VALUE CONTRIBUTIONS IN PARTNERSHIPS
Are you having the conversation?

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1. Fundamental Questions for Partnerships

Collaborations and partnerships between different organisations or institutions are not always easy. They may run into difficulties and even go sour because of an insufficient understanding of what they require, and a lack of skills to make and keep them constructive and productive.

Fundamental questions to ask are:

- *For what purpose do we come together?*
- *What value do we each bring to the joint effort?*
- *How do we handle power inequalities between the collaborating entities?*
- *How will we manage our diverging interests that coexist with our converging ones?*
- *What are the risks for each of us, in the joint action but also in the partnering? How do we manage these risks together?*
- *How do we manage our relationship to keep it constructive and productive?*

This GMI Insight focuses on the value contributions question – which connects to the questions of power inequalities, risk and managing the relationship(s).

2. Are You Appreciating the Non-Monetary Value Contributions?

While organisations and institutions collaborate for a shared purpose and/or more specific objectives, often power inequalities arise between them. The most common sources of power are money, information/knowledge/expertise and political connections/clout. If not handled carefully, such power inequalities will turn the collaboration into a situation of dominance and subordination. Very likely, the subordinate 'partners' will start to feel frustrated and un(der)appreciated, and the communications and overall atmosphere will turn tense.

What we often see is a fairly quick identification between potential collaborators of a shared goal or objective, and a 'decision' to collaborate because one or a few can provide the money. Rarely is there a more intentional and explicit conversation about the non-monetary value contributions that are relevant or even needed for pursuing the objective, and that others can bring to the collaboration.

What would come up if you had such conversation?

3. Appreciative Inquiry: Exploring the multiple value-contributions

One way of opening the mind when consciously going into that conversation, can be differentiating between tangible and intangible and monetary and non-monetary contributions.

Non-monetary but tangible contributions will be all types of assets e.g. office space, production plant, warehousing, machinery and production equipment, vehicles, motorcycles and other means of transport, communications equipment. Non-monetary and intangible contributions can come in many forms. Take the phrase "*What we bring to our joined effort towards a shared objective is*" and explore the many possibilities. Don't just do it intellectually, throwing words about: Visualise each potential contribution, put it on a separate card or so, and explore it in some concrete detail. You will learn a lot about each other while doing so.

Here is a set of possible categories and illustrative examples to stimulate your appreciative enquiry

Ethics: We contribute a strong value base that guides our behaviour

Vision: We contribute a strategic, a longer-term perspective

Perspective: We can contribute an ability for holistic, systems-thinking; we bring an understanding of different stakeholder perspectives

Attitude: We can contribute optimism; stamina and endurance (also in the face of adversity, nowadays called 'resilience'); sustained solidarity and a determination to stay; creativity and out-of-the-box or innovative thinking; an eagerness and ability to learn; a fair appetite for risk and a willingness to try and test; a strong cost-consciousness; gender and age sensitivity; open-mindedness

Data, information, insight: We have different kinds of data; we can generate data; we have the ability to analyse data; we have the ability to interpret data and their analysis

Knowledge: We have the academic research knowledge; we have relevant technical or thematic expertise: we have the learning from broad comparative experience; we have all types of local and locally relevant knowledge

Proximity and access: We have geographical proximity; we have social proximity; we speak the local language or dialect

Speed: We have the ability to act or respond fast; we have the ability to scale up fast (without significant loss of quality); we have the ability to experiment and learn fast

Connections: We have the ability to mobilise many people or key people; we can open doors to key people; we can mobilise political support and protection when needed; we can influence policy- and decision-makers

Competencies: We can contribute practical thematic or technical expertise; we bring methodological skills; relational skills; process management abilities; we contribute our strong communication skills: our cross-cultural competencies

Reputation: We bring our proven track record; we will contribute our credibility, trustworthiness; we come with a perceived legitimacy in the eyes of relevant stakeholders

Fit-for-context: Our contribution will be to make this action fit-for-context, because we have the knowledge, connections and credibility among key stakeholders in the environment where the joined action will take place; the ability to navigate political interests and sensitivities in this arena

We are seeing here a whole set of non-monetary yet very valuable contributions that increase the probability that we will advance towards our shared goal and achieve our common objectives. Several may be harder to measure and quantify, but anyone with some real-world experience knows that their absence makes failure significantly more likely.

The agency with money can take a predatory attitude to this: My money can buy all that non-monetary value! Is that so? Can you buy trust, reputation and perceived legitimacy? Can you buy all forms of connection? Can you buy all these attitudes, that ethical basis? Can you buy and keep all the data, knowledge and competencies without having an ethical foundation, credibility and legitimacy? Not really – money doesn't get you everything.

Now that we have recognised that money may be necessary but is not sufficient, we can more fully appreciate the non-monetary contributions that the others bring to our collaborative effort or partnership. When we do so, money is no longer the dominant shaper of our relationship, and the temptation to abuse the power from the control of money, diminishes.

4. Value Chains and Value Circles

But is this not a simple recognition of a value-chain? Not really, in many value-chains there is profound inequality, dominance and subordination so that the profits or benefits are by no means equally shared. The 'middleman' often has great power over the producer and smaller supplier and turns that into a larger profit. The value-chain can hide an extractive, even an exploitative, process.

Genuinely collaborative work, and equitable partnerships, create more of a value-circle, a value-aggregate, made up of the different value-contributions of each that complement each other. It is the clever mix of ingredients that creates the successful dish! As anyone who has worked in a restaurant kitchen knows, all cooks need to work together as a team to deliver not just individually great plates, but a consistent menu of different courses to many customers. Unlike our hierarchical value chains where failure can (and will) be blamed on usually the weaker player in the chain, success or failure in a value-circle will be shared. That should be a powerful incentive to not just focus on the task, but to also invest in the quality of the collaborative relationship.

5. Discuss Value Adding and Risk Together

Collaborative endeavours and partnerships carry risks. As elaborated in our previous GMI Insight*' No Shared Risk No Partnership'*, these risks can relate to the task but also to the collaboration. In collaborations with strong power inequalities, the power holder can be tempted to mitigate their risk with all sorts of compliance requirements, thereby effectively transferring risk to the less powerful entity. Hardly a 'partnership'! We recommend that you first have the conversation about what value each adds to the collaborative endeavour. It will create the positive atmosphere that enables the conversation about risk. In that conversation, identify the risks for each, but don't keep them as an issue 'between' you (the risk for me, the risk for you). Take one or more objects to represent the risks of each, and put them 'out there', in front of the collaborating entities. Then look together at how you will manage your shared risks.

6. So, Ask Yourself

- Have we had the conversation about what value contribution each of us brings to the joined effort, to the partnership?
- What are the monetary and non-monetary, the tangible but also intangible 'assets' that each can contribute here?
- Are we properly appreciating the relevance, importance and hence 'value' also of the non-monetary and intangible contributions?
- Are we feeling the temptation to use our control over the money to establish dominance (and blame the other when something goes wrong)? Are we resisting that temptation, because we recognise and respect the importance of these non-monetary contributions?
- Are we paying attention, not only to the progress towards our shared objective, but also to the health of our collaborative relationship, so that the potential of our value-circle, our jointly cooked dish, is fully realised?

Other GMI Insights on collaboration and partnering

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Relationship Management Skills in Organisational Partnerships
No Shared Risk No Partnership?
Challenges in Partnership Governance: Some attention points and tips

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