A Fresh Approach to the Leadership of Partnership Working

Partnership working is uniquely challenging. When individuals from differing backgrounds, cultures, organisations and sectors get together to solve problems they enter a maelstrom of conflicting perceptions, arguments, needs and emotions. The need for discussion and agreement about the leadership approach a partnership requires can quickly become the focus around which these conflicts spin and blow.

Eventually, a leadership approach will be agreed. If the process of finding this agreement has been effective it will be a good approach, taking the best from the experiences and respective ways of working of each of the key partners. It will also be an approach that takes account of the overall context surrounding the partnership's work – the environment within which it has to survive and thrive.

It will, however, be an approach heavily influenced by the leadership and management thinking that has evolved steadily since the 1600s in response to the needs of single organisations and businesses. There is obviously plenty of good sense in this thinking and most of it remains helpful and relevant when applied to the needs of partnership working.

But the new world of partnership working is different. Where there was competition there is co-operation. Where there was a drive towards uniformity there is a valuing of difference and diversity. Where there was top down command and control, even if made more benevolent by the advent of participation and empowerment, there are now bottom up and side to side aspirations towards shared and distributed power.

Given these differences it is not surprising that traditional leadership approaches have not always grafted smoothly onto the sensitive young skin of partnership working. They may, for a time, have done an adequate job of holding things together, but will have almost certainly seeped irritatingly and attracted unnecessary, unwelcome attention. Eventually, they may even have been rejected altogether, leaving gaping wounds in the partnership that took time to heal and proved very difficult to stitch together, without causing further pain.

So a fresh, perhaps less painful approach to leadership needs to be found that is tailored to the needs of partnership working. In order to be effective it needs to be founded in actual partnership working practice and retain those aspects of traditional thinking still relevant within the new context.

The Nexus Active Leadership Model offers such an approach. This article will explain what Nexus Active Leadership is, give an overview of the model and then describe each of its components in more detail.

What is the Nexus Active Leadership Model?

The Nexus Active Leadership Model is an approach focused upon the leadership needs of partnership working. Its foundations lie in the good practice and experiences of those that have worked with and within partnerships and have recorded their insights in publicly available case studies.

The title Nexus Active Leadership is appropriate because it brings ideas key to the leadership of partnerships to the fore. The word 'nexus' describes an interconnected group or a complicated interwoven mass. Both of these descriptions have relevance to the reality of partnership working. Those leading partnerships are in a very real sense grappling with a living nexus of interrelationships, tensions and conflicts. The word 'active' draws attention to the need partnership working has for high profile, dynamic and proactive leadership.

Specifically, Nexus Active Leadership highlights and concentrates upon seven areas key to the effective leadership of partnerships. These areas can be subdivided into three leadership approaches and four key supporting activities:

3 Leadership approaches:

- Hub (or platform) leadership – When a strong, resourceful and credible organisation or group of organisations is identified to act as the hub of a partnership – the centre of its nexus – taking a lead role in helping to shape its direction and development.

- Leadership through dialogue – the way in which an effective partnership hub seeks to involve partners and stakeholders in the process of creating a shared sense of purpose and direction.

- Emergent leadership – the process whereby partners and others emerge during the life of a partnership to take on leadership roles suited to their passions, expertise and experience.

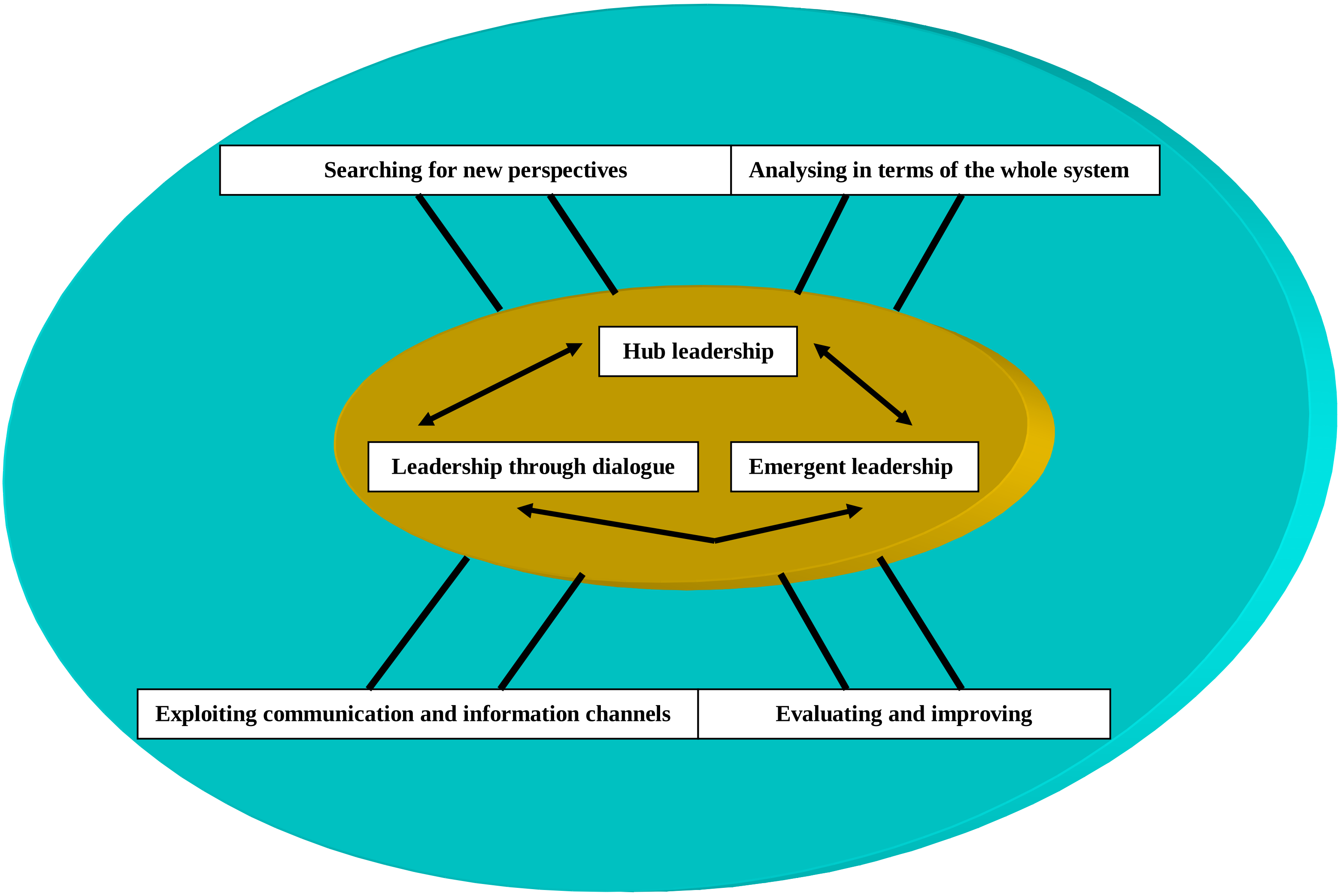
4 key supporting activities:

- Thinking about and analysing a partnership and its surrounding context as an open, evolving system
- Exploiting the entire place – time continuum of communication available to a partnership
- Pragmatically searching out and utilising potentially useful ideas and approaches from a very wide variety of sources
- Effectively evaluating the work and processes of a partnership

To be effective, each leadership approach needs to support and enhance the other two. Those leading the platform or hub of a partnership cannot do so effectively without initiating dialogue with other key partners and stakeholders. Emergent leaders cannot develop without the support of those leading the hub. The hub of the partnership will fall apart if not strengthened by the new perspectives and innovations of emergent leaders. If there has not been open dialogue potentially emergent leaders will remain latent and the partnership purpose and direction suggested by the hub will be shunned. If emergent leaders remain latent and non – contributing then it is difficult for helpful, proactive dialogue to take place – and so on.

The four key supporting activities maintain and develop the effectiveness of the three leadership approaches. Searching out new ideas and perspectives will encourage dialogue and help identify emergent leaders. Analysing and thinking in terms of the whole system will also support these two areas plus help the hub of the leadership maintain a wider, strategic perspective. Evaluating and improving will keep the hub of the leadership and the partnership as a whole flexible, responsive and able to adapt to new challenges. Exploiting communication and information channels will support all three leadership approaches plus raise the profile of the partnership as a whole.

The model can be expressed diagrammatically[1] as follows:



The remainder of this article will describe the above components of the Nexus Active Leadership Model in more detail.

[1] The Nexus Active Leadership Model can also be visualised as a Partnership Working Leadership Wheel. See appendix 1 for more information.

Creating and leading a recognisable partnership platform or hub

To create drive and direction within a partnership a sustainable source of energy needs to be created at its heart. A significant number of partnerships have done this by identifying or creating a particular organisation, or grouping of key organisations, to become the credible centre of the partnership – the hub of the nexus.

To be a credible platform or hub that can support the effective development of a partnership the selected organisation or organisations need the following characteristics:

- Capacity in terms of relevant expertise, knowledge, money and other resources likely to be needed.
- A willingness to share these resources with others involved in the partnership in order to help them build their capacity to contribute effectively.
- An obvious passion for the partnership's area of activity.
- A clear vision for not only the direction and future of the partnership itself, but also for the whole area within which the partnership is operating.
- A strong commitment to encouraging and seeking out new blood, in the form of partners and others, that could transfuse the partnership with additional perspectives, creativity and innovation.
- A commitment to making itself, the partnership as a whole and the processes that support it as accessible and transparent as is realistically possible.

Another important consideration when identifying a platform or hub for a partnership is its capacity to consolidate and continue the work once the partnership initiative has come to an end. Is the hub organisation committed and resourceful enough to ensure that the benefits realised through partnership working are absorbed effectively into the ever – flowing mainstream of organisational and institutional practice?

Encouraging and developing emergent leadership advantageous to a partnership

One of the key responsibilities of the hub of a partnership is to spot, encourage and develop emergent leadership. It is a common trait of partnerships that as their work develops, so too do the partners themselves. Those that perhaps started on the fringes of a partnership can begin to exhibit a particular affinity, passion, or expertise for a specific area of the partnership's work. Once identified, such individuals or organisations need to be encouraged further into the partnership to take up leadership roles consistent with their skills, abilities, motivations and passions.

These emergent leaders must be supported with appropriate training, development and other needed resources, but they also need careful management. Emergent leaders are only advantageous to a partnership if the activities they undertake and the results they achieve are consistent with its purpose and goals. So plenty of dialogue needs to take place between the hub of a partnership and the emergent leaders to ensure shared understanding of and commitment to the activities and results required.

Leading the development and direction of a partnership through dialogue[2]

Those individuals and organisations forming the central platform or hub of a partnership cannot provide it with drive and direction in isolation. Neither can they impose it.

They, and all other significant contributors to the partnership, need to encourage the co – creation of an inspirational vision of where the partnership needs to go and the journey it must undertake in order to get there.

This can be done most effectively through dialogue. Dialogue involves the sharing and exploration of differing views, perceptions, thoughts and feelings about an issue (for example the direction and aims of a partnership). It is designed to encourage an improved understanding of differing outlooks and reveal insights and synergies that might otherwise remain hidden. In some ways it is an attempt to tap into and make explicit the informal conversations and relationships that spring up and develop between and around the borders of most formal, traditionally run meetings and conferences.

The setting for dialogue, whether a large conference or a small meeting, needs to be informal and encouraging of participation rather than formal and didactic. Whilst dialogue takes place, the participants are encouraged to be open and honest, to listen in order to understand rather than reply, and to look for ways to build on new insights and ideas rather than argue against them. It is a process of positive enquiry and building rather than seeking and destroying. It gives all involved acknowledgement and a real opportunity to not only buy into, but also influence the development and direction of a partnership.

Thinking about and analysing a partnership and its surrounding context as an open, evolving system

Thinking about a partnership as a nexus, an interconnected group or complicated interwoven mass, invites us to think holistically and systemically – to start mapping out the partnership's various linkages and layers and its positioning within the greater context within which it exists. This type of thinking has proved beneficial for partnerships. Going one stage further can be even more beneficial. If the complicated mass of a partnership is animated in our minds, perceived as a living system capable of evolving and adapting to its environment, even more insights can be gained, these in turn leading to valuable ideas for a partnership's further development and improvement.

A partnership can be likened to the human body. A body has many disparate organs, all with their own particular function, that have to act in co-ordination with each other – manage and adapt the boundaries between and around them. Sometimes these boundaries need to be flexible and porous. Sometimes they need to become rigid and solid. A partnership is also a system made up of sub – systems (separate but dependent organs) and in order for it to survive, remain effective and evolve it too must maintain adaptive boundaries within and around itself.

There is a significant difference, however, between the human body and a partnership. Whereas the boundaries within and around the human body are purely

[2] For an introduction to the concept of dialogue and its applications read 'Dialogue at Work' by Nancy Dixon ISBN 1-898001-41-3

physical, those existing within and around a partnership can be grouped under two headings – physical and abstract. Physical boundaries that partnerships may have to acknowledge and manage commonly focus on location, distance, the way partners are seated at meetings and the way meetings are laid out and structured generally. Abstract boundaries tend to focus on the previous history between partners and groups of partners, hierarchy and status, recognition and acknowledgement, knowledge, expertise and experience.

Those involved in partnership working need to explicitly discuss and map the various boundaries, both physical and abstract, that they perceive within, between and around them. They also need to examine the boundary between the partnership as a whole and the context or environment within which it operates. What tensions does it experience with the environment around it? What pressures push against it? What other external boundaries does it find itself making contact with or pushing against? Which boundaries feel comfortable or complement it?

Doing this 'systems based' type of analysis ensures partnerships consider relationships, issues and problems from a more strategic, holistic, bigger picture perspective. When deciding on action to address an issue or problem in one area of a partnership, the consequences for other areas can be appreciated more readily. Also, problem hotspots within a partnership are more likely to be put into context and not blown out of proportion. Perhaps most importantly, problem areas and difficult relationships are more likely to be seen as issues the partnership as a whole needs to address, rather than the responsibility of the partner or partners involved.

Exploiting the whole place – time continuum of communication in order to enhance relationships and maximise partnership effectiveness

The interconnected, complicated interwoven mass of relationships and boundaries that is partnership working demands that all those involved work hard at exploiting the whole continuum of communication to its utmost.

Partners, usually originating from different organisations and locations and experiencing perhaps widely differing working patterns and pressures, are almost always separated not only in terms of place but also time. So managing and leading a partnership involves an awareness of all the communication options available and making informed choices about what is the most effective and appropriate type of communication, or mix of communications, to use for any given situation.

The options available fall into four separate grouping and can be said to form a place – time continuum of communication.

- Same time and same place – face to face communication and meetings etc.
- Same time and different place – telephone calls, conference calls, video conferencing, Internet chat etc.
- Different time and same place – whiteboards, flipcharts, notice boards etc.
- Different time and different place – memos, letters, reports e-mail, etc.

The above continuum is straightforward, but further consideration of it poses useful questions for a partnership to address. Is one partner habitually e – mailing or telephoning another partner whose culture is based upon face to face informal contact? Does the hands on, location based work of one partner make e-mail inaccessible to them until late at night? Would formal letters and meetings (and the language that accompanies them) serve to strengthen further the divisions between partners from widely differing backgrounds and cultures? Are valuable ongoing lessons being overlooked because not all partners can attend the workshops, or fill in the appropriate form, or place a message on the relevant notice board (real or virtual)?

Exploration of the place – time continuum can be used to encourage a discussion leading to the creation of a communication strategy that addresses the unique requirements of individual partners and the partnership as a whole.

Lastly, and very importantly, because partners have helped create the communication strategy and understand its rationale, they will be motivated to maintain and develop it.

Pragmatically searching out and utilising potentially useful ideas and approaches from a very wide variety of sources

Most partnerships are created to solve problems and address issues in new, creative and innovative ways. To do this they need to tap into the ideas and novel approaches that can lie dormant within and around them and they need to do this from the very outset.

Partnerships need to cast their net widely when seeking partners and think not merely about the potential cost of their inclusion, but the potential value of their contributions. It is sometimes the small, local and perhaps under – resourced organisations in need of plenty of support and capability development, that sometimes have the most to offer in terms of innovative ideas and approaches (these being gleaned from direct experience of working in the areas central to a partnership's work).

The carousel syndrome

Looking far and wide for potential partners can also avoid one of the great enemies of creative partnership working – the Carousel Syndrome. This describes the situation where the same old faces turn up to every new partnership initiative dealing with a particular issue or locality. This can lead to the same old approaches and ideas being recycled into new contexts. It is true that what has worked before might well work again, but without the energising and transforming contributions of new perspectives, second hand solutions are unlikely to provide complete answers to the new challenges faced by new partnerships.

Two ways to avoid the Carousel Syndrome are to:

- Build up an ongoing database of potential partners and contributors that is always consulted before contacting the usual organisations.
- Hold 'Scouting Meetings' regularly during the life of the partnership to identify and engage with new organisations that may need to become partners in the future.

Unlocking a partnership's creativity

Once the partnership is formed and working thought needs to be given to how it can best identify and utilise the creativity and differing perspectives locked within it. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to structure conversations carefully so that many divergent ideas are surfaced and explored and those of most use incorporated into the partnership's activity and action plans. Dialogue has already been mentioned as one way of surfacing and appreciating differing perspectives, but additional thought and time needs to be given to the use of action orientated creativity and problem solving tools.[3]

Most creativity and problem solving tools offer ways of managing the process of divergent and convergent thinking. This is the process of creatively widening one's perspective on an issue or problem (diverging) and then gradually highlighting particular patterns and insights (converging) that will help solve a problem or address an issue effectively.

The creativity and problem solving tools a partnership selects will depend on their precise requirements and the preferences of the individual partners. But whatever tools or approaches are selected, it is best if all partners understand the reasons for their use and what outcomes are expected at the end of the process.

Related worlds

Partnerships can also broaden their perspectives and gain new ideas by searching out worlds different but related to their own. What other partnerships/organisations have had to deal with problems and issues similar to their own? What did these partnerships/organisations do to address them? What ideas can be transferred back into the partnership's own context? Study visits, secondments and shadowing initiatives can all be used to facilitate this transfer of learning between one context and another.

Effectively evaluating the work and processes of a partnership.

Partnerships cannot develop and increase their effectiveness, or know whether they are achieving anything at all, without effective evaluation. It is therefore a crucial area for a partnership's leadership to focus upon.

But this focus can become blurred as the partnership's activities gather pace and unexpected challenges and demands rear up like monsters in front of it. These 'monsters of the now' demand and devour resources hungrily, whilst the vaguely remembered 'ghosts of evaluation' are allowed to fade away gradually through neglect.

This scenario can be avoided by reminding ourselves that evaluation is not just a shadowing ghost of a partnership's activities, but a real and tangible force for learning and continuous development at all stages of a partnership's life cycle. It is a front end; ongoing and back end activity.

Evaluation at the front end of a partnership

Evaluation needs to be highlighted as a key partnership activity right at the start. Appointing a high profile 'evaluation champion' with suitable seniority and/or credibility is an effective way of doing this obviously and quickly. The three areas that this champion, and the rest of the partnership, needs to give careful attention to during this initial phase are:

- Defining the scope of the partnership's activities.

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[3] For examples of creativity and problem solving tools go to www.mycoted.com.

- Agreeing and setting its core goals.
- Understanding and defining the current situation within the area that is the focus of the partnership's work.

When defining the scope of a partnership's activities, what it will and will not do, where it will and will not go, are partners being overly ambitious or not ambitious enough? Similarly, when agreeing core goals are partners being too timid or too challenging?

Where the boundaries of a partnership's scope are drawn and the levels of its core goals set will act as the cornerstones for all evaluation of its activity and achievements, so getting them right is vital. Set the scope too narrow and the goals to low and a partnership's work when evaluated will seem wonderful, but in fact be ineffectual. Set the scope too wide and the goals too high a partnership's work when evaluated will seem disappointing, but in fact, perhaps, be much better than perceived.

Finally, you do not know how far you have travelled unless you have marked your starting point. Before starting its work a partnership must find out exactly what the current situation is within its areas of focus. Then any changes or improvements occurring during the period of its work can be accurately measured and more credibly attributed to it.

Ongoing evaluation during the life of a partnership

Ongoing evaluation of partnerships is often neglected. This is because of the demands of the 'monsters of the now' mentioned above. To avoid ongoing evaluation fading into the background set up and use incident logs and make a point of measuring not only activity, but also identifying indicators of achievement that put the activity into a context.

Incident logs are simple, short, straightforward forms that can be filled in by hand or via a computer that capture the significant everyday incidents, experiences and learning of all those working within a partnership. Encouraging everyone involved into the habit of completing and submitting an incident log sheet whenever anything of significance happens, especially if it is a success, helps turn the process of evaluation into one of ongoing development and improvement. If these incidents are analysed and their significant lessons extracted and disseminated (perhaps a job for the evaluation champion), small successes gained in one area of a partnership can be replicated quickly by other areas and they can soon aggregate into something even more significant and helpful.

This process can be enhanced further by partnerships embracing the world of the web and posting blogs online that highlight significant incidents and lessons learned and invite comments from anyone with an interest or insight. This will not only maximise the potentially helpful feedback a partnership can obtain, but also provide useful information to the wider community of partnership working.

Achievement indicators help a partnership keep its overall aims, the big picture, in mind whilst immersed within its day to day, moment to moment activities. For example, if a partnership is offering business skills training to unemployed people it is very likely to know how many people have gone through its programme (the amount of activity undertaken). It may not, however, always know the absentee rate, or how many people go on to make use of follow – up services designed to help them look for and obtain work. These latter examples are achievement or context indicators.

Identifying and monitoring them provides an indication of how much lasting impact a partnership's work will have. To continue the above example, if there is a high absentee rate and if many trainees are not going on to use the follow up support services, then it is likely that the activity of skills training is achieving little and having minimal impact upon unemployment rates.

Back end, post – partnership evaluation

There are 4 main concerns during post partnership evaluation:

- How has the partnership done against its core aims?
- How effectively have the benefits gained from partnership working been incorporated into the mainstream of service provision?
- What key lessons were learned during the partnership's life?
- How can the key lessons be highlighted and communicated effectively to other organisations and partnerships?

Evaluating how a partnership has done against its core aims immediately after it has completed its work provides at best a partially imagined snapshot of its effectiveness. A partnership's influence and the benefits it realises continue (and hopefully increase) over years and even decades. Ideally therefore, post – partnership evaluation needs to take place over this time period as well.

A key focus for this long term evaluation needs to be how effectively the benefits of a partnership's work have been incorporated into the mainstream of service provision, as in many cases this is the only meaningful measure of a partnership's ultimate effectiveness.

This focus can also be seen as an evaluation of the ability of a partnership's leadership hub to encourage and motivate mainstream organisations to adopt, sustain and build on a partnership's work. If transfer to the main stream has been problematical then the benefits obtained through a partnership's work could fragment and slip between the functional borders of the new host organisations and be lost forever. If it has been smooth and effective then the initial benefits gained should not only be holding firm but also, given their permanent support within the main stream, be evolving further.

One way to avoid benefits slipping away through organisational cracks is for a partnership to focus on the legacy of learning (not just outputs and benefits) it will leave behind. The key lessons that contributed to a partnership's success need to be recorded (the importance of ongoing incident logs has been mentioned previously) and accompany the more tangible outputs and benefits presented to those that follow.

Those that follow, however, may change over time and not always be known. So how can a partnership ensure that the fruits of its learning and experiences do not degrade over time or get lost in transit between one organisation or partnership and the next? After all, if learning gained from evaluation is ultimately lost with the passage of time what is the ultimate point of evaluation?

To address this challenge partnership evaluation has to become a transparent, high profile activity that is accessible and invites comment and contributions from within and without the partnership. Posting evaluation findings on a partnership's web site or other related web sites[4](blogging has already been mentioned in the previous section) is one way of beginning this process and it needs to be accompanied by other activities across the whole place – time continuum of communication. Making representatives available to give presentations at conferences; finding out what partnership research is going on and contributing to it; comparing and sharing findings between partnerships. All these activities help ensure that key partnership working lessons are not only appreciated and remembered by the partnership that discovered them, but also by other partnerships with similar problems and concerns.

The more profile and comment a partnership's evaluation findings gain, the less likely they are to be forgotten and, importantly, the more likely it is that the benefits of a partnership's work will be sustained and built upon over the years and decades to come.

Summary

Partnership working is uniquely challenging. One of the first challenges partnerships face is identifying and agreeing the most appropriate leadership style for its purposes.

Most leadership approaches adopted by partnerships have their roots in the traditional leadership theories developed for single organisations. These provide helpful but not perfect solutions, as they do not completely address the unique demands of partnership working.

A fresh approach to the leadership of partnerships is needed. The Nexus Active Leadership Model offers such an approach. It retains those aspects of traditional thinking still relevant to partnership working and also utilises leadership lessons learned by those currently involved in partnership working.

The Nexus Active Leadership Model incorporates three leadership approaches and four supporting key activities. These are:

3 Leadership approaches:

- Hub (or platform) leadership – When a strong, resourceful and credible organisation or group of organisations is identified to act as the hub of a partnership – the centre of its nexus – taking a lead role in helping to shape its direction and development.

- Leadership through dialogue – the way in which an effective partnership hub seeks to involve partners and stakeholders in the process of creating a shared sense of purpose and direction.

- Emergent leadership – the process whereby partners and others emerge during the life of a partnership to take on leadership roles suited to their passions, expertise and experience.

4 key supporting activities:

- Thinking about and analysing a partnership and its surrounding context as an open, evolving system

[4] Partnership related websites include www.partnerships.org.uk; www.renewal.net; www.lgpartnerships.com; www.ourpartnership.org

- Exploiting the entire place – time continuum of communication available to a partnership
- Pragmatically searching out and utilising potentially useful ideas and approaches from a very wide variety of sources
- Effectively evaluating the work and processes of a partnership

In order to be effective the three leadership styles need to support and complement each other.

The four key activities enable the effective application of the three leadership styles.

(For a detailed description of the above components and their interrelationship with each other please see above.)

Sources

A Review of Leadership and Competency Frameworks – The University of Exeter – R Bolden, J Gosling, A Marturano, P Dennison

Platform Leadership – Annabelle Gawer, Michael Cusumano

Systems Governance: Towards Effective Partnership Working – University of the West of England – Professor Murray Stewart

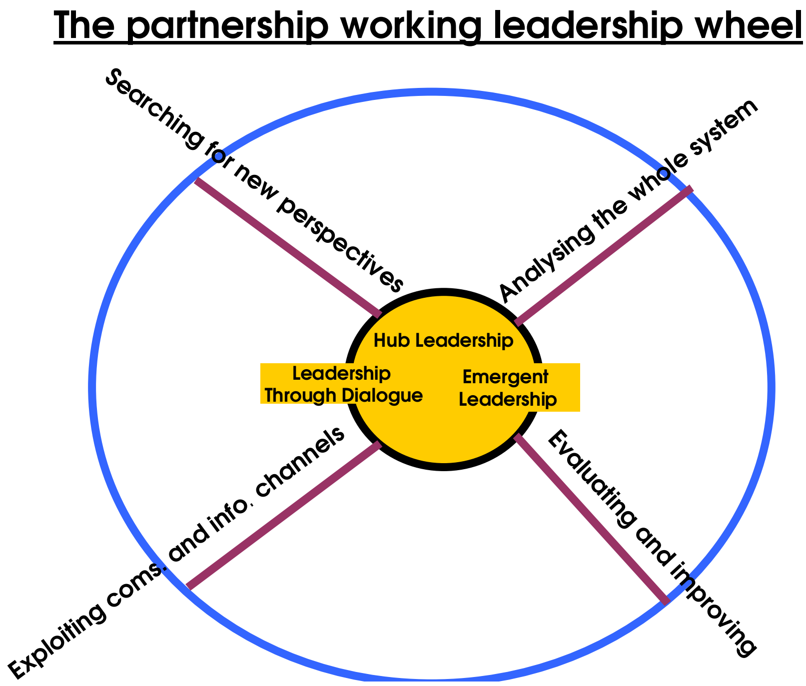
Partnership Working Case Studies **www.renewal.net**

Management and Organisational Behaviour – L J Mullins

www.partnerships.org.uk

Charles M Lines **02.04.07 (amended 13.09.09)**

Appendix 1: The Nexus Active Leadership Model represented visually as a Partnership Working Leadership Wheel



The components of the Nexus Active Leadership Model can be visualised as a Partnership Working Leadership Wheel.

At the hub of the wheel are the three leadership approaches. These interact with each other to provide the power that drives the partnership wheel forwards.

Radiating out from the hub of the wheel are the four spokes of supporting activities. These not only maintain the structural integrity of the partnership wheel, but also transfer power from its hub to its outer edge.