Partnerships 101

Introduction to the partnership cycle

with Kim Aumann

00:00 Introduction

Hi, I'm Kim Aumann and I've been working in partnership with people from my local university for the past 15 years as an external partner, or I often identify myself as a community partner. I work with the charity or third sector, and I think partnership working is great because in my experience, it's meant being able to achieve much more than we could have done on our own.

I think it brings together different knowledges and resources and it sort of taps into different experiences and opinions, out of which come better solutions and new ideas. So I'm a bit of a convert, but I have certainly had some unpleasant experiences. And some of that was my lack of experience and not having enough understanding of universities and how they work, or I didn't know how to ensure the partnership was fair and mutually beneficial. So consequently, it took me a little while to get the hang of things. So if you want to create great partnerships, it's really worth thinking about some of the key elements that can make them sing. And this short video will introduce you to those things.

01:13 The culture divide

Before I get started, I should say right up front that partnering up with people outside of the university requires us to remember the cultural divide that partnership working straddles.Whether you're planning to partner with museums or schools, patient groups, artists, community organisations, or any other partner, you are likely to be straddling very different cultures or different ways of thinking and doing. And while that is amazingly rich and rewarding, it also takes care and attention because it can be easy to misunderstand or unintentionally put your foot in it.

It would be naive to think that it's as simple as meeting up with a new partner and then expecting it to all go smoothly. Partners have different languages, different backgrounds, different knowledges, different ways of working different organisational structures, different protocols, different wealth, and that's before we even start to think about our preconceptions of each other or the impact our positions or status in society might have on us working together.

Which is why it makes so much sense to learn from those who've been before us. A great deal of the research and the consultation on partnership working done to date shows us that the things that are present when partnerships are going well are the very same things that are missing when it's floundering.

02:26 Draw on existing resources

So the good news is that we have a lot of solid information and fabulous resources to draw on. I'm going to use just one of these resources now, called the partnership cycle, to pull out the key elements to good partnership working.

03:00 Communication

The partnership cycle has at its heart communication. Sounds simple, I know, but I think it's a whole skill set that we can underestimate. Working in partnership provides a fantastic opportunity to build and refine our communication skills. I don't just mean getting your message across clearly, but listening well, being curious and inquiring more, navigating differences of opinion, having two-way conversations.

I really doubt that you can do partnership working with external partners if you don't take on board the significance of communication. So making your steps clear, being careful not to assume that the other understands or sees things the same way as you do, checking the things out, making the time to talk, are just key. Interestingly, when you ask people what their best tip for working in partnership might be, they frequently say communicate and communicate again. It's a cornerstone to this type of working.

04:02 The partnership cycle

The partnership cycle divides partnership working into three parts: getting started, working together, and what next. So now I'm just going to introduce these stages and briefly walk you through what's involved.

04:16 Getting started

Getting started is all about scoping your project, finding the right partner or partners and building an early foundation to start your work together. Scoping involves working out what you want to do and why alongside identifying the joint purpose. This is where you might be asking yourself and your partner some important questions, like for example, do I need to work in partnership to do this research or this engagement initiative?

Do I want to have a short-term or a long-term partnership? What do we each want from the collaboration and what do we each bring to it? Of course, if you're doing collaborative research, it's likely to mean you'll be scoping your research together, right from the start. But if you've chosen the focus of your research already, and you're now asking others to engage with it, it will be essential to prioritise communicating the details so that others understand what their role will be.

It always helps to think at this early stage about why your partners might want to work with you. Getting started also means finding your potential partners and knowing how to approach. Who will be best for me to partner with and how will I find them? For example, it could be by asking around in your team or department or speaking to the university's public engagement worker, or maybe it could be about using your other contacts. Perhaps you could tap into the local community network or even do some desk research.

And if you can, it's always brilliant, if you can get someone known to the partner you're seeking out to introduce you. And the other thing to consider is how to introduce yourself. When you go to a meeting or an event to get known, send an email, arrange a call. And what will you say? First impressions can really count.

Once when I was just following this new partnership, my academic partner asked me, so what professional association do you belong to Kim? I'm sure she didn't ask like that, but it put my hackles up a bit because I thought she was playing some upmanship game and, and what difference did it make anyway? But really, she was just starting to get a sense of where we were at and what networks we were part of. It would have been just so much better if she'd asked me that.

And you will want to give some thought at this stage to how you're going to begin building that partnership. How might you get to know each other? What can you do to create some trust at this early stage? For example, in one of my partnerships, before we did any project work or research work together, we just co-delivered a workshop, for parent carers, and in another, we met up for coffee and we just talked about our jobs.

As I said earlier, communication is essential throughout a partnership, but I think it's especially essential in these initial stages, giving some careful consideration to how you communicate is just key to creating the foundations for a strong and a mutually beneficial collaboration. Of course you won't have all the answers to these questions. And sometimes you just have to jump in and give it a go, but you will want to hold onto these things.

07:42 Working together

So now that you have thought about how to get started and found your partner, the second stage of the partnership cycle is the working together stage. This stage is all about what sort of governance or structure you and your partners want for a project. Agreeing the detail for delivering the work, like deciding on the activities. How and who will do what and when and reviewing things as you go along so that you have the chance to keep things mutually beneficial and address any hiccups if things are going a little bit of drift.

It always helps to think about what the best project structure might be for you and for your partner. One structure would definitely not fit all. If you're doing a small short-term piece of work, you're not going to need a contract as heavy-handed as this. You might just need an email agreement, for example. But sorting some type of agreement, however informal, is an opportunity to address equity and power and to distribute any project funding or resources fairly. It clarifies expectations right up front.

You don't want your partners to be saying at the end of the project, "Oh, but I thought we would be covered for our time, not just the expenses." It took me quite a while to learn that the value of getting my organisation written into research funding applications was high because, despite the trust, my partners and I had created, there were times where the university didn't really want to part with too much money.

Successful partnership working clarifies details for delivery. For some partnerships, both partners are involved in all of the stages, but for others partners agreed to only be involved in some aspects. Either way, this is where all partners can be thinking about how the delivery might build capacity and create additional impact.

For example, we took the opportunity in one project to train and support a team of local parents to conduct the research interviews, which meant other parents felt easier about sharing their views and it increases the confidence of the parent interviewers involved.

And when you come to think about reviewing your joint work well, it obviously means checking the progress of the actual project you're doing. It also means touching base about how the partnership is going.

I've been working with a professor for about a year and one day she rang me up and she said, "Kim, do you want to come for a walk?" And I thought, oh, that's a bit weird, it's a bit odd. I was a bit confused. Maybe she wants to be my friend or something, but it was a really clever and very helpful thing to have done because we went for the walk and we had one of those open and non-confrontational, you know, side by side conversations like you have with teenagers in the car, all about how our partnership was going.And it made it so much easier, I suppose, to raise the trickier bits that needed a bit of ironing out.

10:31 What's next?

So then thinking about the cycle as the project has gathered momentum and things are moving along, you want to be sure to think about what next. This stage is likely to be about a mixture of revising, sustaining, and ending.

 These three aspects are often very interlinked and dependent on how you and your partner see the future of the partnership. Revising is about evaluating what went well, not so well, and how you learn from this. It's about identifying and measuring success or the key benefits of your project, for whom. It's also about adapting and updating things as you go along, because if something's going well, obviously you want to make sure you look after that and you maintain it. While if something's not going so well, you want to abandon it or at least try to fix it.

You know, I mentioned that in one research partnership, we trained parents to be the interviewers. Well, what I didn't say was that the first training the university partner delivered was just awful for a whole lot of reasons that were just down to his approach. But as a result, only half of the parents carried on to be interviewers. So we made sure we changed the way we did the second training.

Sustaining is about how your work together has created a legacy and what that legacy is. External partners will definitely want to know that all that effort has been worthwhile and that something will continue after the project has finished. Legacies are varied. Of course, you know, there might be for example, new products like websites, toolkits, academic papers, exhibitions. Or maybe you've built a network of stronger connections. Perhaps the organisation you work with now has new policies, better practices, stronger capacity, or it might be about new understandings or increased skills and knowledge.

At one point, my organisation's board of trustees were querying whether the time spent working with the university was worth it. So it was important that I could refer to some very tangible legacies, some of which were never intended, but came about as a side product or in addition to the research we did together, like one of our workers increased their skills to interrogate the data we kept. Sustaining might also be about continuing the partnership after the project is finished or scaling it up even.

So you will want to think about ways to keep the momentum going. For example, we worked with a university partner on quite a small project evaluating a course we designed. But we so enjoyed working together that we explored other things that we were both interested in and then met a few times to draft a plan for future work.

And then of course there is the ending, which can be an aspect of partnership working that I think gets overlooked. Endings provide an opportunity for everyone to take note of what's been learned and gained and what's worth celebrating. Most partnerships won't last forever and many have a very clear end date. But you don't want to burn your bridges and nor do you want a project to drag on when it's not really achieving anything. So you need a managed end. Sometimes you will want to reset the partnership's direction. And sometimes you want to walk away from it. Endings just help to make the steps clear.

13:53 Putting it all together

And so to recap, if you want to work in partnership, think about how you will get started, the detail of how you work together, and what your partnership will do next. This diagram is a resource that was designed by the NCCPE to help guide the way as we set out to do partnership working. But it's also useful when you're in the thick of a partnership and you want to review it or pick something that is challenging. Of course, the cycle in practice is not always as linear as this diagram might suggest, but all of the aspects within it are worth giving attention. And it's a very helpful framework to order our thinking and build good collaborative working practice. Remember if you're struggling to know where to start or you're already involved and something's going a bit of drift, it can really help to refer to this cycle in its elements and practice is key. So try applying the partnership cycle to your own work.

Perhaps you have a partnership already underway or a partnership you're about to explore. You could use the cycle to help build your confidence in the steps you take or use it to reinvigorate or hold on to that wonderful, energised feeling working with others can bring.

Good luck, everyone, with your partnerships.