RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN ORGANISATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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Be clear about the relationship: 'Partnership' has become a much misused and even abused word, to refer to any type of collaborative relationship. When applied even to unmistakably subcontracting relationships, it can feel like Orwellian 'double speak'. Like when I call a plumber to do some work on my kitchen and call her or him my 'partner'. No, a 'partnership' is expected to be a higher quality relationship. Not all more equal collaborations need to be partnerships: when I co-facilitate or co-evaluate with others that I may not have known before, we need to develop strong alignment and coherence as a team and apply relationship competencies. But it is understood that the collaboration is very task-specific and may very well be a one-off occurrence. When we talk about a 'partnership' (in the work sphere), it doesn't mean the collaborating organisations are (almost) merging. They maintain their autonomy and can do much separately. But there is a longer time-perspective. Be clear where you are, on the spectrum.

Reflect on your use of the word 'partnership': are you precise enough, are all the collaborations you call 'partnerships' indeed that?

Sufficient alignment: Partnering is not an end in itself. We partner for a purpose. That can be a concrete and measurable objective e.g. a law passed that makes it mandatory to pay women and men equally for comparable work. That will take some time, that we can reasonably estimate if we know the legislative process. Or it can be a broader goal, such as getting producers and retailers of shampoo and shower jells make them available in refillable glass bottles, so that we can reduce our plastic waste. That is likely to be a longer-term endeavour with a less clear 'success' indicator. It will require multiple strands of action and it is much harder to anticipate all options and choices that will present themselves in the pursuit of that goal. But we are sufficiently aligned, around our purpose but also our values and commitment, to decide to pursue this goal together in partnership.

Are you clear with your collaborators about what brings and keeps you together? Have you had an explicit conversation about this before joining forces? Do you sometimes review that you are still sufficiently aligned?

Explore the value each brings: There is no partnership when money is the only value brought to it that is recognized; even less so if the money is (overwhelmingly) in the hands of one organization. Then the temptation of using the control of money to dominate, is hard to avoid. Partnerships are complementary value compacts. You collaborate, and partner, because you bring complementary value to the pursuit of a common objective or goal. Sit together before entering a collaborative relationship, and consciously and intentionally list the value each brings. One may bring money and technical expertise, another however a network of vital contacts that can open necessary doors; a third one may bring insightful understanding of the history of the issue in that particular context and why previous attempts to resolve it have failed; another one brings vital language skills and the ability not just to collect data but to interpret them for what they mean in that particular operating environment; yet another one has proven legitimacy and the trust of multiple actors that are stakeholders in the issue you want to address. Monetary and non-monetary and tangible and intangible assets are equally critical for the successful pursuit of your purpose. Identify them, name them, and recognise them as them as such.

Then you can have a more equitable partnership, not distorted by overemphasis on money. (Throwing money at a problem is very rarely enough to resolve it!).[1]

Can you identify the non-monetary value that you and your collaborators need and bring to a current joint endeavour? Do you acknowledge, explicitly, the contribution of non-monetary value? Does it contribute to a fairly equitable relationship?

Do you have any serious collaborative arrangements where there are no money transfers – what are they based on?

It's about behaviours! Many collaborations, at least in Western countries (but not everywhere around the world!), are based on formal agreements, contracts, Memoranda of Understanding etc. When issues arise, we refer to the formal terms and conditions. Yet from experience we know that in reality, people often don't function like that. Employees stay but are disengaged because of the disrespect they are treated with. Even though it is a short-term, transactional, relationship, my plumber may well walk away from the job if I am manifestly unfair and use aggressive language while he is on the job. Expectations about behaviour towards each other are higher when we call the relationship a 'partnership'. These behavioural expectations are not normally mentioned in a formal agreement and remain largely expressed. Yet breakdowns in the relationship are caused by perceived misbehaviours or disappointments over expectations that had remained implicit. That can easily come to override formal agreements. Hence the importance of articulating commitments around behavioural principles and practices in the wider contract, or as a complementary partnership agreement. *(see GMI 2019 Brief 'Partnerships: Pre-conditions, principles and practices)*

Relationship systems- and team coaches help teams develop explicit team agreements and conflict protocols: *How will we be and behave with each other when we are in (fierce) disagreement*? This is equally useful and appropriate in the collaboration between organisations, certainly when the aspiration is one of 'partnership'.

Have you discussed behavioural expectations of each other prior to formalising your partnership? Are these referenced in your formal agreement? Have you jointly elaborated a conflict protocol?

Relationship skills*:* Many relationships, in our personal and professional life, come under stress and may even break down because of unskilful behaviours. There are the everyday micro-behaviours with small irritations caused by, perhaps, a person never being present at the agreed time, speaking very fast and with a strong accent that is very hard for you to understand, or constantly looking away from the screen elsewhere when you are in a video conference. More serious tensions can be caused by regularly omitting the name and even contribution of the partnering organization(s) from your public communications and reports, or an email that ignores what the other party has raised and/or suggested, and therefore comes across as lacking in empathy and authoritarian. When frustrations with a partner are vented in your own corridor but not raised with them or, when raised, only result in mutual blaming, you have signals that something is amiss in the relationship.

Effective relationship management requires emotional and social intelligence. Not something that comes automatically with technical or thematic expertise, and that is always actively inquired into when hiring people for positions that include that responsibility. Cross-cultural competencies need to be added to that, when the collaboration is between people from different societies.

As 'partnerships' are relationships expected to be of higher quality, they merit explicit attention and care, just as much as the task execution. Behavioural principles and a conflict protocol are ways of setting certain quality standards for relationship management. Just as task implementation is periodically reviewed, you can set times for the period review of how the relationship is going, and what adaptations may be required to increase the likelihood of success.

Can you name ten important relationship skills? How much attention and weight are given to emotional and social intelligence and to cross-cultural competencies in your hiring for positions that

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require collaboration? When was the last time you intentionally reviewed the quality of relationship with your partners?

Coherence in relationship management: Senior managers of different organisations may have decided to work together in partnership. But the actual partnership lives between others in the respective organisations, who are in regular interaction. Have they been briefed on the why, what and how of the partnering, or is the responsibility just dumped on them? Further, within each organization different people at times and for different purposes, will interact with the partner organization(s). It may be people from finance, communications, training and development, fundraising etc. Many of them will not know the partner organisation as well, its history, its way of working, its current priorities and stresses. They may not have the personal relationships that enable empathy and provide the resilience in the collaboration to withstand the inevitable tensions. As they have act from their own responsibilities, requirements, priorities and deadlines, their way of communicating or interacting may not conform with the expected and established behaviours that is practiced between those in regular interaction in the partnership. This can create problems. Coherence, on the side of each partnering organization, in the handling of the partnership relationship, is required. Perhaps one person can formally be the relationship manager, that her or his colleagues need to consult with whenever they too need to engage the partner? Good idea as this is, expect this to also cause some internal tensions, e.g. the relationship manager may e.g. tell her or his colleagues to hold off with a demand, knowing that the partner is currently overloaded and not able to respond adequately to it.

Review the last 30 communications from your organization with a partner: Are they coherent in terms of the relationship management? In your organization, is there a clear relationship lead for different partners, that others seek information and advice from? Are you able to make internal compromises within your own organisation to protect the health of the partnership relationship – or do you require the partner to deal with the multitude of demands coming from different people within your organisation, in different tones and relational styles?

What do you think of the following proposition: If there are no collaborative skills within an organization, its ability to collaborate with other organisations is low!?

Partnership relationships evolve: Just as in our personal lives, partnerships in the work sphere are living and dynamic entities that evolve. That evolution can come from changes in the respective partnering organisations that have nothing to do with the collaboration itself, but also from the collaboration experience. Another reason to not be fixed about the original 'contract' and to periodically review the partnership. Some of these changes will bring stresses. Maturity of the partnering organisations and in the relationship can turn these stresses into opportunities. Overcoming challenges together can lead to better partnering skills and deeper trust, which allow the partners now to take on situations they couldn't handle before.

Third party support: Partnering organisations can face relationship difficulties they cannot resolve by themselves and therefor call upon a third party. It is important here to be clear about competencies and roles. There is a difference between a conversation facilitator, a relationship systems coach, a mediator and an arbitrator. A conversation facilitator and a relationship coach seek to create conditions for the entities in partnership to constructively address their relationship challenge – the latter using a particular perspective and techniques. They will not articulate possible solutions for discussion and negotiation, like a mediator, let alone decide who is 'right' and who is 'wrong' as an arbitrator will. It would be a mistake, on the side of the third party, to only consider the terms of the formal agreement between the collaborating parties, ignoring the behaviours and the emotions associated with them. As we have seen, more often than not, collaborations and partnerships break down over perceived behavioural disappointments and offences. Not taking this into account may be missing the ball – badly.

Are you clear about the differences in role? Have you had an experience of third-party support for one of your partnering relationships? What were the strong points, what the weaker ones? Did the third party strengthen your joint ability to deal with the challenge more constructively?

Ending a partnership: Partnerships come to an end, in some cases because their purpose has been achieved, sometimes because one of the other no longer has the (tangible/intangible) assets that constituted her contribution to the joint endeavour, sometimes because of a breakdown in the

relationship, and sometimes because of a change of key people with the newcomer wanting to do everything different from her or his predecessor.[2] There are good and bad reasons to ending or stepping out of a partnership, and good and bad ways of doing it. How we exit/end says a lot about the actual quality of relationship, but also about us. A loss of financial resources on our side is likely to have a significant impact on our ability to engage and contribute – but have we considered the non-monetary ways in which we can continue to add value? If our differences have become bigger than what brings us together, can we separate while maintaining a tone and behaviours of respect? How do we end a collaboration prematurely (the common objective is not yet achieved) in a way that we remain on speaking terms?

What would be, very concretely, behaviours that show respectful and responsible exit? When you review the last ten partnerships of your organisation that are no longer alive, how many ended because the common objective was achieved, how many for other reasons? How many were ended respectfully and responsibly? What needs to be maintained, what needs to be done differently, to increase the percentage of those ended on a positive note?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your organisation's fitness for partnering?

Here some questions to help you assess

1. We only use the term 'partnership' for an equitable, quality collaboration;
2. *When considering partnering, we take time to get to know each other and explore/develop our alignment towards a shared purpose but also appreciation for and commitment to the quality of the collaboration;*
3. *We explicitly explore what value each brings to the collaborative endeavour;*
4. *We appreciate key non-monetary contributions as much as monetary ones;*
5. *We are in/can envisage partnerships where there are no monetary transfers;*
6. *We recognise that behaviours can be more impactful on the relationship than formal terms of agreement;*
7. *With our partners, we jointly discuss behavioural expectations towards each other, and articulate these as principles (and possibly practices);*
8. *With our partners, we jointly discuss and develop a protocol for how we want to be with each other, when tensions and conflicts arise;*
9. *We periodically review the quality of our partnership relationship;*
10. *We recruit/nominate/promote people for their emotional intelligence, cross-cultural and other relationship management skills, where that is part of their role and responsibilities;*
11. *Interpersonal, cross-cultural and relationship management competencies are a component of our internal staff development and staff appraisal;*
12. *We actively ensure internal coherence in how our organisation relates with its partners;*
13. *When needed, we will seek support from a third party with strong partnering and relationship coaching experience and expertise;*
14. *When ending or exiting from a collaboration with partners, we do our utmost to do so respectfully and responsibly;*
15. *In the majority of instances when we ended or exited from a partnering collaboration before the common objective was achieved, the remaining legacy is one of a good relationship.*

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[2] It happens even in as strategic a partnership as NATO.