

The attitudes of the Broker of a Transforming Partnership: What does it take to broker a partnership on climate change, circular economy and other system changes?

Brokering a transforming partnership is a special kind of trade. Therefore, being a broker of a transforming partnership requires a specific set of personal attitudes. These attitudes differ from the attitudes necessary to broker a conventional partnership. A certain personality may even offer an advantage to brokering transforming partnerships.

What is a transforming partnership?

Which specific attitudes does a broker need to be an effective broker of a transforming partnership? In order to answer that, we must first define what a transforming partnership is.¹

The challenging problems of our time, such as climate change, resource scarcity, unequal distribution of wealth and migration, are all problems of a complex, boundary- and sector crossing nature. Therefore they require a variety of - partly non-usual - actors to work together and to come up with solutions for these challenges. The necessary solutions are more than adaptations of the current way of working. The solutions require a system change, in respect to the way we cooperate, the way we deal with economics and welfare, the way we use resources and the way we respect each other.

A transforming partnership is a partnership that is intentionally created to challenge and change mainstream systems and mind-set². The word transforming is synonym to the word transformational. Both adjectives can be used to describe a multi-stakeholder partnership that is suited for and intended towards system innovation, finding ground-breaking solutions for complex problems and dilemma's and aimed at societal change.

Skills and personal traits

The brokering guidebook³ describes the set of skills and qualities that each partnership broker must possess. Among those attitudes are: being an excellent communicator, observe how people are feeling, responding and relating to each other, think clearly and take new ideas on board rapidly, manage complex situations without being

dictatorial, make decisions about how to proceed in the light of what happens and provide focus.

Social skills are the skills of the future. They are a necessity for any kind of professional role in the future. As stated in the Future of Jobs Report⁴ social skills— such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and teaching others—will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills. It goes without saying that this is even more true for partnership brokers.

In his article 'Are introverts better at partnership brokering?' Brouwer takes it to the next level, from skills to the subject of personality traits, as he discusses the differences between introvert and extrovert brokers⁵. He concludes that depending on the situation in the partnership, the specific characteristics of either an extrovert or introvert may be appropriate to use. Brokers who are flexible enough to use the elements of both characteristics, will be the most effective.

What is the difference between a skill and a personality trait or characteristic? A skill is an ability to do an activity or task well, which can be trained and improved by practice. A personality trait refers to enduring personal characteristics that are revealed in a particular pattern of behavior in a variety of situations. Although current psychology suggests that personality traits can also be changed, mostly through reflection and therapy, changing personality traits is seen as a complicated and long-term process.

To help understand the difference between skills and traits one could say that being introvert is a personality trait, while being patient is more of a skill. However, this distinction is not hard science.

¹ For an in-depth answer to what a Transforming Partnership is, please read my article on The Essence of Transforming Partnerships.

² Definition by the Partnership Brokers Association, Ros Tennyson.

³ <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/w/resources/toolbook-series/the-brokering-guidebook/>

⁴ The Future of Jobs, Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, World Economic Forum, 2016

⁵ H. Brouwer, Are introverts better at Partnership Brokering?, 2013, http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/journal/are-introverts-better-at-partnership-brokering/#_ftn5

Therefore the word attitudes is used as a general term to describe skills, qualities and traits. Attitudes can be located somewhere along a continuum between pure skills on the one end and unchangeable personal traits on the other far end.

I will first describe what is distinctive about brokering a transforming partnership and why that is different from brokering a conventional partnership. Secondly, I will provide an overview of the most important attitudes for a broker of a transforming partnership. Finally, I will discuss whether these attitudes can be linked to a certain personality.

What is the difference between brokering a conventional partnership and a transforming partnership?

A transforming partnership is aimed at system innovation and ground-breaking solutions. This entails that when the process starts, there is not yet a clear picture of the outcome. Partners may have a vision and purpose at the beginning, but the process needs to be flexible and open, to be able to adapt to new information and knowledge being developed in the course of the process and due to new partners entering the game. The partnership is about bringing innovation to sectors that are willing to, but maybe not yet completely able to, be innovative and change.

Most of the time the partners of a transforming partnership themselves have no clear picture of the necessary processes and steps to move forward. Frequently, the partners are new to this complex process of change and cooperation for the future. Another handicap is that the partners often experience a back draw from the more traditional forces in their sector and within their own organisations.

This leads to a situation in which the partners of the partnership depend also on the broker for advice and suggestions, both regarding process and content. The broker is partly advisor, partly process-manager. When brokering a transforming partnership, the broker has to frequently introduce new concepts and ideas. The broker therefore also needs own ideas about innovation within the particular sector or field the partnership is dealing with. Since innovation depends on learning, also from other fields and sectors, partners look towards the broker to bring in experience and information about innovation in other areas.

The role of the broker in a transforming partnership has similarities with the role of a transformational leader. In his article on transformational leadership⁶, Paffen defines leadership as 'influencing the behavior of people toward a particular goal'. In leadership the ability to influence people to move in a desired direction is a key concept. This also means that the leader's attitudes and particular skills are vital and that knowledge, conceptual abilities or intelligence are less important.

Three qualities of transformational leaders stand out: 1) Inspirational motivation, the ability to inspire and motivate, 2) Intellectual stimulation, the ability to intellectually stimulate and challenge people and 3) Individualized consideration, the attention to the growth and development of the individual. Paffen describes that a transformational leader knows how to stimulate groups and individuals to develop themselves into leaders. The leader creates a climate of confidence and security for all, a climate of continuous learning and innovation, through a great personal and sincere personal interest and commitment to people⁷. Those qualities are also essential to a broker of a transforming partnership.

There are two main differences between the brokering of a conventional partnership and a transforming partnership. First, the broker of a transforming partnership steers more and secondly, the broker needs to be more innovative, also content-wise, than in a conventional partnership.

Let's shortly elaborate on those two distinctive attitudes of brokering a transforming partnership. First, the role of the broker in a transforming partnership is in its style closer to process-management than in a conventional partnership, simply because the partners themselves are still in the process of discovering their own process. And in order to move forward and prevent the process from taking too long (which is often not advisable because of the limits in finance or the urgency of the dilemma), the broker should take a lead in trying to move the process forward. The difficulty is that often there is not an official mandate for the process-management role and no official authority to ask people to perform tasks. It is all about motivating people into the right direction.

⁶ 'Wat is typerend voor transformationele leiders?' Drs. P. Paffen, Holland/Belgium Management Review, 2011.

⁷ Yukl, G. (2006). Bass, B.M. & R.E. Riggio (2006). Transformational leadership, Second edition. New Jersey, Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, London.

Regarding the second element, the broker continuously needs to encourage others to be creative and innovative and to develop new solutions and other methods. The broker does so by suggesting new options and propositions, also from adjacent sectors and fields. This also is an element of brokering a conventional partnerships, but it is more elementary in a transforming partnership, because innovation and change are the key fundamentals to achieve results in a transforming partnership.

One may argue that the attitudes of suggesting options for innovation and steering the process that are essential to brokering a transforming partnership, should be restrained in a conventional partnership. Because in a conventional partnership the role of the broker is much more of an enabler, using the energy and ideas from the partners, empowering the partners to sit behind the wheel. So, the broker should focus on different attitudes depending on whether it is about brokering a transforming or a conventional partnership.

What specific attitudes are required of the broker of a transforming partnership?

When we answer the question which attitudes are essential for a broker of transforming partnerships, we must realise there is no exhaustive list. Nor should every broker possess all the qualities mentioned.

However, the list below shapes an image of the essential attitudes of a broker of a transforming partnership. These attitudes will guide and help the broker to steer the partnership and to stimulate innovation within the partnership.

How to be an effective broker of transforming partnerships:

Be Innovative

- Feel comfortable to work outside your comfort zone.
- Use innovative tools and methods and develop new processes and tools.
- Be creative, find new and unorthodox ways to broker the process.
- Realize that there is no evidence-based method, be willing to test.
- Attract new essential (non-usual) players.

Be Confident

- Hold space and be strong when needed.
- Be transparent and concrete in your strategies and goals.
- Hold people accountable.

Be Strategic

- Know the vested interests and deal with it.
- Contain risks.
- Focus, both in partners and in goals.

Be Flexible

- Change roles when needed.
- Enjoy the tension between the different partners, the struggle to deal with the different interests, the different cultures⁸.
- Accept that change is the only constant factor.
- Re-evaluate the status quo all the time.
- Adapt smoothly to new circumstances.

Be Reflective

- Sit still and reflect on what is needed, on a regular basis.
- Reflect on your personal style. Learn and adapt.
- Don't act on impulse, but use intuition.
- Have distance towards the partnership brokering process.
- Reflect on the bigger picture: how does this fit within a national or international movement?
- Talk about problems and mistakes in the partnership.

Be Empowering

- Use energy and enthusiasm to motivate the people to take new steps and move the process forward.
- Act with care for people and give space to other people and thoughts.
- Help others to grow.
- Engage the partners.
- Honour the work of participants.
- Be inclusive, but with boundaries when it comes to relevance.

Be Personal

- Explain your actions and strategies.
- Adjust your language and 'intellectuality' to the level of the participants.
- Build an 'experience', use storytelling.
- Be open and vulnerable about your own difficulties and dilemma's.
- Be a psychologist: understand drivers and personalities. Talk about individual gains, needs and conflicts within the partnership.
- Be authentic.
- Build personal relationships with the participants.
- Use compassion.

⁸ See also 'Exploring partnership culture – the partnership broker's role', by Surinder Hundal, Partnership Broker Association, 18 May 2015.

Skill or trait

As discussed, the most important attitudes of the broker of a transforming partnership are steering - with compassion - and being innovative. Furthermore, the broker requires an independent, flexible and curious mind-set and the energy to adopt new knowledge, to create an integral vision on the subject at hand and to carry out a holistic perspective of the future. The broker should not be afraid to enter unknown territory and be a change maker. And the broker must be able to deal with resistance to change.

Some of these attitudes can - easily or less easily - be acquired through training and experience. However, some of these traits may be more fundamental. Curiosity, drive, outside-the-box thinking, perseverance, strongmindedness, presence, being a frontrunner, these are qualities that a person may possess or not. It may well be that the type of personality that naturally possesses these qualities, is more fit to broker a transforming partnership than another personality. The classification introvert versus extrovert is not appropriate, because the described attitudes can be possessed by both extraverts and introverts.

A better classification is that of innovator-shaper versus enabler-coordinator. The necessary attitudes of a broker of a transforming partnership may fit more naturally within the profile of an innovator-shaper personality, than within the profile of an enabler-coordinator personality. In comparison, using a personality model such as DISC⁹, this would indicate that a more yellow-red personality is better fit to broker a transforming partnership than a green-blue personality.

Conclusion

The challenges of our time require partnerships between different actors in society. These partnerships will work on system changes such as climate change, circular economy, new models for the financial sector, global migration, etc. Since the solutions and the process to reach the solutions are often not yet clear at the beginning of the process, flexibility and open-mindedness are necessary. Partners of the partnership depend also on the broker for advice and suggestions. The role of the broker of such a transforming partnership is more active than the role of a broker of conventional partnerships. It has similarities with the role of a transformational leader.

The most marked difference between brokering a conventional or transforming partnership is that the broker of a transforming partnership needs to be more steering and to bring more innovative ideas to the table, also related to the subject matter of the partnership.

These necessary attitudes of a broker of a transforming partnership can be trained by every broker, but may come more naturally to a broker with an innovator-shaper personality profile.

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⁹ <https://discprofile.com/what-is-disc/overview/>