

CHALLENGES IN PARTNERSHIP GOVERNANCE: Some attention points and tips

The bigger challenges in today's world are often too complex to be handled by one agency alone, however capable and well resourced. More often than not, we have to collaborate with others to have effective influence and create more significant impacts. Each brings distinctive competencies, legitimacies, connections and understanding, and can take up distinctive roles. Unfortunately, the prevailing mindset and practices are towards organisational competition, with our attention very inward looking to the organisation we belong to. There is an assumption that collaboration, if needed, is no different from ordinary autonomous practice. It is not: collaboration, certainly in a more equitable 'partnership' spirit, requires distinctive competencies. Facilitators, partnership brokers and organisational relationship and systems coaches, can help.

Let me share here a few attention points, and tips. When reflecting on them, I have some concrete examples in mind where I played or continue to play a brokering and coaching role. But I am quite confident they have much wider applicability. Judge for yourself.


Partnering is a constantly emerging flow: All partnership dynamics are shaped by movements of convergence and of divergence of interests. Even if there is a firm agreement defining the terms of collaboration. At times the convergence will be strongly felt, and the collaborative atmosphere will feel smooth. Other moments, the divergence of interest rears its head and the atmosphere will become tenser. Brokering or guiding such dance effectively requires knowing when to allow the river to meander and even split up into different branches, when to bring it together in one strong channel, and when to point at the solid rock formations that are the red lines. If these are not respected, if the river breaks apart against them, the partnership will crumble. The river metaphor holds, except that we are not talking about an established river, the banks and course of which are fixed and immutable. No partnership will or can go on automatic pilot. Changes, in context, in partnering organisations, in key individuals, will affect its particular chemistry and flow.



As a broker, you need fine situational judgment to know when to step back and let the waters flow freely, and when to step in and remind the waters that the destination is the sea, and that not passing through certain solid rock formations together means the river will split up and go into different directions, losing its force. You also need the confidence to act on your, at times instinctive, judgment.


Confusion when different conversations get mixed up: Partners need to have different types of conversation, each necessary and legitimate. One relates to the common purpose and objective, and how to further progress towards it. Another one relates to the quality of the collaborative relationship. A third one to the validity of continuing the partnership, if a feeling arises, among one or more of the partners, that the respective interests are diverging and even conflicting. In many instances, the first conversation is scheduled to be regularly held. The second one tends to be neglected, unless some friction is felt. Thereby we miss the opportunity to celebrate a good collaboration, and to draw on the positive energy that comes with it. The third one, more often than not, comes unexpectedly, and is disturbing, possibly disruptive. Yet there are times when the very existence of the partnership will be


questioned. The problem arises when the first and the third conversation start mingling in the same meeting. Very likely, all partners will leave the meeting with a sense of frustration and irritation.


 My tip: Tell partners about the different types of conversations, that all are valid, but can best be dealt with when given their own time and focus. A conversation about the continued value of the partnership is not easy. But partners will be better prepared to handle it constructively when it is scheduled as such, rather than intrude in the midst of a conversation about further progressing towards the common objective.

Conflicts of interest in partnerships: Some partnerships are set up with conflicts-of-interest embedded in their governance structure. Two instances from my personal experience immediately come to mind: One is a set up with a standard promoting agency, which has member agencies that want to achieve the standard. The standard promoting agency also audits and certifies whether the member agencies do so. The problem arises when the member agencies also sit on the Board of the standard-setting agency. There is an inevitable risk that some membership agencies will seek to water down the standard or the certification requirements and use their influence in the partnership governance structure to that purpose. Another is of a charity that collects public donations and then funds operational partner agencies if their proposals are accepted. Here some of the partner agencies may feel that the grant-making charity is a direct competitor for public fundraising. Some may also feel that the grant making charity should trust their professionalism, and fund proposals as presented, rather than critically assess them, possibly demand changes or even reject them. Put the operational partner agencies in the governance structure of the grant-making charity, and again there is a risk, perhaps even a high likelihood, that some of them will use that position to promote their own organisational self-interest, rather than the strategic development and effectiveness of the charity.

This situation is particularly complex, because the partnership set-up is longer-term and more institutionalised, as is its governance structure. Having 'independents' in the governance structure is one way of dealing with it. In practice, that only works when they are engaged, truly 'independent' without any consideration for past or future beneficial relationship with any organisational partner, and remain very focused on the mission and the integrity and quality required to achieve it.

 My first tip: Listen for, observe, the difference between a conversation about readjusting the respective roles in the collaboration where the common purpose remains central, and one where the common purpose has been replaced by organisational self-interest. An indicator of the latter is listening for what is not talked about: the ultimate purpose, key stakeholders that are not in the room. Reintroduce both in the conversation.

 My second tip: Ask partners in the conversation to be transparent about what voice they are speaking with: are they speaking in their individual name, for their own organisation and its interests, on behalf of a certain group of stakeholders and do they indeed have the mandate from that wider group to do so, or are they speaking as member of the governance structure that provides guidance how the common endeavour can best achieve its mission and purpose? If they rarely or never speak with that latter voice, although that is their responsibility as members of the collaborative governance structure, ask them to speak with that voice. Ask: How is this serving the mission, the objective?

 My third tip: if a partner is persistently pursuing its own institutional interest, with no convincing argument how this contributes to the shared mission and common purpose, its continued participation in the collaboration may have to be questioned. However, if that agency is felt to be 'incontournable', i.e. too influential to leave out, a difficult situation will persist. Patience and tact will

be required. The 'difficult' partner is not necessarily internally monolithic: there may be more accommodating voices, and a new leadership may take a more constructive stance. Meanwhile, other players in the partnership may have to consciously align to contain the disruptor. But anticipate the need to make some compromises to accommodate the challenger. Choose to compromise on issues that do not fundamentally jeopardise the common mission and purpose.

Bring in ghost stakeholders and -partner¹: Whenever partners are meeting, observe carefully whom they talk about or have in the back of their mind, but is not in the room. Which important stakeholders are central to the purpose but are absent here, so that their voices are never heard? In one case I have been involved in, there were no less than five such: the *domestic public that donates* to a charity (there is speculation about what they want and appreciate or not, and competition among the partners for their donation); the *domestic media* that all those in the partnership try to work with, but also appreciate as a possible threat if they publish negative stories; a *series of smaller partner NGOs* that are not present in the collective governance structure and who do not feel represented by those from the bigger NGOs who are; the *assistance-receiving people* that the domestic public has donated for; and *local organisations* who do much of the actual work on behalf of the international ones. All five are key stakeholders and directly relevant for the purpose of the charity. But their experiences and views are never heard in governance meetings of the partnership.



My first tip: Listen for, draw attention to, and find ways to 'bring in' the perspectives and voices of the ghost partners!



My second tip: If those in the partnership governance structure get too preoccupied with their internal tussles, make them look outward instead of mostly inward. Remind them that, without those not in the room, they cannot fulfil the mission and achieve the purpose at the same level.

Partnership brokering with a wider systems perspective: The above observation also signals that a wider systems-perspective is needed. You may be brokering a particular partnership between some agencies. But they operate in a wider landscape with other key stakeholders and actors. As brokers we need to be attentive that our successful brokering of the collaboration between some, does not unintentionally weaken and subordinate other key stakeholders. For example: You can effectively broker a public-private sector partnership between the government and three water companies. But if you leave out those whose habitat and livelihoods depend on the water that the companies source, and the water-users the companies deliver it to, the latter two interest groups may find themselves in a structurally weakened position. The same holds for, say, local civil society organisations and community-based groups, when you successfully broker a stronger partnership between the most important international NGOs operating in their environment. The unintended outcome may be that those local actors now face a more united and even more powerful front of international actors. Strengthening one partnering relationship in a part of the system may tilt the overall power balance in the wider system, to the detriment of other legitimate stakeholders.



My tip: Always look at a partnership set-up within a wider perspective, ask who is not present in the conversation but should be, and keep promoting a more inclusive approach with broader win-wins.

Gradients of decision-making: All governance structures face the question of how they make decisions. The hope is that there will be overall consensus or a clear majority. In reality, certainly at moments when divergent interests come to the foreground, this will be unlikely. If preserving a smooth atmosphere among the partners becomes the dominant preoccupation, then the possibility arises that one or more partners acquire what becomes de facto veto-power. Nothing is possible that

they vehemently oppose. Alternatively, a decision is deliberately left vague so that everyone can 'agree' to it, which is a recipe for tensions and conflict at the time of implementation. Or the choice is degraded to the lowest common denominator, in which case it may not adequately address the issue it was supposed to be an answer to, and the issue will re-emerge.



My tip: Try Sam Kaner's gradients of agreement, which gives people options beyond 'yes' or 'no' to a proposal.ⁱⁱ For example someone can express a full endorsement of a proposed course of action, or an overall endorsement with some minor concerns, or has reservations but can live with it, or doesn't like it but signals s/he does not want to hold up the group and will stand aside; or disagrees but is willing to go with the majority, or is not comfortable with it at all and doesn't want to be involved in the implementation etc. It is easier to assess whether there is 'enough' agreement.

Formal leadership in partnership: Being executive director of an organisation that is part of a statutory/constitutional partnership, reflected in the composition of its governance structure, adds a particular challenge. Rather than having fairly high autonomy to lead the strategic positioning and development of her or his organisation, s/he can find important decisions delayed and possibly watered down, by ongoing discussions in the governance space. That is frustrating, more so if it feels that some members of the collective governance structure are speaking often for their own self-interests rather than for the greater value from collective action.



My first tip: When recruiting for a senior leadership position, where operating in partnership is intrinsic to the role, ensure you test candidates for the character and competencies to do so.



My second tip: To depersonalise the situation when the dynamics are difficult, bring in a third party, partnership broker or organisational relationships and systems coach. Not just to facilitate one meeting-event. But with sufficient time to observe and more deeply understand what is happening and what is actually driving the partners' behaviour, and then constructively accompany them, until there the atmosphere is positive enough again, so they can handle their collaboration challenges constructively.

These tips are not magic solutions to every partnering challenge. But they may give you some inspiration. Let me know how you get on.

First published on LinkedIn on 18 February 2019

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/challenges-partnership-governance-some-attention-points-brabant/>

The Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI)

offers expertise and practical support in

Collaborative action: facilitation of multi-stakeholder processes and events, partnership brokering

Organisational development: governance, strategic analysis and planning, change processes, inner leadership and responsible followership, positive atmosphere and healthy team work, prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation

Thematic areas and skill development: Conflict and peace analysis, working with conflict-sensitivity, peacebuilding, participatory approaches, community consultations, accountability to affected populations; public participation and citizen engagement

ⁱ The term 'ghost' comes from Organisational and Relationship Systems Coaching (ORSC)

ⁱⁱ https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/gradients_of_agreement_can_help_move_groups_forward