

## Points of interdependence

# you don't need to wear different shirts

Not surprisingly, it's rarely acknowledged that partnership can be about learning how to work with organisations that frustrate, upset or irritate you. Your partner may want to do things that run counter to your own processes; or they may have expectations that don't at all match yours. In these circumstances it's easy to get disillusioned with an organisation that's so different to your own.

The reality you need to face is that you're not going to be able to change them. In fact, you don't even have to like them. Just identify where you need to interface successfully – and make those interfaces work for all parties.

## Dual citizens

Complexities in partnerships often arise because each partner has divided loyalties or, as Charles Handy puts it, 'dual citizenship'. They feel loyal to their own organisation as well as to the partnership.

Most of us are dual citizens in one way or another. In sport, for example, an English golfer may think of himself as British or European depending on which competition he's playing in. But in corporate life we don't get to wear different shirts, and things aren't nearly as straightforward.

While dual citizenship is a fact of life, do we actually feel happier being part of one tribe? This may go some way to explaining why people often use team-working as a model for their inter-organisational relationships - it's more comfortable. Yet in reality there may well be differences in culture, values, working styles and personalities. There will also be different processes, systems and hierarchies. Instead of hiding these differences, good partners can be open enough to understand, acknowledge and work with them.

## Managing complex relationships on a spectrum of collaboration



Partnerships are a complex mix of individual behaviours, organisational cultures and systems, and contractual requirements.

### Balance of power

The way a partnership is really functioning will show up in how the power is distributed. In a transactional customer/supplier relationship, the power passes from the customer (who has the demand power) to the supplier (who has the delivery power). In a team the power is shared between the members.

In a partnership, the power can reside in all kinds of different ways - in proportion to equity in a joint venture, in proportion to the sizes of the partner organisations, or differently between public and private sector companies.

In truth, the distribution of power should reflect what is needed to meet the aims of the partnership. Perhaps real joint power resides in the *space in between* partners - that is, the partnership itself.

### Points of interdependence

But how do partnerships go about addressing the issues of difference and power in their relationships?

We think the first step is to identify the points where not acting seamlessly would impact the success of the partnership. We call these *points of interdependence* - the touch points where partners must work together really effectively if they're to meet their shared goals.

For example, in a cross-organisational product development team, marketers, technicians and operational managers will come together at key milestones to make a joint proposal for the next stage of development funding. At these points any hidden agendas or differences in communication or decision-making style could easily undermine or delay the whole project.

Mapping out the points of interdependence helps to decide where to focus management time and effort - and where, just as importantly, to let partners do their own thing.

If you use the collaboration spectrum (described in Issue 1 of this series), which moves from symbiotic through to transactional types of relationships, it's worth noting that the nearer you are to a symbiotic relationship, the more points of interdependence you'll have.

## Getting the measure

The next step is to identify the differences that exist between partners at the points of interdependence. Having a conversation about difference can be challenging - especially if the partnership is already well established. It's important that it's done in a non-threatening and constructive way.

This process might involve looking at:

1. **differences** between each organisation's culture and ways of working  
*This can be done using the Organisational Partnering Indicator\*, which describes the likely approaches of different types of organisation to partnering situations, in order to address the challenges of working productively together in partnership.*
2. **differences** in behaviours and the personalities of influential individuals  
*This can be done using the partnership profiles for the Myers Briggs Indicator\*, which identify the likely approaches of individuals to partnership situations so that partnerships can be developed at an individual behavioural level*
3. **accountabilities**, expectations of performance and the boundaries of authority.  
*This can be done using the Partnership Performance Index\*, which enables individuals and organisations to identify areas of strengths and weakness and to compare their assessment with those of other partners.*

\*available at [www.socia.co.uk/tools](http://www.socia.co.uk/tools)

Having identified their points of interdependence, together with their different styles and ways of working, the partnership has data for developing the partnership at an individual and organisational level. At Socia, we help our clients put together what we call a partnering framework for closing the gaps between them at these points.

## Creating a partnering framework

A partnering framework will include:

- **governance** – effective and appropriate structures for monitoring and managing the relationships
- **processes** – compatible and efficient processes for operating within the partnership
- **behaviours** – how everyone involved needs to act within the partnership.

With a clear framework, partners - both organisations and individuals - can work successfully as dual citizens. We'll look in more detail in a future *Comment* at how partners can create an effective partnering framework.

## Your Comment

If you'd like to add your own Comment to any of our thoughts about points of interdependence, 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).

## Further reading

*The Age of Paradox*, Charles Handy, Harvard Business School Press, 1995.

More on Socia tools is available at [www.socia.co.uk/tools](http://www.socia.co.uk/tools).

*You can download a copy of the diagram we used in this Comment at [www.socia.co.uk/managing-complexity](http://www.socia.co.uk/managing-complexity)*