
Partnership and Network Management

A Key Principles of Partnership & Network Management

What **management principles** can we distil from the successes and failures of partnerships?

Partnerships are more than just a theoretical idea; the successes as well as the failure of current partnerships demonstrate their viability and their weaknesses, but it also reinforces the possibility of reform and the existence of meaningful innovations in their thematic areas of work.

In general, it is important to keep in mind three issues:

First, partnerships can only be as transparent and accountable as their participants. Therefore codes of conduct can help to guarantee accountability and transparency on the part of all actors.

Second, partnerships need results orientation and sound process standards. Based on a strategic orientation of purpose and expectations, the partners need to agree on operational results. The partners will need to help develop minimum standards in order to guide their own involvement in the partnership. Such process standards should take into account and operationalize general principles such as transparency, subsidiarity, comparative advantages. Formulating common products and “terms of engagement” also form important parts of this endeavor. On the other hand it is critical that strict rules, beyond the minimum necessary, are not placed on partnership operation at the beginning, in order to ensure flexibility and to allow an evolution in the partnership structure.

Third, both evaluating the results of the partnership and embedding it in established institutions are keys for fostering the legitimacy of their results.

Trust, leadership and coordination are three key variables determining the success of partnership cooperation.

Fostering trust – creating bridges: Many practitioners regard lack of trust and misperception among partnership actors as central obstacles to successful cooperation in partnerships. The most important challenge is to overcome stereotypical perceptions and prejudice towards each other. This is not surprising given that relations between partners from different sectors and institutions are often strained. The mistrust among partners across sectoral and institutional boundaries frequently has deep roots, deriving from longstanding antagonistic relations and diverging perceptions and interests.

At the beginning, it might be useful to invest some time to undertake consultations, despite the transaction costs incurred, in order to understand the different organizational and personal motives, time frames, work styles, cultures of each partner. At the same time, it is important to combine the emphasis on process with a focus on results or tangible products – often a difficult balancing act. Many partnerships have profited from setting concrete milestones as part of a common work-plan. “Easy wins” or cooperation on pilot projects yielding relatively quick results, help to complement laborious consultation processes, thus providing motivation and trust. Limiting the duration of a partnership can, at times, place more focus on results.

Promoting leadership: Although partnerships are often coupled loosely and decentrally organized, leadership is a key variable for the success of a partnership. Leadership should not be understood as simply exercising power or influence, but rather in terms of a facilitator role. Leadership in partnerships requires the ability to motivate and mobilize diverse partners toward common goals and products and to improve communication among them. Partnerships mark an end to “business as usual” and their success demands bold experimentation. Promoting successful cooperation in partnerships presupposes debunking established and often rarely questioned principles, mobilizing resources and re-organizing work processes as well as pressing hard to overcome mistrust and the status quo.

Managing expectations is another important aspect of leadership – both internally in terms of the roles of different partners within the partnership and externally in terms of what the partnership can realistically be expected to achieve. While individual and institutional leadership are central for the success of a partnership, it is important that partnerships avoid domination by individuals or one partner. Good leadership requires operational transparency, inclusion and the ability to foster communication.

Interface management - improving coordination: Coordinating intra- as well as inter-organizational relations is another key management task in partnerships. Given the dynamic partnership structure this interface management is a complex task requiring new skills, flexibility and a rethinking of the traditional roles of individual actors. Successful interface management consists of mediating among highly diverse organizational cultures, finding common ground across wide-ranging interests, and using innovative techniques to communicate.

In some partnerships, an independent third party plays a key role in this interface management (Triangulation). In the early stages of partnership formation, one organization often takes over the function of a coordinator. The advantage of this approach is that they can rely on an infrastructure already in place, but the transaction costs and the risk of unbalanced relations are high.

B Cost Analysis of Partnership Products

In every partnership the products consist of different shares of costs. The partners evaluate their benefit according to the benefit of each of the products as well as the overall number of products.

