

The Partnership Manager – Theory & Reality!

Thoughts Paper by Henry Pavey MBA, CTArcf, FICW

Introduction

This thoughts paper looks at the critical role of the Partnership Manager and key draws upon best practice research underpinned by my own practitioner experiences including 10 years as the Strategic Partnership Manager at Southampton City Council where I was responsible for ensuring that the city maximised the benefits of citywide partnership working to address a number of economic, social and environmental challenges. In addition, over the last 10 years, I have advised and coached a wide variety of partnership managers through my own consultancy practice. Throughout this insights paper I will use the following terms:

Partnership: To describe ‘where two or more organisations commit to working together to create shared value to deliver a unique product, service or initiative that cannot be delivered by any single organisation on its’ own’.

Partnerships can also be described as strategic alliances, networks, collaborations, etc – however the basic premise of such an arrangement is shared value. The vast majority of my experiences are predominantly local authority instigated partnerships covering a broad range of themes including community and estate regeneration; town centre development schemes; place-making transformational programmes; culture and economy; health & wellbeing; community safety; education, skills & training; transport; One Public Estate; public service hubs; and strategic partnership leadership teams such as Public Service Boards.

Partnership Manager: Generic term to describe the person responsible for driving the partnership and ensuring that its day-to-day operations are effectively managed and delivery objectives met. Partnership managers can also go by a number of other titles including director, strategic alliance manager, co-ordinator, etc.

So what is a Partnership Manager?

In essence, the partnership manager is arguably the most important person needed to ensure partnership success. A professional and credible individual who combines strong skills and experiences in 5 key areas:

- 1) visioning and strategy - keeping all partners focused on the prize;
- 2) relationship management - building value-creating partner relationships;
- 3) partnership management - making the governance structure work;
- 4) collaborative working - the approaches and methods; and
- 5) programme management - the planning, delivery and reporting.

.....and undertaking all of the above with considerable tact and diplomacy!

Experienced partnership managers also know that partnerships and partnership working is inherently unstable due to a number of factors including:

- All partners are operating in the VUCA World of non-stop volatility; uncertainty; complexity and ambiguity – which means stability and certainty within the partnership is nearly always impossible.
- Lots of moving parts; lots of personalities; individual behaviours, different cultures, priorities, languages (professional and organisational), reporting lines, funding streams, etc.
- In a collaborative context, no one can tell anyone what to do; but that results get delivered through a relentless focus on shared vision; shared value and emotional attachment.
- Physical geographic separation between partners' makes communications challenging as you cannot call a meeting of everyone quickly to resolve issues.
- It is all about building trust and nurturing long-term value-creating relationships; but this is usually forgotten in the 'here and now of delivery'.

Given this, a partnership manager is sometimes likened to a choreographer or conductor (Kittel 2013). Someone able to operate as a diplomat and lobbyist;

connects people and information; gets things done based on sound analysis, experience, out-of-the-box thinking and creative strategies (Tjemkes et al, 2018).

Critically, skilled and experienced partnership managers see and think completely differently when compared to traditional and functional management. They rarely manage resources; but they expertly influence resources of others through value-creating relationships.

A partnership manager's key tasks are as varied as are the many types of thematic partnerships that exist however, in most cases, they are the primary point of contact / the central focus for the partnership and their key tasks should include:

- Ambassador for the partnership; champion for its shared vision.
- Management of the partnership governance structure / framework; whole operating system overview (Echavarria 2016).
- Gets on top of everything; the 'eye & ears' of the partnership; anticipates barriers / challenges to delivery and identifies approaches to overcome. Escalation if needed.
- Partnership programme management and co-ordination of the added value partnership activities through the partnership delivery plan.
- Briefs, supports and agenda plans with the Chair.
- Organises value-creating / value-adding meetings with a clear focus on accelerating delivery; collaborative problem-solving; and seizing opportunities.
- Performance management and reporting.
- Tact, diplomacy, relationship building through strong interpersonal skills with the credibility to nudge, cajole and push all partners and their organisations to meet agreed partnership objectives and timescales.
- Skilled at negotiation and conflict resolution.
- Securing network advantage through stakeholder analysis and mapping.
- Partnership communications – internal and external.
- Supervises the partnership team.

Over the years I have come across many skilled and experienced partnership managers, but also I have come across a number of 'square pegs in round holes'! Just because someone is a good Prince 2 practitioner or a good corporate performance manager doesn't make them a good partnership manager; but I have seen a number of these people placed into a partnership management role with little or no consideration to their own development needs – but tasked with 'making that partnership work'!

In addition, it is also interesting to note that the role of the partnership manager – the very person tasked with making it all work – is usually much misunderstood and / or not articulated very well. There is great mystery about what a partnership manager actually does? Surely all such a person does is 'organise meetings' for others to participate in? I look at the role as:

- If a Partnership is all about delivering collaborative transformation; then the Partnership Manager must be the agent of collaborative transformation.

The Control versus Freedom Tension

To make a real difference a partnership manager needs a significant degree of flexibility and freedom to get things done for the greater good of the partnership. For the partnership manager's employing organisation, they must consider the appropriate degree of 'line-management control' they want to exert on the partnership manager and balance that with the 'degree of freedom' they wish them to operate within.

Within a local authority context – where most of my own practitioner experiences are coupled with a range of consultancy commission experiences over the years – I have talked to a number of 'council employed partnership managers' who feel a real challenge in wanting / needing to work in a way that they are regarded as 'a friend of the partners and not perceived as a stooge for the council'! Sometimes they have to go back within their own organisations with partner feedback that is not positive about their own employing organisation. This can be regarded as career limiting by the partnership manager as their own organisation's logo is on their monthly pay-slip!

Given this, it is absolutely critical that the partnership manager's employing organisation – local authority or otherwise – clearly spells out the rules of engagement regarding 'control versus freedom' and that it also fully expects them to be honest with partner intelligence and feedback regarding their own organisation's partnering capabilities. An alternative approach to resolving this dilemma is for the partnership itself to fund and commission an independent partnership manager who is 100% accountable to the partnership and its membership.

The Partnership Manager's Challenges

Many partnerships fail to achieve their full potential and, depressingly, it is estimated that around 80% to 90% of all partnership failures arise not because the deal - what the partnership was seeking to achieve was impossible or too hard - but because relationships and trust breakdown; if it was ever there in the first place!

Developing and sustaining trust, relationships and the right behaviours is the building block for collaborative success. This can be summed up in the 'collaboration iceberg' where the focus by 'those in charge' usually the Chair and Partnership Board (and not the partnership manager!) is nearly always on the tangible (hard) stuff as it is this stuff that partners understand and therefore can ultimately plan, direct and control.



However, effective collaborative working is first and foremost a human and political challenge (CIPFA 2010) around the dynamics of people, power and politics. It is also the 'human system' that is the enabler that under-pins the whole collaborative system. In collaborative systems it is generally the intangible (soft) stuff of the human dimensions that are avoided through any form of collective discussion and action as they are too difficult / too uncontrollable / too time-consuming – yet it is the very human-beings that create the collaborative culture that ultimately leads to success or failure; the deal being achieved or not! So how does the partnership manager get their partners sitting around the table to address the intangibles?

In considering the intangible (soft) stuff, it is interesting to note that the partnership manager is usually the only one who looks at partnership as a whole operating system. Sometimes Chairs try to do this, but with little real impact because as Martin Echavarria (2016) relates that *'when partners communicate and engage in group partnership development (including Chairs), they become contributors as well as receivers....consequently they lose perspective of what is happening in the whole group from a third person point of view....they only experience what is happening through their reactions and contributions. Only an outside perspective (the partnership manager) can see the group as a whole operating system and help it be successful in its mission'*.

This is critical given that the partnership manager is really the only one who can see what is working well; what is not working well; and the individual behaviours and group dynamics across the whole system.

You would think that these incredibly useful insights would make the partnership manager really critical as the agent of collaborative transformation? Yet the partnership manager can also be quite powerless, because of their perceived power and status, when it comes to directly instigating learning and development activities to address the collaborative skills needs of their partnership members. This is even more so when it comes to strategic partnerships that comprise of senior people who are coming together to tackle some truly wicked and cross-cutting issues affecting their areas. They do not usually see and accept the need to take time out from busy

diaries to undertake, for example, any form of regular partnership health-check review to identify what is and what isn't working well?

Whilst this is the subject of a future Collaborative Impact Insight, it is worth noting that organisations across UK Plc spend considerable sums per year on organisational development activities including senior management development; team building; business unit away-days; service redesign programmes; performance reviews; etc. Yet the investment in partnership development – the very partnerships established to tackle some of the most complex problems facing our society and communities - is (I would suggest) woeful in comparison to both organisational investment and to the challenge of their partnership proposition.

So, the partnership manager can be quite powerless as they are not a 'member of the partnership' but they are the critical organiser / facilitator / doer – somebody who is there to react the partnership members needs and directions; rather than being regarded as someone who influences them! So how does the partnership manager get them to focus on the intangibles (soft skills) when they have a role that is often likened to '*herding cats*' or '*nailing jelly on a wall*'!

One approach that partnership managers can deploy is 'collaborative thuggery' (Huxham and Vangen, 2005); don't worry it is not as brutal as it sounds! This comes down to the stealthy application of two key skills that a confident and skilled partnership manager can utilise:

- Manipulating the Agenda.
- Playing the Politics.

Manipulating the Agenda: This means ensuring that all opportunities for addressing the intangibles such as building trust, confidence and relationships across a diverse group of partners is exploited through co-creation activities such as visioning; strategy development and partnership delivery approaches. It is important that these activities are not dominated by one partner; but that they are undertaken within the spirit of co-creation and partnership.

Other tricks include ensuring that meeting venues are rotated; that agendas are crafted to focus on accelerating delivery and collaborative problem solving; that agendas are shaped with the input of all partners – rather than being ‘done to’ partners; and that weighty reports are banned wherever possible or reduced to two sides of A4 max.

Playing the Politics: This is where the partnership manager spends time networking and engaging with those partners who understand collaboration and the real benefits that – if done well – it can bring to all partners. After all, collaboration is fundamentally about creating shared value. These key partners are, in effect, the partnership’s ‘collaboration champions’ that the manager needs the support of. They can raise ‘partnership development’ issues within a meeting that the partnership manager – because of their status – probably cannot.

For example, they could suggest that it would be a great idea for the partnership to take some time out and have an annual partnership review development workshop to collectively assess what is working well; working is not working well; and to identify development needs.

However, I would suggest that if a good partnership manager has to resort to ‘collaborative thuggery’ – then the role, expectations and profile of the partnership manager has not been fully developed and / or communicated to all the partnership members!

Conclusion

A partnership manager is an agent for collaborative transformation; securing shared value for all partners and an ambassador for the partnership. A person uniquely placed to view the partnership as a whole operating system; a person who has the authority and clout to instigate partnership development interventions when necessary. A skilled and experienced professional who cares deeply (even loves) about their partnership and wants to see exceed its potential.

If the partnership(s) you are engaged in do not have such a partnership manager; ask yourself and your partnership colleagues – why not?

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