



**Reflecting on the Synergy Between Vulnerable Leadership and Partnership  
Brokering Principles: Toolset for Creating authentic, trust-based partnerships**

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## Overarching Synopsis

This paper explores learnings from my partnership brokering journey in the second half of 2024 as a senior leader in a small humanitarian Non-Governmental-Organisation (NGO). 2024 was one of the toughest periods in the organization's 35-year history. It underwent 85% staff cuts due to an unprecedented loss of a major humanitarian program. As a result, the senior management had to pivot rapidly in operational modality and implement a drastic change management process. In my portfolio, one of the responsibilities meant that all 40 partnership arrangements had to be revisited, and we had to start exploring partnerships with large-scale corporate companies – an approach the organisation never explored with deliberation.

One's partnership journey began many years ago but even then concurrently renegotiating six priority humanitarian partnerships, one high stake government partnership, in addition to exploring partnerships with eight corporate companies that worked on a scale far larger than this organisation, with a team of two people in less than six months was intimidating.

My attendance at the *Partnership Brokering Course* helped to explore and constructively reflect on the role of a partnership broker and revisit some strategies that could be applied going forward. At a time of much chaos and multiple priorities, it was extremely helpful to learn to articulate the 'art' through a constructive framework which provided clarity and the conviction that ethical and principled approach to partnership brokering to achieve equity, respect and mutual benefit of the parties involved were indeed possible.

Aside from the technical elements of partnership brokering, the unique experience of the organization during this period opened a painful, but an unexpected opportunity to explore the application of the tenets of 'vulnerable leadership' as part of professional practice. Through series of reflective exercises (two case studies were explored in depth in the partnership logbook) based on professional practice, I have been reminded once again that when addressing complex, interconnected challenges in partnership brokering, it requires more than the surface-level collaborations. Partnerships that truly make an impact must be rooted in authentic trust, mutual respect and shared accountability. The synergy between 'vulnerable leadership' and 'partnership brokering principles' have indeed provided an insight to the much needed 'how' in the context of successful partnership discussions and agreements.

In the last six months, much of my reflection explored the intersection of vulnerable leadership and partnership brokering principles, considering how these frameworks can support the development of meaningful partnerships based on authenticity. This paper draws on these reflections examining how embracing these approaches can transform the nature of collaborative efforts.

## Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of partnerships, it is increasingly evident that addressing complex, interconnected challenges require more than superficial collaboration. For an international organisation that navigates the humanitarian and development nexus, we have observed a significant change in expectation from our local partners. They expect meaningful and respectful implementation of the localization agenda that is based on equity and respect for their expertise and experience. Thus, partnerships with the potential for transformative impact must be anchored in authentic trust, mutual respect, and shared accountability. This reflective piece delves into the interplay between vulnerable leadership and partnership brokering principles, exploring how these frameworks collectively support the cultivation of impactful, trust-based partnerships. Where partnerships do not come into fruition, it also draws on observations of how it impacts those on the negotiation table. Drawing from professional literature and case studies based on professional practice between June and December 2024, this paper examines how adopting these approaches can fundamentally enhance the nature and outcomes of collaborative endeavors which are expressed in key lessons.

## Vulnerable Leadership: A Personal Perspective

The concept of vulnerable leadership resonates deeply as a counterpoint to traditional leadership paradigms, which often equate effectiveness with authority and certainty. By contrast, global experts highlight tenets such as emotional authenticity<sup>1</sup>, emotional intelligence<sup>2</sup>, empathy and compassion<sup>3</sup>, building trust<sup>4</sup>, courage<sup>5</sup>, encouraging inclusivity<sup>6</sup> and openness to uncertainty as some characteristics that describe the essence of success through vulnerable leadership style. This approach challenges conventional norms, offering an alternative pathway to building trust and collaboration appropriate to various settings.

In professional settings, research highlights the transformative impact of vulnerable leadership. Some researchers underscore that leaders who exhibit vulnerability by admitting their limitations or uncertainties foster greater psychological safety among teams<sup>7</sup> which encourages individuals to contribute innovative ideas without fear of judgment. Similarly, others reveal that leaders who authentically express emotions are perceived as more relatable and trustworthy, enhancing team cohesion and performance<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, B. (2015). *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*. Random House.

<sup>2</sup> Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Bantam Books.

<sup>3</sup> Sinek, S. (2014). *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*. Penguin Group.

<sup>4</sup> Covey, S. M. R. (2006). *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. Free Press.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, B. (2012). *The Power of Vulnerability*. TEDx Houston.

<sup>6</sup> Grant, A. (2018). *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*. Penguin Books.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, B. (2015). *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*. Random House.

<sup>8</sup> Côté, S., Kraus, M. W., Cheng, B. H., Oveis, C., van der Lowe, I., Lian, H., & Keltner, D. (2020). The social effects of leaders' emotional expressions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 31(1), 101-120.

As a professional trained in deep traditional leadership paradigm for over 20 years, the growing emphasis on vulnerable leadership style and its characteristics and impact across sectors is a welcomed and valuable addition to established leadership frameworks. Rather than existing as a separate model, tenets of vulnerable leadership enriches traditional approaches by introducing a more holistic leadership approach that fosters environments where teams feel secure to innovate, share ideas, and collaborate meaningfully, resulting in greater engagement, creativity, and long-term success in chosen endeavours.

In the last six months, I have learned that these principles provided a synergy in application to partnership brokering principles that positively influence fostering of trust that is vital to achieving transformative and mutually beneficial outcomes. This approach proved particularly effective in navigating partnerships that were either on the brink of crisis or showing signs of imminent deterioration.

In one instance, this approach created opportunities within a crisis that fostered deeper trust and authenticity—qualities that were essential to elevating the partnership to a more advanced level of collaboration. In another case, while the formalization of the partnership was ultimately unachievable due to misaligned strategic objectives and incompatible operational processes between the organizations, the engagement still yielded significant value. It provided individuals from the other organization with their first exposure to a constructive and positive dialogue. This experience, though it did not result in a formal partnership, likely left a lasting impression, shaping their approach to future discussions and collaborations.

In partnerships where the application of these two approaches yielded no tangible impact, we learned that certain critical precursors serve as indicators of the boundaries of what is achievable in collaborative efforts. Without these foundational elements, it becomes challenging, if not impossible, to establish authentic partnership practices.

### **Impactful Partnership Brokering: Amplifying Effective Planning and Collaboration with Limited Resources through Existing Support Framework**

Partnerships frequently face challenges such as misaligned objectives, power imbalances, and ineffective communication—issues that closely mirrored those encountered by my organization in our collaborations with priority partners. Operating under significant organizational limitations, both internally and with our partner organizations, alongside external constraints such as the scale of challenges and the rapid pace of change, we relied on established frameworks like those outlined in the *The Partnering Initiative*<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://archive.thepartneringinitiative.org/the-partnering-toolbook/>

These frameworks, along with professional case studies<sup>10</sup> documenting how skilled facilitation can prevent the breakdown of partnerships, played a crucial role in rapid capacity development (or more accurately knowledge development) which assisted in shaping our internal planning and fostering open dialogues with key stakeholders.

Furthermore, opportunities to share challenges close to real time in closed forums such as the Community of Practice<sup>11</sup> enabled one to stress test approaches in a safe environment and receive support in developing a constructive application of the partnership brokering principles. The diversity of the group members provided various approaches, suggestions and potential solutions which were extremely valuable during a period where you were limited with time and resources. Practical approaches such as this assisted to ensure approaches enabled constructive unpacking of emotionally charged issues with nuanced solutions that were supportive of multiple interests between the parties involved.

### Intersections Between Vulnerable Leadership and Partnership Brokering

A deeper insight unveiled not only a synergistic relationship but also a considerable potential for mutual reinforcement when the principles of vulnerable leadership are seamlessly integrated into partnership brokering practices and applied during collaborative discussions.

Both frameworks share a foundational belief in the importance of trust, authenticity, and shared purpose for effective collaboration. When the qualities of vulnerable leadership—such as openness, emotional intelligence, and inclusivity—are incorporated into partnership brokering practices, they create an environment where trust flourishes. This, in turn, fosters authentic discussions, agreements, and actions that can lead to transformative outcomes.

Diagram 1



For example, during a session with a long-standing humanitarian partner, it was necessary to facilitate a challenging conversation addressing multiple critical issues. The blue circles in **Diagram 1**<sup>12</sup> illustrate the key elements that were meticulously considered and discussed during the planning

<sup>10</sup> <https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/resources/>

<sup>11</sup> SEA-AUS CoP was initiated by a small group of cohort members from the Partnership Brokers Training held in Brisbane in July 2024. Held once a month, closed group members gathered to share challenges with the group where potential solutions were also shared that were founded by the partnership brokering principles.

<sup>12</sup> The blue elements describe tenets of vulnerable leadership as outlined in the Forbes Article: *The Power Of Vulnerability In Leadership: Experts Say Authenticity And Honesty Can Move People And Achieve Results*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/luisromero/2023/03/08/the-power-of-vulnerability-in-leadership-experts-say-authenticity-and-honesty-can-move-people-and-achieve-results/>

phase preceding the formal meeting. The yellow circle represents an unplanned element that emerged organically during the discussions, leading to an unexpected yet highly positive impact on the outcome. This experience underscored an important realization: as an organization committed to co-learning with partners on the meaningful implementation of the 'localization agenda' and co-designing more effective collaborative approaches, it became evident that addressing power dynamics and asymmetrical partnership structures requires more than a focus on the 'language' of collaboration. It necessitates tangible actions that demonstrate genuine commitment to equity and mutual respect in practice.

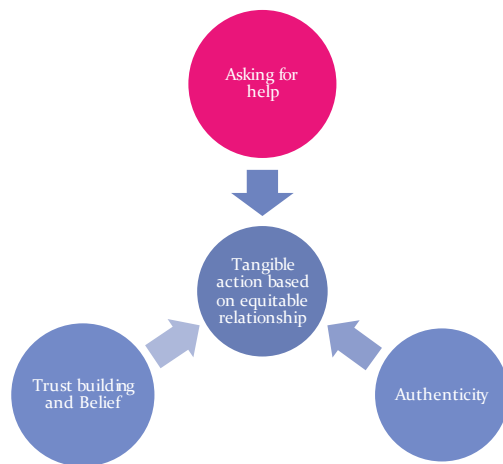


Diagram 2

Both organizations had to confront the reality that addressing asymmetrical partnerships required a mutual acknowledgment and acceptance that each possessed equally valuable resources and expertise to contribute. For the organization I represented, seeking assistance from our partner organization in the Pacific signified not only the recognition of this fact but also a deliberate and humble step toward active collaboration. Feedback from our partner indicated that this approach strengthened their sense of trust and belief in the partnership. This trust was demonstrated

through their unprecedented tangible support, which aligned with our request for assistance and ultimately delivered mutual benefits for both organizations, as depicted in **Diagram 2**.

It is crucial to recognize that this approach does not ensure success under all conditions. A key insight gained from this experience is that the efficacy of such combined principles is highly contingent upon the pre-existing dynamics between the partners and the level of maturity each party demonstrates in fostering healthy, collaborative relationships. In this particular instance, the approach yielded exceptional results, largely because mutual respect among individual representatives and a profound understanding of each organization's objectives and methodologies had already been firmly established.

Conversely, it became evident that this approach was significantly less effective when engaging with corporate entities whose foundational principles and business models diverged substantially from those of our organization. The lack of aligned values and mutual understanding posed considerable challenges in establishing the trust necessary for sustaining meaningful and productive engagement.

In one notable case, a partnership discussion with a corporate entity was expedited due to external project deadlines outside the control of both organizations. This accelerated timeline added layers of complexity to the brokering process, compounded by several multi-dimensional factors. A limited understanding of each organization's business approach, strategic priorities, and operational frameworks hindered the effective application of vulnerable leadership principles and the partnership brokering methodology.

Where there was an absence of foundational knowledge about each organization's history and representatives' grasp of effective partnership practices—particularly if this gap existed on one side—the discussions tended to devolve into transactional outcomes. This perpetuated a negative cycle rooted in asymmetrical relationships, reflecting the default status quo. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in this particular instance, the principles of vulnerable leadership, grounded within the partnership brokering framework, were applied at a technical level despite these constraints.

While the ultimate success of the partnership was not realized, it was clear that consistent engagement and constructive dialogue yielded several positive and tangible outcomes for the project. Feedback from the corporate organization highlighted the enduring impact of this engagement, with many individuals noting that it marked the first instance in which they participated in a constructive, solution-oriented discussion, irrespective of the project's context. It is our hope that this experience will inspire them to adopt a similar approach in future partnership discussions with humanitarian and development partners.

### **Learnings on Integration of Vulnerable Leadership and Partnership Brokering Principles**

I imagine there are numerous partnership broker practitioners who are well on their way to mastering the art of integrating principles of vulnerable leadership into their practice, and I hope the following insights resonate with existing strategies and best practices, while offering additional perspectives:

1. **The Power of Authenticity:** motional honesty and openness are essential for building trust and fostering meaningful connections, which in turn shape the authenticity of both new and existing partnerships. Being 'authentic' in one's approach requires a nuanced understanding of cultural and contextual dynamics. When achieved, it cultivates 'trust' and 'belief'—key qualities that are fundamental to the co-creation of equitable and respectful partnership models.
2. **Lean In and Ask for Assistance:** 'Asking for help' demands courage and is inherently tied to humility, especially when approached in a constructive and thoughtful manner. Requesting assistance serves as one of many avenues to acknowledge and respect the diverse expertise and skill sets that each partner brings to the table. This fosters a

strength-based model of complementarity, actively preventing asymmetrical relationships and unequal power dynamics.

3. **Pradigm Shift Requires Time:** Partnership brokers play a pivotal role in navigating complex dynamics, promoting equity, and keeping the focus on shared goals. While the integrated approach has significant potential, its success is largely dependent on the context and dynamics of the specific partnership. As individual practitioners, the consistent application of this integrated approach will encourage a positive paradigm shift that may take time to materialize. While you may not immediately see the impact of these changes, others will recognize their value in due course.
4. **The Value of Inclusivity and Learning through Existing Network of Practitioners:** Diverse perspectives enrich partnerships, leading to more sustainable and impactful outcomes. This process begins with learning from other practitioners and leveraging available resources. Global insights and perspectives, such as those found through Communities of Practice or the resources offered by the Partnerships Brokering Association, provide invaluable guidance that can encourage diversity and inclusivity in partnership discussions.

These insights have profoundly influenced partnership dialogues with various organizations over the past six months. As a practitioner, they have underscored the importance of keeping an open mind towards new approaches (to the practitioner) and in my case it was adopting a new leadership and facilitation approaches that prioritize trust-building, inclusivity, and collective responsibility—essential ingredients for cultivating effective and transformative, equitable, and respectful partnership brokering processes.

## **Conclusion**

The synergy between vulnerable leadership and partnership brokering principles constitutes a robust framework for cultivating impactful partnerships. By prioritizing trust, authenticity, and a shared sense of purpose, these approaches lay the groundwork for meaningful collaboration that transcends mere transactional and asymmetrical agreements. As collective action becomes ever more essential in addressing the complexities of challenges in the development and humanitarian space, the integration of vulnerability and principled facilitation stood out as a transformative methodology for my organisation in the last six months.

Looking ahead, I believe the adoption or consideration of these principles in professional engagements can foster environments where stakeholders contribute openly, with genuine commitment and equity in mind. This reflection highlights the profound potential inherent in prioritizing transparency, inclusivity, and authentic trust within collaborative initiatives, setting the stage for more profound and sustainable outcomes.