

## What to do if a partner won't collaborate

# it's nothing personal...

Being in partnership can be threatening to individuals and groups. And there are all sorts of ways in which they can undermine a partnership they don't agree with. The result can be conflict and confusion.

It can seem almost impossible to find a way through the complexities of personal issues and strong feelings. But there are strategies available. And a lot of the time, it comes down to de-personalising some very personal-looking situations.

### Why the breakdown?

There are, of course, any number of symptoms of breakdown in partnership. Decisions may be made and then reversed. Partners might be saying one thing and then doing another. Or leaders might contradict each other in what they say or do. All these serve to hamper progress and waste resource.

What's really going on when things like that happen? We think they can all be traced back to one or more problems with leadership.

- **Reluctant leadership.** A leader might disagree with the terms or the timescales of the contract. They might have joined before the contract was signed, and be predisposed to its failure. Or they might fundamentally disagree with the partnership – either on a philosophical or practical basis.
- **Controlling leadership.** A leader might have difficulty letting go of control so that the partnership itself can take over. This is often routed in a reliance on traditional command-and-control.
- **Weak leadership.** While the leaders may think the partnership is a great idea, operational staff might rebel and undermine the partnership because it makes life more complicated, demands new skills, or because it puts constraints on what they can do.

In a world where the blame culture is alive and well, fault lines will show up and loose cannons can be dangerous and costly. So what can partners practically do in these situations?

## Recruitment that takes account

If the leader who has inherited a partnership has reservations about it, this carries huge risk. They are in a position to direct their organisation to take an adversarial, transactional approach – and to sabotage or undermine the partnership.

If possible, make sure you've recruited key players before entering into a demanding partnership agreement. And if a senior individual is recruited after the partnership was agreed, this is significant and their recruitment must take account of it.

## Honesty

If the current leader is prepared to make the partnership work despite personal reservations, then there can be resolution. What this boils down to is an honest conversation, with colleagues being able to ask questions like, 'What would make a difference for you?', 'What can we do to allay your doubts?'. This sounds difficult – yet we've got experience of those conversations being the gateway to real progress.

But beyond dialogue with colleagues, there are other important structures for overcoming the barriers of reluctant or controlling leadership in any of the partnering organisations.

## Partnering framework

If a leader is having trouble letting go, or is uncommitted to the partnership for any reason, a partnering framework will need to be put in place very quickly. This will define the behaviours expected within the partnership, its governance and the processes needed to create a properly integrated environment. Be warned that if a leader has his or her own agenda – then other parties might start to feel excluded, or in conflict, very early on.

The partners will need to formalise communication and decision-making processes and ensure that all partners are aligned to these. To manage problems at the highest levels, having the right escalation procedures in place at the right time can serve to isolate a controlling leader.

What's important is to depersonalise the issues through the governance structures of the partnership. This can be counter-intuitive for the individual leader – and can seem to threaten their standing in the organisation.

## Expert mediation

On the roadmap to partnership, there is a decision point – to partner or not to partner. The commercial reasons for partnering may be compelling and necessitate very different organisations coming together.

But if the clash of values is on the table to start with, if the differences are truly recognised, organisations can function effectively as partners while remaining very different. As we've explored in previous issues of *Comment*, this is not about expecting partners to be in each other's likeness. There may be personality-driven problems and conflict may arise. That's why there needs to be expert mediation alongside a strong partnering framework.

## Collaborative leadership

If operational staff and managers aren't on board within a partnership, this tends to be a symptom of poor leadership at some level. If leaders don't build relationships and create visibility for other partnering organisations, then staff will fill the vacuum with myths or caricatures of what the other organisation is like.

At the same time, if there is no dissent or discussion at an operational level, this can be a sign that new behaviours have not been managed or defined across organisational boundaries.

Such lack of leadership can seriously undermine the partnership by the back door. In these cases, a better understanding of collaborative leadership is needed. We'll look in more detail at how collaborative leadership can happen in the next issue of *Comment*.

## Evolution

While the partnering framework needs to be in place early on, it's important to recognise that building the partnership will be an evolutionary process. It is about gaining agreement and making changes along the way – and that will take time.

All of these situations can seem intractable – and the problems can be time-consuming and complex. But it *is* possible to work through the issues by co-creating a proper partnering framework, by facilitating discussions between partners, and by developing a new style of collaborative leadership.

In truth, the long road to effective partnering is the only road – because there are rarely alternatives.

After all, the 'nuclear option' for most organisations is – in reality – no option at all.

### How you know you've got a problem

Any one of the following can be a symptom of problems in leadership by one or more partner:

- ✓ decisions are reversed or regularly revised
- ✓ key people aren't consulted or involved in decision making
- ✓ leaders contradict each other
- ✓ people in the partnership say one thing and do another.

## Your Comment

If you'd like to add your own Comment to any of our thoughts on problems with collaboration, we'd be delighted to hear from you. You can get in touch at [info@socia.co.uk](mailto:info@socia.co.uk) and, with your approval, we can publish your Comment on [www.socia.co.uk](http://www.socia.co.uk).

**Socia advises executives in public and private organisations on effective partnering. This is one in a series of *Comments* looking at real partnering issues. Each *Comment* gives insights into how partnerships work, plus practical guidance and ideas. To subscribe to *Comment* or to talk further about any of the issues raised, phone Alex Cameron or David Archer on 0870 787 6202 or email [info@socia.co.uk](mailto:info@socia.co.uk).**