

Embracing the bitter sweet paradoxes of partnership working

'The task is not to decide between competing objectives, but to bring them together into effective performance on many fronts at the same time'

Lucian J. Hudson – The Enabling State: collaborating for success

Much of partnership working is about addressing apparently conflicting needs and pressures, the paradoxes that lie at the heart of its nature that can make it such a bitter sweet experience for so many of those involved in it.

This article will describe six key paradoxes present within partnership working and identify the skills people need to develop in order to manage them effectively.

Six key paradoxes of partnership working

Six key paradoxes of partnership working are:

1. A partnership must focus on short and long – term issues at the same time.
2. A partnership must be both open and closed.
3. Partners must act both separately and together.
4. Partnerships and partners are both powerful and powerless.
5. A partnership must be both predictable and unpredictable.
6. Partnerships and partners need to be both directive and reflexive.

1. A partnership must focus on short and long – term issues at the same time.

When a partnership is formed it is often in response to some very pressing need that individual organisations alone have not been able to address effectively. As a consequence of this, short – term aims and concerns tend to clamour for attention. It is, however, a partnership's longer-term strategic aims that are most likely to make the real difference in terms of whether or not a partnership is truly effective in its endeavours. Therefore a partnership delays dealing with these longer-term aims at its peril.

Case study 1

When 'Community Links' worked in partnership with others to set up a Social Enterprise Zone in Newham they had many pressing issues that needed to be addressed in order to get local people out of the poverty trap and contributing to the development of their community. They also knew that any advances they made would be very short – lived if not embraced over the longer term by mainstream organisations.

The simple act of inviting someone from a mainstream public organisation (the Inland Revenue) to work with them helped address both short and long term goals. They gained key expertise that helped address short – term issues around dealing with the black economy and encouraging people away from benefits, and they also created a conduit into a key organisation that would help them achieve their long term aim of cementing new ideas and practices into the mainstream.

2. A partnership must be both open and closed

A partnership needs a clearly defined identity. Once it develops this identity it creates a necessary boundary between itself and everything else. This identity not only makes a partnership recognisable, but also contributes to its overall direction and cohesion. Those that are inside a partnership's boundaries can get to know each other and work out an agreed strategy and way of working.

But a partnership also needs to be open, inclusive and transparent. It needs to keep its boundaries porous, encouraging and allowing in new people and ideas that can keep the partnership energised, relevant and trusted.

Case study 2

When the Heathrow Express Rail Link was being built, the Chief Executive knew that he had to build trust and a sense of shared values and direction between existing contractors and suppliers. So he set up regular Suppliers' Club Meetings where all current partners in the venture could get to know each other, be updated about current progress and issues, share their worries and concerns and ask for help where required.

He also knew that due to the length and complexity of the project new partner contractors, suppliers and other various experts would need to be consulted and/or called upon as the work progressed. So he invited potential partners in the project to 'Scouting Meetings' where they were briefed about the project and asked for their thoughts and ideas about what had been achieved so far and where they felt they might be able to contribute in the future. These meetings enabled the project to keep its boundaries porous and 'scout for new talent' that would be of use to it in the future.

3. Partners must act both separately and together

Individuals working within partnerships are riding upon the horns of a dilemma. They are not only separate entities representing the best interests of their organisations or interest groups, but also key components of the partnership mechanism. This means that partners' relationships with one another will be dynamic and unpredictable, oscillating between harmony and conflict and collaboration and competition as dictated by the issues being addressed and the various interests of the partners.

Case study 3

Intel, the world's leading microprocessor manufacturer, needs to work with a wide variety of computer and software firms to create universally useable computer components. Inevitably, these various firms will have complex, ambiguous relationships not just with Intel but also with each other. They may be collaborating with Intel and each other in some areas, whilst competing against Intel and each other in others. Further complexity is added to the situation by the size and diversity of Intel itself, with its various parts having different goals and opinions about where and when Intel needs to compete and collaborate.

To manage this complex, potentially explosive mix of tensions Intel has a policy of explicitly acknowledging that they exist. They hold formal, high profile debates with all relevant parties to explore issues and their underlying tensions. Participants are encouraged to express and explore dissenting views. To emphasise the importance of these debates they are usually chaired by very senior executives who are empowered to make decisions and take action.

Sometimes the debates end with an agreement that 'firewalls' will be created between various groupings within and without the company. These walls of confidentiality ensure that current fruitful collaborations can continue without the suspicion that one or other partner might inadvertently or otherwise find themselves in areas that could give them an unfair competitive advantage.

4. Partnerships and partners are both powerful and powerless

Partnerships and individual partners can be very powerful because they are supported by credible, well-resourced organisations and/or given political, statutory and monetary backing by Government.

These very same partnerships and people, however, are powerless without the consent and support of key stakeholders.

Case study 4

In the 1990s an English Metropolitan Council became suddenly very powerful in term of resources by bidding successfully for about forty million pounds worth of regeneration funding.

In other ways, however, the council had become weak and powerless. Recent political turmoil had forced the council into meltdown, changing its leadership and fracturing badly many of its relationships with the local organisations and stakeholders it needed to work with in order to get things done. There was a very real danger that the council's key stakeholders would not be willing or able to agree upon where, when, how and upon whom the recently acquired funding should be spent. The council could lose its new – found power almost as soon as it had gained it.

Senior council leaders decided to take radical action to address this situation. Knowing that they were powerful in term of holding the purse strings, but also powerless in terms of not being able to spend the money effectively without others' help and agreement, they decided upon an Open Strategy approach.

They called an extraordinary conference of all key partners and stakeholders and presented their plans for how best to spend the money. They made it clear, however, that their plans were only a starting point and that over the next few days all those present would jointly agree the final strategy to be implemented.

What followed was not an easy process. Past animosities and disagreements impinged upon proceedings and there were, because of the conditions placed upon the funding, severe limits as to what could be changed in terms of the way the money was used.

But despite all the problematic history, animosities and disagreements, the meeting did create and agree a strategy. This success was due in no small part to senior council leaders acknowledging their powerlessness and their need for help by engaging publicly and courageously with their key partners and stakeholders. This act of engagement, paradoxically, made the council more powerful because key players responded positively, offering their support and acknowledging the resources the council could provide.

5. A partnership must be both predictable and unpredictable

In order to gain support and build trust a partnership needs to be predictable. It needs to set reassuringly worthwhile objectives and use consistent, tried and tested ways of working that will help it achieve them. In many ways it needs to be quite traditional in the way it presents itself and its activities.

But many partnerships do not really know what they can achieve, or how they might best go about it, until the various partners have started working together. For this reason a partnership's activities and goals can and should be subject to unpredictability. In short, a partnership needs to be not only credible and reassuring but also creative and dynamic.

Case study 5

Leeds City Council worked with various partners to set up a system of 'Youth Hubs'. These created central points that offered a range of services to young people. The project needed to be professionally run and compliant with good practice in order to attract funding. It also needed to gain the involvement of young people so that they would feel some ownership of the hubs' activities and therefore be encouraged to take advantage of the services on offer.

To obtain funds it was important to prepare and submit bids that were compliant with the funders' requirements, but the proposals contained

within the bids needed to be attractive and meaningful to the young people who would benefit from the hubs' services.

Rather than merely consulting young people for their views the project made young people partners in the endeavour and asked them to take the lead in writing and presenting the bids. They were offered help and support with the bidding process, but the ideas and approaches contained within the bids were generated, developed and presented by the young people themselves.

The bids were successful, the hubs were set up and young people began using the services.

The success of this project was due to its ability to marry predictable, compliant and consistent good practice with the unpredictable, less compliant creativity of young people.

6. Partnerships and partners need to be both directive and reflexive

Partnerships and those working within them need to be willing and able to use 'collaborative thuggery'¹ to drive progress in the directions required.

Simultaneously, however, partnerships and those working within them need to hold their aims lightly, to be willing and able to travel in different directions that might ultimately prove even more beneficial than those mapped out originally.

Case study 6

Sheffield 1st is the strategic partnership for the City of Sheffield. Its partners, who are key individuals and organisations from the local public, private and voluntary sectors, provide the vision and direction for initiatives and activities designed to enhance the city and the physical, social and economic well being of its inhabitants.

¹ The term 'collaborative thuggery' first appears in the book 'Managing to Collaborate: The Theory and Practice of Collaborative Advantage', by Chris Huxham and Siv Evy Vangen. It is used to describe the manipulative and political behaviour sometimes employed by partnership managers to get things done and ensure progress in a certain direction.

As it is high profile and backed and required to act by statute, it has the credibility to kick start activities in the direction it wants them to go. It also has the mandate to rationalise and co-ordinate new and existing, perhaps more informal, initiatives and collaborations that are ongoing in its area.

The partnership realised early on that this ability to provide direction and co-ordination was both a boon and a bane. It could be used to get things done and push things through, but if not carefully managed it could cause defensiveness, resentment and ultimately disengagement in the very individuals, local groups and organisations the partnership needed to work through in order to get things done.

A series of regular conferences were set up to address this issue. One of the key aims of these conferences was to listen to the views of those working with, through or for the partnership. Specifically, information was collected about both where relationships and activities were going well, and where they were less effective.

Crucially, some of these conferences were facilitated by a third party. This enabled the strategic partnership to take a step back, reflect upon its own approach, style, processes and behaviour and identify where these were either helpful or in need of review and alteration.

This type of public reflexivity helped Sheffield 1st to maintain its credibility and develop positive, flexible relationships with the key stakeholders it needed to work through.

Additionally, Sheffield 1st offered key contributors to the partnership's activities training in briefing, communications and meeting skills. This enhanced people's ability to present and articulate the information and feedback they wished to offer to the strategic partnership, giving it better quality, more concise and specific information upon which to reflect.

In the above ways Sheffield 1st sort to merge its ability to provide direction with a willingness to seek feedback, look back in upon itself and alter its activities and approaches as seemed most appropriate to the needs of its stakeholders and the ultimate achievement of its aims.

The six key skill areas that can help us manage partnership paradoxes effectively

The above paradoxes, because of their in built tensions and contradictions, can be very difficult to manage effectively, especially if we apply traditional management approaches to them.

Traditional management thinking tends to be rational and binary; it helps us analyse issues logically and encourages us to choose between good and bad, right and wrong, suitable and unsuitable etc.

Paradoxes, however, defy this traditional approach. If we choose in favour of one side of a paradox rather than another, if we stretch and distort the distance between its two aspects, they will at some stage rebound upon us and create turbulence and discomfort. For example, if we concentrate upon long – term issues at the expense of short – term gains a partnership can lose momentum and support. Also, if a partnership works hard at being open and transparent but does not address issues of membership and confidentiality of information, becoming a glass house within which everything is seen and commented upon, its foundations of trust can quickly become undermined, its whole structure shattering and collapsing.

And so on through the paradoxes we can go. If ever we concentrate upon one aspect of a paradox at the expense of another then the tension and distortion we cause will amplify itself over time and sooner or later feed itself back in unhelpful ways, causing us more problems than we started with.

In order to manage partnership paradoxes effectively we need to find and develop new skills, tools and ways of thinking. These need to encourage us to address both aspects of a paradox effectively, to work with and benefit from its duality rather than fight against it. Six key skill areas that we can develop to help us do this are:

1. Systems thinking and boundary management
2. Doughnut thinking
3. Parallel and dual track thinking
4. Triple thinking
5. Learned optimism and resilience
6. Reflexivity and flexibility of mind set

1. Systems thinking and boundary management

Intel's creation of firewalls of confidentiality (case study 3) only makes sense if one thinks beyond the partnership to where partners become competitors within the wider business system.

By surfacing the competing priorities and interests of all those involved, including itself, and then managing these by creating internal boundaries, Intel was addressing two key partnership paradoxes: the need to be both open and closed, and the need to be both separate and together.

The Heathrow Express project (case study 2) is also an example of systems thinking and boundary management being used to manage the paradox of needing to be both open and closed. By creating suppliers' clubs the project was acknowledging and maintaining the boundaries between current suppliers and everyone else. These boundaries were kept permeable by the regular scouting meetings the project undertook to identify potential partners from the wider system of interested parties, such as local businesses, that surrounded its work.

The Community Links Social Enterprise Zone (case study 1) used systems thinking and boundary management to address a different paradox, that of focusing upon both short and long term issues at the same time.

By inviting a representative from part of the mainstream system (the Inland Revenue) into the work of the project, Community Links was creating a conduit that cut through the boundary between its localised short – term achievements and the long – term activities of a main stream Government Department. This increased the probability of innovative approaches and other gains achieved during the life of the Social Enterprise Zone being transmitted to and embedded within the long - term practices of the larger system of public services.

The ability to think holistically and appreciate and manage the interweaving relationships and boundaries within and outside of a partnership is key to addressing many partnership paradoxes effectively.

An effective way for a partnership to practise and develop systems thinking and boundary management is for it to incorporate them into its stakeholder management processes. A technique that can help achieve this is described at Appendix A.

2. Doughnut thinking

For the Leeds Youth Hubs proposal (case study 5) to be taken seriously it was very important that understood, predictable and compliant processes were followed that involved the creation of business cases and the describing of core outputs and outcomes. Those involved in the project knew, however, that if it were to succeed it would need to expand outward from this core of good practice. The project would need to seek out and adopt approaches to its work that would not have been predictable at the outset, only coming to light when the young people who would be using the centres were effectively engaged with and made partners in the endeavour.

The above is a practical example of doughnut thinking. It helped the project to focus upon what was at the heart of its thinking: the 'jam' at the centre of its doughnut of activities. Then, by working with the young people that were its key stakeholders, it worked outwards towards the outer edges of its thinking: towards the sugary outer layers of its doughnut of activities, adapting to new insights and approaches that would enhance its ability to achieve its aims.

Doughnut thinking addresses the key paradoxes of being both directive and reflexive and being both predictable and unpredictable. Focusing upon the core of a partnership's thinking provides direction and reassuring predictability. Thinking outside of the core of its thinking encourages a partnership to reflect back upon and question its purpose and activities and take advantage of unexpected insights and attractive opportunities.

A detailed description of doughnut thinking and how to develop and use it is given at www.tallistraining.co.uk/the_partnership_doughnut.htm.

3. Parallel and dual track thinking

Parallel thinking

The open strategy approach adopted by the English Metropolitan Council (case study 4) relied upon the partners being able to explore and appreciate many differing viewpoints, reactions and emotions relating to the regeneration project under consideration. Key to this process was being able to hold onto the various viewpoints in parallel, appreciating the differences but also being able to 'bracket' or suspend judgement about them so that they did not become ever present crunch points of contention.

Instead the differing perceptions, once bracketed upon the ongoing history or script of the discussions, became additional windows of insight framed along its progress. These could then be reviewed by all those involved, helping them to perceive a rich landscape of differing views that could, through being considered in parallel, equally and without judgement, contribute towards rather than hinder the creation of a jointly agreed strategy.

Edward De Bono's² 'Six Thinking Hats' technique is a widely used creativity tool that encourages the development of parallel thinking. A full description of the technique and how to use it can be found at www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_07.htm

Dual track thinking

Dual track thinking also encourages a form of parallel thinking. It concentrates upon gaining the benefits of both sides of a paradox at once, whilst also seeking to minimise their drawbacks. It identifies the poles of a paradox and then lists the advantages and disadvantages associated with each. Lastly, an action plan is created focused upon maximising the benefits and minimising the drawbacks.

An analysis of a paradox based upon dual track thinking would look something like this:

Paradox: A partnership must focus upon both short and long term issues at the same time.

Short Term		Long term		Actions
+	-	+	-	
Get quick wins	Treat symptoms not causes	Treat the causes not the symptoms	No immediately visible payoffs	Align all activity, including quick wins, with overall strategy and outcomes
Keep stakeholders and customers happy within the immediate time frame	Eventually Lose support due to lack of focus and overall vision	Gain solid commitment from stakeholders for a long term vision and strategy	Cause stakeholders and customers to become frustrated by the apparent lack of progress	Create processes to involve stakeholders in the formulation of long - term strategy and inform them of and involve them in ongoing activities and progress
Obtain credibility quickly	Lose credibility if not able to build upon initial successes	Build a strong foundation upon which long term success and credibility can be	Initial workings upon the foundations will be done 'out of sight' so hard to	Advertise work and achievements widely and create opportunities to gain suggestions

² Edward De Bono is a leading writer about creativity and how to develop it. It was he who coined the term 'parallel thinking'.

		built	motivate others to build upon them	from wider interest groups about future progress
Create a sense of action and achievement	Tend to focus upon short term activity rather than long term achievement	Focus on long term achievement rather than short term activity	Lose the sense of momentum that is gained by activity	Identify high profile activities that create a sense of continuing momentum towards long term aims

4. Triple thinking

When Sheffield 1st (case study 6) used an independent person to broker its meetings it was encouraging triple thinking.

Those involved in the partnership, not possessing a detached viewpoint, would have found it difficult not to slip into the binary thinking associated with making judgements. They would have been tempted to analyse the work of the partnership in terms of what was good and what was bad, what was right and what was wrong. This type of thinking would have deleted from their awareness those things that were interesting or unique about the partnership and its work.

The independent facilitator however, being detached from the partnership and its work, was less likely to be judgmental and more likely to recognise what was interesting or unique, adding a third or 'triple' aspect to the partnership's thinking. This increased the chances of the partnership being able to identify and exploit areas that might otherwise have remained hidden from it.

A simple way of developing triple thinking is to use what Edward De Bono calls PMI thinking. This involves developing the habit of asking three questions when presented with an issue, activity, situation or problem:

1. What are its positives ?
2. What are its minuses?
3. What are its interesting aspects?

You then ask yourself how you can maximise the positives, minimise the negatives and, importantly, make use of and build upon the interesting aspects.

5. Learned optimism and resilience

The key to building resilience is to learn the skill of optimistic thinking. When Sheffield 1st (case study 6) held their conferences and workshops

for partners and stakeholders they put great emphasis upon identifying and acknowledging what was going well, going so far as to make it a specific agenda item. This not only provided the partnership with the opportunity to build upon these positive aspects, but also helped it develop an optimistic perception of itself that contributed towards enhancing its people's overall motivation and confidence levels.

Sheffield 1st were identifying and acknowledging the positive aspects of their work at an organisational level, but obviously such an approach would also have had a desirable effect at the team and individual levels as well. This is because the positive aspects identified would have been attributable to specific teams and the individuals within them.

A technique that can be used to develop the skill of systematically looking for, acknowledging and building upon positive aspects, so helping to build optimism and resilience, is the SOAR Model. SOAR stands for Strengths, Opportunities, Appreciations and Results:

Strengths	Opportunities
Appreciations	Results

The activities of a partnership are analysed and the following questions asked:

- What strengths have been demonstrated by the partnership? How can these be maximised?
- What opportunities have been created by the work of the partnership? How can these be exploited to the full?
- What has been appreciated about the way the partnership goes about its work? How can these be built upon?³

³These aspects differ from those identified under strengths by being qualitative and subjective rather than quantitative and objective. Items captured under this heading focus upon capturing the type of positive opinion and feedback that is sometimes taken for granted and/or only partially expressed. For example, users of a partnership's services may appreciate the way staff remember and use their names when addressing them. Perhaps staff even remember some other personal aspects about their clients as well. This contributes to the partnership's clients feeling welcomed, valued and respected. Clients may talk about their appreciation of this amongst themselves, but perhaps mention it less often to the partnership's staff. Once fully identified and acknowledged aspects such as these can be exploited to a partnership's advantage.

- What results have been achieved by the partnership? How can these be built upon?

As people address the above questions it is important that they remember to ask what they and others did specifically that contributed to the positive aspects identified.

Having an optimistic outlook and becoming resilient are skills that can be developed like any other. Encouraging a partnership's people to analyse what is going well and then identify what each of them has contributed to this, is a practical way in which to develop an optimistic outlook that can help build overall resilience.

6. Reflexivity and flexibility of mindset

Running through all the above skills, like the wording running through a stick of rock, are the two overarching skills of reflexivity and flexibility of mindset. Reflexivity is the ability to look back upon your habits, activities and practices, see where they may be contributing to difficulties and then make adjustments to them as necessary. Flexibility of mindset is the ability to comprehend your own way of thinking, how you might be perceiving a particular problem or situation and then, mentally speaking, being able to put yourself in the shoes of others and see and explore things from where they stand.

These two skills are looped closely together. If we perceive things in subtly different ways to that which is usual for us then our behaviour will be subtly altered. If we behave in subtly different ways to that which is usual for us then our perceptions will be subtly altered.

All the previously mentioned skills, perhaps especially doughnut, triple and parallel thinking, require and help develop reflexivity and flexibility of mindset.

Summary

Much of partnership working is about managing the paradoxes that lie at the heart of its nature.

Six key paradoxes of partnership working are:

1. A partnership must focus on short and long – term issues at the same time.
2. A partnership must be both open and closed.

3. Partners must act both separately and together.
4. Partnerships and partners are both powerful and powerless.
5. A partnership must be both predictable and unpredictable.
6. Partnerships and partners need to be both directive and reflexive.

Managing a paradox effectively is not about choosing in favour of one aspect rather than the other. It is about addressing and reconciling both aspects so as to create effective performance across as broad a front as possible.

Traditional management approaches are of limited value when managing a partnership paradox. This is because their rational, judgmental approach encourages partnerships to choose in favour of one side of a paradox over another.

In order to manage partnership paradoxes effectively new skills are required. These skills need to help partnerships work effectively with the dualities of paradoxes, embracing them rather than fighting against them. Six key skill areas that can help partnerships achieve this are:

1. Systems thinking and boundary management
2. Doughnut thinking
3. Parallel and dual track thinking
4. Triple thinking
5. Learned optimism and resilience
6. Reflexivity and flexibility of mind set

See the main article for detailed descriptions and illustrations of the partnership paradoxes.

See the main article for detailed descriptions of the skills needed to manage partnership paradoxes effectively.

References

Cusumano, M. and Gower, A./2002/Platform Leadership: How Intel, Microsoft, and Cisco Drive Industry Innovation/2002/USA/Harvard Business School Press

De Bono E./1992/Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New ideas /1992/UK/Harper Business

Fredberg, T. Beer, M. Eisenstat, R. Norrgren, F./ 2008/Embracing Commitment and Performance: CEOs and Practices Used to Manage Paradox/www.hbs.edu/research/pdf/08-052pdf/01.09.09

Handy, C./1994/The Empty Raincoat/1995/UK/Arrow Books Limited

Hudson, J./2009/The Enabling State: Collaboration for Success/2009/UK/Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Huxham, C. and Vangen, S./2005/Managing to Collaborate: The Theory and Practice of Collaborative Advantage/2005/UK/Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group)

Lownds, S./1998/Fast Track to Change on the Heathrow Express/2000/UK/CIPD

National School of Government/1999/Walsall Partnership – Working Case Study/1999/UK/National School of Government

National Youth Agency/2008/Local Authority Case Study: Leeds Integrated Youth Support Hubs/2008/UK/National Youth Agency on behalf of the DCSF in support of myplace

Seligman, M./1991/Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Life/2006/USA/Vintage Books

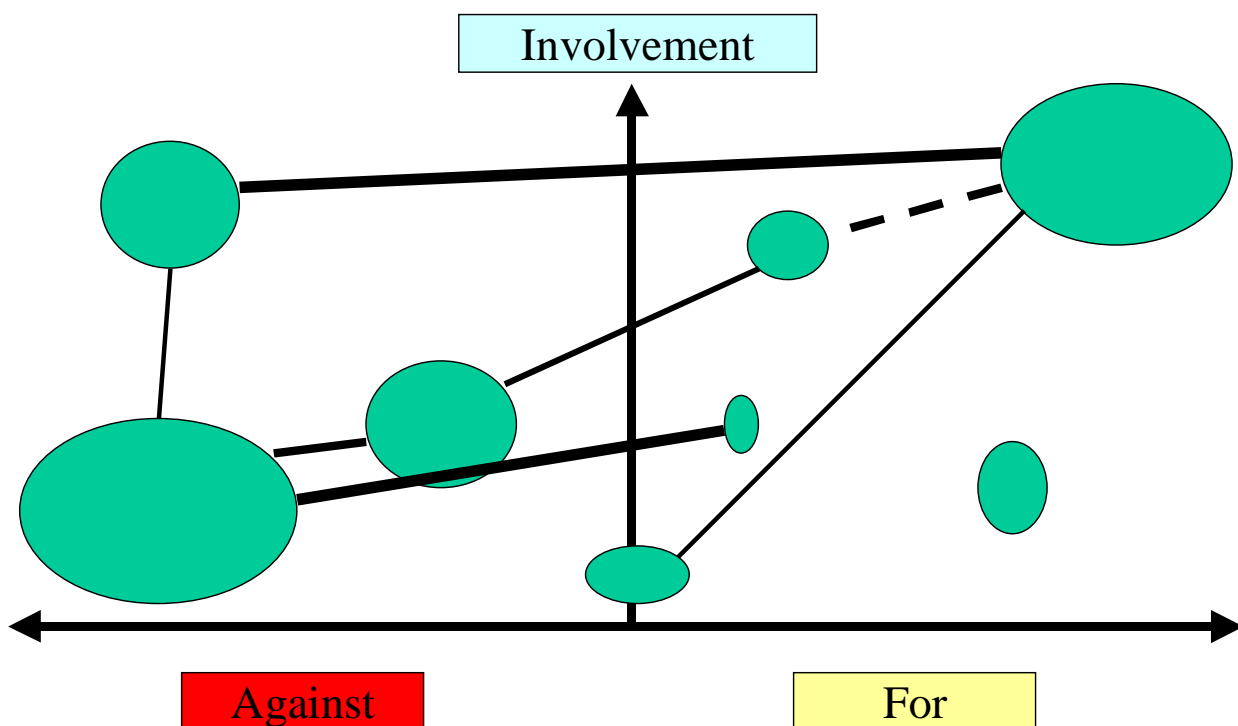
Smerdon, M. Robinson, D./2004/ Enduring Change: The Experience of the Community Links Social Enterprise Zone/PDF/www.community-links.org/images/uploads/enduringchange.pdf/01.09.09

Taylor, V. and Fell, J./2003/Sheffield First Partnership 'Infuse' Programme/2003/UK/renewal.net/02.01.04

Taylor, V. and Robinson, S./2003/Sheffield First Partnership: Skills and Knowledge for Neighbourhood Renewal/2003/UK/renewal.net/02.01.04

Appendix A

A Stakeholder Involvement, Attitude and Relationship Mapping Graph



- Firstly, brainstorm all your stakeholders
- Then position them on the graph according to their level of involvement and to what extent they are for or against the partnership's work. The higher they are on the graph the more involved they are. The further left the more 'Against' they are. The further right the more 'For' they are.
- The size of the shapes denotes the importance of the stakeholder to the partnership. The bigger the shape the more important the stakeholder.
- The lines map relationships between stakeholders. Thick lines denote strong positive relationships between stakeholders. Thin lines denote weaker relationships. Dotted lines denote negative relationships. No lines denote the lack of any relationship at all.
- You can vary the thickness of the lines as much as is useful to denote varying strengths of relationship. You can also use colours to denote relationships as well as/rather than varying the thickness and type of line.

Once the relationships are mapped a partnership can then analyse the results and decide how they are going to manage key stakeholders and, where necessary, try to improve relationships between stakeholders.