Together We Can: A Guide to Partnership Working
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Introduction

This manual is written as a working document to assist anyone interested in or having to develop ways of partnership working. It sets out the main issues, describes the kinds of tasks involved, gives a sense of the most useful order in which to tackle things and provides a map of the territory the intrepid partnership worker has to negotiate.

If there is a renaissance in finding ways to overcome institutional or organisational limitations and difficulties via a partnership arrangement then this may be fulfilled in a number of ways. This manual provides a set of working tools and frameworks for an individual who is undertaking to develop and implement partnership ideas.

Many people are involved in the various kinds of arrangements that fall under the term ‘partnership working’. Many of those doing such work do it very successfully yet there are others who find it all very bewildering when they first begin. Over the fifteen years and more that I have been involved in these kinds of arrangements, I have found that even those who are ‘intuitively’ good at it don’t always know how they do what they do and, like any of us, have ‘gaps’ in their working understanding.

There are others who think that there is some systematic way to go about such ways of working and attempt to follow a formula. They often come unstuck at some point early in the work when they realise that the formula doesn’t work because the people who are involved don’t always obey the guidelines the project worker had hoped they would.

Like any map, it is only as useful as the journey the person takes and the kind of travelling they intend to make. The manual is not a blueprint of how things ‘ought’ to be done, nor is it a comprehensive and exhaustive list of activities that need to be ticked off, rather, it is an overview of the range of activities that need attention. It contains worksheets, exercises and guidance that are designed to be useful at the time the project manager needs it. Although it is written in a sequence that suggests things occur in order, they rarely do so in life. The manual is designed to be referred to as needed rather than be slavishly applied in the order things are described here.

The manual has two sections:

1. The first gives the framework and outlines the various tasks involved.
2. The second provides more background information on the skills and ideas that partnership working depend upon.

The reader is invited to use the manual in any useful way throughout their partnership project and not to be confined by the order in which things are set down here.
Section I: A Partnership Working Approach
Chapter 1: What is Partnership Working?

Enthusiasm attacking the impossible.

‘Partnership Working’
‘Partnership working’ comes out of the need to develop new kinds of relationships between organisations. It usually requires the efforts of individual members attempting to work across the usual limits and constraints. Sometimes partnership working may involve representatives from different sections within the same organisation attempting to work more collaboratively or develop a more integrated response to an organisational issue.

In order to establish a partnership arrangement there are usually some senior representatives of the organisation or units involved. Their decision to establish what is sometimes termed a ‘strategic alliance’ creates the broad framework for those charged with implementing the partnership arrangement.

Why Partnership?
Partnership ways of working are an attempt to work outside the usual rules and procedures of organisations in order to accomplish tasks that current ways of working cannot accomplish or accomplish ineffectively. A ‘joined-up’ approach to working is perhaps the most recent encouragement in the attempt to find effective ways of relating and working that improve the quality of provision to the end users of a wide range of services. Partnership working is a term familiar in local authorities, health, education, in the public sector in general and in partnership arrangements between public and private contributors: initiatives in education and health being two of the obvious ones.

The ‘players’ in any developing partnership arrangement will come from a variety of backgrounds. Some will be agencies, such as the Benefits Agency or the Employment Service. Some will be representatives of Local Authority interests such as housing, education or youth and community work. Some will represent private interests such as local employers. Yet others will come from the not-for-profit sector, such as CVS and specific voluntary groups. All of these might belong to the network yet they might never all meet together in the same room at the same time. The decision to bring together certain players at any given time will depend on the stage of the partnership task and its needs at that particular moment.

‘Partnerships’, ‘Strategic Alliances’ and Other Terms
The potential effectiveness of partnership working is related to and overlaps with a number of other ways of describing non-conventional responses to working problems which require new sorts of arrangements and relationships between organisational members. Some of the most important are outlined below. The success of any particular project will vary not only according to the type of working involved but also with the commitments and the freedom of action given to those involved in implementing the idea in practice.

1. Strategic alliance: many partnership arrangements arise because other key players in an organisation or in different organisations decide to adopt a strategic alliance in order to further some aspect of their work. A strategic alliance often precedes and stands above the work of those engaged in attempting to deliver whatever the resulting partnership is charged with implementing.
2. **Cross-disciplinary working:** many efforts to work across traditional occupational boundaries require and depend upon forms of partnership working – at least by those charged to help bring such arrangements about.

3. **Multi-professional working:** again, those attempting to bring different professionals into closer collaboration are often using similar skills and developing similar arrangements to those of partnership working.

4. **Project team development:** members are drawn from across different sections or departments of the same organisation to bring about a shared result. Those setting up such arrangements and enabling them to work effectively will often have to negotiate with key managers to get release and approval for individuals to make their contribution – another form of partnership-type working.

5. **A development alliance:** where two or more agencies work together to create a new form of response or develop a new form of provision then partnership-type ways of working are likely to be involved.

6. **Project working:** a project worker appointed to initiate a new response or develop a new way of working is likely to need and depend upon similar skills to those involved in partnership approaches.

**Networking Skills**

A large part of the work, in the early days especially but also throughout the whole of a partnership project, is to be an effective networker. Partnership arrangements are also very similar, use many of the same skills and require a similar approach as ‘networking’ when it is put to some organisational purpose. Partnership working and networking are not synonymous although they are enormously linked and overlap to some degree.

**Example**

A local authority and an educational organisation together with private sector interests wish to pioneer closer school-to-work links in a form of partnership. Once the decision to go ahead with this is made, a set of procedures have to be established in order to fulfil the aims and there is often an assigned individual to implement this. That individual will have to build a range of relations amongst a wide range of players in order to implement the proposal. So partnership is the task, networking is one of the tools.

**Why ‘Partnership Working’?**

Partnership working is often a task that cannot effectively be undertaken by the usual organisational methods; this can generate ambivalence inside the organisation itself. On the one hand there is hope for a way of solving a real difficulty or dilemma, and on the other there is potential for resentment at the methods that the person responsible is encouraged to exercise.

Partnership working usually arises as a result of a policy decision or major initiative by an organisation or organisations. The aim is to improve some aspect of their work as a result of developing shared working practices or joint arrangements. Indeed, for many people a ‘partnership’ is a formal effort to attempt a more ‘joined-up’ approach to some commonly held

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1 Networking and related issues are addressed in more detail in Chapter 9.
issues that transcends work roles or even organisational purposes. Such approaches are becoming increasingly attractive. More people are realising that the answer to organisational difficulties lies not in the creation of yet more organisations and new roles but in getting those we do have to be more flexible, adaptable and integrated.

The Meaning of ‘Partnership’
A ‘partnership’ or ‘partnership working’ is open to a variety of meanings. People often use the word in a variety of senses, aware of what they understand by the term, yet it is not always clear to a listener just which kind of partnership is being referred to. For some, partnership working is a systematic way of building informal links across the usual organisational or role boundaries. For others, it is a loose description that refers to the way they maintain important contacts. Partnership, however, in the way in which it is being described here, is a relatively developed and sophisticated way of working that requires a good deal of trust from a good many people: senior managers, project managers, participants, colleagues and users of services. It encompasses the conscious and deliberate efforts of an individual or group of individuals to improve the tasks they are engaged upon. These tasks might be collaborative ones or overlap in some other important way.

Example
The development of a shared approach to staff recruitment across all sections of a major hospital is a good example of just such a task, since it will have implications for and importance to a very wide range of contributing organisations, departments and professionals.

Potential for Partnership Working
Partnership working presents new forms and structures to work out how to deliver services in potentially new ways. At the same time, they are staffed by individuals who, for the most part, have been used to working in traditional structures and in organisations that have a long-term history – even though in recent years it is a history of change. It falls then to those who are used to the familiarity of organisational forms to create new forms and new ways of working that are far from simple to devise. Cross-disciplinary working, whilst laudable as an aim, is notoriously difficult to implement effectively in practice. Multi-disciplinary teams may exist in many areas of working life, but the interrelationship of members and how to release the undoubted potential of their contribution is often relatively undeveloped.

A significant influence upon the loss of conviction that occurs in many collaborative efforts is that individuals lose motivation over different issues at different times. All may start out with a real willingness to see something different occur, yet as efforts are made to progress, issues arise or implications are unearthed that have an impact upon the organisational body the individual represents, the profession they work within, or the routines are at odds with previous working practices and so on. Before long individuals, who have been strongly motivated, may well be labouring under a welter of conflicting demands, irreconcilable pressures and torn loyalties. Working with these issues is far from easy and not something that can be overcome quickly. However, it is possible to explore and gain some insights about these matters and develop clarity of priorities in relation to one’s own role, the stage of development of the organisation itself and the emerging priorities of the strategic direction it is implementing.
Individuals or agencies can become involved in a network without implying that they have an awareness of their role or status vis-à-vis one another, or that their actions are organised collectively, are interdependent or directed toward some common goal. They may be, but it is not necessary in order to work effectively. For a practitioner in an agency contemplating an intervention at the client or community level, analysing the situation in network terms offers the dual advantages of specificity in terms of actors and actions, and an absence of confining categories which can lead to a priori decisions as to who should or should not be important.

**Partnership and Networking**
Networks, like any other kind of group, develop a climate or an atmosphere in which they operate. Some are high on social and emotional levels of relating; others are far more interested in the tasks to be accomplished. The problem of evaluating what kind of climate exists varies but some of the features to look out for if a network is struggling to maintain itself are important. For example, people can often attend more out of the fear of missing something than out of any genuine commitment to the aims of the network itself.

**Warning**
Many networks are thus sustained in a fairly desultory way. No one is confident enough to stay away yet no one cares enough to challenge the aims, the values, the approaches and the activities that the network continues to promote.

To develop a network of partners can be the stated intention of some ‘prime agent’ (see Chapter 3), allocated the task and responsibility either from within their own agency or given the brief from some other funding body. This can lead to individuals being appointed to establish a network. Very often there are already existing groupings, pressure groups or associations working directly in the territory concerned or closely related to it. Agencies establishing networks must be prepared to proceed cautiously and consult existing representative groups or they will be seen as ‘taking over’. Flagrant attempts to take over existing arrangements can create immense resentment and difficulty, ensuring little progress is made whilst damaging an already well-established and active system.

**The Benefits of Being a Contributor to Partnership Working**
Apart from it being a means to get things done, the very method – its informality and personal presence, as opposed to role involvement – makes networking an attractive style of operating, and whilst working in open, strong networks is not for the weak or the shy, the rewards for such high forms of collaboration are that networks can be extremely efficient and effective. They can hold people together in the light of tremendous opposition or hostility because those who belong to a network will have argued out their positions with one another and so can be trusted to rely upon one another. One of the great advantages of such ways of working is that it enables individuals to move with and across organisational boundaries with relative ease. Status is not an issue. If someone in the network has information you need then it is accepted practice that you have the right to contact them irrespective of any significant role differences.

In the end it is perhaps the direct face-to-face contact, at least from time to time, that makes a network important to people; it is not simply the services that they get from network membership, but it is the affiliative and friendship relationships that often go along with it. It is also important that networks are based on trust and respect: important bonds that hold people together which are often not found in conventional organisations and departments. Networks
are often personal and friendly, supportive and affirming, critical and energising. They can provide great intimacy and immediacy of contact which is often in marked contrast to what individuals find in their organisation and sometimes even in their personal relationships.

**Partnership Issues**

Most people who become involved in partnership initiatives have a large measure of goodwill and hope – yet they often have limited experience of the mechanics of organisational partnerships to guide them. All of us have experiences of other kinds of partnerships, which will not always be of the best either. It is one thing to want to work much more closely (as partnership working suggests), but there are a whole host of questions that ‘partnering’ players have to resolve before they arrive to the table, as well as a good many more once they arrive – and all long before anything concrete gets done.

These include beforehand:

1. **Working out with their own agency, how far partnerships ‘can’ go.** What are the limits and how are they set?

2. **Establishing a brief for the partnering representative** that gives sufficient freedom of action to work things out in the partnering forum, but which does not leave them a ‘free agent’ able to arrange things unilaterally on behalf of those they represent.

3. **Having effective lines of reporting back and gathering information** to influence the growing partnership process.

4. **A policy about the limits to action and discussion** that representing others involves.

5. **A detailed sense of the agenda** of the professional group or whoever they represent.

With the partnering organisation:

1. **Openness about any differences in strength, power and influence** and how these are to be worked with (rather than ignored and manipulated).

2. **Clarity about how far each partner will share the agendas** of the organisation and groups they represent.

3. **A working agreement about how to report back to those they represent** and how to manage resistances to their growing influence (partnering players often have little direct power and are therefore reliant upon influence to bring about change).

4. **A willingness to work out joint strategies, plans and working norms** that suit their shared circumstances rather than import those of one agency and impose them on others.

5. In addition to management knowledge and organisational understanding, **facilitative skills are crucial** – most of their work will be spent in persuading people to give things up now in favour of potential benefits then – no easy task.
Host agencies and professional groups (or the body from which the partnering players are drawn) have to recognise a number of things. For example, once you move out from such a base and into the limbo of partnership working, inevitably those charged with making it work will necessarily at times take action or endorse decisions that go against those interests that they have been sent to represent. Many people have not had a chance to work out any of this kind of thing before they are ‘elected’ or ‘nominated’ to take up a role, nor have a realistic assessment of what is possible in their particular circumstances. Hence it takes time for the partnership to develop to the level where there is trust between all the members, agreed levels of disclosure of information, agreed ways of operating. All these need to be addressed prior to the ‘real’ tasks of the partnership group getting underway.

The impact of all this for those who manage or co-ordinate networks is to remember always to keep it simple. Recruiting people via mass mailings, for instance, creates many more problems than it solves. Many people may know your intention and even share it, but if you end up with too many people for a manageable structure, the network will never become established at all. In the end it is perhaps the direct fact-to-face contact that network styles of operating promote that have to be embedded in the way a network is formed and encouraged to grow.

Remember
Start small and stay small seems to be biggest lesson in successful networking.

When the network begins to be unwieldy do not be afraid of breaking it up and forming a set of networks rather than try to keep everyone together. Sets of networks can communicate effectively with one another and yet each individual retains the directness of contact and face-to-face relationship that are important in maintaining the life and interest of networks for those who belong.

In partnership working, a network is directed towards some end; it is brought into being to do something. It is activated to make something happen, to facilitate a task that someone has undertaken. It therefore has to be maintained, this may be by infrequent phone calls or a postcard or a regular meeting. It may mean keeping in touch with individual contributors or gathering them together periodically in one place. A network therefore has some sense of a membership and contributors who help make the network work. It will require some set of arrangements to maintain it as we have noted above; these may vary from the very simple or the highly elaborate (teleconferencing, computer networks and so on are sophisticated versions).

Box 1: Partnership Issues

It is useful to remember that:
- Networks are useful for interventions at a variety of levels: individual/community
- They can be mobilised for specific purposes
- They arise out of need
- They do not necessarily pose a challenge to established agencies’ interests
- The initiator can generate the contacts they require
- It depends more on shared agreement to meet and willingness to work together than on institutional commitment.
In order for the network to work there must be a minimum level of commitment from the network builder (the person whose network it is, in the sense of the person who activates the contacts for whatever purpose) and network members. This commitment will be based on an alliance of interests rather than personal liking. It will be based therefore more on shared values and ideology than on personal preferences. The commitment is not simply to one’s own main aims and intentions but also to the efficiency and development of the partnership itself. Consequently, there will need to be awareness of how to maintain one’s own position whilst taking into account others’, which may be, if not actually conflicting, at least somewhat divergent. For all members of a partnership therefore, but perhaps especially the prime mover in the enterprise, possessing negotiation\textsuperscript{2} skills is extremely valuable.

\textsuperscript{2} Negotiation is explored more fully in Chapter 11.