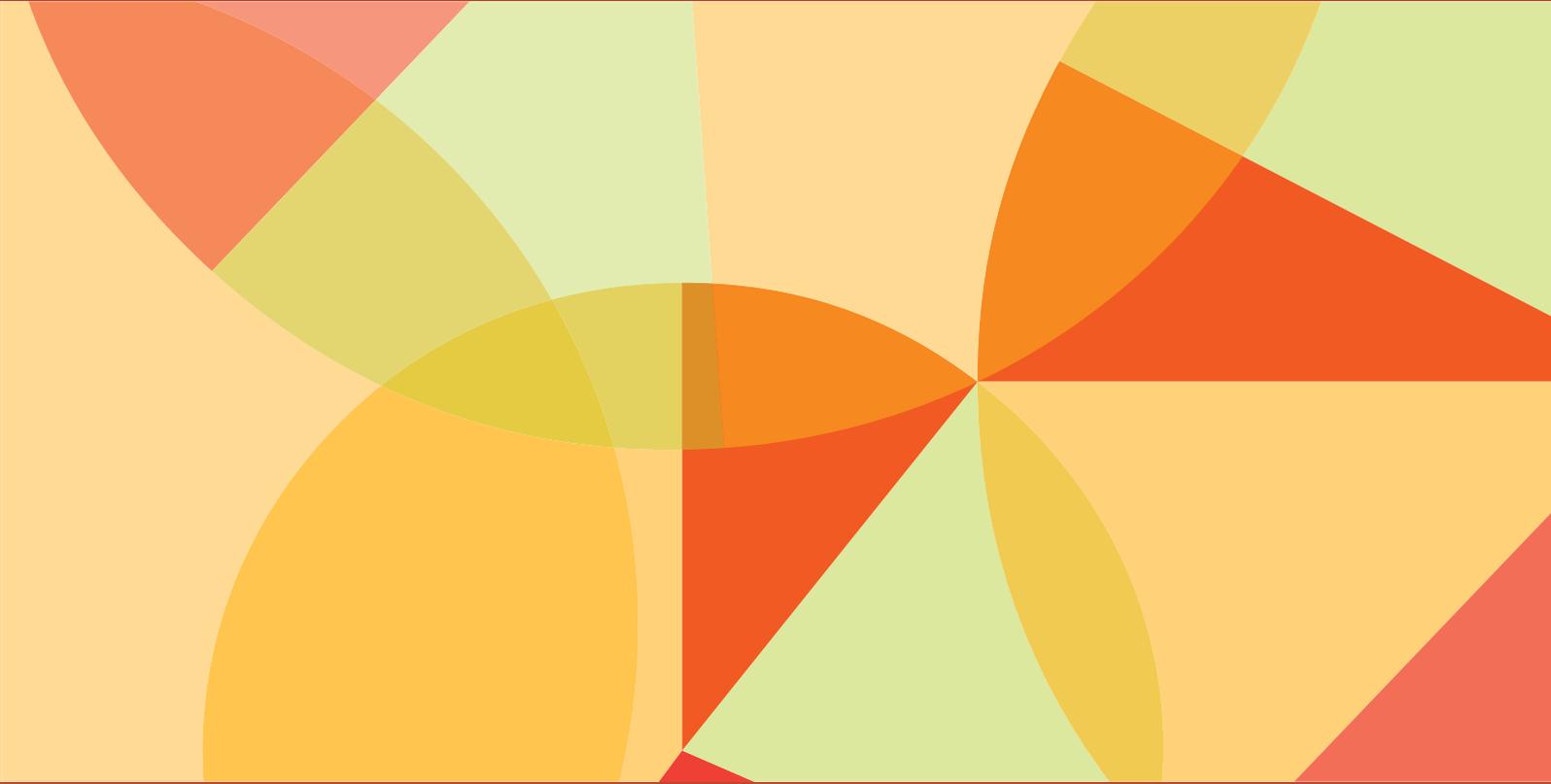
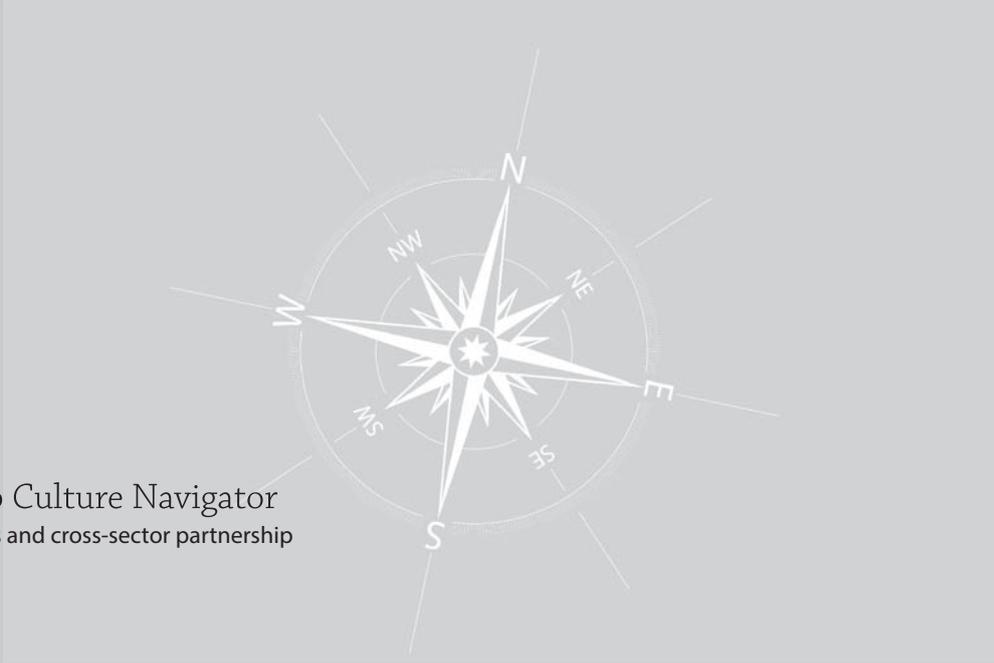


The Partnership Culture Navigator



Organisational cultures and cross-sector partnership



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Introduction

This booklet is the second in The Partnering Initiative's Navigator series. It has been designed as a practical guide to help users navigate the challenges of dealing with different organisational cultures when working in cross-sector partnerships. Differences in organisational and professional cultures are a common source of misunderstanding in international collaboration: they can reduce the efficiency and the impact of cross-sector partnerships and can generate risk. The Navigator outlines a number of key issues for consideration and proposes some achievable actions that can be taken both to make it easier to deal with different cultures and to make your own organisational culture more partnership-friendly.

The Navigator is intended for strategic and operational staff in any organisation for which working in partnership is integral to the achievement of its strategic mission. This will include policy-makers, senior managers, partnership specialists, human resources staff and operational field staff. It assumes that working in cross-sector partnership is of considerable importance to the organisation. It also assumes that the individuals or teams using this Navigator will have some role and capacity as agents of change – actors in an organisation who might, at some level, be able to instigate, lead or catalyse change. Such change-agents may be working independently or in collaboration with an external consultant. In either case the Navigator is designed to identify potential problems and to suggest routes to possible solutions.

The challenge of transforming the internal culture of an institution is a daunting one and much has been written elsewhere on the possible strategies and success factors involved in significant culture change.¹ It is not our intention here to address the extensive and complex range of issues raised by organisational change. The current booklet has a more modest purpose: it aims to provide some insights into the cultural misalignment that can occur between organisations in cross-sector partnership and to offer some practical step-by-step guidance on how to deal with such misalignment. Its observations

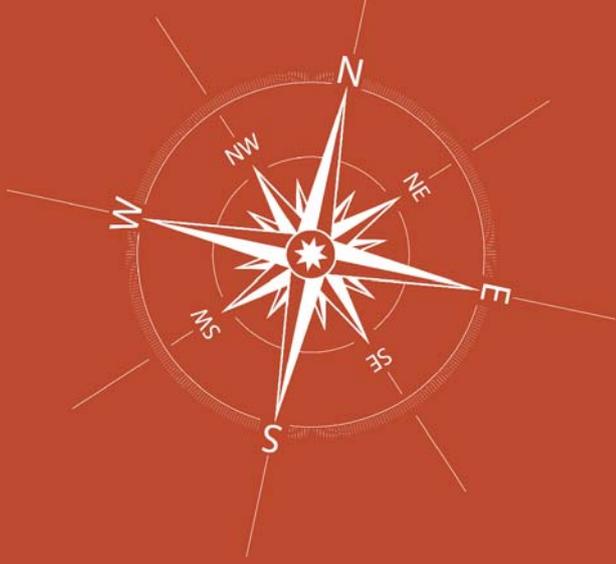
and recommendations are rooted in the belief that even relatively small changes in the way that an organisation operates will generate rewards in terms of its ability to manage valued external relations.

The material in the Navigator derives both from research and from real-life practice. Each of the main sections contains Reflection Questions to encourage consideration of the issues raised and to stimulate relevant discussion within the reader's organisation. Four of the sections also contain case studies provided by WFP staff. These have been selected both to illustrate key points raised in the main text and to provide practical examples of solutions to the challenges of building partnerships between culturally diverse organisations.

There are six main chapters in the Navigator. They cover the following areas:

- The paradox of partnership and the necessity of balancing flexibility with core values
- The importance of going beyond stereotypes and developing cultural awareness
- The characteristics of a partnership-friendly culture
- The role of leadership in establishing cultural norms and behaviour
- The need for effective learning processes to be embedded in organisational systems
- The place of targeted training and development in building partnership skills

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1. For an introduction to the field, see Brown, A. (1998), Handy (1993) or Schein (1985)



● Tips for using the Navigator

The booklet is the second in the Navigator series and follows the established format of providing explanatory text supported by real-life examples and reflection questions to aid discussion of the issues raised. The emphasis is on providing the busy professional with an accurate outline of the main issues, some illustrative case material and a series of prompts for reflection and discussion. Key sources are referenced and suggestions for additional reading are provided.

The booklet can be used as a learning tool both for individuals and for teams developing their partnership knowledge and skills. Indeed, it could be employed as a resource for co-learning between staff from partner institutions. In an ongoing partnership, the Navigator might be used when partners are meeting to review progress and consider revising partnership procedures and practice. It could also be a valuable resource when working with an external partnership consultant or broker in the development of new partnerships or partnership policies.

Key terms and concepts

1 *"A cross-sector or multi-stakeholder partnership is an ongoing working relationship between organisations combining their resources and competencies and sharing risks towards achieving agreed objectives while each achieving their own individual objectives."*

Figure 1: TPI definition of partnership

Defining cross-sector partnership

The term "partnership" can be confusing as it is used to describe such a wide range of relationships, including those which are primarily commercial and contractual rather than collaborative. For TPI, cross-sector partnerships involve any combination of organisations from government, business and civil society working together in areas of mutual interest to achieve common – or at least complementary – goals. All stakeholders in a partnership should be sharing both risks and benefits; roles, procedures and outcomes should be the result of a common agreement. Figure 1 above shows TPI's normal, working definition of partnership.²

Three key elements need to be at the heart of cross-sector partnership: Equity, Transparency and Mutual benefit. Although these are by no means the only qualities that a partnership may need, they do delineate the critical characteristics which will support good partnership working. Figure 2 provides definitions of each of these elements.³

● WFP defines partnerships as:

"Collaborative relationships between actors that achieve better outcomes for the people we serve by: combining and leveraging complementary resources; sharing risks, responsibilities and accountability; working together in a transparent, equitable and mutually beneficial way. With partnerships, we achieve objectives that would not be achieved as efficiently, effectively or innovatively alone, where the value created is greater than the transaction costs involved."

2. www.thepartneringinitiative.org

3. www.thepartneringinitiative.org

2

Equity Equity is not equality – partnerships often bring together organisations with vastly different status, scope and resources. Equity is recognising that each partner has a vital contribution it brings to the table, for which it should be valued and which earns it the right to have a respected voice in decision-making

Transparency Openness and honesty in working relationships are pre-conditions of building trust between partners and of a willingness to sustain the collaboration. Transparency is an essential first step towards creating an atmosphere of trust and of ensuring mutual accountability

Mutual benefit Partnerships are based on shared risks and shared benefits. A healthy partnership will recognise that each partner needs to achieve specific benefits – over and above any common benefits – and will work towards this goal

Figure 2: Defining the key elements of good partnership

Reflection Questions

1 How do we define partnership in our organisation?

2 Is there a single, agreed definition?

3 If so, how does it compare to the definitions provided here?

Key terms and concepts

- 3 *Organizational culture entails the shared beliefs, values and norms in the organizational context. Culture may determine individual behaviour but it is also concurrently constituted through human behaviour.*

Figure 3: An academic definition of organisational culture

Defining organisational culture

In many respects, culture is an even harder term to pin down than partnership: there are almost as many definitions as there are accounts of organisations' ways of working. Culture is made up of a complex web of ideas, values and practices that are both the expression of individual and group behaviour in a specific community and an influence on shaping that behaviour.⁴ A simple, academic definition is given in Figure 3 above.⁵

Culture is never a fixed or static phenomenon but is constantly made and re-made by individual actions. As people in an organisation make decisions, take actions and interact with their colleagues, they will be influenced by the prevailing culture. They may, for example, choose to follow established procedures for presenting a proposal, running a meeting or describing the organisation's goals. By doing so, they confirm the cultural norms and reinforce those norms for themselves and others. However, they may also choose to do things differently, to challenge the prevailing culture – and this may lead to change.

Edgar Schein, one of the most influential writers on organisational culture, broke the concept of culture into three elements: artefacts, values and assumptions.⁶

Artefacts represent the visible manifestations of culture – the technology, procedures and typical behaviour patterns of members of an organisation. Values are those standards or norms that organisational members are likely to share and to publicly subscribe to. Assumptions are more deep-lying and less likely to be articulated: they represent the view of how the world works which underpins the organisation's operations.

When considering the impact of organisational culture on cross-sector partnerships it is important to recognise these layers of complexity: changing something at the visible level may not, in the short-term, alter basic values or assumptions. In the Navigator we have sought to distinguish between practical changes in structure and procedures and more profound changes in the way people think about their work. As we are primarily concerned here with achievable improvement in partnership practice, the focus is most strongly on how agents of change can begin to address cultural change through leadership, systems and training. However, an understanding of the underlying forces that affect organisational culture will help practitioners to approach any change programme with greater sensitivity.⁷

Nevertheless, for all its apparent complexity, organisational culture is also something that most people feel that they can recognise and describe. This is because each organisation does have its own style of working and this is something that an individual, joining a new organisation, will learn to recognise and then to adopt – or, perhaps, to challenge. Put very simply culture is “the way things get done round here”.⁸

In this booklet the use of the terms “partnership” and “culture” imply the basic definitions presented above in Figures 1 and 3. However, because of the many variations on, and refinements of, these definitions it is important to ensure that potential partners enjoy a shared understanding of what is meant by the terms. Indeed, one could present an argument for building mutual understanding between partners through discussion of organisations' respective cultures!

Reflection Question

1 Is there a sense of “the way things get done round here” in our organisation?

4. For an introduction to the many competing theories of culture and culture change, see Fincham and Rhodes (2005) at <http://fds.oup.com/www.oup.co.uk/pdf/bt/fincham/Chapter15.pdf>

5. Ayas K. And Keniuk N. (2004)

6. Schein, E. H. (1996) and Schein, E.H. (1985)

7. Wellman (2009, Chapter 3) provides an excellent and lively review of these central issues in organisational culture

8. Deal and Kennedy (1982)

1 The partnership paradox

At the heart of the challenge of developing a successful partnership lies a paradox – an inherent contradiction that any organisation needs to address in building its own partnership culture. A primary goal of cross-sector partnership is to bring together organisations with different but complementary attributes and to achieve something together that neither organisation can achieve independently. That is what most proponents of partnership see as its vital added value: it is precisely the difference between the organisations' resources, skills and mindset that will create a productive synergy. Yet, that difference is also what produces a lack of familiarity and comfort as diverse organisational cultures strive to work together. Even if two organisations share important goals and commitment they might have ways of working which are very different. The paradox of partnership is that what makes an organisation attractive as a partner can also make it more difficult to partner with.

We can see this paradox taking effect right from the outset of a collaboration. When two or more organisations from different sectors instigate a new partnership, there will inevitably be a need for each organisation to adjust – to some degree – to the working practices of their new partner. Flexibility – of thought and of action – will be needed if cultural difference is to be successfully managed. Yet flexibility should not be interpreted as a willingness to change the essence of the organisation – to “bend over backwards” to accommodate your partner's way of working. If an organisation changes too much then it risks losing the distinctive characteristics that make it attractive to other partners.

There is a useful analogy to this paradox in the field of linguistics. Students of language use a concept called “adaptation” to describe the process by which an individual modifies their language and behaviour to try and establish rapport with someone from a different culture. Research has shown that while too little adaptation to the style of the other person will hamper communication, too much adaptation will also create a negative impression: successful adaptation means not being rigid – being able to be flexible when this is necessary – yet not “over-adapting” by actually taking on the values and characteristics of your counterpart.⁹

In the same way we would argue that overcoming the paradox of partnership means demonstrating openness and flexibility while clearly maintaining your own core values.

So, in building an effective partnership, participants have to identify the core strengths of their own organisation – their comparative advantage over other bodies – and how those strengths can be harnessed in partnership with others. The central paradox of partnership creates the necessity both to acknowledge cultural difference and to better understand your own operating culture. In addressing these challenges it is important to remember that cultural differences, although they may generate problems, are also sources of solutions: diversity can stimulate innovation. As we will discuss later, building a partnership is a learning process and it is often in the cultural gaps between organisations that the greatest learning is done.

Creating a third culture

One practical response that has been observed in studies of organisational collaboration is the creation of a working culture which is distinct from the normal culture of either partner organisations. This is the concept of a “third” or “hybrid” culture, a working culture developed between partners that is a fusion of the organisations' styles and enables partners to operate together without some of

9. See, for example, Francis, N.P. 1991 'When in Rome? The effects of cultural adaptation on intercultural business negotiations'

1 The partnership paradox

the constraints of their traditional working practices.¹⁰ Sometimes such a third culture has emerged naturally from the process of co-operation; at other times it has been consciously crafted in order to accommodate collaboration.

There is an obvious advantage to establishing a new set of rules and procedures which all partners can accept: it allows them to generate a unique and productive style of collaborative working. It also offers an alternative strategy when changing procedures in the parent organisation represents too great a challenge. Resources can be better focused on building an effective working culture within the partnership itself. Over time, a successful partnership will serve as a model for future collaborations and a source of useful learning, which may then begin to have an impact on the culture of the parent organisation itself.

10. See, for example, Earley and Mosakowski 2000 'Creating hybrid team cultures: An empirical test of international team functioning'

Contemporary technology can facilitate a hybrid culture approach through the potential to establish file sharing, discussion fora and on-line conferencing: partners can explore their capacity (and enthusiasm) for a range of procedures and tailor a working environment that suits the partnership as a whole.

To overcome the basic paradox of partnership, then, the value an organisation brings to a collaboration needs to be clear and strongly maintained yet it mustn't be encased in a rigid set of working procedures. It must always be possible to exercise flexibility, to learn from experience and to discover new ways of working together which maximise the chance of success in a particular venture.

The case study below is a good example of partners recognising both the common ground that brings them together and the very different characteristics that distinguish them. It illustrates well the need to have clear, established common goals while always being prepared to appreciate the expertise and perspective of your partners. The case study draws on the accounts of both WFP and TNT Express participants.

Reflection Questions

1 What is distinctive about our organisation that gives us a comparative advantage and makes us an attractive partner to others?

2 In the past, have we tended to show too little, or too much, adaptation to the culture of our partners – and what were the consequences?

3 Where could we be more flexible in the way we work with others without losing our core strengths?

The North Star Alliance partnership (1): recognising cultural similarities and differences

North Star Alliance is an independent non-profit founded by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the global delivery company TNT Express (TNT) at the end of 2006. The aim of North Star Alliance is to stop the transmission of HIV and other communicable diseases through commercial and humanitarian supply chains. During the initial phase, WFP and TNT also had a third partner in Ikaheng, a South African company, which contributed specialist expertise in setting up roadside clinics. Today North Star has 32 roadside health clinics in 12 Sub-Saharan African countries, providing HIV and primary healthcare to more than 220,000 truck drivers, sex workers and roadside community members each year.

WFP: North Star had a solid foundation built on common ground between the partners. Although several possible areas of collaboration were explored in depth, it was the supply chain and its link to the transport sector where partner interest, expertise and purpose converged. Even as the partnership evolved, it retained its focus and reflected the shared core business pursuit of a healthy, productive supply chain. For WFP, the humanitarian commitment to 'do no harm' was also a key driver to get and stay involved. Another key ingredient came in the form of our third partner Ikaheng from South Africa who brought the specific technical expertise required to establish a roadside clinic. This created a tripartite relationship that evolved and changed as time went on. The recipe for success is having a clear vision of what is needed and creating an appropriate group of partners to achieve the objectives.

TNT: The practical, results-oriented culture at WFP enabled us to get working immediately on building our solution and then to iterate as we learnt from our experiences. Any successful partnership is built on the initial commitment of a small group of individuals. Those individuals bring a perspective (or expertise) on a given matter but it is their attitude that often has the biggest influence on the success or failure of the collaboration. The first prerequisite for success is the willingness to take the time to understand (and appreciate) the perspective, interests and needs of the prospective partner.

WFP: The time and space carved out for getting everyone up to speed was not to be underestimated. A thorough problem analysis was essential in order to identify and then tackle the solution. But, besides that, the TNT team needed time to learn and absorb the social, cultural and political aspects of HIV and AIDS. The UN jargon, UNAIDS terminology, public health and development principles, and the global AIDS agenda introduced a new language of risk, vulnerability and human rights, which was totally unfamiliar to TNT. A turning point came when a WFP and TNT joint delegation attended the 16th International AIDS Conference in Toronto. It was a significant investment of time and funds but up until that time, TNT had underestimated the complexity, diversity, sensitivity and opportunities of engaging in a frontline AIDS response.

TNT: The WFP team clearly had more knowledge of the subject matter (HIV in Sub-Saharan supply chains) but were willing to take the time to allow the TNT team to understand the subject (to ask the stupid questions!) but also to listen to TNT opinions on how to approach it, which were grounded in sound project management and business development practices. If the WFP team had not created the space for their TNT colleagues to explore and experiment, not just tolerating but welcoming their opinions, then the partnership would surely have failed.

WFP: Understanding and valuing the difference between partners is critical to success. In the case of North Star it has been equal part WFP's humanitarian mission, TNT's business acumen and Ikaheng's nuts and bolts knowledge that created a winning partnership.

Source: Luke Disney, Executive Director of North Star Alliance; Robin Landis, Operational Information Management and Reporting Officer, World Food Programme Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

2 Differences in organisational culture

Creating and managing a successful cross-sector partnership – one that both achieves its formal aims and works well as a relationship between complementary teams – can be a daunting task. Nevertheless, the paradigm of partnership has been a significant factor in the transformation of many fields, especially international development, over the past 20 years as public, private and not-for-profit institutions have begun working together to tackle complex, long-term social and economic challenges. Central to the creation of viable and productive partnerships has been the ability of individuals and teams to recognise and then go beyond the often stark differences between the values and the operating cultures of different sectors.

Problems deriving from cultural difference can have their origins in assumptions and preconceptions that have been formed prior to any partnership activity taking place. Past experience, common stereotypes and organisational rumour can all shape individuals' perceptions of specific institutions and, indeed, of whole sectors. Participants engaging in a new collaboration may be operating with stereotypes of another culture which will pre-determine their own behaviour and may impede their ability to learn from the encounter in an open and responsive way. One study of a partnership between a private company and a not-for-profit organisation found that each side was operating with a stereotype of the other that was not only inapplicable to the collaboration but could negatively influence behaviour towards the partner.

- **Serious and distinct negative stereotypes held by both business executives and nonprofit leaders are a core reason behind the inability of these institutions to form and implement successful partnerships. The fact that these stereotypes are unconscious or unacknowledged provides a major hindrance to working together. And the different organizational cultures in which business and non-profit executives operate unwittingly to reinforce negative preconceptions.¹¹**

At the outset, therefore, there is an issue of cultural awareness on three levels. First (as we discussed in Chapter 1) there is self-awareness: members of an

organisation need to be able to recognise the culture of their own organisation and how that culture might create difficulties in partnering with a very different organisational culture. Second, there needs to be an awareness of the partner's culture – one that is informed by contact and discussion rather than based on pre-existing stereotypes. Third, the participants in a partnership need to establish a reciprocal awareness that any culture gap might create problems. Trust between partners is built not given: being clear about the way you work and what issues that might raise will help to create an environment in which trust can develop.

Many differences in organisational culture are matters of procedures and practice – Schein's cultural "artefacts". For example, the normal time-scale for reaching decisions; the level of formality between junior and senior staff; the frequency and structure of meetings. If such practical problems can be identified at an early stage then each can be addressed knowingly rather than allowing problems to emerge when expectations on one side are not met.

The most challenging cultural differences tend to be those driven by the underlying differences in organisations' goals, priorities and values. For example, if we look at critical areas such as decision-making, accountability and risk we can see clear – and logical – differences between sectors. The *business sector* has to focus on opportunity: this means being responsive to market changes and grasping opportunities in a competitive environment. Because competition is ever-present, business has to be

11. Laufer Green Isaac, 2004 Hidden Agendas: Stereotypes and cultural barriers corporate community partnerships

2 Differences in organisational culture

structured to make decisions quickly. This may involve risk and that risk will be assessed and managed but it can't be eliminated: companies have to balance risk and reward. Ultimately, their managers are accountable to shareholders and investors and this drives the need to take risks in order to capitalise on opportunity.

Contrast this with state institutions or international agencies such as those in the UN system. *UN bodies* focus on values and standards: this means being responsive to the principles established by their member states. UN bodies do not operate in a directly competitive environment. Risk will tend to be minimised and uncertainty carefully managed: considerable attention is paid to protecting the agencies' reputation and mandate to operate. Some UN agencies have become skilled at responding to global crises but the conventional decision-making process is geared to precautions rather than possibilities.

The highly heterogeneous collection of organisations that make up the *civil society* sector demonstrates characteristics of both of their potential partners. The focus here will tend to be on delivery, on achieving the impact for which the organisation was originally founded. This means being responsive to social, economic and policy changes and being able to communicate ideas – and deliver campaigns – rapidly. But it also means demonstrating compliance with the organisation's stated values and ethics. The challenge of their operating environment may be less that of competition than of legitimacy: NGOs need to balance the need for impact with the need for recognition and respect from other key players and their own supporters. This means that risks will be acceptable but that they will be limited by the established parameters of the organisation's mandate. Ultimately, their accountability is to their membership (or other funding source) and that requires constant attention to the compatibility of activities with an overall objective and an agreed style of operating.

A well-developed awareness – both of self and of others – is important in order to counter the tendency to view the world through a lens coloured by the assumption that our own culture has 'got it right' and that its norms, behaviours and values are globally applicable.¹² Working towards a better initial understanding of organisational culture will enhance both internal awareness and the capacity to partner. The case study below provides a typical example of how partners from different sectors operate with different priorities and working methods. The case explains how simple, practical steps were taken to ensure that these differences did not impede the success of the partnership.

Reflection Questions

- 1** How would visitors from a very different organisation encounter and perceive our predominant organisational culture?
- 2** What evidence do we have – for example, from independent evaluations or consultancy reports – of how our partners regard us?
- 3** Do we have a clear understanding of how partner organisations differ in their internal values and systems?

12. See Rehbein, 2003

WFP and RAND Corporation HIV/AIDS Partnership in Latin America

Significant gains in universal access to antiretroviral (ART) treatment in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) over the previous decade have led to increased pressure on governments to develop interventions that are contextually sound and evidence-based to support policy development and facilitate treatment for people living with HIV: ensuring comprehensive care, including food assistance and/or nutritional support necessary for positive treatment outcomes, is essential. Recognizing the gaps in data and contextual information within the region, the World Food Programme (WFP) created a partnership in 2007 with RAND Corporation, the US non-profit research institution, to strengthen these areas.

Recognizing the gaps in data and contextual information within the region, WFP and the RAND Corporation, the US non-profit research institution, created a partnership in 2007 to strengthen these areas. The aim of the partnership was to develop a strategy in line with WHO treatment standards aimed at improving nutrition and food security for people living with HIV/AIDS, and which took into consideration local food availability, cultural acceptability and family budgetary constraints.

WFP's HIV work has a strong focus on linking food and health systems through the provision of nutrition and food assistance for better health outcomes. At the field level WFP also works on the implementation of nutritional guidelines for HIV care and treatment in association with antiretroviral therapy and management of HIV and tuberculosis co-infection; as well as supporting operational research related to HIV treatment and care. RAND, a not-for-profit organization originating in the United States but with offices worldwide, helps improve public policy based on research evidence and analysis.

The two organizations combined their respective expertise and experience to achieve two main outcomes: first, to provide important evidence regarding HIV and ART adherence and the relationship with nutrition and food security in the region; second, to allow WFP to improve their food assistance and promotion of a comprehensive nutrition approach for people living with HIV in LAC. Integral to

success was a multidisciplinary approach: the partnership combined RAND's rigorous research methods for contributing to evidence-based policy with WFP's extensive experience in programme implementation and food assistance to vulnerable populations such as those living with HIV. While RAND led methodology development and data analysis, WFP provided regional guidance and advice, combined with a local WFP team in each country carrying out data collection. The results of the research conducted by WFP and RAND were the foundation of WFP's programme implementation.

During the life of the partnership, clear differences in each partner's approach to "getting things done" were identified. Some of the differences encountered were related to issues around planning and execution. As a humanitarian agency, WFP places a high value on responding quickly to an arising need while RAND, a research-focused partner, values deep understanding of a particular event. These different approaches had an impact on the time spent between the planning phase and the implementation phase. RAND placed a great emphasis on considering and controlling for all the variables that could affect data collection, while WFP's focus was on the service delivery aspect of the interventions.

Faced with these differences an agreement was made by both partners to institute a system of monitoring and evaluation of the overall activities where benchmarks and timelines were established. Additionally a monthly meeting to discuss results and

to address challenges was put in place. Since the government was the main client and benefited from technical assistance of the partnership, RAND and WFP also agreed to deliver a consistent message to the government counterpart regarding the type and duration of the activities as a means to reduce possible conflict. In these ways, the partners were able to manage the process of collaboration, to deal with any challenges that arose and to communicate findings to the government with a single, unified voice.

The partnership between WFP and RAND has created a unique opportunity to combine project implementation with in-depth research on a topic that has lacked attention in Latin America and the Caribbean. The result of the partnership has seen the augmentation of unique HIV and nutrition expertise and capacities in the Latin American region. In particular, research abilities for developing a much needed evidence base to shape policymaking and programme implementation were strengthened.

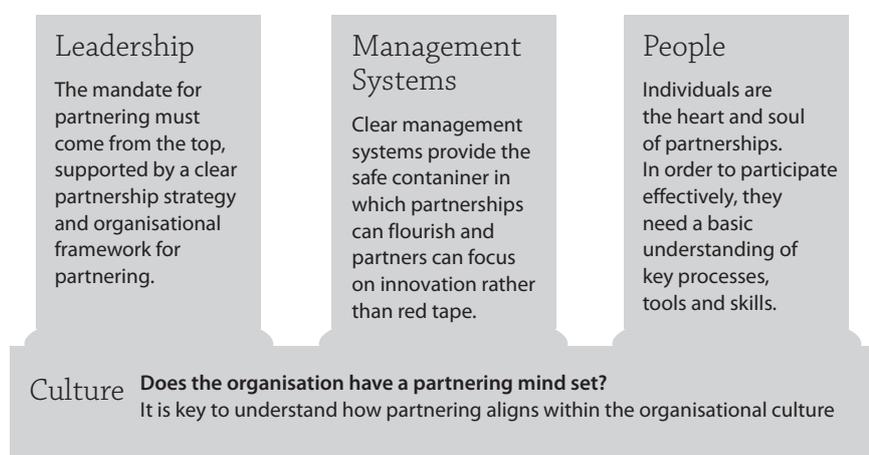
Source: Hugo Farias, Regional Advisor Capacity Development, World Food Programme Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

3 What makes a partnership-friendly culture?

So far, we have focused on the need to develop an awareness of the possible differences between organisational cultures and to understand the potential impact of those differences on partnership programmes. We have also raised the prospect of partner organisations crafting hybrid cultures which enable partners to collaborate effectively within a working environment which does not directly replicate the working culture of either organisation. Nevertheless, to achieve such awareness (and the ability to respond to cultural difference) organisations also need to address their own internal attitudes and working practices. In short: to build an internal culture that is oriented to partnership working. This is what we mean by a “partnership-friendly culture”: an organisational culture that is characterised by values, procedures and behaviour which encourage and support working in partnership across sectors.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of the Navigator we offer practical advice on developing a culture of partnership both within your organisation and in your dealings with potential and actual external partners. We do this within The Partnering Initiative’s ‘Fit for Partnering’ framework. This approach is based on four Foundational Elements, of which the underpinning element is Culture. In addressing partnership issues through changes in Leadership, Management Systems and People, organisations can instigate the change towards being a more partnership-friendly culture and become more effective in managing external relations.

The four are inevitably inter-related and the most successful approach is likely to be an holistic one, where changes in the first three elements help to drive change in the fourth. However, in practice, change rarely progresses so smoothly: partnership practitioners will need to make decisions about where and how to focus resources at each stage of a partnership programme. It is also valuable to recognise that, within any one organisation, there will be local cultures or sub-cultures which may deviate from the main corporate culture. Country offices and decentralised functions will have had to adapt to local conditions and this may have supported the development of a uniquely



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Figure 4: TPI Fit for Partnering Framework

3 What makes a partnership-friendly culture?

local organisational culture. Such sub-cultures might be more attuned to partnership working and might thus represent better starting-places for the practitioner seeking to encourage a partnership mindset.

In this chapter, we will look briefly at some of the characteristics of a partnership-friendly organisational culture and at some of the factors that can inhibit cultural change. The list of factors reviewed here are not intended to be comprehensive: they have been selected on the basis of past research and represent the factors which we believe should be prioritised in the process of shaping a more partnership-friendly culture.

Awareness

We have already observed that an *awareness* of the nature and impact of organisational culture is an important starting-point in the process of enhancing the organisation's capacity to partner effectively. Reviewing the internal culture, and reflecting on how this will impact external relations, will yield valuable insights into the organisation's strengths and weaknesses as a potential partner. But what are the other key cultural elements that contribute to a capacity to establish and manage successful partnerships?

Openness

In the three core elements of good partnership,¹³ culture relates particularly to the issue of transparency or *openness*. Building on the creation of awareness, transparency is about showing your potential partner who you are and how you operate; sharing values and aspirations; and not trading on stereotypes and expectations. Some organisations may operate in ways that are naturally more transparent than others and, for some organisations, issues of confidentiality, intellectual property rights and sensitivity of data may make openness a major challenge. Nevertheless, the principle of greater transparency –

greater openness with those you partner with – is an issue that has to be addressed in building a partnership-friendly culture.

Flexibility

Openness is not just about transparency regarding your own organisation's goals and activities. It is also about being able to listen to the views and aspirations of partner organisations – and to recognise the value that may lie in a diversity of ideals or approaches. The ability to respond to difference is another quality which might be said to characterise organisations that are adept at working productively across cultural boundaries. In Chapter 1 we mentioned the issue of *flexibility*, or adaptation: the challenge of being able to acknowledge and respond to different approaches without sacrificing the characteristics that make your own organisation distinctive. The flexibility to change when change is what is truly needed, contributes to an organisation's worth as a collaborator.

Consistency of purpose

Finally, a partnership-friendly culture is one that demonstrates a *consistency* of principles and behaviour which enables any external partner to predict – and thus rely on – its partner's actions and responses. Partnerships are never fixed or static – they evolve as internal demands and external pressures change. The long-term success of a partnership will depend to a high degree on the partners' ability to manage these changing circumstances and this requires resilience (in the face of difficulty) and clarity of purpose. In practical terms this also means total organisational commitment ("buy-in") to a partnership: internal doubts and divisions can be especially damaging when partnerships face tricky problems of evolution.

Recognising some of the characteristics of a partnership-friendly culture will not, of course, suffice to transform an existing culture. Indeed, one overwhelming lesson from a century of organisational change programmes in business and government is that organisational culture cannot be imposed – it has to evolve in an organic way.

13. Equity, transparency, mutual benefit: See Figure 2, page 6

Main reasons for failure in programmes of institutional culture change

<p>TOP MANAGEMENT: The programme doesn't have the support of top management. Top management must change too. Research has shown that a transformational leader who gains the support of the senior management team is a crucial factor to successfully implement and sustain a change programme and, when absent, spells doom for the programme.</p>	<p>PERCEPTION: If the problem addressed or the solution offered doesn't resonate, then the programme will not work. This can happen because of strong beliefs that cannot be overcome, public reactions, or unintended consequences.</p>	<p>NON-ENGAGEMENT OF STAFF: If the programme is top-down and does not adequately engage people throughout the organisation, it inevitably fails.</p>	<p>RESISTANCE: For the above reasons, the change initiative is either resisted or treated passively by managers, supervisors and staff.</p>
	<p>REALITY: The programme doesn't address "real" problems facing the organisation.</p>	<p>COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY: The problem for many innovations is not that they don't work, but that the organization has not worked out how to scale them up and embed them as defining features of the organisation.</p>	
	<p>FEAR: A culture of trust is not fostered.</p>		
	<p>RESOURCES: It is not properly resourced with time, money, and/or people.</p>		
<p>TRAINING: Training is not provided.</p>			

Figure 5: Reasons for failure in culture change programmes

Most critically, employees need to recognise a need to change and then be prepared to "own" that change: this is a simple reason for the failure of many attempts by senior managers to introduce a top-down change programme.

So, becoming an organisation that operates with a culture that is favourable to working in partnership cannot happen overnight, nor can it simply be imposed from above: it needs to be an evolutionary process that reflects the real needs and wishes of the staff for whom partnerships are a critical element in achieving their goals. Partnership practitioners committed to leading organisational culture change will need to recognise both the constraining and

the enabling factors that influence such change and to accept that some changes will be easier to achieve than others. In Figure 5 above we reproduce a summary of reasons for failure in culture change programmes: this can act both as a cautionary reminder of the problems and – more positively – as an indication of where resources may best be directed to achieve maximum impact.¹⁴

14. Source: UN Food and Agriculture Organization, *Independent External Evaluation 2007*, Box 6.3, p. 233

Reflection Questions

- 1 What constraints are there on our ability to be open and transparent with external organisations?
- 2 Have previous projects failed due to our inability to be flexible in the face of change?
- 3 How well are partnerships supported across the organisation – are there issues about "buy-in" to external collaborations?

4 Leadership

“The priority for WFP is not just to extend its partnership networks but also to partner more strategically. In simple terms, we must both obtain and provide greater value from the partnerships in which we engage.”

Elisabeth Rasmusson, Assistant Executive Director, Partnership, Governance and Advocacy Department, World Food Programme

Taking practical steps to building a partnership culture requires strong leadership. That is not to say that changes in culture can be imposed by leadership – indeed, research tends to suggest the opposite is true! Nevertheless senior leaders in an organisation have an important role to play in endorsing, promoting and supporting initiatives for change. Clear leadership sends signals to the rest of the organisation – and to external partners – and helps to legitimate new forms of behaviour.¹⁵

This can be illustrated in terms of some of the cultural characteristics discussed in previous chapters. Senior decision-makers can give a clear lead on corporate values, raising awareness (both within and beyond the organisation) through a statement of partnership ideals and aspirations. Similarly, a strong message on willingness to work with others and an acknowledgement of the worth of partners can help create a supportive context for partnership innovation. Finally, leaders can empower staff working in partnerships both by allocating adequate resources and by providing consistency in policy and resourcing. Such actions will not only enable staff internally to act with greater flexibility and creativity, it will also send a message to potential partners that a robust commitment exists to partnership relations.

The important commitment of creating a strong, clear partnership message can be defined in terms of a series of simple, practical steps that can be taken by those in senior management tasked with developing partnership strategy:

- Create a single, concise definition of what partnership means for the organisation and how it fits into its overall mission or mandate
- Make a statement both of the value that the organisation brings to partnership and of the value that it seeks from its external partners
- Create a typology of different kinds of partner relationships based on the purpose, function and value of the collaboration
- Disseminate this information both internally and externally to set the context for new partnership development
- Allocate appropriate resources to support the organisation’s commitment to partnering

Senior staff throughout an organisation can also make a difference by practising internally the values and behaviour that are needed for external partnership. Good partnership practice can begin within the organisation by working with colleagues in the way you want to work with those from other bodies. Modelling good partnership behaviour is another way of sending signals both to staff and to partners that the organisation’s culture is one that is comfortable with self-awareness, openness, flexibility and consistency of purpose.

Leadership is not, however, the exclusive responsibility of the most senior managers. However good the leadership at the top level, a partnership-friendly culture will only evolve through operational staff building the capacity to create and sustain partnerships that deliver their intended value. This means that a degree of leadership responsibility should be devolved to those who can become local partnership “champions” and “change-makers” on the ground.

15. See Wellman (2009) pp. 66–69 on the importance of leadership in shaping organisational culture

4 Leadership

Experience across many different organisations shows that some of the most effective partnerships are those that emerge naturally out of good local relationships between organisations operating in the same field. Sufficient authority needs to be delegated to local, operational staff to enable these sorts of partnership to evolve and flourish. It is often only local staff who have the understanding required to identify and implement solutions to partnership challenges.

The following case study illustrates two forms of leadership. The first relates to points made earlier about the need for commitment and consistency of purpose: in the example, WFP demonstrates to its NGO partners a clear commitment to support partnership despite substantial environmental challenges. The second relates to the value of grass roots leadership as a source of innovation: NGO staff were prepared to make the partnership work by generating innovative solutions based on their local cultural knowledge. All parties demonstrated openness in considering new ideas and flexibility in supporting a grass roots initiative.

Reflection Questions

- 1** Is a commitment to partnership included in the organisation's mission statement or statement of core values?
- 2** Is there a clear statement of the organisation's rationale for partnering and the value it brings to partnership?
- 3** Would staff at all levels of the organisation be able to articulate this?
- 4** Is there an explicit statement of the worth that external partners can bring?
- 5** Is good partnership practice modelled internally in the way that departments work together?

Programme Assistance Teams (PAT) in Afghanistan: Gender Sensitive PAT Monitoring

WFP's commitment to serving the hungry poor in Afghanistan and to ensuring accountability to women have remained the catalysts for refining WFP operations in a country where gender inequality is pervasive. Afghanistan ranks 150 out of 152 countries for gender equality: women and girls are largely excluded from education, healthcare, income generation and ownership of assets. 87% of women and girls are illiterate and two Afghan women die each hour from maternal and pregnancy complications.

In 2008, WFP pioneered the concept of Third Party Monitoring which, in the Afghan context, is called Programme Assistance Team (PAT), to monitor food distributions in unsafe or inaccessible areas either due to ongoing conflict, impassable infrastructure during winter, or both. The PAT system is based on a partnership between WFP and local NGOs, working in the affected areas, which provide the PAT monitors. The local NGOs have more flexibility in their ability to access remote and difficult areas, and can fulfil WFP's requirements for effective third party monitoring.

Third Party Monitoring has proven a viable concept and the practice has subsequently been expanded to safe areas, utilising PAT monitors for a range of functions traditionally carried out by WFP Field Monitors such as process monitoring, distribution monitoring, post distribution monitoring, emergency assessments, protection, gender and market price monitoring. It is vital for WFP that its commitment to women in Afghanistan must also be infused throughout the PAT monitors' organisational capacity. Ensuring these women are afforded a voice has spurred further innovation in the PAT partnerships.

A major challenge faced by the PAT partnerships has been the country's strict gender segregation: Afghan society dictates that it is highly inappropriate for men to engage with women or groups of women. The obvious solution is to recruit female monitors but this is easier said than done in a country where the prevailing socio-economic and cultural

patterns render it extremely challenging for women to travel unaccompanied. Even for two female monitors to travel together is only practicable within the city-limits in provincial capitals: overnight stays remain unacceptable, especially in volatile remote conflict-torn areas. This has naturally hampered the ability to conduct gender-sensitive monitoring in remote areas.

The solution has come from the field, from a group of committed female PAT monitors, who were determined not to compromise their work. In their quest to maintain an open dialogue with female beneficiaries in the deep field, they recognised that the only way to reconcile culture and safety was to travel accompanied with their *mahram*, which is a close male relative. Initially, a few spirited PAT monitors in Kabul, Hirat and Kandahar Provinces convinced their husbands and brothers to accompany them in their travel and proposed the unconventional solution to their management. The arrangement was welcomed and formalised by the WFP/PAT partnership, to include coverage of transport costs and daily travel allowance for both travellers, enabling the PAT monitors to continue their important work. These female-to-female beneficiary consultations continue to equip WFP with a stronger insight in how to refine programmes and operations, particularly through the lens of their local understanding of gender issues.

In extremely challenging circumstances, local operational staff have demonstrated strong leadership, a willingness to innovate, and a deep understanding of the cultural context. Today, just 17 out of 144

PAT monitors are female but it is a start in an innovative campaign to overcome gender inequality. The monitors' efforts are fostered by a strong partnership between WFP and the NGOs and it is this dimension, combined with the courage and tenacity of female PAT monitors, that will enable WFP and its partners to continue their dialogue with beneficiaries.

Source: Dorte Jessen, World Food Programme Monitoring and Evaluation, Kabul, Afghanistan

5 Systems: learning and communication

The process of enhancing an organisation's capacity to partner will necessitate innovation or refinement in a number of internal systems and processes. For example, the creation of specialist partnership units, appropriate partnership agreements and external promotional documents. These will all contribute to building a culture of partnership but they are not the primary focus here. In this section we will be concerned with what are sometimes called "soft systems", the way in which culture is shaped through communication, interaction and shared knowledge. In particular, we focus on the role of learning and the value of integrating learning into partnership processes to enable the transformation of values and behaviour. At a practical level, this is about finding ways to support individual and organisational learning by creating procedures and opportunities that support the acquisition and use of new knowledge. It is also about building trust between partners through that open communication and shared learning.

In many respects a partnership-friendly culture is a learning culture.¹⁶ It is also a culture that communicates effectively, sharing its learning with others. We have already highlighted the importance to good partnership relations of transparency and of presenting a clear message: how you communicate tells people a lot about what sort of organisation you are. This is not just about encouraging openness in external communication and dealings. It is also about employing language that embodies a spirit of equity and mutual benefit. The quotation in Figure 6 offers a (negative) example of this. Taken from a 2008 publication by a major state-funded institution, it illustrates how the language of a statement can undermine its intent: whatever its literal meaning, the formality of tone and the choice of words ("consultation", "invite") conveys an impression of aloofness and condescension to non-governmental bodies.

6

"[The Organisation] is today pursuing the establishment of a genuine culture of partnership, which is the only guarantor of the proper and effective implementation of its mandate. Thus: [The Organisation] may make suitable arrangements for consultation and cooperation with non-governmental international organizations concerned with matters within its competence, and may invite them to undertake specific tasks."¹⁷

Figure 6. **Working with NGOs**

The practical actions needed to put good learning and good communication in place are not complex, but they do require forethought and planning. The process can be simplified into three stages: planning for learning; building in reflection; sharing and embedding learning.¹⁸

16. For a summary of the concept of the 'learning organisation', see Senge (1990)

17. TPI consultancy report – confidential source

18. For a more detailed discussion see Reid, S. (2009)

5 Systems: learning and communication

Planning for learning

Collaborating with culturally distinct organisations should always be viewed as an opportunity for learning. At an early stage of any partnership project, participants should take into consideration not just the formal outcomes of the partnership but also the learning opportunities afforded by the project, the possible learning needs of the participants and the activities that might be put in place to support learning during the project. Making a commitment to learning from collaboration also sends a strong message to partners about your openness and willingness to work in a truly collaborative manner. Contrast the quotation below (Figure 7) with the previous example in Figure 6:

7

“The scale up of cash transfer programming will increasingly cultivate innovative collaborations and strategic partnerships that share WFP’s fight against hunger. Together with existing and new partners, the design and implementation of cash transfer projects will engage a cross-section of actors toward positively addressing the unique and complex challenges facing our beneficiaries while simultaneously creating value for partners.”¹⁹

Figure 7. WFP Cash-Based Transfer materials

Building in reflection

At the heart of modern theories of learning²⁰ is the concept of reflection – conscious consideration of experience in order to identify insights that will shape future behaviour. Reflection, either individually or in group discussion, may focus on a particular case, a practical problem or an incident: valuable learning may be produced from a consideration of ‘failures’ or mistakes as usefully as from obvious successes.²¹

The most important single action to support learning is to allow space for reflection in the partnering process: allocating time for participants to think about what they are experiencing and, where appropriate, to share that with others. Research suggests that building in reflection can make a major contribution to more effective collaboration across cultures. Research²² has explicitly linked reflection to the learning capacity of young executives, concluding that managers who demonstrated a more flexible style of learning would be more able to modify their cultural stereotypes in the light of experience and thus be potentially more effective at working across cultural boundaries.

Sharing & embedding learning

Partnership is a process not a product: as it evolves, it requires analysis and review. At best it can be a collaborative learning experience where all partners gain benefits in terms of experience and knowledge. Yet at the level of any one specific partnership, the learning is often restricted to individuals. If the communication of learning is effective then it may be shared across the partnership teams. To go further and contribute to a broader culture of partnership, the learning needs both to be captured as knowledge and to be communicated to the organisation more widely. This is the transition from individual to organisational learning and is characteristic of organisations with a culture favourable to co-operation and innovation.

Organisational learning can be said to occur when the learning of individuals within an organisation is made explicit, shared, and embodied in the structures and routines of that organisation.²³ This is not a simple task. Wellman (2009) rightly remarks that “Culture has high viscosity – it resists the flow of knowledge into or out of it.

19. World Food Programme How to work with WFP: A Handbook for Non-Governmental Organizations, Rome 2005

20. Argyris and Schon (1974); Schon (1983); Kolb (1984)

21. (Hunfeld 1997). Belz and Muller-Hartmann (2003)

22. Ratiu (1983)

23. Argyris and Schon (1996)

5 Systems: learning and communication

It is difficult and time consuming to embed lessons learned..."²⁴ However, the potential rewards are substantial: organisations that learn more effectively tend to innovate more readily and manage change more comfortably. They should be better able to draw on accumulated knowledge and experience in responding to new challenges, including those presented by varied external partnerships.

In practical terms, embedding learning into the organisation might mean holding feedback events, publishing review or evaluation studies, finding opportunities to speak to key committees or decision-makers. It might also mean using the learning from one partnership to inform decisions on further collaborations. In terms of Monitoring and Evaluation (M & E) systems,

it will mean monitoring and reviewing the partnership itself rather than just the programme outcomes. New forms of knowledge-sharing will, in themselves constitute factors that may contribute to re-shaping the organisational culture, making it better able to manage a complex, multi-sectoral operating environment.

In Section 1 we drew on the case of the North Star alliance partnership in Southern Africa. Below we revisit that partnership to hear the comments from WFP and TNT partners on the importance of good communications and a shared commitment to learning. The partners' accounts make it clear that there was a very strong link between good communication, shared learning and the building of trust. This is a 'best-case scenario' where openness and a commitment to learning underpinned a productive relationship between the partners.

24. Wellman (2009) p.73

The North Star Alliance partnership (2): building trust through learning

TNT: When you are blazing new trails and dealing with unknowns you need to be able to trust the fact that your partner is seeing the same things you are and know that at the end of the day they want to achieve the same results. If you cannot communicate then you will never be able to build that trust. While relationships can be sustained by email and over the phone, they are built in person. You need to invest time with each other, preferably in the settings in which you are going to work together. We spent a lot of time with our WFP colleagues at truck stops, depots, ports and warehouses. These shared experiences forged a mutual understanding of the problems we were trying to tackle, helped to build trust between the teams and created personal friendships.

WFP: Good communication is at the heart of any successful relationship between two or more parties because, in the end, it is the individuals that form the partnerships, not the organizations.

But good communication cannot be achieved without a large dose of trust and trust takes time and requires forgiveness. Sometimes it even means having to 'take the other side' while risking ridicule or a perception of disloyalty from colleagues.

TNT: Without the ability to talk frankly and frequently with each other it is impossible to learn and to grow. A benefit of the partnership with WFP was a willingness to iterate. Both parties had a clear idea of what we wanted to achieve and where we wanted to start but we did not know what our partnership would look like. You need a destination to convince someone to join you on a journey but keeping them with you on that journey requires a flexible and curious mindset. Trying to define every last detail in advance risks turning enthusiasm into frustration. With an open attitude to communication and learning you can adjust your course as you encounter new information, while keeping in sight the fundamental goals.

WFP: Once you have built the trust then the magic can happen. You aren't as self-conscious about choosing every word or floating crazy ideas or even just admitting that you don't understand something. That openness of spirit and confidence in your partner's motives is essential for the creative process; and it's the creativity that helps get new partners excited and keep existing partners engaged.

Source: Luke Disney, Executive Director of North Star Alliance; Robin Landis, Regional Reports Officer, World Food Programme

Reflection Questions

1 Do we consciously seek to learn from our experience of working in partnership?

2 Is it clear to external partners that we value the opportunity to learn from diversity?

3 Do any systems exist that support learning or the dissemination of learning in our organisation?

4 Are our M&E procedures able to capture knowledge about the process of a partnership as well as its tangible outputs?

6 People

Much of what we have already discussed demonstrates the need for investment in people development. This can be divided into training for key partnership staff in specific competencies for partnership working; and awareness or familiarisation for all staff with the organisation's partnership commitment and policies. It might also include the creation of opportunities to develop new skills alongside counterparts from partner organisations. This can extend and reinforce the shared practical learning described in the previous chapter.

Key partnership skills

We have already reviewed some of the competencies which support good partnership working and which characterise an organisation which is building a partnership-friendly culture. Those we chose to highlight were *awareness, openness, flexibility and consistency*. In addition we have emphasised the value of *learning* and the ability to *reflect on experience*. Research, both on partnerships²⁵ and on competencies for working with different cultures,²⁶ has identified a range of other valuable competencies that might be the focus of dedicated training programmes. These include interest-based negotiation, mediation (or brokering) and active listening. Allocation of resources to people development is always a major commitment so it is vital that the organisation focuses its efforts on the skills and knowledge that will make the greatest potential contribution to improved performance. Figure 8 below uses the TPI Partnering Cycle to highlight the range of knowledge and skills required across the main stages of a cross-sector partnership. Of course, many of these skills will be important throughout a partnership but certain ones will be of particular value at each stage of the relationship.

The Cycle diagram is a simplified representation of the main stages through which a partnership will move as it evolves from the initial scoping of opportunities and identifying suitable partners through to the point of scaling up or moving on. At each major stage, certain skills are of particular value in enabling the partnership to operate as effectively as possible. For example, in

the early scoping and building stage, partners need to exercise both self-awareness and an understanding of other organizations' needs. Many of the issues discussed in Section 1 and 2 of the Navigator are highly relevant here. As a partnership typically develops, then good communication skills and operational flexibility are vital to supporting the partners' work. These are qualities which we emphasised in Section 3 above and which are illustrated in the first two case studies. Similarly, strong leadership – discussed in Section 4 – can be of great value to successful management and consolidation of the partnership.

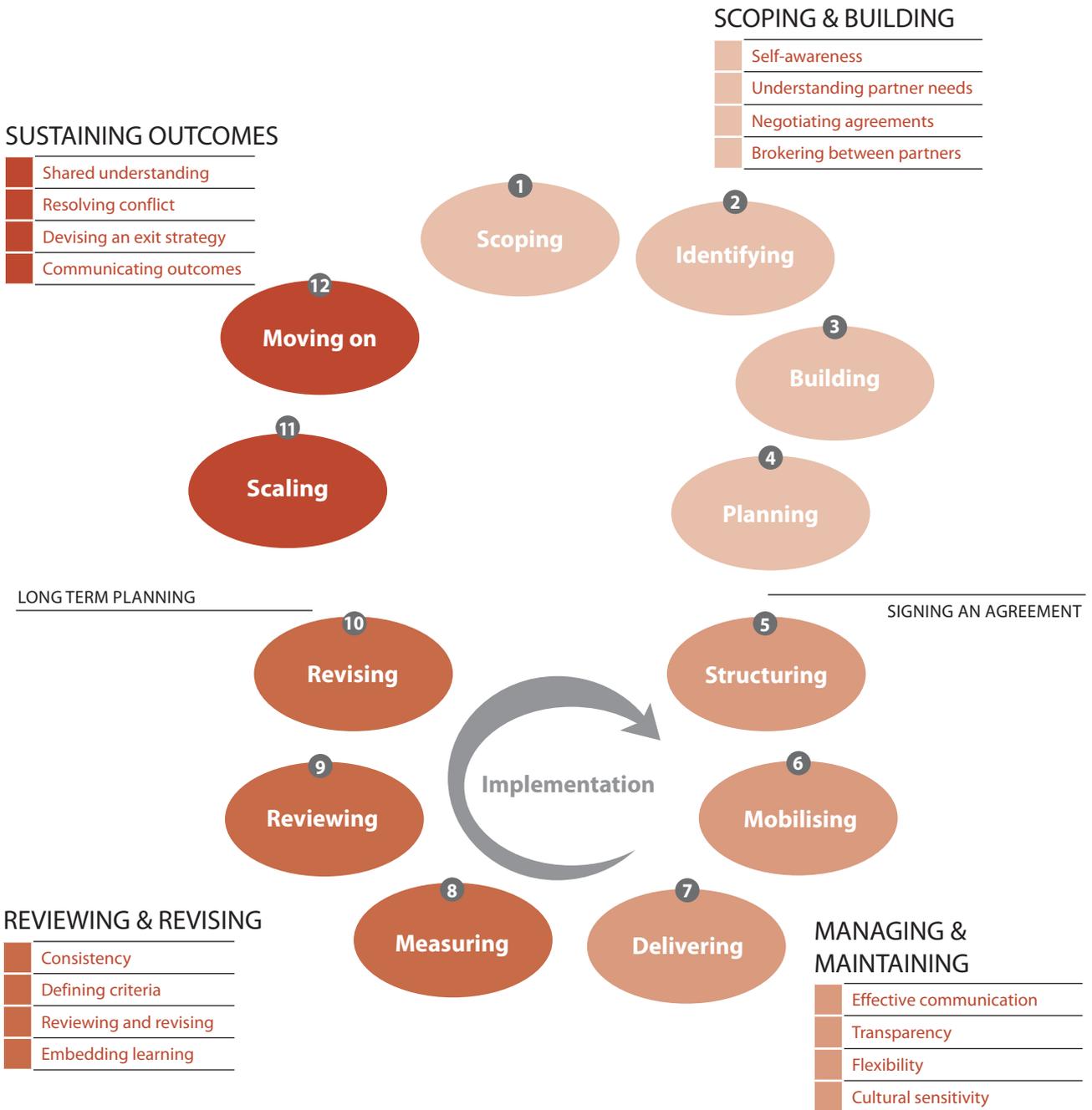
The third stage of the cycle highlights the need for active review of the partner relationship and attention to the learning available from the partnering process. We have emphasised these factors in Section 5 above and, in the accompanying case study, illustrated how partners benefit from a strong orientation to shared learning. Finally, as the partnership approaches its potential end-point, then strategic planning and conflict resolution skills may be needed to ensure that all partners have achieved satisfactory outcomes and can agree on how best to build on the partnership experience.

Although the Partnering Cycle is, necessarily, a simplification of the complex trajectory of a real partnership, it can be used as a framework for thinking about planning for a partnership and how best to allocate resources to people development. More specifically, it can be used with an operational or management team at the very outset of a partnership process to assess existing skills and determine where and when resources should be directed to developing priority skills for key team members.

25. Tennyson (2005) Tennyson and Wilde (2000)

26. Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009); Reid et al (2009)

The Partnering Lifecycle



8 Figure 8. The Partnering Cycle

Organisation-wide familiarisation

The focus so far in this section has been on the identification and development of staff skills but this has to be done within a sound framework of organisational planning, clear strategy and strong leadership. The existence of these elements will not only enable effective people development, it will also facilitate the dissemination of the partnership message across the organisation as a whole, which is vital to creating a culture which values collaboration with others.

Raising awareness of partnership across the organisation depends on the work of key partnership specialists and their senior champions creating effective internal communication of partnership policies and systems. This can be supported by input from external experts or learning facilitators. In the longer term it also depends on the integration of reflection, review and shared learning where new knowledge emerging from working in partnership strengthens internal capacity-building. As was discussed in Chapter 5, effective exploitation of any knowledge will depend on an organisation having methods of dissemination and channels of internal communication which allow that knowledge to be shared. Creating online resource centres, regular intranet reports and case study narratives are all practical ways of embedding partnership learning into the culture of the organisation as a whole.

People development and awareness-raising can be further supported by using internal reward systems to recognise the value of partnership. This means integrating partnership competencies into the core organisational competencies and incorporating these into job specifications. This lays the basis for assessing partnership capacity through performance appraisal and reward systems, helping to generate an expectation of partnership awareness and skill. Such tangible recognition is a powerful way for an organisation to demonstrate its commitment to a partnership mindset and a partnership culture.

Co-learning with partners

Opportunities for staff development and skills training do not have to be restricted to a single organisation. Some of the most innovative learning and training initiatives have been based on an assumption that partners will learn better together. Structured co-learning with participants from culturally different institutions can be a powerful tool for change.²⁷ Partner organisations can explore the use of schemes such as reciprocal secondments and internships or can commit resources to developing joint training programmes with significant partner organisations.

This offers three benefits: direct exchange of knowledge and insights from diverse organisations; greater awareness of alternative perspectives on partnership issues; and enhanced trust through the shared experience of learning together.

27. See Reid (2007)

6 People

Reflection Questions

1 What personal and professional competencies would be most useful to build partnering capacity in our organisation?

2 Is it easy to identify where key knowledge and support on partnering is located in the organisation – and to access it?

3 What training is currently in place to prepare staff for partnership management?

4 What internal knowledge resources exist to support partnership working?

5 How might we work with external partners to establish shared learning programmes?

Summary

Within every cross-sector collaboration lies the paradox of partnership: what makes an organisation attractive as a partner can also make it more difficult to partner with. Bringing together organisations with different but complementary attributes produces inevitable challenges as diverse organisational cultures strive to work together. Even if two organisations share important goals and commitment they can have ways of working which are very different. So, in building an effective partnership, participants have to acknowledge cultural difference, better understand their own operating culture and recognise the value in the different organisational cultures of partners.

Building an organisational culture which can work more effectively in cross-sector partnership demands a long-term commitment to fostering positive attitudes and behaviour. Four attributes are of particular importance:

Awareness – an awareness of the nature and impact of organisational culture is an important starting-point. Reviewing internal culture, and reflecting on how this will impact external relations, will yield valuable insights into the organisation's strengths and weaknesses as a potential partner;

Openness – building on the creation of awareness, openness is about showing your potential partner who you are and how you operate; communicating freely; sharing values and aspirations; and not trading on stereotypes and expectations;

Flexibility – the ability to respond to difference is a quality which characterises organisations that are adept at working productively across cultural boundaries. The flexibility to change when change is what is truly needed, contributes to an organisation's worth as a collaborator;

Consistency of purpose – a partnership-friendly culture is one that demonstrates a consistency of principles and behaviour which enables any external partner to predict and rely on its partner's actions. Partnerships evolve as internal demands and external pressures change: long-term success will depend to a high degree on the partners' ability to manage these changing circumstances and this requires resilience; clarity of purpose; and total organisational commitment to a partnership.

No process of internal culture change is quick or easy. Becoming a more culturally aware, responsive and effective organisation demands a conscious commitment to changing attitudes and behaviour. This requires strong leadership, changes in organisational systems and dedicated people development:

Leadership – senior leaders in an organisation have an important role to play in endorsing, promoting and supporting initiatives for change. Clear leadership sends signals to the rest of the organisation – and to external partners – and helps to legitimate new forms of behaviour;

Systems – A partnership-friendly culture is a learning culture. It is a culture that communicates effectively and shares its learning with others. At an early stage of any partnership participants should take into consideration not just the formal outcomes of the partnership but also the learning opportunities afforded by the project, the possible learning needs of the participants and the activities that might be put in place to support learning during the project. Making a commitment to learning from collaboration also sends a strong message to partners about your openness and willingness to work in a truly collaborative manner.

People development – great performance is the key to great partnership. Developing people includes training for key partnership staff in specific competencies; familiarisation for all staff with the organisation's partnership commitment and policies; and the creation of opportunities to develop new skills alongside counterparts from partner organisations.

Working in partnership is an integral element of the drive for a fairer, more sustainable form of development. Corporations, institutions and agencies from all sectors and fields are committed to working in partnership but many still underestimate the complexity of managing collaboration between culturally diverse forms of organisation. Investing resources in understanding cultural challenges and developing 'partnership-friendly' attributes will make a significant contribution to the success of partnerships and to the value that they deliver.

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ABOUT THE PARTNERING INITIATIVE

The Partnering Initiative (TPI) is an international NGO dedicated to driving widespread, effective collaboration between civil society, government and companies towards societal innovation and sustainable development.

For over a decade, TPI has pioneered the development of the theory and practice of cross-sector partnering, working with leading global organisations from all societal sectors to support their partnering strategies and approach, and in developing multi-stakeholder programmes to scale up partnership action worldwide.

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