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CREATED BY PARTNERSHIP BROKERS. PRESENTED BY PBA.



Working inside a large organizational culture to achieve more effective partnering

This paper explores how the culture of a large organisation can influence effective partnering, and how internal brokers can act to build partnering culture and stronger partnerships. Key themes of overcoming what were found to be common blockages associated with a hierarchical, siloed and customer/business-oriented culture include: understanding diverse positions and developing common goals; shared language and culture; building internal connection and communication; developing and sharing tools and resources that show the value of partnering; and, working with influential external agents that understand partnering. What becomes evident is that internal brokers are important agents shaping organisational culture to be more 'fit for partnering'.

AUTHOR: ALLY LANKESTER

ORGANISATION: Collaboration Analyst at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

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PBA Accreditation Paper, Ally Lankester

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the culture of a large organisation can influence effective partnering¹, and how internal brokers can act to build partnering culture and stronger partnerships. I draw on the literature, my action learning to scope a partnership with two large public organisations, and the insights of four others with experience working in large organisations to support partnerships. Key themes of overcoming what were found to be common blockages associated with a hierarchical, siloed and customer/business-oriented culture include: understanding diverse positions and developing common goals; shared language and culture; building internal connection and communication; developing and sharing tools and resources that show the value of partnering; and, working with influential external agents that understand partnering. What becomes evident is that internal brokers are important agents shaping organisational culture to be more 'fit for partnering'.

INTRODUCTION

Working inside a large organisation to support better partnering has generated a whole new interest for me in understanding organisational culture, particularly public bureaucracies, and how they work, are understood and their intentions and realities of change. The culture of an organisation is shaped by core assumptions, beliefs, values and norms that influence individual and group behaviour, but is also shaped by the behaviour of humans in this context (Reid, 2016). Schein (1992) outlines three cultural aspects of organisations:

- artefacts (visible organisational structures and processes),
- espoused values (strategies, goals, philosophies), and
- underlying assumptions (unconscious, taken for granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings, hence the ultimate source of values and action) (Hundal, 2015).

The systems and processes of an organisation are often most visible with the underlying assumptions that guide behaviour being less obvious. An organisation can also have competing values that relate to different cultural orientations (e.g. group, development, rational, hierarchical) with differing underlying assumptions about motivation, leadership, and effectiveness (Denison and Spreitzer, 1991). There is also a described 'feel' of an organisation, which incorporates the nature of dimensions such as interpersonal relationships, hierarchy, work and the focus of support and rewards (Schneider, Brief and Guzzo, 1996). There is likely to be a combination of climates and cultures or sub-cultures within an organisation with some being more dominant than others, especially for a large geographically and disciplinary-spread organisation. The degree to which creativity and innovation (e.g. continuous learning, risk taking, support for change, constructive responses to conflict and mistakes) occur will be influenced by the organisation's strategy, structure, support mechanisms, behaviour and extent of open communication (Martins and Terblanche, 2003).

¹ This paper is focused on 'partnership' that is a non-transactional cross-sector arrangement to work together to achieve a shared purpose with the intention to share risk and benefits and review and revise the arrangement regularly (PBA, 2017). For a partnership to be effective they require investment and a shared understanding of what a 'partnership' is, a clear purpose, mutual accountability, added value to the work of each other, co-planning and monitoring and a principled approach to working together (PBA, 2017).

Large scale bureaucracies have their origin in the start of industrialism when the division of labour in society and work become more complex and difficult to manage. The responsibilities and coordination of activities became focused on specialised units; and there was the creation of regular, standardised behaviour and orderly structure governed by rules, hierarchy and experts (Thompson and McHugh, 1995). However, since globalisation and neo-liberal developments in the 1970s there has been a global shift in all public sectors, and consequently the non-profit sector, to what has been termed New Public Management (NPM). The intention of NPM was to replace what was seen to be deficiencies (e.g. inefficiency) in the traditional model of public management and make public sector organisations much more 'business like' and 'stakeholder-market-customer oriented' (Diefenbach, 2009). This new administration was also a response to reductions in public funding and the need to generate revenue due to less public funding and shifting political agendas. This shift has also spread to the not-profit or NGO sector, mainly due to governments increasingly turning to competitive tendering and contracting as NPM became more dominant (Lambell et al, 2008).

The translation of this new administration depends on the organisational context, and there are different cultural variants of NPM (Hood, 1995). However, a general trend has been for the organisation to develop strategies based on innovation and entrepreneurship in line with their private counterparts with strategic objectives to 'increase efficiency and productivity' and 'cost-effectiveness' (Diefenbach, 2009). Diefenbach's (2009) critique of NPM describes consequences of this entrepreneurial shift to be a move away from meeting the needs and concerns of citizens to meeting the needs and interests of influential external stakeholders and customers, deletion of activities that are not profit-making, an emphasis on quantitative performance metrics over measuring less tangible or qualitative assets and outcomes and more management layers in contrast to claims about less hierarchy. Due to the problems and challenges of NPM, there has been emerging interest in what's termed a 'public value approach' (Moore 1994, 1995). This approach is characterised as post-competitive, relationship focused and encompassing multiple goals and objectives and accountability systems; redefining the role of managers, requiring new skills and presenting challenges to the existing capabilities developed (O'Flynn, 2007).

Organisations, depending on their culture, vary in their 'readiness' to partner. Some may have the leadership to support a partnership strategy, an organisational framework for partnering, management systems that support partnership and people with skills in partnership (Reid, 2016). However, other organisations may have low awareness of partnering and when it is needed, and poor culture and few structures to support partnership.

CASE STUDY OF INTERNAL BROKER EXPERIENCES

I used a case study approach to explore how the culture of a large organisation can affect partnering and how a partnering culture can be enabled through partnering with another organisation and the actions of the internal broker. I provide a summary of my organisational context and the action learning of scoping a partnership with my mentor for the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) Accreditation Program. I also provide a synthesis of my insights and those of four others who I interviewed. The criteria for selecting people to interview was: (1) completion of the Partnership Brokers Training, and (2) having the experience of an internal broker type role in a large organisation. I selected people both based on people I knew who worked inside a large organisation and a snowball approach of interviewing one person and then others based on the suggestion of that person. I conducted semi-structured interviews and asked people about their organisational context, cultural factors they found were blockages and actions they found had worked to shift culture to enable more effective partnering. I had half hour to an hour phone interviews and sorted

the data into the three categories that Schein (1992) used to describe organisational culture (see above).

MY EXPERIENCE

My experience is based on working (at a project level) in the corporate and strategy part of a publicly funded research organisation to support partnerships, particularly with universities, and to work with the different parts of the organisation to develop and deliver strategy on collaboration. My role involves supporting the research units/divisions with their partnerships; developing and sharing resources and insights about partnering practice with my team, others across the organisation and partners; asking questions and offering advice based on the the principles of partnering such as fostering partner equity in decision-making, challenging assumptions, building capacity and awareness of partnering, and considering the benefits and risks of options for a partnership; and, suggesting when and where external partnership brokering and mentoring may be needed. I regularly engage in discussions about what a partnership is and involves, where it makes sense, how it differs from other relationship arrangements and what difference it can make to the organisation and the wider world.

While there are multiple cultures within the organisation where I work, there is a strong NPM culture of transactional relationships and entrepreneurial discourse with language that includes terms such as ‘customer’ and ‘engagement’. This culture is influenced by needing to fulfil a substantial external revenue target (Lefroy and Porfirio, 2017). The internal structure has hierarchical management and includes a corporate section that oversees different research and service divisions which have their own separate revenue and science targets. During the mentoring period for the PBA Accreditation Program, I was helping to re-scope a partnership between my organisation and a university: a similar large hierarchical organisation with an embedded NPM culture and discipline silos but a mandate to meet teaching and learning targets as well as research targets.

During the PBA mentored period I developed a stronger awareness of serving the partnership, fostering partnering principles, and deeper self-reflection to take a more considered approach to my interactions, including ‘letting go’ when needed. I was spending a lot of time waiting for permissions and responses to initiatives and questions and learned a process of ‘active waiting’: taking actions and initiatives that were possible to keep serving the partnership while waiting for decisions and answers. I often found that questions did not always have answers and learned to use this as an opportunity to initiate ideas that could possibly add value. These initiatives and reflections on my assumptions and reactions helped move out of a set rational mindset and perceived limits (both self and externally imposed) and build confidence, independence, relationships and understanding of the partnership and positions that could, in turn, add value to the partnership.

INSIGHTS OF CULTURAL BOCKAGES AND ENABLERS TO ACHIEVE MORE EFFECTIVE PARTNERING

Table 1 summarises perceptions from my experience and those of the four people I interviewed. Many of my experiences of large organisational culture were shared by others. The approaches listed below to overcome blockages (associated with hierarchy, bureaucracy and NPM) to effective partnering appear to be based on: understanding the organisational culture(s) and what matters to people from the different parts working in it; building internal relationships and common goals; and, developing a shared language and understanding of partnership and the culture, skills and capabilities to partner well. Also highlighted was the value of identifying and working with people

and opportunities open to change; learning and working with an external broker and partnership network; bringing in external peers who understand partnering; and, developing and initiating tools and interventions to show the value of partnership that enable better partnering while adding value to people’s work and the organisation’s mission.

Table 1: Internal brokers’ experiences of obstacles and enablers of change to partnering in the context of working in a large organisation

Cultural factors	Description of blockages	Description of actions that enabled change
Artefacts		
Top-down decision-making Line of management reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of decision-making and authority or positional power to have the capacity to broker • Inability to ‘jump through’ lines to act • Feeling of being stuck in lulls waiting for others ‘higher’ up to make decisions, give permissions, define roles and clarify what leaders want to achieve for the partnership • Power imbalances and positions of power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took a role that spanned boundaries in a principle-based way and got people working together • Found willing, proactive, flexible and open people around ‘blockers’ in line of authority • Built networks and personal relationships- made the most of informal meetings and conversations with leaders to build trust and credibility • Made the most of opportunities to highlight and build awareness of a partnership approach in scoping agendas and plans, and evaluating programs that involve relationships • Kept actively thinking of ways to work around the obstacles and achieve what the partnership needs • Turned the outcomes of informal conversations with partnership leaders and participants into a resource for sharing: to build understanding of partnering, the scope of the partnership and the value of scoping the partnership before agreeing to partner • Initiated working with an external partnership broker who was independent, had credibility with leaders and could equalise power, ask strategic questions, influence decision making and create equal opportunity for voices and input into the process, as well as be a sounding board for partnership decisions
Internal silos, especially with a large organisation with multiple purposes and units that are geographically spread	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No or poor negotiation of shared goals • Poor and difficult communication and coordination between internal units • Can be difficult to build credibility as an internal broker and sustain longevity to collaboration initiatives due to focus getting split throughout the organisation • Line of reporting up silos not across • Fragmented sub-units with conflicting business and relationship models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found common ground and overcame judgment mindset to build perception of units as part of the whole organisation with multiple objectives and goals • Helped people realise how more internal communication and connections, and shared planning and problem solving, can make peoples jobs easier • Unpacked what drives people and understood their problems • Identified a mutual purpose or ‘hook’ that gave people a reason and focus to connect and got people’s attention and excitement to work together • Established good working relationships face-to-face first to make on-line communication more effective

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate identities and cultures amongst internal units that are often in competition for internal revenue and rewards and can have different planning time-frames • Tendency for thinking about the unit first rather than the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified and initiated conduits, opportunities, and forums for people to explore issues together, make mistakes and learn, think 'blue sky' and realise shared responsibilities- where there is an imperative to collaborate across units, central funding and the leadership to work differently
Internal rewards, systems and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revenue driven KPIs • Quantitative measures of performance • Templates and gateways that make partnering difficult 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Built support and understanding for having metrics/KPIs that measure relationship outcomes like increased trust and social capital compared to sales/customer focus on measuring outputs such as number of calls and meetings • Worked with internal legal and business units to create new templates and processes that made partnering easier
Espoused values		
Recognition for knowledge or expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be hard to find agreement and common ground in addressing complex issues together with experts when reputation and status is seen to be at risk • Multi-discipline teams where everyone is the expert and worried about losing status and time through the collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found a 'clean' area to work on together that was not political or obviously owned by anyone, had low reputational risk, was an opportunity to experiment and tickled people's curiosity • Helped establish where there are opportunities for all to contribute and there is a level playing field and benefits (e.g. makes jobs easier) • Agreed to only refer to each other when necessary • Tried not to ask discipline specific questions and generated interest in what everyone brings to the problem
Underlying assumptions		
Mindset, language and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dominant culture with resistance or low priority given to a partnering approach • Ad hoc or poor shared understanding of partnership • People revert into conditioning and what they know best • The environment and norms do not remind people to think differently • 'Square peg in round hole': it can be easy for leaders to discredit partnering approach because it doesn't fit into their way of working • Different languages of diverse participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understood how people think about things- their conceptual frameworks, assumptions, hypothesis, and how they make decisions, and helped people understand each other better • Built leadership understanding of the value and benefits of a partnering approach • Identified what drives the board and executive team of the organisation and what partnership means to them • Had conversations around the organisation becoming a good partner and the potential this can bring, the risks of not being a good partner, and partnerships and their arrangements as an approach or tool to manage programs, reduce risk and achieve impact • Identified areas in the organisation where there is an open mindset, partnership awareness and opportunity to work differently • Shared stories and examples of systems change and the benefits that occurred • Celebrated positive partnership stories and included voices from outside the organisation of how things have changed for them from partnering

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving the organisation rather than the partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed awareness of the organisational culture, including obstacles to and opportunities for partnering well • Understood the language framework people are operating in and applied frameworks to build relationships • Tried not to take the tacit knowledge- understanding behind partnership brokering language and capability- for granted and be explicit and transparent about it with others and adapt to context to add value • Created space to get out of 'business as usual'- made time in peoples diaries to engage with different thinking and develop a shared language and understanding • Developed a business case for an investment process to adopt a partnering approach and partnership arrangements in a way that makes sense to the organisational context • Found strong internal sponsors with authority and external peers (CEO-CEO) who understood the approach and its value to share resources and stories about partnership and how developing partnering skills and approach in the organisation is good for business and the community at large • Initiated a CoP to develop a community of partnership aware people and brokers, reduce isolation, build a trusted network and partnership culture, and support each other with resources and problem solving • Identified the internal levers to pull within the Hunan Resources matrix to build in core capabilities of partnering skills using partnership language (compared to sales/customer) in hiring and screening mechanisms for positions/roles tasked with building relationships • Identified places in the organisation where people are building relationships and PBA training could be of benefit, to transition the organisation and develop a shared language and understanding- and offered internal training (e.g. 2-day masterclass) • Built shared language into agreements- used the agreement process as an opportunity to discuss assumptions about formal/collaborative language together • Encouraged diverse participants to do the same training
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CONCLUSION

This paper builds on understanding of large organisational culture and the work of internal brokers to shift culture to enable more effective partnering. Insights from my experience and others working to support partnerships within large organisations highlighted some common blockages to

partnering and surfaced a rich list of ideas to help organisations and/or those in it wanting, or needing to, shift towards developing a culture that can enable stronger partnerships (see Table 1). Many large public organisations still have dominant transactional and rational approaches to collaboration focused on inputs, defined and measurable outputs and rewards based on status and profit in line with NPM. However, with external changes such as reduced funding for ‘public good’ research, funding programs requiring collaboration across institutions, and our problems becoming more complex and, thus, requiring multiple perspectives and institutions to solve, organisations have a growing imperative to change their culture to partner well. It is likely to be increasingly important to find alignment with organisational business models and strategies and a partnering approach; a ‘hook’ for leaders in these organisations to see value in taking a different more transformational approach to partnerships where it is needed and that meets their needs and interests; and identify opportunities for critical thinking and dialogue to develop a shared language, capabilities and arrangements that contribute to a culture that supports building stronger partnerships. More effective partnering will also be facilitated by understanding organisational culture, acknowledging its limitations and opportunities for partnering well, and continually checking one’s own and other’s assumptions.

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