



Understanding Enablers & Blockers in Multi-Sector Partnerships

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My brokering journey

Throughout my professional career, I have actively engaged with communities through various initiatives, from addressing concerns about agro-chemicals to organizing community-based organizations and advocating for participatory technology development. Professionally I have focused primarily on my country – Pakistan, but through my partnership work I have become familiar with sustainable agriculture challenges and initiatives in both developed and developing countries.

To further develop my skills in community engagement and empowerment, I pursued facilitation training, which provided me with the opportunity to serve as a facilitator both locally and internationally. This training has proven invaluable in my current role.

In 2017, I was introduced to the term "Partnership Broker" and had the opportunity to be involved in a partnering agreement. The process captivated me and ignited a desire to deepen my understanding. In 2018, my office organized a short introductory training on partnerships, which fueled my growing interest. Subsequently, our job descriptions were redefined to include a focus on partnership management. As a result, managing and developing partnerships became central to my work. In 2022, I completed a four-day course on partnership brokering, marking the beginning of my journey toward accreditation.

One evening, after a particularly challenging stakeholder meeting, I returned home feeling drained and disheartened. While having dinner with my daughter, we reflected on our day and discussed the various behaviours that arise in group settings. She reminded me of the concept of "enablers and blockers" in group facilitation. This perspective instantly reshaped how I viewed the meeting, and I recognized how relevant this concept was to the process of partnership brokering as well.

Integrating the enablers/blockers concept into my ongoing professional practice has been helpful to me and made me a more self-aware partnership broker. My interest in investigating further the application of the concept through my accreditation project has been prompted by a desire to share my experience with peer partnership brokers, but also to learn from them.

What are the applications of the enabler/blocker concept in partnership brokering? What are the limitations or dangers of using the concept? In what circumstances or contexts is the concept counterproductive or unhelpful? I believe these are some of the questions that will resonate with peer partnership brokers. For this reason my accreditation project is more about starting a conversation or dialogue on the enabler/blocker concept and its application in partnership brokering practice than an attempt to provide once-and-for-all answers.

Enablers/blockers in context

Partnership building aimed at dealing with a challenge or problem relies on identifying stakeholders as potential partners, who must then be brought into the partnership-building process. The task of the partnership broker is to help prospective partners gain an appreciation for the potential benefits of working in partnership rather than acting alone or in isolation.

Transforming stakeholders into partners requires them to recognize that the costs and risks involved, need to be shared among partners, rather transferred or dumped onto others, if the desired results & benefits are to be achieved for all partners individually and collectively.

Partnership brokers can play a crucial role in promoting and enabling prospective partners to adopt pro-partnering behaviour in the partnership building process. It is helpful for partnership brokers to work out how to distinguish between behaviours that block or disincentivize constructive partnering and those that enable or incentivize it.

As a practicing partnership broker, I asked myself what kind of prompts or rules of thumb might help make my interventions aimed at accelerating partnership building more effective and impactful?

In seeking answers to this question, I sought to understand better the role of enablers and blockers as seen by my experienced partnership building practitioners involved in the Australia's ACIAR work.

The ACIAR work, of which I am part, seeks to achieve more productive and sustainable agricultural systems through mounting research partnerships in developing countries.

My reflections along with the five Audio interviews on enabling/blocking behaviour in partnering, which I completed as part of this project constitute a milestone in my journey to become a PBA accredited partnership broker. My hope is that they will be of interest to partnership brokers operating in different geographies, as well as those concerned with a different thematic focus.

ACIAR broker, facilitate, invest in, and manage strategic partnerships with public and private research institutions to improve the productivity and sustainability of agricultural systems and the resilience of food systems in partner countries. It identifies opportunities and partnerships to undertake international agricultural research and capacity-building but does not undertake research directly.

Partnership is key for ACIAR-supported research aiming to produce specific research outputs that translate to development outcomes. To build and maintain these essential research partnerships, ACIAR has a network of in-country staff across ten office locations in four key regions—the Pacific, East and South-East Asia, South Asia and Eastern and Southern Africa. For more detail visit: <https://www.aciar.gov.au/>

I started out my exploration by trying to understand the concept of blockers and enablers in partnership building. In what sense is blocking or enabling behaviour associated with individuals or sectors? Is it something that stems from conditions or contexts? Is it something that is dynamic and changes over time? Or is blocking/enabling behaviour part of the psychology or personality of individuals that cannot be easily changed?

I started out by reading and reflecting on how the concept of blockers and enablers played out in my own experience.

Reading and reflecting on my own experience

The dictionary meaning of enabler: *something or someone that makes it possible for a particular thing to happen or be done*; & of blocker is: *something or someone that prevents something from happening or succeeding* (5). We come across these sorts of behaviour in our daily life and our response varies. However for a partnership broker the response will be different.

Christopher and Leyla have categorized enablers and blockers in three types: cultural, institutional, and personal. Cultural blockers come from the values, beliefs, and dominant ways of thinking.

Institutional blockers are those related to the characteristics, policies, and practices of institutions. Personal blockers are related to the mindset and skillset of the stakeholder (6).

The concept of blockers & enablers appears to refer to behaviour and attitude. These kinds of behaviours cannot be fixed with personality. These behaviours emerge because of one's fear and assumptions. The performance blocking behaviours like obstructing change, subverting vision, and creating hinderances in reaching to the goals and objectives are important because they can destabilize or slow-down the partnership development process.

Enablers are individuals whose behaviour actively supports and facilitates the growth and development of the partnership. They might be naturally forthcoming or may need encouragement to become more engaged. It's crucial to bring them to a platform where they can contribute effectively. Enabling behaviour can also be attributed to organisations or institutions. But my focus here is on individuals.

Blockers, on the other hand, are those who behave as if they do not see the value in the partnership or doubt its potential to achieve its goals. They can hinder progress due to their scepticism or differing beliefs. They can cause disruption and obstruction. Blocking behaviour is often attributed to bureaucracy and other external factors related to institutions and culture. My focus here is, however, on individuals who must deal with the blocking behaviour of the organisations or institutions with which they are associated.

In my experience, blocking behaviour is seldom deliberate, but counteracting blocking behaviour may require a great deal of the energy, effort, and drive from Partnership brokers. This means that an important investment and preparation for partnership building needs to be focused on creating an enabling environment. Managing assumptions and fears effectively can transform blocking behaviour into enabling behaviour.

For example, we initiated a new partnership to enhance the vegetable value chain, focusing on hybrid seed development and grower access. Stakeholders included researchers, local research institutes, academia and students, growers, and a seed company. Researchers and academia had a strong relationship, while the seed company was new.

I found the seed company innovative, producing hybrid seeds in their greenhouses with a unique code on each packet for quality verification. This system involved a mobile network operator, a mobile-based verification service, and possibly a national seed agency.

Researchers and academia were hesitant to include the seed company in meetings, preferring to develop technology with universities and students first. To address this, we organized a visit to the seed company. The staff welcomed feedback, and students were fascinated. This initial interaction helped ease tensions and paved the way for smoother collaboration.

The broker who usually sees him/herself as an enabler can sometimes act also as a blocker, and so it's important for the broker to be self-aware and constantly asking himself/herself this question – is my behaviour blocking or enabling?

Consider the situation where – a partnership broker sends out invitation to the stakeholders for an initial meeting. Some stakeholders don't reply – it is easy for the broker to assume that these

recipients are not interested. – this is blocking behaviour! It leads to a dejected feeling. This usually happens with internal or inexperienced brokers. However a seasoned broker practicing reflection can come to a different conclusion by trying to understand why the invitation was ignored and adjust the response accordingly.

Enabling behaviour on the part of the broker might focus on addressing recipient's agenda concerns, different priorities, or other pressing assignments (1). Receiving a "no" should not be the end of an interaction, but the beginning of one...

The context of multisectoral partnering

A partnership that emerges when all stakeholders (like government, non-profit, private, and public organizations, community groups, and individual community members) join hands and agree to share the success and failure to achieve a desired benefit equally good for all. However this is a challenging task. Recently I was involved in developing a partnership for water resource management. We brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including public organizations (irrigation departments), water researchers, academia, civil society organizations, water users' associations, and growers. Each stakeholder had strong opinions about the others and often placed blame elsewhere, leading to significant coordination challenges.

To address this, we organized numerous meetings and discussions, both separately and collectively, to build consensus around the idea of collaboration. It took considerable time for stakeholders to recognize that each partner brought unique strengths to the table. We emphasized that this journey towards our goal had to be a team effort, with shared resources and shared responsibility for both successes and failures.

This experience taught me the importance of patience and persistent communication in building trust and understanding among diverse partners. It resonated with many of my colleagues at ACIAR who have faced similar challenges in multisectoral partnerships, highlighting the value of collaboration as mutual respect that generates mutual benefit.

As this partnership draws resources from various diverse sectors so it has a better chance to succeed. This is also true if you have smaller organization seeking to partner. Every partner brings value to the partnership. The partners understand that their own expertise alone is not sufficient to accomplish the greater benefit. They also have understood that while engaging with partners they might have to make certain sacrifices or compromises (2). In the above example – it was a challenging activity, we were aiming to improve water resource management by bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders: public organizations (irrigation departments), water researchers, academia, civil society organizations, water users' associations, and growers. Each group had its own strong opinions and often blamed the others for various issues, which made coordination extremely stressful and uncomfortable.

For instance, during one of our initial meetings, the irrigation department representatives were very dismissive of the growers' concerns, viewing them as uninformed and resistant to change. On the other hand, the growers felt that the researchers and public organizations were out of touch with

the practical realities they faced daily. This mutual distrust led to a lot of blocking behaviour, where each group was more focused on defending their own positions rather than working towards a common goal.

To address this, we had to arrange numerous back-and-forth meetings, both separately and collectively, to slowly build trust and understanding. It was a painstaking process, but over time, we managed to create a sense of shared purpose. By emphasizing that each partner brought valuable strengths to the table and that success or failure would be a collective outcome, we gradually overcame the initial resistance.

This experience taught me that working with unlike partners can indeed be stressful and uncomfortable, often leading to defensive and blocking behaviours. However, with patience, open communication, and a focus on building mutual respect, it's possible to transform these challenges into a productive and collaborative partnership.

At the onset of any partnership initiative stakeholders don't feel comfortable like a new kid in class. They might have good relationship and trust on the broker but trusting all at early stage is difficult. In fact, Tennyson reflects that, "perhaps the only thing that all partners have in common at the start of the process is their uncertainty about each other, the partnership itself, and what it will demand of them" (4). In the previous example about developing a partnership about the vegetable value chain, researchers, academia, and students were comfortable working together due to past collaborations. However, the seed company and growers were new and cautious, having never worked with these partners before. Researchers and academia believed businesses were profit-driven and didn't appreciate research, while growers were seen as lacking the education to understand research dynamics. Conversely, the seed company and growers viewed researchers and academia as focused solely on research and publication, disconnected from practical realities. This mutual distrust was evident from the start.

Interviewing ACIAR peer partnership brokers

In reaching out to my five informants, I sought to verify my own reflections and enrich them. Each of my conversations, including those recorded, I made use of a series of prompts or talking points which I shared with my informant in preparing for the interview.

- Relevancy of usefulness of Concept of blockers and enablers in your work.
- Enabling partnering behaviour & lessons from these examples.
- Working through disabling or blocking partnering behaviour & lesson learnt
- Are partnership brokers sometimes blockers rather than enablers? Do you have any personal experiences in this regard?

ACIAR brokers and funds research partnerships between Australian scientists and their counterparts in developing countries. To build and maintain these essential partnerships, we rely on a network of in-country staff who develop, maintain, and manage these collaborations. The Country Network is enhancing its capacity in partnership brokering and knowledge management to handle rapid changes in some countries.

Based on their experiences, the diversity of their partnerships, the challenges they faced in managing these partnerships, and the duration of their collaborations, I interviewed the following associates, with whom I have developed strong professional relationships. Like me, they all operate as partnership brokers. For them partnership brokering is second nature.

- **Mai Alagcan:** Mai and I have been together from last many years. She laid the foundation of partnering agreement at Philippine before moving to Pacific.
- **Hazel Aniceto:** Hazel's expertise in community engagement has greatly influenced our approach to stakeholder management.
- **Thi-Thanh-An Nguyen:** An has done her Masters in Communication and she has more than 25 years' experience stakeholder management. I always seek guidance form her in managing communication in partnerships.
- **Pratibha Singh:** Pratibha has been in partnership manager in a multinational agribusiness. Her experience from the private sector has provided some new insights for multisector research partnerships.
- **Chetali Chhabra:** Chetali had exposure to partnership brokering prior to joining of ACIAR. Her view on partnership management has always helped me.

These interviews provided deep insights into the complexities and rewards of managing diverse, multi-sectoral partnerships in relation to the concept of blockers and enablers. For listening the interviews follow the link:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tmGu_lebljhwV3dniT40YrvfZzCBIQZ?usp=sharing

Making sense of Blockers & Enablers

When you propose a partnership idea to your stakeholders, they analyze how well it aligns with their needs and goals, as well as the current strategy and competitive advantage of joining the partnership. Some stakeholders might feel uneasy about this new approach and resist it, while others may be eager to embark on this new journey. Consequently, blockers challenge the broker to be innovative and creative in managing the partnership processes.

A delay in response or a simple "no" to the partnering process should not be seen as a lack of intention to join but rather as an opportunity to be more innovative in addressing the blocking behavior. Kym, in her paper, quotes Rafal: "Discomfort could be seen as a signal or indicator that something new is, or can be forged, that a breakthrough may happen (3)." However, this poses a challenge to the partnership broker and inspires the acquisition of new tools and skills. Kym Burke also argues that partnership brokering is not always comfortable. As a broker, you are exposed to conflict and strong emotions (3).

During interviews I found that my colleagues have gone through same sort of experiences. It may be the culture of the organization or nature of our jobs that across different regions and cultures our experiences are about blockers and enablers are almost same with some minor variation.

One of the peers has shared an interesting experience where an enabler turned into a blocker due to a shift in beliefs, which affected the project's conclusion. This highlights how roles can change based on context and individual perspectives.

Reflecting on the interviews, I noticed several differences and similarities between my experiences and those of the informants.

Differences:

- **Approach to Challenges:** Some informants had unique strategies for overcoming obstacles that I hadn't considered. For example, a few brokers emphasized the importance of leveraging informal networks, which was different from my more structured approach.
- **Perception of Courage:** While I viewed courage as a fundamental value, some informants saw it more as a situational trait, necessary only in specific contexts.

Surprises:

- **Adaptability:** I was surprised by how adaptable some brokers were in shifting their strategies based on the partnership's evolving needs. This flexibility was more pronounced than I had initially expected.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** The high level of emotional intelligence displayed by many brokers was unexpected. They often prioritized understanding and managing emotions, both their own and others', to facilitate smoother partnerships.

In Line with Expectations:

- **Creativity and Innovation:** The need for creativity and innovation in brokering partnerships was consistently highlighted, aligning with my preliminary reflections.
- **Challenges and Hurdles:** The consensus that partnership brokering is fraught with challenges was in line with my expectations.

Consensus Points:

- **Importance of Communication:** There was a strong agreement on the critical role of clear and open communication in successful partnerships.
- **Value of Trust:** Trust was universally acknowledged as a cornerstone of effective partnerships.

Differences:

- **Risk Tolerance:** Informants differed in their tolerance for risk. Some were more willing to take bold steps, while others preferred a cautious approach.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Approaches to conflict resolution varied, with some favoring direct confrontation and others opting for more diplomatic methods.

Learnings from Interviews:

- **Holistic View:** I learned to adopt a more holistic view of partnership brokering, considering not just strategic but also emotional and relational aspects.

- **Flexibility:** The importance of being flexible and adaptable in response to changing dynamics was a key takeaway.
- **Continuous Learning:** The interviews reinforced the idea that continuous learning and self-reflection are vital for effective partnership brokering.

These insights have enriched my understanding and will undoubtedly influence my future approach to managing partnerships.

Conclusion

Interviews reveal that people acknowledge the difficulties of being a partnership broker, especially when encountering blockers. However, some blockers can be turned into enablers if the underlying cause of their blocking behavior is identified. To get to the bottom of it, brokers must put in extra work and preparation.

A powerful insight is that the broker can become the blocker or display blocking behaviour. This is why brokers must always assess the current needs of the partnership and evaluate their own actions in the partnering process in relation to those needs – what does the partnership need now? Am I providing partners with what they need now?

In interviews, my colleagues have shared similar experiences. A partnership broker can become a blocker in the following ways:

1. **Failing to remain neutral:** This can create a power imbalance, leading to mistrust and preventing a fair and balanced relationship from emerging. It can also create an environment where some voices are not heard or valued, culminating to disengagement and inefficiency.
2. **Ignoring conflicts:** Conflicts are natural and healthy but ignoring them won't help. For the partnership to move forward and achieve its objectives, conflicts need to be addressed.
3. **Introducing complex processes or procedures:** This can create unnecessary barriers that slow down progress, confuse partners, or prevent them from focusing on their main objectives.
4. **Not following up on agreements, commitments, or action points:** This can lead to frustration, erode trust, and block the momentum needed to move the partnership forward.

In essence, while a partnership broker plays a crucial role in enabling partnerships, their own actions, lack of awareness, or missteps can inadvertently block the very progress they are trying to facilitate. It's essential for brokers to be self-aware, neutral, and responsive to the needs and dynamics of all parties involved. The process is always messy and always unfinished. For this reason practicing reflection is not a 'nice-to-have' for the broker, but a 'must-have'!

In the spirit of sharing and learning, I offer 5 rules of thumb for partnership brokers who are interested in applying the concept of enablers and blockers in their professional practice.

1	Blocking or enabling behaviour is not hardwired in individuals. Always distinguish behaviour of a person from the person. We all behave as blockers or enablers. In other words, don't judge the person, but their behaviour and its consequences.
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2	Enablers can become blockers. And vice-versa. Blocking and/or enabling behaviour is about the relationship (past, present & future) between the individual, their organisation and the partnership that is being strengthened or created.
3	As a broker serving the partnering process, you are not immune to enabling/blocking behaviour. Reflect on how you – as a partnership broker – are helping or hindering partners to collaborate with one another more effectively. You may be part of the problem as opposed to part of the solution.
4	Look to assumptions, fears and motivations to understand blocking/enabling behaviour. Recognise that both blocking and enabling behaviour can be beneficial for partnership building. Both are opportunities. As a broker, don't waste effort trying to turn blockers into enablers. Always focus on the partnership – on what it needs and on what value it brings and to whom (now and in the future)
5	Make sure governance arrangements (rules developed for partnership operations) create space for taking advantage of blocking and enabling behaviour of partners and stakeholders, for example through periodic health checks and evaluations of the extent to which the partnership is achieving its potential.

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