Position Paper

Partnership

Introduction

Partnership has grown into a central pillar of government policy which is now embodied in the concept of the Big Society. Today it underpins public life in the UK. This can be traced to a range of factors - the growing number of different agencies involved in delivering services at local level, the attractions of "synergy", the pooling of expertise and resources, the realisation that problems have multiple causes and require an integrated approach if they are to be resolved, and the fact that services can not be delivered by the public sector in isolation. The third sector and local communities are equal partners

Context

Historically multi agency and inter agency working have been around for a very long time but the concept of "partnership" as a factor in its own right and a determinant of success became more widely understood and embedded in the culture of public sector bodies throughout the 90s. It would now be unthinkable for one organisation to claim that it could single handedly tackle the major issues which face our society.

Research

It is worth remembering that twenty years ago, public policy was characterised by single agency responses with responsibility carried by local authorities or individual organisations funded by grants. Public policy now requires multi agency responses, drawing together public, private and voluntary sector interests to develop formal partnerships and deliver integrated programmes to promote the arts & culture, regeneration, to tackle crime and disorder and to increase health and well being. In the private sector collaborations and mergers have always been part of business. Companies have to consider all the time whether their future best interests are served by continuing as a single entity with its inevitable limitations on growth or whether to collaborate with others in order to flourish but with the potential to lose the core identity or brand.

There was a crucial turning point during the 1990s when the labour government in opposition drove a new strategy to tackle the ills of society once and for all. Called the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal it brought together mixed teams of professionals from a wide range of disciplines charged with detailed research into hard to tackle issues – housing, poverty, health, crime, economic development. Their findings were incorporated into one report which was formulated into a ground breaking ten year strategy. A key finding across the themes had been that quality of life was determined by where you lived. At its core this strategy sought to ensure that everyone had the same opportunity and would not be disadvantaged by where they lived. This became known as "postcode lottery" and "narrowing the gap" between those who lived in areas of deprivation and those who lived in more affluent areas became the major objective of the strategy.

The foundation of the strategy was the concept of partnership – a belief that single agency action was insufficient to tackle the problems facing society. Tony Blair, as prime minister, drove this culture forward and understood the need to break down silo thinking both in government, public and private sectors. That the strategy was only partially successful was due not to a flaw in the basic premise but rather to the same mistakes which businesses often make – a lack of adequate situation appraisal, inappropriate and inarticulated expectations, a lack of good quality information which made the metrics impossible to calculate. This was a major reason for the rise and rise of the technocrat – in this case those who had statistical, analytical or IT expertise and who began to assume power based on "knowledge and understanding" The technical background to the concept of partnership is enough for a separate book

What is Partnership

So what is partnership? Do partnerships always have an implicit core? - equality, common aims, shared vision, agreements, cultural understanding. It does seem that there are essential characteristics which are common to all working partnerships. An understanding of these can facilitate successful outcomes. One explanation could be "Two or more people who join together to undertake a business, a venture, an initiative, an action. This explanation does not cover the issues of power and control and goes no way towards explaining the extremely complex, delicate and dynamic nature of professional and business partnerships where the risk of communication breakdown as we see from the number of partnerships which split up. This is often because two people in similar or complementary businesses relate well and wish to maximise their business potential and so form a business partnership. They give no thought to the logistics of working as a team rather than as solo practitioners with all the requirement for common systems and routines.

Partnership is of course a two way process with advantages and gains to set against losses and responsibilities. The management gurus of the 80's - Tom Peters, (Peters 1987; Peters and Waterman 1982) Rosabeth Moss Kantor, Kanter 1989) Charles Handy (Handy 1989) gave us new ways of looking at the working environment. Meetings and committees could be seen as a good way of ensuring that nothing was actually achieved. Brilliantly portrayed in the The Dilbert Principle by Scott Adamsthey explore the futility at the heart of office life within a hierarchical

bureaucratic structure. For today, the paradox is that the pivotal requirement for meeting, sharing, and agreement lies at the heart of partnership. What we are seeing now as a result of the explosion in social media capability is what I call the 2011 model – see final paragraph.

The issue of perception is a crucial one. A partnership's culture is determined by people's perception of it. Some partnerships are seen as dysfunctional when they are not necessarily and some who can deal with much partner conflict are nevertheless seen as effective. My own experience is that where an upbeat, positive culture is created and consistently applied, whatever the difficulties, that partnership culture becomes infectious and perceptions about the partnership are coloured by it. Viewed from the inside and the outside this partnership is then perceived as effective. A recent book – "Why does E = MC 2 by Brian Cox and Jeff Forshaw Is written by two physicists for a lay audience. It explores, amongst other things, Einstein's theory of Relativity. This theory established that there is no such thing as absolute time. Time is a concept which is relative to other things. It struck me that in partnership almost everything should be seen through the prism of relativity.

Implications for us

We are all partners in our professional lives both as individuals one with another and as representatives of organisations whose interests and wellbeing we are charged with.   For many of us, the experience upon which we draw in order to make partnerships work in our professional lives is accessed from other parts of our lives where in our families, our relationships and our networks we are practising our partnership skills all the time. At work, whether we know it or not, we draw on this emotional experience as well as our professional expertise in order to forge new partnerships and make them work.   A very successful piece of work which I carried out recently used music as a metaphor for organisational change. (*see position paper – All that jazz*). The 12 month follow up review is still being carried out but what this project appeared to confirm is that organisational change can only be brought about through capturing people's hearts and minds *and* that people work better and harder, are more loyal and committed if they can be wholly themselves – what they bring as individual people to their role within the organisation.

My own experience of working with strategic partnerships, alliances and collaborations over many years has demonstrated that individuals report that partnerships encouraged them to "think more broadly" and "extend their knowledge" particularly of other organisations cultures.   They also revealed considerable ambivalence about the weakness of partnerships which can become exclusive, elitist and self interested with tensions between accountability to the public and the self interests of different partners. Partnership does slow down decision making requiring leaders to understand that partnership requires a consensual culture of peer respect and not a room full of individual charismatic mavericks.

Tensions and resolutions

Inevitably there are tensions between stakeholders. For example, partnerships established for particular non capital purposes to prevent, improve or develop an

aspect of society eg reducing obesity, creating jobs, regenerating run down localities - typically have multiple stakeholders, all of whose interests have to be taken into account. As a result, there are considerable cultural differences within such partnerships between stakeholders and a delicate balance of interest and motivation. The balance can easily be disrupted with damaging consequences. Many of these partnerships also have networks of provision operating in complex inter agency environments. Smaller organisations may rely on larger organisations for assistance and, together, they may all work to provide a network of linked services which would not be otherwise possible.

The terms "partnership" and "network" are often used in imprecise ways or are seen as interchangeable. (McCabe et al 1997) One of the most important differences between them is the formal relationship between organisations involved in a partnership manifested by the establishment of a board or company. Networks, on the other hand, rely on relationships which have indistinct boundaries and fluid memberships and operate on the basis of shared interests. Networks and partnerships coexist and networks are often formalised into partnership bodies. What is clear is that managing the complexities of these relationships on a day to day basis is very complex and demanding and this is both **core business and periphera**l to the aims and purposes for which the partnership was established.

Strengths & weaknesses

In networks rather than partnerships, there is typically a wide spread of activity with a flat structure giving managers a very broad span and staff taking on a wide range of tasks. Roles may appear unclear or ambiguous which can reflect low staffing levels or funding structures requiring core functions to be spread among project funded staff. It may also reflect the complexity of relationships between unpaid management committees and paid staff.

There is wide variation in practice according to origins and dominant constituencies. Staff recruited from other backgrounds such as the private sector typically comment on the lack of systems and clear responsibilities. There can also be a reliance on trust and a reluctance to address issues of authority. Alternatively, there are many examples of centralised organisations, structured along hierarchical lines, dominated by a charismatic individual adopting a decentralised model but with strategy, budget and standards firmly dictated from the centre.

One of the strengths often attributed to partnerships specifically created to tackle issues across a range of organisations and structures is seen as innovation. This is felt to be the result of having the opportunity of taking a new and creative approach to intractable problems. Whilst this may be the case, it is more often true that such partnerships import tried and tested ideas and initiatives which may be new to that locality but are not new in concept.

The 2011 Model

What we are seeing now in 2011 is an emerging maturity to business relationships. The recession, the organisational and partnership experiences of the last decade, the

excitement about the boundless potential of electronic communication together with the downside of round the clock data, spam, hacking, viruses etc have seemingly led to an increasing reflection on fundamental values.   Across the UK (with the possible exception of the banks) companies are routinely considering corporate social responsibility, climate change, efficiency savings and acknowledging that they way to increased success and profitability is not just the bottom line but the fact that their staff are human beings who long to be given responsibility and to see greater synergy between their working life and their personal life. Sahar Hashemi author of "Switched On" writing in "Director Magazine March 2011 says organisations that will be able to retain talent in future will be those that truly leave behind the presenteeism mentality and empower employees to align their personalities with their work. My own view is that some of this becomes very apparent when the cultures of different organisation clash around the table and people understand the need to develop their own partnership culture. This can present them with the need to examine their own fundamental attitude to work.

Conclusion

The development of a partnership follows a process. It can be helpful to understand this process before beginning.   Most partnerships go through life cycle stages. These are well documented already and include such stages as initiation - development - consolidation - maturity - review & evaluation - exit strategy and or rebirth. The cyclical nature of this process allows for learning from mistakes and for consistent review and refocus.   If a partnership bears this in mind and does not expect to get it all right first time, it can usually become a much healthier place for relationships to flourish and for great outcomes to be achieved.   Partnership has become an accepted part of working life.   Partnership has its strengths and weaknesses.   An understanding of those can help us to improve our individual businesses. Our experience of working in partnership has helped us to understand what is important to us at work.

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