

Heather Maitland considers the sometimes tricky relationships between arts practitioners and their community partners, and offers some tips for keeping professional relationships on the right track.

The art of collaboration

When did you last check the health of your relationship? Here's a litmus test, Cosmo-style quiz:

You like Top Gear and your partner likes cookery programmes. What do you do?

- Give your partner the channel changer – it's more peaceful that way
- Give your partner the channel changer – they'll owe you one
- Give your partner the channel changer – but refuse to talk to them for the rest of the evening
- Buy another TV

Buying that extra TV sounds like a simple solution, but is it really such a good idea to be sitting in separate rooms all evening? In a healthy relationship the give and take goes almost unnoticed, but how do we create work partnerships where the compromises necessary for collaboration come as easily? Give and take within a partnership is dependent on commitment; commitment is dependent upon trust and trust doesn't happen by itself. It needs working on – particularly with the kind of partnerships with community groups so important for audience development.

Doing vs planning

My ongoing research into the way that arts partnerships and collaborations work has underlined for me the extent to which arts professionals are 'doers'. As corporate guru John Harvey Jones once said, "Planning is an unnatural process; it is much more fun to do something. And the nicest thing about not planning is that failure comes as a complete surprise rather than being preceded by a period of worry and depression." As a result, I don't think we do enough thinking and planning about our relationships. And those who do, feel guilty. Here's one of the members of new music consortium, Sound Circuit: "We didn't achieve much in the first year but it allowed the group to gel. It was my biggest worry, but people stuck with it and since year two we haven't looked back."

Getting it right

The Young Foundation has just published a report that highlights how difficult it is for the people who make things happen in their communities to work with people like us.¹ These community champions usually become active because they are unhappy about the way things are and go into battle to change them. They blame the people with the power and money for not fixing things before. And that includes us. Building trust is therefore doubly important.

Quite often though, the time limits placed on project funding means that there is no time to build the partnership before the activity has to start. Some organisations do develop relationships with potential partners beforehand, even involving them in decisions about what is needed, and putting together the funding application. But this has drawbacks too. One arts marketer told me, "We got



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everyone on board and then discovered that our Director's priorities had changed and he wanted us to put the project on the back burner. This has wrecked relationships and it's going to be a long time before they'll want to have anything to do with us again." To the community partners, it must feel like being jilted at the altar.

Trust is key

Here's another litmus test for relationships:

Your partner left a wet bath towel on the bed this morning. What's your reaction?

- Sympathetic – they must have been in a rush to get to work
- Exasperated – how lazy can they get?
- Resigned – this is normal
- Cross – do they think you're their mother?

Trust is so important in sustaining relationships and work partnerships because, when partners trust each other, if one of them behaves 'badly' the other makes excuses for them. I've been watching one collaboration deteriorate rapidly because of a lack of trust. This springs from the imbalance of power between the partners. The group was brought together by a funder to explore new ways of working. Only a couple of the partners bought into the agenda from the start, and they have been determined to make the project work, talking and meeting independently. But, by doing this, they alienated the

other partners following reluctantly along. The sources of resentment are many and varied: the name those two partners gave to the project (behind their backs the others refer to it by a nickname based on one of their first names); how they decided who should be partners; how they allocated roles to everyone else; the way that they have imposed their own terminology; their control of the meeting agendas and consequent refusal to discuss any areas of contention; and the lack of consultation about how decisions should be acted on. This partnership has not long to live.

Making it work

The solutions to situations such as this are generally so simple – boring, even:

- facilitate meetings properly so everyone gets a say and feels valued
- circulate papers well in advance so it's not just those who can think on their feet or who have privileged information that are able to contribute to discussions
- talk openly and honestly about terminology, structures and processes, ways of working, communication methods and leadership.

Some experts, though, believe that this kind of highly directive leadership is sometimes appropriate. They call it "collaborative thuggery". They say it depends on whether the partners have overtly agreed that this is how they want to be led and are still happy with the situation; whether the partnership is achieving anything; whether the leader can cope with the workload; and whether the group could cope if that leader left.

In writing 'Greater than the sum of its parts', Anne Roberts and I looked at 18 partnerships within the arts. From this, we can offer our own top tips for sticky relationships:

- talk about things openly and honestly
- deal with power imbalances
- clarify roles
- be transparent about what each member expects
- be transparent about what the group expects
- if necessary draw up written guidelines
- don't avoid conflict: it shows people care. ²

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'Greater than the sum of its parts: a joined up guide to working in groups' is available to download free at www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications

¹Maitland, H. and Roberts, A. (2006) Greater than the sum of its parts: a joined up guide to working in groups, Arts Council England, p34

²Bacon, N. (2007) Transforming Neighbourhoods: lessons from local work in fifteen areas, The Young Foundation

³Huxham, C. and Vangen, S. (2005) Managing to collaborate: the theory and practice of collaborative advantage, Routledge, p79

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