

Twenty-four Limiting Mindsets in Partnership and collaborative working:

A number of us at Bath Consultancy Group are interested in harvesting what we have learned about partnership working in public service and making it available to a wider community. At the Conference Danny Chesterman started a provocative inquiry into what we have noticed works, arising from our various engagements in public service contexts. The following represents the best we know so far. You are invited to consider and contribute to it in the spirit of 'work in progress'.

Limiting Mindsets	Antidote (Liberating mind set)
1. Agreeing a set of goals will commit the organisations to subsequent action	You cannot know how far you are willing to take the partnership before you start to work in partnership. Efforts to agree goals are important but need to run alongside experiments in working together...only there do you develop a 'bridging' language
2. Settling shared goals is the first task in a partnership	Understanding the goals of the individual partners needs to <i>precede</i> the settling of shared goals. Subsequently there needs to be a 'just good enough' agreement on goals to get commitment to beginning working together.
3. For partnerships to work all partners need to be an equal voice.	Voices in a partnership are rarely equal. There are often client/contractor relationships at stake. Inequality is something to be expected; indeed, articulating and bringing these differences to the surface is often essential to healthy partnership working.
4. Power is assumed to lie with the dominant partner.	Very often the sense of <i>powerlessness</i> is felt most keenly by those who are allegedly the most powerful. Less dominant partners can use the power of withdrawal to undermine the very legitimacy of the partnership. Plus power is hard to define – size doesn't always matter and the power of consumer 'choice' and citizen 'voice' can be significant

<p>5. Trust needs to be built up to enable the partnership to function</p>	<p>Frequent reorganisation and people churn means that memberships are usually constantly shifting. What can help is to make sure that those who manage the partnership members accept the responsibility to 'hand the baton' on to a new representative.</p>
<p>6. A set of agreed standards of behaviour will ensure that the partnership ethos is maintained.</p>	<p>Because of the difference in partner cultures it's inevitable that members 'upset' each other. What makes the difference is a willingness to practise the twin skills of forgiveness and apologising for the unintended impact our actions have on each other</p>
<p>7. The ability to resolve differences and influence others is crucial.</p>	<p>It is not differences that cause difficulty but <i>attitudes</i> to difference. Sometimes these differences can and should be resolved; at other times they just need to be held in tension as a polarity/framework for working with newly emerging issues. Often the problem is not that we can't influence people, but that we <i>do</i>...more than we think!!</p>
<p>8. Getting agreement about future plans will bring the partnership together</p>	<p>'Planning for the future' can often be just a way of avoiding action in the here and now. Better a small joint step now than a big step some time in the future that never actually happens.</p>
<p>9. Pushing leadership out to other partners is crucial</p>	<p>Optimism and faith are key leadership responsibilities.....most needed when the going gets toughestand that cannot be delegated or distributed</p>
<p>10. Healthy debate (conversation characterised by exclusive use of advocacy) will help to shape goals</p>	<p>Debate can simply ensure that the already powerful win decisively. Dialogue, which combines both advocacy and inquiry, can be more helpful.</p>
<p>11. Mutual respect is a precondition for success</p>	<p>Respect is something that is earned through working together through all the highs and lows. It is an outcome, not a precondition. The key question is: am I willing to make myself vulnerable enough to begin to work together with you, even when I don't know you (or I think I do!)?</p>

12. Training in partnership skills will build capacity	Yes, but the key skill is letting go of the certainties we so often take for granted...so <i>unlearning</i> is even more important. Key capacity is self awareness....i.e. knowing how the culture that shapes you determines the way you see the world
13. The job of the partnership leaders is to build the commitment of partners to the goals	The number of absent voices and stakeholders who affect the partnership context in the public service means that the major role for partnership leaders is often voicing the voices not in the room at all
14. Get the service user involved when you've got your act straight	Get the service user involved...straight away
15. Make hidden agendas transparent	There will always be hidden agendas... because people balance many loyalties at anyone time and not all can be voiced in the limited time that partnerships have. Making your own <i>assumptions (i.e. what you believe to be true)</i> transparent and checking out what you believe others think is key.
16. Partnership is like a marriage.	Difficulties with this metaphor include: partnerships are often imposed; there are many partners, and they often change; partnerships do not usually start with partners falling in love!
17. We expect complex systems to react in predictable ways...so change can be planned as if cause and effect were linear	The behaviour of complex systems cannot safely be predicted ...so successful partnerships need to work with what is emergent and unpredictable as well as what is planned
18. Things get simpler if you define and clarify them	Not true. When you clarify and define things in a partnership context, an even greater level of complexity is often revealed
19. Partnership means being nice to each other	Partnership means BOTH nurturing the best in each other (looking for the good intent) AND confronting the non committed or non performing (using what Chris Huxham calls collaborative thuggery)

<p>20. Partnership working is hard work, unfamiliar territory, but basically it is an extension of good management</p>	<p>People are inherently capable of working together in many aspects of their lives. What's hard is integrating this capacity with our assumptions about organisations and the world of work. Partnership working does require us to change many of the assumptions that we take for granted when working <i>inside</i> organisations</p>
<p>21. Partnership working needs formal mechanisms to make it happen, for example, putting clear structures in place, like partnership boards and project management processes.</p>	<p>Old meeting practices generate old behaviours, and when they fail to deliver, bring partnership working into disrepute. We need new meeting architectures to give us a better chance of working differently. Example, a willingness to co-inquire or learn together can allow new dialogue to emerge for working together.</p>
<p>22. Getting people together in partnership meetings, to agree strategy and action plans is the way to get things done together.</p>	<p>Without specific attention to joint and separate responsibilities and accountabilities, partnership working reverts to a series of joint meetings with indeterminate outcomes</p>
<p>23. Leadership in partnerships comes through the Project Board and project management.</p>	<p>Leadership in partnership arises through a deliberate and reflexive assessment of the conditions needed for new actions on the ground and a willingness to confront 'old' leadership behaviour characterised by the military and political metaphors. The role of the leadership is firstly to articulate an account of the future which makes sense of the complexities that people are facing and secondly, to create jointly the conditions for managers and professionals to work more effectively together and with their clients, across boundaries</p>
<p>24. Partnership working is time consuming because of all the new meetings and structures that need to be attended to, as well as 'the day job.'</p>	<p>Working in partnership should become 'instead of' and not 'as well as': if the separate components of the partnership carry on with the day jobs, untroubled by the challenges of joint working, then something is going wrong....</p>

Danny Chesterman, Sue Pritchard, Peter Binns and other colleagues at the Bath Consultancy Group Conference September 2005