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PrC Insight Series

Partnership Skills



THE PARTNERSHIPS
RESOURCE CENTRE

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Rotterdam School of Management
Erasmus University



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The **Partnerships Resource Centre (PrC)** at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University is an international centre for research and knowledge about public-private collaboration for sustainable and inclusive development, bridging science and practice. PrC aims to understand how cross-sector partnerships work and how they can contribute to sustainable transformations. Through the **PrC Insight Series**, we share evidence-based knowledge to enhance the effectiveness and impact of partnerships.

#1 WHAT ARE PARTNERSHIP SKILLS?

Partnerships are more likely to be successful when committed people are good at working together: *the right people in the right place* is a necessary condition. The right people can build meaningful relationships that create real results. The right partnership staff members have a collaborative mindset, a principled attitude, relevant knowledge and specific partnership skills at their disposal. You need a mix of interrelated characteristics to

be effective in achieving goals in cross sector partnerships (CSPs¹).

What's more, practitioners have pointed out the importance of what they call *the spark*², describing it as a personal connection between the people involved, a common vision and goal, but also a high level of enthusiasm and a strong belief that 'it is going to work'³.

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Partnership skills are specific personal skills and traits that are reflected in successful behaviour such as bridging different contexts, language, working cultures of various sectors, and guiding partners to build a fit for purpose relationship in order to develop solutions that add value.

This PrC Partnership Insight sheet, Part 3 of the Series, describes what partnership skills are and why they are important, and is based on several PrC research projects⁴. In addition to skills, the toolbox for successful partnerships also contains a collaborative mindset and a good understanding of partnership frameworks. This

Insight sheet describes which skills you need when building partnerships; they can range from facilitation and co-ordination to negotiation and advice. And there's one more important characteristic of an effective partnership manager: the ability to challenge partners to go beyond 'business as usual'.

#2 WHY ARE PARTNERSHIP SKILLS NEEDED?

CSPs involve partners that are not accustomed to working together. They usually have very different backgrounds. Moreover, CSPs often work in an uncertain environment such as a fragile context in unpredictable political or economic regions that requires a high degree

of flexibility, adaptability and resilience. Or it could be because the CSP's ambition is so innovative that it has never been done before. In CSPs there are usually a lot of 'unknowns' and no examples or role models to follow. The partners are considered to be frontrunners

and much of their collaboration consists of co-creating new activities.

People working in such partnerships need to:

- question and reflect upon the standard ways of working;
- move beyond 'business as usual';
- co-create new ways of doing things;
- balance a new, appropriate way to collaborate to get things done;
- lead, learn and act almost simultaneously.

#3 WHAT SHOULD BE IN YOUR PARTNERSHIP TOOLBOX?

Toolboxes belonging to people in effective partnerships have at least three components:

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First, they have a **collaborative mindset**, or a set of beliefs and mental models that determines how they perceive 'working in partnership' and which guides their behaviour. It means:

- being intentional about how the partnership is designed, managed and implemented;
- paying attention to the relationship between partners, including developing mutual trust;
- being able to look from others' perspectives, recognise that others sometimes may have more appropriate knowledge;
- having a propensity for innovation and at the same time be willing to give up autonomy of decision making;
- a learning attitude: daring to move into the discomfort zone of being aware of your own lack of incompetence or skill, and engage in meaningful feedback;
- people who embody qualities such as empathy, reflection, openness and modesty.



Learn to transform

Partnership processes are not easy to plan and are often iterative because problem definitions change over time, and projects are adjusted. This means these processes require constant learning and feedback loops, especially if a partnership wants to address a complex issue to which there is no simple solution.

The transition from a group of stakeholders (often with conflicting interests) towards a team of interrelated partners with shared goals and practices that work well is a big challenge for CSPs. But as soon as members of a partnership start to derive part of their identity from the team, the partnership moves towards a more mature stage.

The transition from group to team is often just as painful and uncomfortable as an individual's learning process towards awareness of competence.

Partnership managers should have:

- the capability to ensure that others within the partnership are well prepared to take on responsibilities;
- the ability to make certain that a partnership moves on and matures into an enterprise in its own;
- the willingness to 'let go' when the time is right.

In service of the partnership, good partnership managers aim to work themselves out of their own job:



Servant leadership

The concept of servant leadership⁶ focuses on other people needs being served: a true leader is alert to new possibilities and ready for whatever develops. True leadership is an inner quality. Otto Scharmer⁷, an action researcher who co-creates innovations in learning and leadership, often quotes this famous statement:

'The success of any intervention is entirely dependent on the interior condition of the intervener.'

Translating this to effective partnering, it means that it is more about **who you are** than about what you do or how you do it. Partnership staff need capacity for empathy, authenticity and integrity, and patience and persistence. Personal motivation, not to say, personal passion, is key.

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Then, effective partnership staff has a **specific skillset**. People in partnerships come from a variety of cultures, organisations and disciplines. Their world views and values often differ. This requires:

- a focus on soft skills such as deep listening, meaningful facilitation and consensus building;
- being skilled in *connecting the dots*. You have the ability to see the important details while also keeping an eye on the big picture
- being attuned to key information and understanding the importance of how each piece of information relates to others;
- creating patterns that help identify opportunities or creating innovative solutions;
- reflection – in a positive, constructive way. Questioning what the partnership does well, and what it needs.

Reflection is an important skill in ensuring continuous improvement of the partnership and its work.

A partnership can be seen as a learning journey navigated by partners who create a map, plan their route, choose their mode of transport, and change direction when necessary⁵. It's often like building a boat while simultaneously sailing it.



Key CSP skills

Because partnerships develop in an uncertain environment, a particular set of skills is needed for strengthening the collaborative essence of partnering. Managing partnerships requires different skills.

CSPs require skills that vary from soft skills and mastering practical management to being able to do things differently for the first time, and dealing with tensions, uncertainties and the unknown.

Soft skills

- ✓ Awareness raising / influencing
- ✓ Facilitating meaningful conversations
- ✓ Reflecting
- ✓ Patience and persistence
- ✓ Courage to speak up
- ✓ Providing a safe space
- ✓ Coaching
- ✓ Creative thinking

Management skills

- ✓ Programme and project management and planning
- ✓ Co-ordinating and administration
- ✓ Communicating and marketing
- ✓ Lobbying
- ✓ Resource mobilization
- ✓ Information and strategic analysis and synthesising
- ✓ Advising on agreements, reviews, health checks, strategy
- ✓ Strengthening partnership capacities and institutional engagement

Collaboration skills

- ✓ Understanding and bridging differences
- ✓ Interest-based negotiation
- ✓ Building relationships
- ✓ Supporting co-creation
- ✓ Challenging partners to go beyond 'business as usual'
- ✓ Understanding complexity
- ✓ Managing group dynamics and conflict; building on diversity
- ✓ Navigating uncertainty

Partnering is a **balancing act** that supports collaborative working and at the same time, getting things done.

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Finally, partnership staff has a collection of [partnership tools](#) at their disposal. They need knowledge of:

- partnership characteristics, such as the interests, motivations and drivers of partners;
- the partnership ambition, its resources, and its required capabilities;
- partnership governance, and, last but not least:
- partnership concepts and frameworks to navigate the partnership's dynamics.



Tool set

There are a multitude of methods, approaches and techniques. One of the best known and probably most used frameworks is the [Partnering Cycle](#). It provides an overview of the stages of a partnership and their associated required activities. Of course, there isn't a single partnership that would conform precisely to this schematic sequence, but it is valuable as a guide to working in a structured and systematic way.

You should be able to choose what is 'fit for purpose', and this requires a deep understanding of what a particular partnership needs at a particular given time.

#4 SEVEN STEPS FOR BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

How do you ensure a shared view of collaboration? In other words, how can you make a partnership work? Which skills should you use at what time? The trick is to keep an eye on the ultimate goal for your partnership as well as how you plan to achieve it. Those are two aspects of the same objective, and you should address both

repeatedly with all partners involved. It is a joint quest to create the right skills at the right time.

The development of an effective partnership comprises these seven steps. Which each step associated partnership skills are needed.

1

Work on a shared ambition

Organisations will only start working together if they believe that the collaboration is meaningful and provides added value for each organisation.

All partners should be able to recognise themselves in the shared ambition of the partnership and having a good conversation about this is essential. Convening, scoping and facilitating are required skills that help partners work systematically and successfully towards formulating a shared goal.

2

Respect each other's interests

There are different levels of interests: individual interests, those of your organisation and of your partner organisation, and broader societal interests. A successful partnership does justice to each of those levels. It is important to create an open and safe atmosphere to reveal underlying interests and support the conversations between partners who have different imperatives and priorities. You can make effective use of the differences by navigating consciously between partners' interests, motives, and expectations, rather than by letting the differences get in the way of possible solutions. Relationship building is key.

3

Pay attention to personal relationships and group dynamics

Working together is done by humans.

Personal relationships always have a dominant role in effective communication – and are sometimes just as important as any substantive arguments. So, keeping an eye on the social psychological processes and group dynamics is crucial. This requires partners to engage in in-depth conversations about their partnering work, and to jointly create new approaches. It's at this stage that partners often build their own partnership capacity which makes them well prepared to collaborate and take up the lead when necessary.

4

Organise the partnership in a professional way

Every partnership must be well structured in a professional way. Next to a partnership agreement⁸, an appropriate structure for organisation and governance must be in alignment with the joint ambition of the partnership – and must be as light as possible while remaining fit for purpose. The same applies to the decision-making procedure and the way in which communication takes place. Such structures should provide for the most flexibility and ability to adapt to changing or as-yet-unknown circumstances.

5

Focus on a meaningful process

An effective, meaningful partnership process provides answers to three key questions:

1. How can we do the right things at the right time?
2. How do we properly discuss and reach an agreement?
3. What role does each partner play and who is in charge at what time?

This is how to create a joint collaboration framework (including core values and partnership principles⁹) that offers guidance to all partners. Such a partnership framework connects partners, reduces confusion and conflict, and ensures successful collaboration.

6

Support joint learning

It is important to ensure that the partnership continues to match the expectations and interests of all the partners. At the same time, partners should regularly review and revise the partnership activities, especially while operating in an uncertain environment. Taking time to conduct joint reflection and to co-create new approaches are ingredients of continuous learning amongst partners. These activities improve the process of collaboration as well as enlarge the potential impact of the partnership.

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Sustain partnership outcomes

Partners need to think about how to sustain their achievements, and how they want to move on. There are several options for mainstreaming or institutionalising their endeavours:

- moving into the next phase, when efforts are scaled up;
- duplicate partnership projects in other regions or in other sectors;
- phase out when the partnership' objectives have been achieved, or,
 - develop an exit strategy.

Here, being able to look at the big picture is important (what is needed now?) as well as personal detachment (letting go).

#5 PARTNERSHIP SKILLS: A POWERFUL TOOL

By identifying and paying attention to the three essential parts of the partnership toolbox – mindset, skillset and tools – you can build effective and meaningful partnerships and achieve positive outcomes. Mastering a variety of interrelated skills at the same time and on various levels – individual, organisational and partnership – can enable partners to have crucial conversations. These conversations connect people, organisations and issues.

Partnership skills are required to make these connections, and they are needed to address the social challenges of our time. This implies that investing in developing partnership skills makes perfect sense. In fact, recruitment and selection of employees who have a partnership toolbox at their disposal is a valuable investment for any organisation that takes its social responsibility seriously.



FURTHER READING

Russel M. Linden wrote [Developing a collaborative mindset](#). In this short article (6 pages) he tells the story of how Cisco Systems, an American technology corporation, made the transformation towards a collaborative and innovative business.

The Centre for Development Innovation ([CDI](#)) of Wageningen University & Research published [the MSP Tool Guide](#): sixty tools to facilitate MSPs. In this Tool Guide you can find specific tools to develop [Partnership Skills](#). The guide includes, for example, the Context Immersions ([tool no.17](#)) for building understanding and an appreciation for diversity, building on multiple perspectives ([tool no. 29](#)), dealing with conflict ([tool no. 37](#)), various tools for co-creation, and a tool to integrate reflection into the learning process of a MSP ([tool no. 56](#)). For each tool, the guide makes reference to its underlying sources.

The website of [Liberating Structures](#) claims to offer 'an alternative way to approach and design how people work together'. It provides a menu of more than 30 *Liberating Structures* 'to replace or complement conventional practices'. There's also a translation of the website in [Dutch](#).

The Partnering Initiative ([TPI](#)) provides the [Partnering Toolkit](#), 'an essential guide to cross-sector partnering'. The tools and frameworks in this basic manual have been adopted by organisations from all sectors, and by partnerships operating in many different contexts. The tool book includes a section about [partnership skills](#) (page 21) and a tool (No. 4) developed for individuals involved in partnerships to assess their own partnering skills.

REFERENCES

1. In this Insight Series we discuss CSPs as a collaborative effort in which parties from different societal sectors (government, business, civil society organisations and/or knowledge organisations) pool resources to provide solutions to grand challenges. For an explanation please see the Introduction to this Series at www.rsm.nl/prc.
2. 'The spark' is a non-scientifically validated concept. In social psychology this factor is also referred to as the 'chemistry' between people; organisational studies talk about 'alignment'.
3. Stöteler, I., Reeder, S. and Van Tulder, R. (2012). [Cross-Sector Partnership Formation. What to consider before you start?](#) The Partnerships Resource Centre: Rotterdam (p. 15).
4. Please visit <https://www.rsm.nl/research/centres/prc/research/> for more information on PrC's research projects.
5. The journey metaphor is derived from the perspective of [partnership brokering](#), as developed by the Partnership Brokers Association ([PBA](#)).
6. Robert Greenleaf (1977). [Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness](#), Paulist Press.
7. [Dr. Otto Scharmer](#) is a senior lecturer at the Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and co-founder of the [Presencing Institute](#). He has written several books, amongst others [The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications](#) (2018).
8. See for more information on partnership agreements the [PrC Insight Series](#) on Partnership Agreements at: www.rsm.nl/prc.
9. See for more information on partnership principles the PrC Insight Series on Partnership Principles at: www.rsm.nl/prc.

COLOPHON

For an introduction to the PrC Insight Series and the other Insights, please visit:

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