

# Building relationships with stakeholders

*Heather Maitland* uncovers the secrets behind successful partnerships

Last year I worked with the Henderson Aplin Partnership to research how venues and visiting companies share audience data. We started out thinking that this was a contentious issue. But we talked to 50 companies and many of them said things like: 'I don't encounter massive problems as we have good relationships with venues who are happy as long as they get something in return.' So what is a good relationship and how can we create them?

This is Siv Vangen and Chris Huxham's specialist area of research. They say that partnerships between organisations are difficult to manage and often don't deliver. They are effective only if the partners continually nurture the collaborative processes, particularly at the beginning and end of the relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Partnerships are about promoting our own agenda while making compromises to accommodate our partners' goals: that is, helping them get something they want in return. This means that partnerships only work if partners have enough in common to keep those compromises to a minimum. Anne Roberts and I looked at 17 partnerships between arts organisations to see what worked. The most successful groups had clearly articulated aims and a clear idea of how they would benefit, individually and collectively.<sup>2</sup>

Agreeing shared aims can be difficult, though. If the partners

already know and trust each other, then a full discussion at an early stage can be productive. If not, then it can emphasise rather than resolve differences.<sup>3</sup> A better option might be to aim for some modest quick wins to build up trust and have the in-depth discussion later. Even so, just to get started you will have to find some common ground, even though this may not be central to the partnership, or find enough consensus for you to agree what to work on first or focus just on your aims that are compatible.

## Building trust

Trust is essential. In the for-profit sector, research shows a clear relationship between high levels of trust and increased sales and profitability.<sup>4</sup>

Blomqvist and Stahle define trust as the expectations we have about our partners' competence, goodwill and behaviour. We need trust because when we make compromises for the good of the partnership, we are putting ourselves in a potentially vulnerable position. We only trust a partner if we believe they have the relevant skills and know-how, are willing to co-operate and be proactive and that they have values that mean they won't behave badly.<sup>5</sup>

What can we do to encourage our partners to trust us? We can improve communication skills; behave reliably; show commitment; be sincere, benevolent and competent; act with integrity; and show we are working

towards reaching project milestones and establishing common goals.<sup>6</sup>

## Structuring the partnership

Trust is not just dependent on individual behaviour. The way that the partnership is set up can help build trust.

The partners need to be clear what the collaboration is for. There needs to be a partnership champion but they must not be allowed to take over the group.<sup>7</sup> Inevitably, some people within the partnership will have more power than others. This may be because the others see them as having more expertise, they are more popular, they have been right several times in the past, they talk the most, they say things that reflect the values of the partnership even if they are wrong, they have more information or their organisations have more resources or status.<sup>8</sup> It's important that the partners deal with this imbalance of power.

Trust is dependent on the workload being shared fairly – and the credit too. This means that the partners need to check their relative levels of commitment and resolve any differences.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers looked at collaborations that operate at different levels within the organisations. They found that it is important everyone feels that they are helping to develop policy and strategy.<sup>10</sup> Relationships between marketing staff can be difficult to sustain if this is not the case and they feel they are just implementing

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decisions made by artistic leaders or chief executives.

**Fast trust**

Huxham and Vangen emphasise that we need to allow time to build up an understanding. What if we don't have that time?

Unfortunately, many researchers

believe that trust results from the accumulation of positive results each time the partners invest in the relationship. It is so socially complex that it is difficult to speed up. In order to build 'fast trust' the partners need to have an early understanding of the foundations of their relationship: purpose, goals, the resources needed

to reach the goals, what they can provide and what they need from their partner. This means they have to put their cards on the table, and that needs excellent interpersonal skills. It also presumes that their organisation as a whole has thought through what it wants from the relationship.<sup>11</sup>

Above all, partners need to be prepared to compromise individual goals for the good of the group – that way they will all win in the long run.

*I belong to one group where, if we want a pizza and we all want to stay together, then the one who doesn't want pizza moans and groans. In Guardians of Doubt we all eat pizza with grace and enjoy it.*<sup>12</sup>

From a member of Guardians of Doubt, a partnership exploring and challenging issues around experimental dance and performance, [www.guardiansofdoubt.org](http://www.guardiansofdoubt.org) ■



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