

Knowledge in Action – Issue 34

Developing partnerships for change

On their own, it's difficult for individuals or even teams to effect organisational change. They need help – and help in the form of others, working to the same broad objective, albeit perhaps for different reasons and to further their own agendas. But how best to create those partnerships, and locate the right people to partner with?

Action Research by members of the Henley Forum explored these questions, developing a set of practical tools and check lists. The result: a body of actionable, practical guidance that will be of value to anyone wanting to shape their organisation's future.



Creating change in organisations is complex – and generally too complex for any one person, or any one person’s team, to achieve by themselves. Therefore, as individuals working within organisations wanting to make change happen, each of us has to develop successful internal partnerships with other individuals in other teams, because we simply can’t do it alone.

TIP
Start with people you know and already have a working relationship with. Then draw others in through those contacts.

Joining forces

The project’s goal was straightforward. Given the importance of building successful internal change partnerships, what principles of good practice could be identified for selecting potential partners and operating co-operatively with them across relationship and organisational boundaries?

But which people should we partner with? And how best to identify them, and create those partnerships? Such questions are vital, because successful change partnerships are about much more than simple strength in numbers.

Clearly, three questions were critical:

- What human factors support internal partnership effectiveness?
- What systems and processes help internal change partnerships to work well?
- What organisational factors shape what internal change partnerships can do?

Instead, successful internal change partnerships build bridges of understanding and commitment between individuals, between teams, and between organisational silos – so that creating change becomes a joint venture, and a burden shared across multiple individuals. But achieving that is no easy task.

Practical tool #1: Defining your focus for action

Networks, communities and collaborative ways of working all play a vital role in enhancing long-term organisational potential.

TIP
Write down what you want to achieve. You may revise it as you work with your partners, to develop shared or more aligned goals for your work.

As an Action Research project, embracing real-life individuals working within real-life organisations, Henley Forum researchers explored the dynamics of how successful internal change partnerships could be built. Ten people from nine organisations took part in the research between June and December 2015, working on real and important issues related to knowledge and organisational learning activities in their own organisations, in order to develop research insights with practical value.

But partnerships are more focused and selective. As individuals, we choose other individuals – or they choose us – and develop partnerships in order to achieve specific goals.

TIP
Take a stealth approach – just get on with it and initiate the conversations.

The result: the development of a number of practical tools, check lists, diagnostic questions, and tips – which together build into a body of guidance that will be of value to anyone wanting to instigate change within their organisation.

So, the first thing to do is to define a focus. What is to be achieved? How is it to be achieved? And where – and how – could partnerships provide assistance beyond what is already to hand, in individuals’ immediate teams?

Remember, partnering is not just a ‘nice to have’: everyone enters into partnerships (and chooses to remain in them) for a reason. So it’s important to be clear about what those reasons are.

“From speaking to other people, you get different knowledge and different experiences, and that’s been really, really good.”



Use the questions below to help you to define your own focus for action.

1. What is the difference that you want to make?
2. What changes will be needed to help you make that difference?
3. What partnerships do you have in place beyond your immediate team that could help you?
4. Which of those partnerships are working well in helping you to effect those changes?
5. Which partnerships could be energised further to help you effect those changes?
6. What other partners might you need to help you effect those changes?

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Co-ordinated by Dr Sharon Varney of Henley Business School, the Action Research programme described here involved Henley Forum members drawn from Citizens Advice, the Department of Energy & Climate Change, the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, the Financial Conduct Authority, Lloyds Banking Group, Ofsted, Surrey County Council, and United Utilities.

Use this framework to develop partnerships across internal boundaries in your organisation.

Finding the right partners

Who are the right people to partner with?

Who can help you to find these people?

What existing relationships can you build on?

Forming productive working relationships

How can you build understanding of each others' perspectives and goals?

How can you develop trust between partners?

Performing to meet goals

How will you clarify mutual aims and objectives – which may not be shared – and jointly develop an action plan to realise (multiple) delivery goals?

How will you maintain pace and momentum?

Birkinshaw, J, Bessant, J and Delbridge, R (2007) 'Finding, Forming, and Performing: Creating networks for discontinuous innovation'. California Management Review, 49 (3): 67-84.

“The meetings with partners helped in terms of learning what others are doing. Hearing about [other people’s] struggles to get things going is re-energising.”

Practical tool #2: A framework for developing partnerships

Existing research suggested a simple framework as a means of structuring thinking about the development of successful internal change partnerships. What we learned from applying this research in practice is that developing successful internal change partnerships can be likened to navigating a maze – albeit a maze that is continuously evolving.

- Finding the right partners is about creating a line of sight through the maze, so as to be able to see where sources of assistance and common shared interests might lie.

TIP

Face-to-face communication promotes understanding as people can ask questions and check understanding instantly – with no delay.

- Forming productive working relationships is about working together to clarify areas of mutual benefit and common purpose, in order to create a bridge across internal boundaries. Here, we learned that face-to-face communication trumps everything.

TIP

Show that you're not muscling in on their project, but just trying to find the commonalities between how you and them work.

12 top tips for developing successful internal change partnerships

1. Begin with a positive attitude – it can be catching – and aim to get others into the same positive state of mind.
2. Develop clarity about who you need to partner with, even though this takes time and effort.
3. Make the most of existing connections. Reach out to them first and build out from there.
4. Keep talking – ideally in person – in order to create clarity. Ask questions to draw out tacit understanding.
5. Get yourself a good backer: someone that people tend to trust already.
6. If you want to change your world, get started and accept the imperfections. Don't wait for things to settle – because they rarely will.
7. Your attitude matters. Become an 'attractor', because of your energy, openness, passion and honesty. Use this to build trust and a shared vision with partners (although without imposing your vision).
8. Timing matters, so choose yours. Take the time to do things properly.
9. Say hello face-to-face, which builds social capital and trust.
10. Develop shared objectives, or at least try to get your differing objectives on the same page.
11. Think about 'what's in it for me?' Partners all want a share of the cake.
12. And last, but not least: Model the Way. Lead by example to show others in your organisation how to develop successful internal partnerships.

- Performing to meet goals is about using opportunities as they arise, based on that network of partners, and navigating the maze together, making the most of the diverse perspectives and opportunities that each partner can potentially bring.

TIP
The finding, forming, and performing process is not a simple, linear progression. Developing successful internal partnerships involves a complex negotiation around those elements. Sometimes, in order to move forwards, it's necessary to first go back and renegotiate.

Practical tool #3: A matrix for reflection

Developing successful internal partnerships for change is rather like navigating a maze that keeps evolving.

There is a valuable prize attached to success, but obstacles along the way can make that navigation treacherous. Moreover, as with a maze, individuals have only a limited view of what's going on.

“The value was in having an iterative, reflective process to follow. It made me realise that it wasn't necessary to try to do everything in a ‘big bang.’”



	Finding the right partners	Forming productive working relationships	Performing to meet goals
What works?			
What is it about the individuals that made that possible?			
What is it about the organisational context that made this possible?			
What is it about the systems and processes that made that possible?			
What are the barriers?			
What is it about the individuals that made that difficult?			
What is it about the organisational context that made that difficult?			
What is it about the systems and processes that made that difficult?			
And what helped you to overcome the barriers?			

Developing different perspectives on that complex picture can facilitate navigation by offering insights into ‘dead ends’ and unproductive detours, and by providing keys to unlock other parts of the maze.

TIP
Keeping people informed is critical at the performing stage. Keep wider stakeholders and senior managers informed of progress.

But how to obtain those different perspectives? A matrix of self-diagnostic questions, based on this framework of finding, forming and performing can help. Completed periodically – every two to three months, say – and ideally in collaboration with individuals with whom successful (or less successful) internal change partnerships exist, it can provide valuable insights into what works – and what doesn't.

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To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Marina Hart +44 (0) 1491 418723.

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