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I n t r o d u c t i o n T h e P a r t n e r i n g D i l e m m a

**GOVERNMENT**

**COMMUNITY**

*“A cross sector partnership can be described as a form*

*of strategic alliance between organisations drawn from*

*the business, government, education or community sectors,*

*who commit to working collaboratively on a project,*

*program or complex issue to pursue a common*

*purpose.” 1*

In this form of partnership each partner will not only

contribute from their own resources and core knowledge

and skills, but also share the risks and benefits by achieving

their own, each others and the overall partnership’s

objectives.

Cross sector partnerships can range from those comprising

one organisation from each sector, such as in many

corporate social responsibility initiatives, to clusters of

companies, government agencies, education institutions,

not for profits and community groups that come together

to address significant and complex issues.

There is really no limit to the various types of collaborations

that can occur within and between the sectors, however,

with more partners at the table, the degree of complexity

and the need for efficient and effective partnering

processes increases significantly.

For this reason cross sector partnerships should only be

entered into when this approach is clearly seen as the best

alternative to achieving results, as there are substantial

transaction costs involved, with consequent risks and rewards.

While the challenges for cross sector partnering are many

and varied, there can be significant benefits, such as:

• The ability to bring more resources and capacity to the

project or program

• Enabling more creative and innovative solutions to be

developed

• Allowing greater integration of broader economic, social

and environmental objectives

• Developing the skills and capacity of individual

partners, and

• Reaching across a broader area or region

*1* Partnership Brokers Accreditation Scheme (UK)

*2 The Partnering Toolbook*, Ros Tennyson (2007)

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Weighed against this can be some of the risks, such as

the large amount of time and effort required, the possible

loss of autonomy, the impact on an organisations

reputation and the overall challenges of implementing

with many groups and people involved. In any decision

to move forward there needs to be a positive benefit or

‘value proposition’ for all partners as well as the overall

partnership.

If we are going to embark on the partnering route, how

can we be sure that we will be in a position to maximise

the benefits while reducing the risks? What are the

underlying principles of partnering that are fundamental

to achieving a positive outcome? What is the glue that

will hold the partnership together through the most

challenging and difficult periods?

While there can be a number of principles developed for

particular partnerships, there are three basic principles

that keep recurring time and again, namely: equity,

transparency and mutual benefit,*2* where each of these

can be described as follows:

**Equity** - *where this implies an equal right to be at the*

*table, and a recognition that contributions to the partnership*

*can be in different forms*

**Transparency** - *where all relationships are based on*

*openness and honesty, and where people will be truly*

*accountable*

**Mutual Benefit** - *where all partners can achieve specific*

*benefits over and above the common benefits to all*

When the partners develop and agree their basic principles

for operating this will form the basis for how all people

involved in the partnership will work together. It also

provides the partnership with the opportunity to become

a strong and durable collaboration, just like a piece of

cord that is made up from a number of individual strands.

If we look closely we can see that each individual strand

retains its own identity and individual characteristics, but

when it is woven with the other strands its gains strength

and durability whilst still retaining its flexibility.

C r o s s S e c t o r P a r t n e r s h i p s

**EDUCATION**

**BUSINESS**

**PARTNERSHIP**

**OUTCOMES**

the risk of going one step forward and two steps back,

or in the worst case self destructing completely. The three

stages we use in our partnership process are shown

below.

While we use these three stages as a progression and a

way of ensuring that key activities are addressed at the

right time, **the absolute critical imperative is the**

**underlying relationships between people that are being**

**built throughout this partnering process**.

Now let’s look briefly at each stage of the partnering

process:

**Stage 1 - Creating**

The most crucial aspect of this **'Creating'** stage is that

each of the potential partners work together to design a

partnership framework that clarifies what the partnership

is about and how the partners will work together. One of

the key outcomes of this stage is that all the key

organisations and people are engaged in the partnering

process and there is common agreement to move forward.

Partnerships can be initiated in many ways, but whenever

discussions turn to a possible partnership or alliance and

people start moving in that direction - that is the time to

sit down with the prospective partners and start asking

some key questions, before you go too far. Questions

such as:

• Who needs to be involved in these discussions and the

proposed partnership?

• Are we ready to partner?

• What is the purpose of this partnership?

• What are our own and others expectations for being

involved in the partnership?

• Who will provide financial support to take the partnership

forward or is everyone able to fund themselves?

• How are the potential partners going to work together?

• How well do the partners know and understand each

other? What is the level of trust between the partners?

• Are you going to need support from an external

partnership broker?

While these questions are a good guide there may be

other questions specific to the proposed partnership that

need to be answered in these early stages, before the

partnership progresses.

Once these questions have been explored and agreements

are reached partners may wish to formalise the end of

this stage by developing some form of partnership

agreement. This agreement can range from being a simple

document where some basic principles are set down on

how the partners will work with each other, through to a

more formal Memorandum of Understanding.

**Stage 2 - Developing**

The key initial step of the **'Developing'** stage is to create

an Action Plan for the partnership. This plan is much more

detailed than the partnership agreement and sets out

clearly the direction and tasks required to achieve the

partnership objectives - this is in effect the operational

or implementation plan. Key aspects of this plan would

include:

• A clear purpose statement and key objectives for the

partnership

• Key actions required to be undertaken

• Key milestones for achieving these objectives and

actions

• Resources to be applied to the partnership by each of

the partners

• How the process is to be managed and by whom

While there are no doubt many approaches to building

a partnership, our experience suggests that using a

simple framework is a very useful tool, particularly to

act as reference point and checklist as you work through

the partnering process.

For this purpose we have developed a framework

that comprises three distinct stages, which if worked

through carefully can make the task easier and ensure

success. If you try and shortcut these stages, you run

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**CREAT I N G DEVELOPING SUSTAINING**

B u i l d i n g a C r o s s S e c t o r P a r t n e r s h i p - S t e p b y S t e p

Depending on the type of partnership, the Action Plan

may cover other areas appropriate to that particular

partnership - the key point here is, that there needs to be

a plan that is developed jointly and agreed by all partners

if it is to have any chance of success. For the plan to be

agreed it needs to have the full support of each of the

organisations involved, not just the people at the table.

Some key areas that may need to be addressed during

this stage are as follows:

• Establishing procedures and protocols on how the

parties are to work together

• Developing internal and external communication

processes including how the partnership will be

represented

• Seeking outside expertise when required

• Continuing to develop relationships between all

of the partners

• Resolving conflicts as they arise

While this is only a quick snapshot of some of the

areas to be considered in this stage of the partnership

process, the overriding factor is that these activities need

to work towards maintaining engagement and building

commitment between all the partners involved in the

partnership.

**Stage 3 - Sustaining**

Once we have **created** a partnership and then **developed**

it so that it is functioning effectively and it is starting to

deliver some outputs, the next challenge is to **sustain** it

so that it reaches its full potential and delivers the expected

overall outcome. It is at this stage that partners need to

take ownership of the partnership and ensure that it

delivers. To do this partners have to be accountable and

take responsibility for maintaining momentum and

continuing to drive the process. Some of the key questions

that need to be addressed at this stage include:

• Are we meeting our commitments? If not what are we

going to do about it?

• Are we still getting value from being in this partnership?

Is the partnership delivering the outcomes we sought

at the beginning?

• Is our strategic direction still current? If it isn't, what are

we going to do about it?

• How can we do things better? What do we need to do

differently?

• Are the partners still committed? Is there a better way

of delivering the same outcomes?

The ability of partners to assess objectively the need for

a partnership to continue is one of the most challenging

aspects of partnering, and that is what makes it so

interesting and rewarding.

It is also important that in working through these stages

there is a desire to seek not only **engagement** of the

partners, but to build their **commitment**, and eventually

achieve shared **ownership** of the partnership arrangement

by all the partners. It is only then that the partners will

fully incorporate the partnership activities into their core

business and action will be achieved.

This simple formula is a guide that we use as we work

through the partnering process. It is also important to

understand what is meant by these terms and just how

we know when we have achieved each level.

**Engagement** – at this level people are prepared to be at

the table. They are receptive to being involved and will

be keen to explore potential opportunities and scope

various activities without committing actual resources.

They will be interested enough to accept in the early

stages that there may be some potential opportunity

through this process and that the benefits will outweigh

the costs and risks for being involved.

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PARTNERSHIP

**ENGAGEMENT**

**COMMITMENT**

**OWNERSHIP**

**ACTION**

+

+

=

OUTCOME

After coming together and investing a great deal of time

and resources into working through a partnering process,

how can you ensure that you will get results? That the

outcomes are in fact better than would have been achieved

using any other approach.

In our experience we have found that there are three

critical components that are fundamental to ensuring

success and getting results from any partnership, namely

Within each of these three components are a number of

key areas which need to be developed as the partnership

progresses through the various stages, so let’s look at

each area in turn.

**PURPOSE**

Developing and agreeing a clear purpose for a partnership

ensures that all partners have shared expectations of

what the partnership will deliver. A facilitated dialogue

between the partners resulting in a documented purpose

statement for the partnership should be one of the first

steps in any partnering process.

In developing this purpose statement a number of

questions need to be addressed, such as:

• How broad or limited should the scope of the partnership be?

• How will the partnership relate to each of the partner

organisations involved?

• What will the partnership do that is different from what

can be done individually by the partners?

• What will be the identity of the partnership?

• Is the partnership to deliver specific projects or is it

intended to be a catalyst for collaboration, while the

actual projects are undertaken by each partner

organisation?

It is not uncommon when potential partners come together

that they will have vastly different expectations as to what

the partnership is intended to achieve. If expectations are

not clarified at the early stages, and a clear purpose for

the partnership is not agreed, this can lead to confusion

and eventually frustration and conflict.

**Commitment** – at this second level people will be prepared

to commit actual resources to the partnership. There will

be a clear demonstration, by way of some form of

partnering agreement that will recognise a willingness to

stay involved and a level of accountability for future actions.

**Ownership** – this is the ultimate level and one which we

believe is crucial to the ongoing sustainability and

performance of a partnership. At this level the partners

take control of their partnership and it becomes their own

and they take full responsibility for ensuring the partnership

continues and maintains momentum. This is demonstrated

by trust and accountability to each other and not being

reliant on an external driver – the power comes from

within the partnership and it truly is alive.

In seeking to develop through these different levels of

engagement, commitment and ownership it is critical that

sufficient time is spent at each stage of the process. This

may require you to spend far more time in the early stages

to ensure that the fundamentals are right before moving

on too quickly. Ensuring that there are clear understandings

between all the partners and clear agreements on how

to move forward are essential. If concerns are raised they

need to be addressed, not pushed aside as

‘undiscussables’, where they are likely to fester and come

back to bite all the partners at a later stage of the process.

Overall a step-by-step approach will ensure that the

partners progress together and everyone is brought along

at the same time. In this way you will have a far better

chance of success than blindly rushing in or trying to

short cut the process.

Partners need to take

ownership of the

partnership and ensure

that it delivers

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**PURPOSE**

**P E O P L E P R O C E S S**

G e t t i n g R e s u l t s

Gaining agreement and commitment to a purpose

statement will focus each of the partners on their own

‘value proposition’ for being in the partnership, and help

them decide their ongoing commitment to the overall

partnership process.

It is also important that partners explore not only their

own individual ‘value proposition’ but also what is the

collective added value by coming together in a partnership.

Often these benefits are not evident at the early stages

of the partnership but evolve as the innovation and energy

develops within the partnering process.

**PEOPLE**

*Relationships*

It is essential to remember that it is ‘people that partner’,

so the effectiveness of a partnership will depend on the

relationships that are established between people from

each of the respective partners. These relationships must

be built on mutual trust and respect for each other and

enable each partner to have a shared understanding of

how each other operates on a day to day basis.

Sometimes in the urgency to get a partnership up and

operating, relationships can be ignored or seen as

something that will develop naturally. We have found that

whether or not partners have an understanding of each

other from a previous situation, time and energy needs

to be allocated to developing this shared understanding

and developing relationships. In some cases it may be

appropriate to have structured relationship building

sessions as part of the initial stages of the process.

This aspect is even more critical for long running

partnerships where people are continually leaving and

joining. This reinforces the point that relationship building

should not be seen as just one event but needs to be

maintained throughout the process. People who join the

partnership need to be properly inducted and briefed fully

on the background and philosophy of the partnership.

Most importantly you must ensure that the lines of

communication between and within the partner

organisations are not disrupted in any way.

*Partnering Skills*

Linked to the ability to forge strong relationships is the

overall level of partnering skills in each of the partner

organisations. Do people have an understanding of the

partnering process? Do they know the pitfalls and

obstacles they are likely to encounter? How will they

resolve the inevitable conflicts that will arise and still stay

focused on achieving significant outcomes?

Operating in a partnership environment is different to that

of a normal organisation where there are clear structures

in place and direct lines of authority. In partnerships this

is not as clear as no one partner has authority over another.

Working in this environment requires great skills in

negotiation and facilitation rather than relying on directions

from some higher authority.

*Permission to partner*

Inherent in any partnering process is the ability of people

to think collaboratively and be willing to explore

opportunities for working together. In some cases, people

will find this extremely challenging, sometimes due to

their mindset or to the lack of support from the parent

organisation.

In each of the sectors we experience what we call ‘vertical

drivers’, those that encourage people to conform to a

hierarchy and undertake activities solely for their

organisation, and ‘horizontal drivers’, those that encourage

people to work across agencies and organisations in a

collaborative manner.

Unless we have strong horizontal drivers at all levels of

the partner organisations, that give people ‘permission

to partner’, then real results will not be achieved. By this

we mean that people have the full support and freedom

to operate within the partnership and not be restricted or

overly controlled by their parent organisation. This allows

people to have the freedom to fully participate in the

partnering process and to truly create and innovate.

**PROCESS**

*Managing the Process*

One of the greatest challenges for partnering is how to

manage the process so everyone feels involved and power

imbalances do not occur. One partner should not feel

disenfranchised or that they are being controlled by any

of the other partners. It is important that there is a level

playing field.

Critical questions for each of the partners are: - Who will

initiate action? Who will make decisions? Who will take

the lead on particular activities? Who will bring the partners

together when needed? Who will follow up on actions

and decisions? These questions are hardest to address

in the creating stage when people are first coming together

to explore the potential opportunities.

Getting a clear set of procedures and protocols in place

is a critical step in the partnering process and one that

usually takes place in the developing stage. Once these

are established a further question is who should coordinate

the partnership - should this be an internal partnership

broker from one of the partners or an independent external

partnership broker? Either way, most partnerships will

require a dedicated resource to help broker various aspects

of the partnering process.

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*Adequate Resources*

If adequate resources are not applied to a partnership

process, all the goodwill in the world will achieve very

little. While funding, people and time are obvious resources

that are required to enable activities to be undertaken

and the partnering process to proceed, the amount of

these resources available is often underestimated and

can often be variable through the life of the partnership.

Of the resources required, our experience shows that

time allocation continues to be one of the most difficult

areas to address in the partnering process. People

invariably have very heavy workloads and commitments

before they even consider being involved in a partnership

arrangement and collaboration takes time. Shortcuts in

this area can have a profound impact on the ability of the

partnership to deliver results.

Consistency of resourcing is essential to maintaining

momentum and is a clear sign of each partner’s

commitment and shared ownership of the partnership

process. Any uncertainty can give rise to strong tensions

between the partners with resulting frustration and possible

conflict.

*Open Communication*

Effective communication is essential in any organisational

setting; however, with the added complexity of large

numbers of people from each of the sectors involved in

partnering, communication becomes even more critical.

While participating partners may each have clear strategies

and processes for communicating both internally and

externally, these are very unlikely to be the same as other

partners.

Some important communication considerations within a

partnering context are:

• Is everyone being brought along in the partnering

process?

• Is there clear communication both between and back

within each partner’s organisation or sector?

• Do people need to come together in person to share

knowledge and build understanding between each

other?

• When difficult situations arise, are different partners’

views expressed in a respectful way so that trust is built

between the partners?

• Are partner’s comfortable placing issues on the table

so they can be discussed openly and resolved?

This is not an exhaustive list, but developing a clear

communication checklist is a useful tool in getting the