

## **Learning in partnerships – a view from a multi-agency continuous learning set**

### **Paper prepared for the Engage East Midlands Annual Conference and AGM 19<sup>TH</sup> November 2002**

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you some of the thoughts and deliberations that a group of colleagues recently developed, both as part of our own learning but also as participants in the burgeoning partnership environment one finds in the public, voluntary, community and private spheres.

Engage felt that the experience of our learning set is relevant to you and the partnerships that you contribute to or seek to involve yourselves with.

What I'm going to talk about is set of course in the context of the subject of your conference and its goal to input to the crosscutting review.

#### **1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

Our learning set met under the auspices of the **SOLACE Continuing Learning Programme**. The paper represents the personal views of those involved in our group, and given the highly personal nature of much partnership activity, it is perhaps the stronger for that.

Our learning set came together almost three years ago, and its latest incarnation was borne from an original group of seven chief executives and directors in local government across the midlands, the north of England and Wales.

It has since developed into a more diverse group with several agencies and sectors represented prominent in partnership working.

It included colleagues from the Health Development Agency, local authorities, the university sector, the Inland Revenue, regional voluntary sector, the Department of Health and an independent consultant. We were however unable to involve other key sectoral interests, such as business, the police and other regional agencies and we recognise that our range of representation was incomplete.

Given the primacy of partnership working in much of what Government requires of the public, community and voluntary sectors, choosing partnership working was perhaps an easy choice. Particularly so as we recognised that sustainable improvement in the quality of life of our communities requires holistic solutions developed and delivered through collaboration. Our experience covered partnership across local, regional and national systems.

To an extent, our group was and remains a metaphor for the coming together of institutions with different things to offer that one finds in most partnerships. We wanted to act in partnership, in concert with each other yet be challenging and challenged to act constructively and genuinely.

We were clear that we wanted to use the set for personal, managerial and leadership development – and to an extent one can find those motivations at work in real-world partnership activity.

On coming together our learning set quickly began to contribute openly and fully to the debates. There is an interesting sidebar here for those of you working in real-world partnerships. How long does that openness take to develop in your partnership? Has it ever really become the dominant operational feature or is it a tactic used to achieve goals that are not always apparent?

## 2. INITIAL THOUGHTS ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

Now, it should go without saying that partnerships offer an ideal vehicle to deliver holistic and sustainable improvement, provided that they can avoid creating or perpetuating the cynical attitudes and behaviours one can quite easily find at work in our daily intra and inter-organisational activities.

I hope that you can already see that the metaphor I mentioned earlier was real – our group could just as easily have proceeded along the sort of lines that you and I might have experienced in partnerships we know, e.g. competitive, confrontational, dysfunctional, excluding and ‘secretive’.

And in both partnership working and partnerships, I emphasise the distinction, the necessity for collaborative people working in effective relationships brings into play elements of inter-personal skills that one can understand through something called emotional intelligence – I will return to this at several points during this paper.

We know partnerships are an essential aspect of the delivery of the Government’s agenda for change. They operate within the context of the Prime Minister’s drive for public service reform. They represent complex challenges and opportunities for those who come together with shared concerns at neighbourhood, local, sub-regional and regional levels.

They are also reflections of a new paradigm for how organisations are expected to provide community leadership through inclusion and collaboration. Why then do some of us who contribute to partnerships harbour growing concerns as to some of the cultural and power aspects found in them?

In our view partnership is less about structures and more about relationships between people. In our experience structures can be the things that keep people

apart as much as bring them together. We heard for instance a colleague talk of one town that had 57 partnerships; what one might call a comprehensive set, but if groups or agencies were excluded from or joined belatedly the critical top-level partnerships then their involvement could only have limited impact. The voluntary and community sectors tend to suffer disproportionately in these scenarios.

We all had extensive direct, recent and relevant experience of these aspects, i.e. the 'culture' of partnerships, and in particular how partnerships operate in complex, partially 'hidden' ways.

Our learning set had the security to be able to explore these so-called 'softer' elements of partnerships. It was apparent to us that these aspects play a significant part in any partnership's success or relative 'failure' for that matter. You might also recognize that having the security to raise issues, challenge the status quo and critique process and task is not always a feature of your partnership. The group dynamic can often be so strong that challenge is discouraged, openly or implicitly in the way the partnership operates.

Our discussions covered our experience that trust, empathy and a willingness to adapt and change are essential elements for healthy partnership activity and examples of that health. In our experience not enough attention is paid to these important facets in the critical formative stages of partnership development.

We found that 'success' is more likely when partners have a clear understanding of each other's organisational imperatives, how they impact upon their contributions to the group and have shared those imperatives in some way.

### 3. MAKING PARTNERSHIPS HEALTHIER

The pace of social and technological change in society, its shifts in structure and composition allied to reduced time available to evaluate and consider proposals emanating from policy making bodies, tend to militate against the 'softer' elements of relationship building being properly recognised and addressed.

This is however an aspect which we consider partnerships should coherently and openly pay attention to, whether they are focused on a particular geographic area, interest group or societal theme and regardless of their scale, i.e. neighbourhood through to major sub-regional and regional partnerships.

This is not to say that where all seems fine, partnerships should as one colleague put it "stop and engage in lengthy and potentially expensive communal navel gazing". No, but where appropriate proper consideration, time and resource should be given to the healthy and open exchange of views about the way the partnership operates below the surface and what some of the blockages to optimum performance might be.

That would be distinct and different from whether its secretarial support is adequate: whether key roles are distributed equitably or the quality of action plans and bid publications are satisfactory.

Problems in these areas could however be symptoms of weaknesses elsewhere in the partnership, of a kind I am highlighting here.

In our experience effective organisations and teams can be a metaphor for the healthy operation we want to experience in our partnership activities. Think about a team that you recognize as healthy, productive and progressive. What is it about that team that makes it a winner? We found that effective teams exhibit a

number of characteristics, including openness, integrity, accountability, appropriate honesty, shared responsibility for progress and so on.

Effective partnerships also need to exhibit these characteristics and many do – we recognized that. When they are progressive their participants will frequently show themselves to be emotionally literate, i.e. they have the ability to develop self-awareness, understand and appreciate others, build strong relationships to connect with the community and thus make sound contributions to a better society.

In fact, the best teams, and we all recognise them, seem to find the time and energy to achieve both the ‘day job’ and be sound, emotionally literate teams. Just as we are sure, from our experience, that those functional teams who do not invest in themselves are less likely to achieve all they might be expected to or expect of themselves. And so it is for partnerships, where some of the indicators of and contributors to healthy inter-personal and inter-organisational relationships are just as essential to healthy partnerships.

We recognised though that there are important constraining factors relating to partnerships, and perhaps more than constrain functional teams, e.g. their cross-boundary nature, the potential imbalances in the power and resources of partners, espoused motivations differing from the ones actually in use, the complexity of the relationship set at play amongst the partners and so on.

#### 4. WHY IS ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT?

Some of you will by now be familiar with the tongue-in-cheek definition of partnership working for some, i.e. the “suppression of mutual loathing for cash”. But, does it really matter how people in partnerships feel if the partnership in question actually gets the resources and delivers the goods? Well, yes it does for a variety of reasons.

Why would we need this focus of attention on softer issues when our partnership actually gets the cash and delivers the targets? Good question and one that might go to the heart of the way agencies are being exhorted to work in the public sector, i.e. target driven.

Sustainability is one answer as to why we need this attention. A more balanced focus on both task and process makes for a more sustainable partnership.

Just as organisations which over-concentrate on the financial bottom-line and not enough on the emotional and social bottom-line eventually suffer dire consequences, then partnerships that ignore the corrosive effects of game playing, power imbalances, hidden motives and an over-reliance on task, will eventually diminish. Both in their right to speak on behalf of communities and also in their capacity to develop renew and attract new partners to refresh their thinking.

Think of ENRON – what has that to do with partnerships? It is this. That company chose to take a certain course of action focused on making its ‘bottom line’ as healthy as possible. It was a purposeful choice, perhaps without the full consequences having been explored but choices were made nonetheless. We have now seen the disastrous consequences of that target driven, bottom-line obsession.

Partnerships too can make purposeful choices to be integrative and collaborative or be sites of competition and zero-sum games, i.e. win/lose scenarios, purportedly for the good of the community. Does that sound familiar? If it does, perhaps you are in a group that requires a look at its emotional bottom line as well as the financial one. As a colleague on the group put it, “such a partnership might well end-up being a site of exclusion rather than inclusion”.

This is not an argument for organisational development in a partnership setting to take place for its own sake. But it is an argument that suggests without concentrating on the emotional 'bottom-line' and on healthy dialogue, we miss essential opportunities to avoid or clear up misunderstandings, appreciate and value fellow partners' roles, and build strong bonds of trust.

In short, we have to work to create healthy, sustainable relationships in a complex environment. And are not these exactly the kinds of outcomes partnerships are seeking to achieve for their communities, whether communities of interest or geography, i.e. healthy, sustainable communities celebrating their diversity and complexity, inclusive and trusting rather than exclusive and mistrustful?

Think for a moment about a partnership to which you contribute. It might be concerned with health improvement, community safety or economic regeneration. It will have discussions about how the community needs to both participate in and own its own health improvement, improved security or educational attainment. Yet, how often might you also have felt that your participation in and ownership of what you wanted to achieve was being blocked in some way, and sometimes substantially so? Have you been able to do anything about it or have the various imbalances of power and influence rendered this partnership unable to confront its shortcomings?

We recognised that there is nothing wrong in being positively critical about groups we are part of. In fact, our experience showed that with effective critique and open dialogue those partnerships were more effective and healthier in their own right. So too were relationships within and across our organisations and upwards to regional and central government strengthened by informed and open dialogue, i.e. of people listening to "both the words and music" as we heard from a partner.

## 5. ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

Despite our concentration on these 'softer' elements we did not ignore the importance of processes and structures in partnerships. We recognised there have been several recent good examples of advice, guidance, tool-kits and self-assessment models. These include material from the Nuffield Institute for Health, the Local Government Association, the Local Government National Training Organisation, District Audit and others. We found this material helpful, thought provoking and to offer a range of methods to assess partnerships and encourage their development.

For instance the Local Government National Training Organisation (LGNTO) posits these eight facets of healthy partnerships and has a methodology for partnerships to assess their performance in these facets:

- ❖ Real results through collaboration
- ❖ Common interests over partner interest
- ❖ Use of the term "we"
- ❖ Mutual accountability
- ❖ Shared responsibilities and rewards
- ❖ Partners strive to develop and maintain trust
- ❖ Partners willing to change, and;
- ❖ Partners seek to improve how the partnership performs

The LGNTO goes on to suggest that on a number of dimensions such as trust, leadership, and learning, improvements can be made through the development of skills and knowledge after properly identifying the learning need. As the title of this piece suggests, we support that contention. We did wonder however as to how many partnerships might have used these models. Have yours?

Our experience was that planned and thorough self-assessment in the plethora of partnerships we attended was still at an early stage and partnerships tended to focus on managerial aspects, for instance improvements to systems and structures and how the partnership performed on the surface. Not unimportant matters, but only part of the picture.

A review of progress in this area is for another piece of work perhaps.

Our perspective is that these methodologies are only part of the picture for healthy partnership activity. Experience has already shown us that where there is unease with how a partnership is developing, it is less about the mechanics or systems of that group, important though they are, and more about those things largely left unsaid as people gather around the table. For instance the things people in organisations do not pass on to others unless trust is developed to a high degree, e.g. the 'shadow-side', including 'political' motives, the individual expectations of partners, potential power and resource imbalances and so on.

We discussed often that the glue of successful partnerships we participated in was not the process for a particular bid or a specific type of constitutional set-up. It was the positivism of the participants, their relationships and the quality of their dialogue. The notion of 'real' partnership working, with mature dialogue not submerged antipathy, is there to be developed and won by more partnerships than currently achieve it.

## 6. A DUTY OF PARTNERSHIP OR A SYSTEM AT WORK?

The statutory power to create or mandatory necessity to have some partnerships, coupled with the feeling that we are not sure what value they might deliver to an already complex web of partnerships, can militate against healthy relationship working.

We considered what Pat Gordon at the London School of Economics has called “the contradictory notion of a ‘duty’ of partnership”. A somewhat strange notion almost designed to create problems where the powerful join the less powerful, creating a ready-made environment for competition rather than collaboration.

People working in systems can make things work despite the system or structure they inhabit. Whole system perspectives help us to understand the complexity of organizations and that they are not as I would say all unified, rational, goal-seeking entities – far from it if you think about it! There is fear and risk in entering into partnership coupled with complexity, uncertainty and a need to cope with those facets of networking organisations coming together for specific goals.

Partnerships can blur the edges and boundaries of our organisations and introduce the notion of patterns of events that we have to recognise and work within rather than seek to control, which is the familiar technical or managerial response to events.

Barry Oshry in his book *Seeing Systems* (1) offers fascinating insights into what he called the ‘dance of the blind reflex’, e.g. “we see our part of the system but not the whole; we see what is happening with us but not what is happening elsewhere; we don’t see how all the parts influence one another; we don’t see ourselves in relationship nor do we see the dances we fall into in relationship”.

These insights can help us to structure our understanding of relationships within partnerships and how to improve them where required by taking a whole system view of what Oshry called the ‘swim we are in’.

Our collective experience of community and voluntary sector engagement with statutory partnerships clearly showed that time and again those organisations have real problems in being accepted and treated as equal partners within the system. They can feel that one or more of their partners, the ‘usual suspects’

perhaps, have little intention of altering how they either operate or control resources as a result of the partnership activity.

This we believed was in part due to some agencies having real problems in appreciating diversity, influence and different perspectives, in part due to time for deeper thought and more open dialogue not being scheduled or encouraged in the 'normal' activities of the partnership and in part due to antipathy towards those organisations out-with the normal control mechanisms.

In this respect we recognised that things look different depending upon on where you are in the 'system'. What it might look like for the so-called 'hard to reach' groups, is different when it's the statutory agencies that are harder to get access to or prove to be "hard of hearing" a colleague put it, in a partnership setting.

How does it feel to be a local voluntary sector group or your local or regional umbrella body, often hard-pressed, under resourced and working across the micro and macro levels, yet absolutely critical to the success of partnerships? Your resources are frequently inadequate to fulfill all that's expected of or available to you. This is particularly relevant when set in the context of how the voluntary sector develops its role with powerful statutory partners who have significant resource advantages and 'territories' to protect.

## 7. BACK TO PEOPLE

We recognised the important role individuals can play in creating the right atmosphere in partnerships, i.e. the benefits to be had from the contributions of particularly progressive and resourceful players – and we instantly recognised such people form our experience.

We debated whether this dependence upon individuals might actually work against partnerships in some cases because the willingness to contribute openly,

accept responsibility and develop open relationships are attributes not universally shared by people in organisations and thus not universally found within partnerships.

We had experienced partnerships suffering significantly when particularly progressive and positive individuals had moved on, having created a dependency that perhaps should not have been created in the first place, but was understandable given the development path followed by some partnerships.

This led us to consider whether some individuals might have some particular skills or characteristics that result in a predilection to partnership working or are brought out in partnership environments. If this were the case, what are these skills and characteristics and could they be developed in others?

To understand this better, we were encouraged by our facilitator to engage with some of Daniel Golman's work on Emotional Intelligence, the personal and social competencies that effective performers appear to have, particularly in leadership roles.

We examined our own attributes under the five Emotional Intelligence headings of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

We completed the ubiquitous questionnaire one finds attached to some theoretical models and had our results analysed. The answers, perhaps because they were about us as individuals, were of particular interest to us. Recognizing strengths and weaknesses can be fun and also revealing!

The model separates those five elements in two major groups of Personal and Social Competences. We found that we were of course all different yet scored highly in areas where it might matter most in partnership working. For example, Empathy, which is an awareness of others' feelings concerns and needs, taking

an active interest in their concerns, anticipating and meeting others' needs and reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships; and Social Skills, the adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others through things like listening openly, sending convincing messages, resolving disagreement and working with others towards shared goals.

Now, you pay your money and take your choice with any theory or model that seeks to explain, categorise or reduce inter-personal behaviours to labels. I recognize that some commentators approach this theory as a "techniquisation" of emotion for utilitarian/managerialist purposes. None the less we were appreciative of a theory that gave us some headings and definitions to begin to unpack and explain why, in our experience, and probably yours too, some colleagues were effective partners and others very much not partner-friendly and why some partnerships operate far more dynamically and collaboratively than others.

Of course we also recognized that some groups just don't work because people are quite frankly 'knackered' and suffering from partnership fatigue. As one colleague said, "I seem to spend a significant piece of my time moving from one partnership meeting and sub-group session to another, invariably meeting the same people who also invariably are suffering the same fatigue as me."

These are issues for us all to consider as we use our precious energy and creativity in partnerships. But what I will say about emotional intelligence is that it did provide the means to understand what we meant by partnership-friendly and productive people. I would recommend anyone who has an interest in this area to review any of Daniel Golman's material.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

So we come to some conclusions to be drawn from our learning set experiences.

There is much to celebrate in the rapidly developing partnership arena and examples of good practice in partnership activity.

Yet we expect so much from individuals and their organisations, thrust as we are into complex and pressurised relationships with generally little specific training and with agendas of a potentially conflicting imperatives.

We also have to work increasingly to targets and outputs when perhaps the goal should be more about sensitive measures, developing capacity and concentrating upon outcomes. This is an argument not just for partnerships to contend with but many services in the public domain.

The focus for partnerships, understandably so in their early stages, is on the task at hand, but our strong recommendation is that attention must be paid to developmental aspects of a partnership at the very beginning and throughout its life, in a planned and coherent manner.

We believe this balanced approach offers better prospects for sustainable development, equitable operation, widely owned action plans and community support for a partnership's activities.

We think that a recognition of and discussion around how an understanding of emotional literacy in partnership working can help develop them. We also know that mature, open and honest dialogue plays a key role in developing strong and self-challenging fora.

If people are to commit themselves to the heavy demands of partnership working, move outside of their 'silos' and feel comfortable in recommending change to their home organisation, then trust-based relationships are essential.

In developing trust, space and time are required for all agencies to explore their motives for engaging and what they have to offer each other, particularly those from the hard-pressed voluntary and community sectors who can find the game playing in some partnerships enervating and incomprehensible

Our principal conclusion, admittedly not unique yet we feel to be very important, was that people more than structures make partnerships work most successfully and therein lays the learning to be had from our involvement in them.

END

Our learning set is keen to engage in dialogue with colleagues from across the voluntary and statutory sectors about how to improve the time we spend in partnerships and the outcomes they deliver. We'd be pleased to hear from you via our group's facilitator at [SLora18221@aol.co.uk](mailto:SLora18221@aol.co.uk)

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(1) Barry Oshry: Seeing Systems ISBN 1-881052-73-7