

Getting the most out of a partnership's latency phase

What is the latency phase?

To start with a scientific example:

When water is heated up gradually towards boiling point, there is a period of time, just before it boils, when its temperature stops rising and remains constant. During this phase the energy from the heat applied is being used to change the internal state of the water, to loosen up its molecules in readiness for its transformation into water vapour and steam. Once this internal, hidden activity is completed the temperature of the water begins to rise again, until it reaches 100 degrees and vapour and steam rise into the air. The period of constant temperature observed just before the water begins to boil is called its latency phase.

Many Partnerships experience their own version of the latency phase.

Working in partnership with other organisations can be time consuming and resource intensive. Sometimes, a partnership can seem like a gigantic black hole, pulling in all the time and resources around it without any glimmer or shimmer of a reaction. It can feel as if an eternity is passing, with more and more resources disappearing into the abyss and increasingly frenetic activity observable around its edges that is focused upon managing and slowing the flow.

Eventually, however, after the partnership black hole has spent ages satiating its enormous appetite, the seemingly impossible happens. The black hole transforms into an intensely bright globe that radiates energy to all corners of its universe. Also, where previously it seemed to pull time and resources greedily and violently into itself like a gluttonous ogre, it now attracts them without effort because of its magnetic dynamism and the unselfish sharing of its innate brilliance.

When is a partnership's latency phase most likely to occur?

The latency phase is most likely to manifest itself several weeks or months into the life span of the partnership, depending on how often the partners get together. The initial coming together of the partnership will usually be characterised by lots of enthusiasm, fuelled mainly by the newness and novelty of the project and the meeting of new and interesting people. This enthusiasm will carry the development of the partnership forwards for a while: an overall purpose or vision will be agreed upon, and an initial plan of action drawn up. Both during this process, however, and also the related process of agreeing roles and responsibilities, partners will start to think more deeply about their place within the partnership and the nature of their relationships with others around the table. They will begin to notice and analyse the internal and interpersonal dynamics of the partnership. The latency phase will probably begin soon after partners begin to think in this way.¹

¹This initial questioning of one's place in the partnership or group could be interpreted as the onset of the storming phase of Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing Model of Group Development. Especially as the Storming stage is characterised by a working out of internal group dynamics and relationships.

Whether or not the latency phase leads to the positive transformation of a partnership depends very much upon how it is perceived.

If the latency phase is perceived negatively, as a source of delay and inactivity, then it will cause frustration and people will want to battle through it as quickly as possible. If this happens it is likely that the partnership will not put sufficient energy into the formation of its internal processes and relationships and it will find it difficult to transform itself into an effective, results rich enterprise. If, however, the latency phase is perceived positively, as a phase that can, if given time, work some powerful magic on the internal workings of the partnership, significant attention and energy is likely to be devoted to it, making the previously described transformation much more likely to happen.

What, specifically, is going on during the latency phase of a partnership?

Individual partners are trying to find answers to seven important, fundamental questions:

1. How can we begin to trust each other?
2. How can we effectively manage the social and cultural differences between us?
3. How can we balance the core goals and interests of the partnership with those of the individual partners involved?
4. How can we effectively address the issues and problems related to partners' differing environments and localities?
5. How can we effectively manage the expectations we have of each other and the partnership in general?
6. What are our individual communication needs and how can we communicate with each other most effectively?
7. How can we build an attractive, accessible and resourceful platform or foundation for the partnership that will act as an effective focus for its activities?

All the above questions are centred upon a partnership's internal needs, processes and relationships, and because almost all of them involve the facilitation and management of interpersonal relationships, they can take time to explore, understand and address effectively. Any stakeholders observing a partnership during this time could be forgiven for thinking that it had ground to a halt and become nothing more than a talking shop. In fact, this talk is laying the foundations for future success.

How can we ensure that a partnership's latency phase becomes a catalyst for effective partnership working?

If we want to ensure the latency phase becomes a catalyst for transforming a partnership into a bright, unselfish beacon of achievement, we need to manage its fragile dynamics very carefully. Five specific things we can do are:

1. **Perceive the latency phase positively**, acknowledging the crucial role it plays in helping a partnership develop and realise its potential.
2. **Explicitly explore and address the seven fundamental questions** partners tend to ask during the latency phase (as described earlier in this article).
3. **Factor in enough time for the effective management of the latency phase**. It is helpful to remember that a complex partnership arrangement can take a lot

longer to achieve results than a single organisation working on similar tasks². This time will be added to even further if the complex dynamics of a partnership's latency phase are not addressed effectively.

4. **Hold regular, informal meetings between partners at differing locations and times.**

An informal approach will help partners relax, form personal relationships and share their wants, needs, hopes, fears, expectations and aspirations; it will lay the foundations for trust.

Meeting partners on their own patch and at times that fit in with their day to day activities can of itself go a long way towards building trust, gaining better social and cultural understanding, and appreciating differing expectations and communication needs. It will also highlight the practical challenges presented by the locality and environment within which the partnership is working.

5. **Create a shared sense of partnership time.** This is perhaps the most abstract but in many ways most powerful thing a partnership can do to help ensure its safe and productive passage through the latency phase. We all perceive the passing of time in different ways. These perceptions are influenced by the cultures we live and work in and how important or central an issue or subject is to us. If we are used to working in a fast paced environment we will become frustrated if results are not achieved quickly. If we are used to a slower pace then not achieving results quickly will not worry us so much. If an issue is important to us it can often, regardless of the actual amount of time involved, feel as if ages are passing before it is addressed. If an issue is not important to us then the amount of time passing before it is addressed is of little or no personal significance, so even long periods of inactivity can go by almost unnoticed.

These differing perceptions of time and the significance of its passing will all be interacting with each other as a partnership comes together and goes through its latency phase. If these perceptions are not managed effectively they will cause mutual frustration, misunderstandings and perhaps even conflict.

Encouraging partners to think explicitly about how they perceive, react to and use the time they spend working together will discourage unhelpful preconceptions about what should be happening and when it should be happening by. It will help create a new, shared sense of pace and time that is appropriate to a partnership, what it needs to achieve and how it needs to achieve it.

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² It is interesting to note that Local Area Agreements between central government, local government and other local partners have been extended from a one year to a three – year period. Local Area Agreements set out the priorities for local areas under the headings of health, safety, economic development and children and young people.