. Leadership, however, may require more structured, decisive action. The tension between adapting to partner needs

Reflective questions focus on deeper exploration, while solution-based questions push towards concrete action

Solution-Based Questions

- What steps can you take to resolve this issue?
- What options do you see to address this challenge?
- How can you apply what you’ve learned to create a better outcome?
- What would be your first step in solving this problem?
- What resources do you need to achieve your goal?
- What would success look like in this situation?
- How can you overcome the obstacles in your way?

Reflective Questions

- What was your experience like during that situation?
- How did you feel when that happened?
- Why do you think this issue is important to you?
- What might be influencing your perspective on this? What are some of the assumptions behind this perspective?
- What could you learn from this experience?
- In what ways has this situation challenged you?
- How do you see your role in the outcome?

and maintaining a steady course toward the desired outcome can lead to conflicts, which require skilled conflict management and patience to resolve.

- **Experimenting with the Art of Framing Reflective Questions**

Framing questions effectively can foster deeper understanding and encourage meaningful dialogue. Framing paired questions to facilitate both self-reflection and collective insight is helpful as they can help promote introspection and foster a culture of open dialogue, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and collaborative environment.

Here are some examples of paired questions—one directed at oneself and the other aimed at others:

1. Self-Reflection on Empathy and Impact

- **To Self:** How can I cultivate greater empathy in my interactions with others?
- **To Others:** In what ways do you feel my actions or words have impacted you, positively or negatively?

2. Exploring Vulnerability and Team Dynamics

- **To Self:** What fears or hesitations do I have about being vulnerable with my team?
- **To Others:** How comfortable do you feel sharing your vulnerabilities in our team discussions? What enables or hinders you to share?

3. Addressing Power Hierarchies and Inclusivity

- **To Self:** How might my position or experience create unintentional barriers to inclusivity?
- **To Others:** What can we do together to ensure everyone’s voice is heard in our decision-making processes?

4. Emotional Management and Team Support

- **To Self:** How do I typically manage my emotions during challenging situations?
- **To Others:** How can I better support you when you’re experiencing emotional challenges at work?

5. Building Trust and Open Communication

- **To Self:** What actions can I take to demonstrate trustworthiness and transparency in my leadership?
- **To Others:** What would help you feel more comfortable communicating openly with me or the team?

6. Reflecting on Personal Growth and Team Learning

- **To Self:** What have I learned from my past mistakes, and how can I apply those lessons moving forward?
- **To Others:** What lessons have you learned from our recent challenges that we can implement as a team?

7. Understanding the Collection Process

- **To Self:** What methods or approaches do I currently use to collect stories from stakeholders in my community?
- **To Others:** What techniques have you found effective in gathering stories of movement from our stakeholders?

8. Evaluating Engagement Strategies

- **To Self:** How do I ensure that team members/stakeholders feel comfortable and willing to share their stories?
- **To Others:** What strategies can we implement to encourage more team members/stakeholders to share their stories openly?

9. Reflecting on Impact

- **To Self:** How do I assess the impact of the stories collected on our community or organization?
- **To Others:** In what ways do you believe these stories have influenced our community’s movement or initiatives?

Tensions of Leadership Mindset and Partnership Brokering

Three: Balancing Clash between Navigating Power Hierarchies to 'Hold On' and 'Give Up' Power

Organizational leaders are seen as authority figures who provide direction, make decisions, and have the final say. This mindset focuses on control, maintaining a clear structure, and guiding the team toward predefined outcomes. When a leader embraces the role of an internal broker trying to embed partnering principles, the authoritarian hat has to be left aside consciously. The focus will be more on building relationships, bridging gaps, and fostering collaboration between different parties. The tension will be handling the feeling of discomfort that comes with relinquishing control and understanding that an intentional environment is being created for undermining. The tension arises from whether the leader should direct or facilitate and how much power they are willing to delegate and how comfortable they are with appreciating challenge to hierarchical power structures.

Navigating Power Hierarchies

- **Imbalance of Voice:** Power hierarchies often mean that certain voices (typically those in higher positions) are heard more frequently or given more weight, while others (often those in lower positions or from marginalized groups) are minimized or ignored. Understanding that and being mindful of it can help balance this.

Every year, EquiDiversity Foundation organises an 'equality fair', with the idea that the local government, women's groups and the other community groups collaboratively develop this fair which is about promoting the message of gender equality. This past year, the community practitioners who attended the training and had participated in previous fairs, took it upon themselves to question and have a conversation around the issue of 'whose fair is this'? They got inspired and enthused, and worked to bring the local government more on board. The government completely came on board and they took charge, but in the process, the community women, who were used to playing a bigger role in decision making, faded somewhat into the background. "... it was the local government, the men, the women (elected people's representatives), that had taken over. So, this was beautifully organised, they had taken responsibilities and it became their programme, but interestingly, we saw how the invisible isolation of other groups happened- especially the community based women's groups. Again, as a group there was an effort to balance the power but reinforcement of more powerful people holding more power happened. As an organisation when we tried to reflect on this, it was interesting that we were also not very aware of it, it was only when we reflected and saw that internally this process had happened."

What was required, according to the team, was for some of the NGO staff and NGO volunteers to broker the power imbalance that existed between the community and the local government. Effectively, a transfer of ownership occurred with the organising power having shifted from Equidiversity to the local government staff who hijacked, perhaps inadvertently, the decision making and management of the event, so it was not a collaborative process. That power imbalance was reinforced so it went from the NGO to local governments, rather than building a more equitable space for all other stakeholders to have a stake in it. This led to internal reflections in the NGO and they are still grappling with how best to intervene again in such situations.

Summary Observations:

- *Providing space for others to be empowered to act in new ways can have inadvertent effects such as transfer of ownership as was the case in this situation.*
- *How power dynamics need to be brokered carefully as interventions can have unintended consequences and even reverse intended outcomes where a power imbalance can become stronger rather than reduced.*
- *Players who are not necessarily interested in equity can exploit the goodwill of those trying to foster it.*

- **Dependency on Authority:** To what extent do individuals at lower levels feel dependent on those in power for approval? If the response implies significant dependence, it is probable that this can lead to a reluctance to challenge authority, express dissent, or share innovative ideas.

- **Empowerment and Autonomy:** Giving team members more autonomy over their work and decision-making can help reduce dependency on authority figures and foster a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. ‘Laying off’ consciously can go a long way in instilling support. It would be always interesting to go back to one’s notes to see how the decision paid off.
- **Transparency and Openness:** Leaders can mitigate the effects of power imbalances by promoting transparency in decision-making processes and inviting input from all levels of the organization, not just those in leadership roles. Interpreting silence of the lesser resourceful team members in meetings and dialogues becomes an important gateway to question equity in the group.
- **Enhancing the Sphere of Influence:** Leaders can work consciously to expand the influence of all team members by promoting shared decision-making and encouraging contributions from all levels of the organization and especially empowering individuals through skill building and conceptual trainings, to feel more confident and engaged in shaping outcomes.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Implementing regular feedback loops and check-ins, can help gauge the emotional climate of the team and identify areas for improvement.
- **Being Vulnerable as a Leadership Value:** Vulnerable leaders create an environment where team members feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns. This openness contributes to a culture of transparency and inclusion. Vulnerability allows leaders to model a growth mindset. By acknowledging their mistakes and demonstrating a willingness to learn from them, leaders inspire others to embrace challenges and view setbacks as opportunities for growth,
- **Understanding Navigating the Groan Zone:** The "groan zone" refers to the phase in discussions where things become difficult, conflicts emerge, and misunderstandings are common. It’s a natural part of collaborative processes, where diverse perspectives meet. Leaders need to know how to shift into a more facilitative or broker role during these moments.
 - **Staying Neutral to Process:** Focus on understanding the underlying interests and concerns of each party without taking sides. This neutrality can help in finding a balanced solution.
 - **Manage Emotions:** Manage one’s own emotions and those of the team members. Acknowledging frustration and maintaining composure can help diffuse tensions.
 - **Focus on Shared Goals:** Remind the team of their common purpose and the bigger picture. This can help realign the group when disagreements become personal or overly focused on individual interests.
 - **Reflect on the process deeply afterwards:** Consider what went well, where tensions arose, and how the team eventually found common ground.

Tensions of Leadership and Partnership Brokering

Four: Defining Success

The tensions as a leader and an internal broker in defining success stem from differing approaches to power, goals, and measures of achievement. As leaders, the tendency is to focus on tangible outcomes and authority and as a broker one tries to move away and emphasize on process, relationships, and inclusivity.

Outcome vs. Process

- As a leader, one is used to typically defining success by achieving clear, measurable outcomes—completing a project on time, hitting specific performance targets, or implementing a strategic vision. Successes are often concerned with efficiency and the final product, ensuring that objectives are met according to plan. As a

broker, success is defined in the effectiveness of the process—how well relationships are managed, how inclusive decision-making is, and how well collaboration across stakeholders is fostered.

Speed vs. Sustainability

- Whether the focus will be on outcome or process, depends primarily on the speed and efficiency in achieving the goals of a project cycle. Meeting deadlines and demonstrating quick success can be seen as crucial for organizational momentum and stakeholder satisfaction. Valuing sustainability and long-term relationship-building over speed can take a backseat despite the understanding that the strength of ensuring that decisions are made with input from all stakeholders, creating buy-in, and fostering relationships usually lasts beyond the immediate project or initiative.

Individual Accountability vs. Shared Responsibility

- Often operating under a model of individual accountability, where the responsibility for success or failure falls squarely on the organization leader's shoulders, they are seen as the ones who must take charge and ensure things get done. Distributing accountability among all stakeholders is perceived to be costly and cumbersome.

Balancing the above

- Aligning both outcome-based goals and process-oriented benchmarks and incorporating process evaluations along with outcome metrics ensures that both measurable achievements and the quality of the decision-making process are valued.
- As leaders recognize that fostering relationships and trust can have long-term benefits that translate into future tangible outcomes, redrawing the broader strategy to incorporate the idea of sustainability by defining long term relationships and partnerships becomes possible.
- Organizations can track both tangible results (e.g., performance metrics) and intangible gains (e.g., stakeholder satisfaction, trust-building).
- Building capacities of team and communities to tell reflective stories can be another way of building new narratives of culture.

To successfully balance these tensions, a hybrid approach that values both tangible results and inclusive processes, both speed and sustainability, and both individual accountability and shared responsibility can create a more cohesive and effective path to success. It requires creativity and confidence to embark on this process.

Tensions of Leadership and Partnership Brokering

Five: Stepping Away

The tension is rooted in the differing roles and approaches to control, autonomy, and responsibility. As leaders it is perhaps more difficult to step back due to their focus on ownership and direct oversight of outcomes and they may seem to be less inclined to facilitate collaboration and delegate power to others.

Control vs. Facilitation

Leaders often find it challenging to relinquish control, as they are typically responsible for driving results and ensuring that targets are met. Stepping away can be seen as losing grip on the outcome, and there may be anxiety about whether the team will succeed without their direct involvement.

Leaders can learn to step away by gradually delegating responsibilities and building trust in their teams. Here the leader needs to don the hat of a broker by giving the team room to make decisions, encouraging others and by filling in the gaps to enable the teams/partners oversee the big picture while maintaining the inclusive processes. This is also based on the ability of the leader to interpret and redefine failure and success when the desired and identified result is not seen to be emerging.

Ownership vs. Shared Responsibility

Leaders often feel personally accountable for the success or failure of a project, making it difficult to step back. They may fear that stepping away could lead to a lack of direction or accountability, as the chain of command may become unclear.

Leaders can balance this by defining clear roles and responsibilities, distributing ownership among all team members or partners, fostering a collective approach to success. Stepping away is a way to reinforce that everyone is equally responsible for the outcome. Leaders can support this by encouraging distributed leadership, ensuring that each team member understands their role in contributing to the larger goal.

Visionary Direction vs. Empowerment

Leaders often carry a strategic vision for the team or organization, which can make stepping away feel risky, as they might worry that the vision will become diluted or misinterpreted without their constant input. Developing a clear strategic framework together ensuring that the vision remains aligned with the team's collective goals can be a way forward.

Building trust in their teams through gradual delegation and mentorship and seeking support of board members to provide assurance that the collective process is robust enough to handle uncertainties to empower the process. Ultimately, it is desirable that new visions emerge along with visionaries.

Conclusion

To create a lasting and scalable impact where teams actively embody partnership principles in their work with the community, they must first build confidence in these principles and learn when to lead or step back. This process of cultivating a strong internal culture starts within the organization, led by its leaders and embraced by team members. The central tensions involve balancing control, trust, and accountability. Leaders can navigate these challenges by cultivating confidence in their decision-making, while maintaining the courage to face obstacles and accept feedback. Through self-awareness, journaling, and mindfulness, leaders can recognize when ego is influencing their decisions and respond with more thoughtful, measured actions. By separating personal identity from one's role in the organization, leaders can make decisions that prioritize the collective good over personal recognition.

Fostering a culture of openness—where feedback and dialogue are encouraged, and mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth—helps curb ego-driven behaviours. Building a network of trusted colleagues, mentors, or a "critical friend" can provide valuable perspective and act as a sounding board for decisions, helping leaders stay grounded.

Leaders can balance their need for control with a facilitative, partnership-oriented approach by adopting shared leadership practices, clearly defining responsibilities, and creating frameworks that allow for both autonomy and oversight. A partnership mindset allows leaders to step back, ensuring that processes foster trust, collaboration, and inclusivity, resulting in a more balanced approach to leadership and partnership.

My journey of transitioning into a partnership broker role and adapting leadership styles has been about more than just changing processes—it has required a deeper cultural shift and a better understanding of self. This has meant creating an environment where reflection and dialogue are valued as much as action and results, and where leadership is about facilitating the emergence of collective insights, rather than providing all the answers. Though challenging, this journey has laid the foundation for building a more resilient and adaptive organizational culture—one where creativity, reflection, and collaboration are the cornerstones of sustainable change. My personal journey of finding balance has evolved into a collective one, where we all experience moments of "toppling over, standing up again, and continuously seeking balance together."



[Google Image Result](#)

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