

Setting the context

The purpose of this paper is to provide a prompt to conversations, within and between organisations about Partnering and Facilitative Leadership. This paper provides a challenge to conventional thinking about organisational culture, leadership and relationships between organisational partners. It has been created by Questions of Difference, a niche consultancy who have established a strong reputation over the last 10 years as thought leaders in facilitating transformational change in a systemic way across large and complex organisations. The models, tools and processes we have developed enable organisations and the individuals within them to adopt our Partnering and Facilitative Leadership approach to transform how they operate within months, not years.

Partnering proposes a radically new vision of relationships between organisations. Partnering challenges the belief that win-win is the ultimate goal. If we decide what winning is before we even engage with our Partners, then we limit the outcomes. By adopting both-gain, we will achieve more than we believed was possible. Partnering also fundamentally recognises, celebrates and exploits the differences that exist. By developing a culture that sees conflict as a natural resource, Partners create healthy strategies for working with differences.

Facilitative leadership is the individual embodiment of the partnering ethos. Facilitative leaders have the capacity to engage others at every level within an organisation. They have the self-knowledge to recognise their own strengths, values, and beliefs and use these to lead with true congruence. They have the courage to be clear in their vision and communicate it to those around them, they have the humility to recognise and support excellence in co-workers and the audacity to lead beyond authority. Facilitative leaders have the wisdom to look within themselves and their teams to lead small parts of the organisation, in synchrony with the larger organisation, towards their collective goal. Facilitative leaders are the components that build the partnering vision.

What is Partnering?

Partnering as Ethos and Vision

Partnering is not a new word, however, we use it to describe a new aspiration towards intra and inter-organisational interdependence and collaboration. Partnering is an ethos, by which we use this definition: “the fundamental character or spirit of a culture; the underlying sentiment that informs the beliefs, customs, or practices of a group or society and the dominant assumptions of a people”. This is our Partnering Vision: we are proposing the adoption of a radically new, shared view of the world, which transforms beliefs and behaviour, leading to enormously positive outcomes. Partnering urges people and businesses to co-operate for mutual benefit, achieving greater future success than that which is possible through working alone.

What is the underlying sentiment of Partnering?

Human beings do not operate in isolation; our success and happiness is dependent on the quality of the relationships we build with others, whether as individuals, organisations, businesses or societies. If we pay attention to how we build those relationships and move away from a confrontational or even win-win approach we can reap the benefits of a new way of relating, in which both parties can gain. We believe that people and organisations are capable of genuine transformational change when they understand that everything is possible, and that “hopeless” situations can be transformed by changing our beliefs, assumptions and behaviour.

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What are the beliefs and assumptions of Partnering?

The strength of the Partnering ethos is its breadth and inclusiveness; it accepts many views and beliefs about society. Inherent in the ethos is the assumption that organisations operate as complex systems, with high levels of interdependence within and between levels of the organisation, and across different organisations. The challenge in understanding organisations and their links, is their complexity. The strength of operating, using this assumption, is that it allows leaders to intervene at a systemic level to create rapid effective change, or “tipping points”.

Partnering requires that we adopt and constantly strive to live by the Questions of Difference seven Partnering Assumptions (1). The first and probably most challenging of these is recognising that conflict is one of our greatest natural resources. You do not have to create or engineer individual and organisational differences, they are there: it is how you manage the difference that determines whether the outcomes are innovative or destructive. Other Partnering assumptions include assuming good will and good intent on the part of others (even when the good intent is not directed towards you!), being prepared to challenge thinking and behaviour, valuing difference and being aware that the language we use creates our reality. The Partnering assumptions are not complex in themselves, or difficult to understand. What is more difficult is adopting them and living by them.

Partnering Outcomes: Mindset, Behaviours and Transformational Change

The Partnering mindset is one of appreciation, curiosity and flexibility. It involves living the Partnering assumptions day to day. The mindset leads to behaviour, which promotes the development of strong, durable relationships. The positive outcomes of these relationships are shared between both partners. The Partnering mindset moves beyond win-win to both gain; it is an aspiration of shared success at all levels within and between organisations.

Partnering requires and builds on collaboration with others. You cannot partner alone, and in developing partnering relationships, so partnering behaviours grow within and across organisations. The mindset requires that individuals and teams are prepared to change, be challenged, and learn new skills to become more effective communicators, leaders and models of Partnering. The adoption of new behaviours allows individuals to integrate a Partnering ethos within their existing style and approach. This creates individual agents of change, who invite others to challenge their assumptions and propagate further change throughout the organisation. Our approach introduces to individuals a mindset that they can adapt to compliment their unique perspectives, values and principles; so bringing their strengths to work in transforming their organisations.

Facilitative Leadership

A critical element of effective Partnering is a significant Facilitative Leadership capacity. Facilitative Leaders are capable of bringing out the best in those around them. They have an authenticity to their leadership style, which encourages trust and commitment from others. They model their values and principles every day in the way that they work and lead, their actions speak as loudly as their words in demonstrating their expectations to others.

Facilitative leaders are able to work beyond authority. They know that in Partnering situations they may not have the luxury of hierarchy to assist in leading those around them. Their leadership depends on the ability to engage others and take them with them, rather than issuing orders. They have the skills to motivate and inspire those they work alongside and lead from within the group. Given that Partnering is an ethos for systemic cultural change, it follows that Facilitative Leadership capacity needs to be developed at every level of an organisation.

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Facilitative leaders are able to excite and engage others with their belief that everything is possible. They use the language of possibility to explore future goals for themselves and their teams. They create a sense of safety within their teams, which allows differences to be noticed and named to the mutual benefit of the group. Facilitative leaders understand that groups prosper when individual difference is recognised and allowed to flourish. The sense of security created also enables their teams to challenge each other, including their leader, in a way that disrupts conventional thinking while strengthening relationships.

Facilitative leaders assume the best in those around them, which allows them to take risks and build trust quickly. They have the humility to acknowledge excellence in others, wherever they see it and the tenacity to support novel points of view in the face of opposition if they believe this is the right thing to do. They are constantly curious, and are always keen to know how things could be done differently. They know themselves, and are comfortable with chaos, especially when this arises from questioning the status quo.

Facilitative leaders are the individual embodiment of the partnering ethos, the small components, which together create the complex, responsive and evolving organisations that deliver the Partnering vision.

Conversations for the future

The Questions of Difference approach to Partnering and Facilitative Leadership has evolved over the last 10 years to incorporate new insights gained from effectively helping organisations to change and develop. The ethos continues to evolve and we look forward with excitement to continued learning as we partner with our clients on their journey of transformation.

This paper represents the beginning of many conversations; as you think about what could be different when your organisation rises to the challenge of the Partnering and Facilitative Leadership we encourage you to reflect on these questions:

- What is the difference that you are passionate about seeing in the world around you? When you wistfully wish 'If only this could be different' what is it you crave? Who are the people that will benefit?
- What are the strengths that you personally bring to your work that enable you to make a difference yourself? What do your colleagues recognise as being your strengths that enable them to make the greatest contribution?
- When you think about the other organisations that have an influence, which are the ones that aid you? Which are the ones that seem to obstruct progress?
- Imagine you are at a party when people from all of these organisations (the helpers and the hinderers together). Collectively, you are ALL celebrating a milestone achievement that you have ALL contributed to. What might the common vision that you would all celebrate be?
- How would transforming relationships across this community of organisations benefit the people that you strive to make a difference for?
- Recognising yourself as a Facilitative Leader, what is one thing you will do that will encourage this partnering vision?

To learn more about Questions of Difference, contact our London office on +44 (0)20 8883 9966 or visit our web site at www.questionsofdifference.com

References

(1) Cash in on Conflict, Charlie Irvine, London 2006. www.cashinonconflict.com