

Bridging the

David Archer and Alex Cameron reveal how we can work together constructively



Partnering is a fact of life for many engineering managers these days. Partnership working is demanded from clients, consultants and contractors, and within large organisations the language of collaboration is becoming the norm. But what does partnership really mean and how can these often-problematic relationships be sustained? A new approach is giving partners a way of looking at and solving problems that have been little understood – or even acknowledged.

PARTNERSHIP – A DEVALUED TERM?

Almost any new large project demands partnering; in the construction and operation of our hospitals, airports, schools and factories, control is no longer in the hands of any one party. But increasingly there is cynicism about the concept of partnership – and problems of delivery on the ground. Projects are prey to miscommunication, misunderstandings, and missed deadlines. It's difficult to get consensus on the issues, never mind the best way of tackling them. So what's going on here? What can people do who have to work with other disciplines or organisations to deliver joint success?

As described previously ('The Myths of Teamworking', *Engineering Management*, Oct/Nov 2004), partnerships sit on a spectrum of collaboration that runs from purely transactional contract-bound relationships at one end, to the almost symbiotic relationship of a permanent team at the other (see fig 1). The skills and techniques needed to manage a partnership are different to those needed to pull together a team of individuals or manage a sub-contractor.



partnership divide

As fig 1 shows, partnerships are complex relationships. Managers who are in partnership need to focus both on managing individuals and on getting the contract right with an understanding of their partners' culture and how to best work with it to achieve mutually beneficial results.

Each organisation will have different cultures, systems and behaviours, and will bring its own assumptions to the partnership. Successful partnering isn't about being alike (or even liking each other), but it is about being prepared to understand and work with these differences.

CHARACTERISING CULTURE

The first step towards transcending differences within partnerships is often to introduce some quantifiable measure of partnering performance so that all parties can see how the others perceive the strengths and weaknesses of the partnership. A number of survey tools exist to analyse different perspectives of a partnership.

In his pioneering book 'The Character of Organisations', William Bridges defines 16 archetypal organisational characters based on definitions of their typical ways of working, using the same language as the popular Myers Briggs personality indicator (MBTI). This work has now been extended to look specifically at the nature of the contribution that different organisational cultures are likely to make to a partnership – and their potential blind spots. By offering a concise way of describing differences in

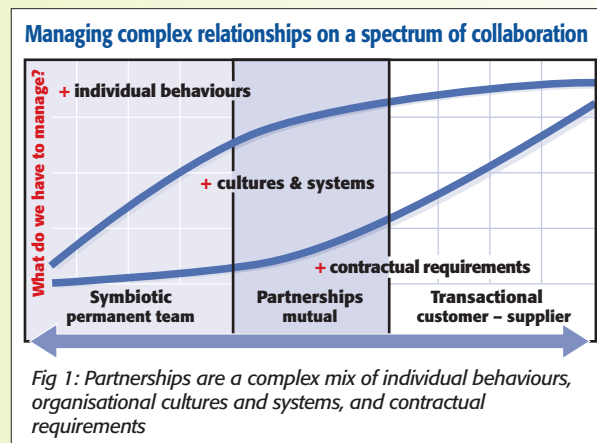
culture you can turn the cross-organisational flashpoints or failures in a partnership into opportunities for gaining clarity, understanding and a way forward.

To understand more about how tools like these work, we'll use a case study of partnership between three very different organisations.

A large IT and engineering project management consultancy (let's call them Aardvark) is responsible for delivering a major infrastructure project to a Government department as part of a long-term partnership contract. A key component of the project is the design and integration of some innovative touch-screen technology which is being supplied by a small high-tech start-up company (let's call them Zenith).

THE PROBLEM

Aardvark's project manager has been having problems. A major deadline has been missed for the delivery of the pilot system and senior officials in the Department are starting to call Aardvark's project management capability into question. Aardvark thinks the real cause of the problem lies somewhere between the Department being late in →





The Department (organisational type ESTP)

What we're like:

- ◆ We want to take charge of the partnership in time-critical situations
- ◆ We are good at identifying ways of addressing urgent issues that are blocking progress
- ◆ We are very single-minded in achieving the task
- ◆ Our communication style is very task-focused and can appear harsh

When you partner with us:

- ◆ Find ways of engaging us in longer term planning work – it doesn't come naturally
- ◆ Communicate concisely and stick to the point
- ◆ Expect us to want to get involved in the details of your work for the partnership
- ◆ Expect us to surprise you with changes of direction when political or other external forces dictate it

Aardvark (organisational type ISTJ)

What we're like:

- ◆ We focus on implementation and want the partnership to deliver tangible results
- ◆ We are good at bringing the necessary governance and formality to a partnership
- ◆ We will ensure that the partnership is planned and avoids getting deflected
- ◆ We will follow the agreed rules and procedures of the partnership and expect others to do the same

When you partner with us:

- ◆ Give us time to digest new ideas and expect us to come back with an analysis of implementation challenges
- ◆ Set clear rules and boundaries about what we each expect of each other
- ◆ If you make a commitment to us you will be expected to deliver it completely
- ◆ Be precise in your communications and provide evidence of your opinions

Zenith (organisational type INFP)

What we're like:

- ◆ We are passionate about the aims of this partnership and we see it as a long term relationship, not a contract
- ◆ We can be very flexible in the way we work – as long as we believe this takes us all towards our shared goals
- ◆ We will happily share our knowledge and expertise with our partners
- ◆ We hate bureaucracy and can rebel against it at times

When you partner with us:

- ◆ Give us the freedom to do what we do best
- ◆ Expect us to question the values and beliefs of our partners – they matter to us
- ◆ Spend some more time socially together – a partnership is not all about work
- ◆ Don't try to tie us down to specific processes too early

Table 1: The Organisational Partnering Indicator analyses and describes each partner's organisational culture and the contribution they want to make to the partnership. (ESTP – Extravert Sensing Thinking Perceiving; ISTJ – Introvert Sensing Thinking Judging; INFP – Introvert Intuitive Feeling Perceiving)

signing off the details of pilot specification and Zenith making last-minute changes to the software – which looked fabulous but didn't work reliably.

Aardvark is caught in the middle. On the face of it, project team meetings are well-received and decisions appear to get made. But then when the individuals go back into their own organisation, decisions get reversed and ideas blocked. All three partners say they are fully committed to the success of the project and are working hard to ensure it will work; they've even been on an away-day to build a common vision and objectives as a team.

The Aardvark project manager calls a meeting and the three partners list the problems that they see. In summary these are:

- lack of clarity about business requirements;
- key decision-making points being missed;
- too much time being wasted writing and reviewing detailed statements of requirements which is using significant project resource;
- people say one thing in a meeting and then go away and do something else;
- the right people aren't consulted at the right time;
- losing sight of the original vision;
- no evidence of precisely how the pilot system is going to work.

While the impact of these problems is clear in terms of the missed delivery deadline, the reasons behind them seem confused and even contradictory. And if they are not resolved, the partners can see they will soon slip into a blame culture where everyone, apart from the lawyers, will lose.

THE SOLUTION

Aardvark decides it needs to get some more specific data on how each organisation views the partnership and their potential contribution to it. Using the Partnering Performance Indicator (PPI), they carry out an analysis to identify the differences between the partners' perceptions.

The results are shown in fig 2. It's clear that the three partners each have a different picture of how the partnership matches up to their expectations. Aardvark wants much clearer communications, decision-making processes and defined accountabilities than they currently see, whereas Zenith and the Department seem more prepared to go with the flow. But the mismatch in perceptions of the alignment of objectives is a major concern for all, as is the view that no-one thinks the ways of working in the partnership are well adapted to meet the needs of all concerned.

The areas to focus on first to help the partnership develop are becoming a little clearer. Aardvark decides to use the next partnership workshop to build a shared understanding of these issues. To do this they bring in another tool, the Organisational Partnering Indicator. This analyses and describes each partner's organisational

- 1 Alignment of objectives – does each party believe its is working to aligned goals?
- 2 Effectiveness of communications – are meetings and communications focused on the right issues and is the information believable?
- 3 Clarity of decision making – is the process clear to all and are the right people involved?
- 4 Clarity of accountabilities – does everyone understand who is accountable for what?
- 5 Access to skills – are all partners getting people with the right skills in the right place to manage the partnership, or are skill gaps being ignored?
- 6 Collaborative leadership – do people believe the leaders are acting collaboratively for the good of the partnership?
- 7 Ways of working – do people understand the differences in culture across the partnership and are they willing to adapt their ways of working to suit others?

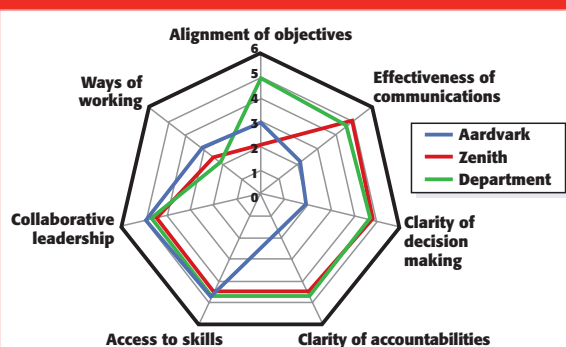


Fig 2: By measuring perceptions of a partnership in seven key domains, the individuals and organisations involved can identify differences in order to address the gaps

culture and the contribution they want to make to the partnership (in much the same way as a personality profiling tool describes the character of an individual). The output of this analysis gives each partner the chance to feed back to their colleagues some vital data about how they want to be treated and what will help to build trust between them. The results can be seen in Table 1.

From this workshop the leaders of each organisation start to see the other partners in a new light and understand that they all came to the partnership with their own cultural baggage that can't be ignored. It becomes obvious that getting agreement around the project team table is not in itself enough. People need to go back and influence their own organisations and to do this they need their partners' help. Following the meeting, all three

Dos and don'ts for partnerships

- Don't try and make your partners into your own likeness. It won't work and will waste time and resources.
- Focus on the points you need to work seamlessly, and forget about the rest.
- Recognise that partners bring different cultures, systems and processes that will influence behaviour and approaches.
- Don't assume that if problems aren't surfacing then all is well. A lack of conflict can indicate that differences aren't being addressed.
- Create and articulate a framework for partnership, which addresses the points where you are interdependent and identifies the processes, behaviours and governance that are needed at those points.
- Be prepared to invest resource and energy on an ongoing basis. Every partnership takes work.

partners agree a set of changes to partnership processes, behaviours and governance.

As a result of using the analysis tools, Aardvark's project manager can predict problems and put risk-management strategies in place. He also now understands how to present information in a way that helps get decisions made. Inefficiencies can be ironed out – planning is done earlier to ensure that all three organisations can get what they need from the process. They agree to hold pathfinder meetings where the Department can talk about a range of possible future requirements without having to commit anything to paper. Zenith can respond to these with creative ideas of its own, while Aardvark takes note of the possible implications for its core infrastructure.

There is a long way to go. But now each partnership meeting and area of conflict helps to build knowledge of the different cultures of the partners and how best to work with it to deliver an effective result. They agree to repeat the PPI in three months to assess progress.

TOWARDS A NEW PARTNERSHIP AGENDA

Engineers are often faced with the problem of delivering services in partnership with people from different organisations who bring with them very different assumptions about how to get things done. Here the old engineering adage of 'Being right doesn't count' still rings true. Unless you can take you partners with you, and take on board their views yourself, you won't achieve lasting success.

The tools described are part of a body of emerging knowledge about what makes partnerships work. The expectation of partnerships as the mechanism for renewing our national infrastructure is enormous; but the risk of failure is high unless we create a debate about how to understand their dynamics and exploit them effectively. ■

The authors founded Socia, an organisation which advises executives in public and private organisations on the governance, processes and behaviours that support effective partnering: www.socia.co.uk