

What Successful Partnerships Do: Problem Solving for Collaborative Partnerships

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This tip sheet provides strategies for solving several “problems” common in partnership work. It is a companion piece to [What Successful Partnerships Do: 6 Key Activities](#) and [Planning for Partnership](#).

Challenge: Working in partnership is not automatic

“I don’t recall having any training on the topic of partnerships and networks...”

Strategies:

- Recognize that our dominant education system and culture (still) do not emphasize collaborative partnership approaches. Because of this, it is crucial to remind ourselves of the benefits of partnership, to co-learn skills together, and to practice patience along the way.
- Recognize that other cultures (e.g. Indigenous, rural, newcomer) can bring key insights and approaches to enhance our partnerships. Listen and learn from partners with experience in collaborative work from these cultures. Attend trainings (co)led by people from these cultures.
- Find opportunities to co-attend or co-host workshops with partners. Such efforts can build skills, solidify common reference points (frameworks/language) and enhance partnership bonds.
- Make time for regular [evaluative discussions](#) about “on-the-journey” process learnings. Develop an evaluative learning plan that includes learning goals, related questions, and a mix of evaluation methods/activities.
- Learn to recognize, value and “practice” the [six activities](#) of successful partnership work: connect; foster shared understanding; create a shared vision; plan collaboratively; work together for change; celebrate, evaluate and renew.

Challenge: Aligning mandates

“Members have different priorities/commitments... for some organizations partnerships are optional.”

Strategies:

- Reconnect with the people involved in the partnership (e.g. through 1-1 meetings) to learn more about how they see their alignment and where there are gaps. If engaging in partnerships is optional for them, approach their role as a voluntary contribution you want to foster and support. Appreciate the gifts they can offer.
- Make time (20 minutes) on your agenda for members to reflect in pairs on the benefits they have gained personally and organizationally through network participation. Follow with a group discussion on how to enhance benefits and alignments.
- Set aside time (1-2 hours) to reflect on the diversity of partners, using a stakeholder profile tool. Key questions are: Who are the various stakeholders? What is their connection to the initiative/network? What are their priorities? What is their history of involvement? What contributions have they made? What are their expectations? What do these insights mean for moving forward?

Challenge: Red Tape

“Some approvals can be lengthy and tie up the project... ”

Strategies:

- When planning, remember to ask “what could go wrong or slow things down?” Anticipating challenges ahead of time can facilitate smoother planning and strategy development. Talking with higher authorities before you need to approach them may facilitate faster response time when you do.
- Look around the table and think about who may be able to help expedite the process based on their position or personal contacts. Enlist these people to contribute in any way they can.

Challenge: Lack of time

“Everyone is very busy... it’s hard to convince them to add another thing to their already full plate.”

Strategies:

- Good partnerships take time to develop. This presents challenges when a partner’s availability is limited, while issues being addressed are urgent... we need to work with the paradox.
- Luckily, the ingredients that fuel successful partnerships can also stretch time. Facilitate dialogues/activities that enhance the sense of alignment, purpose, progress, inclusion, and team spirit among partners.
- Be sure the people who are new to a partnership (<2 years) have been properly welcomed, oriented and included. Take a pause from the flow of business to do this.
- Make simple pie charts about where people spend their partnership time (meetings, reading, research, enhancing initiatives, new collaborations)? How do people feel about this distribution? Does it align with the needs, skills and aspirations of each partner as well as the partnership? What changes could promise better alignments and outcomes?
- Commit to make more meetings “[effective meetings](#)”. For example, a 2 hour meeting needs 4-6 hours of prep.

Challenge: Finding the right person

“Our partnerships are only as good as our contact person... ”

Strategies:

- Identifying this challenge is also a key insight; practice appreciative inquiry. Ask: Who are those good partners? What it is about them? How did we find them (or how did they find us)? Hopefully, you can develop some related insights to facilitate finding more good people.
- At the same time, it may be worth recognizing how interpersonal and group dynamics impact the way an individual acts. With this understanding, take a look at what allows good contacts to act the way they do, and consider how to remove barriers and/or create opportunities so that other individuals can contribute their gifts in good ways.
- Annually (or more often) reflect on [who’s at the partnership table](#): What strengths do you have together? What is missing? Who (key individual, organization or perspective) might be missing?
- As the saying goes “there are many fish in the sea”... getting out of the office and out of our usual circles can also bring unexpected gains.

Challenge: Is this relationship working?

“When to step back and let others ask for input... when is the partnership not effective...”

Strategies:

- Reflect on your position and approach. Can you shift your approach to better meet the pace, priorities, and culture of other people and organizations?
- Have a conversation about the relationship (1-1 or in the group).
- Choose 4-10 reflection questions based on the best practice literature. Use a likert scale or “spiderweb evaluation tool” to allow for nuance. If this is a group discussion, start in pairs then debrief together.
- Discuss: What next? Allow yourselves to consider all options - including “scaling back” or “letting go”. Talk honestly about which option partners feel more energetic about (talk in pairs or threes first to increase comfort). Allow for all feelings to be shared during this discussion (including anxiety, sadness or frustration). It may not be necessary to make a final decision at the same meeting, but it will be important to outline next steps in the decision-making and, where relevant, a timeframe for the next check-in.