



Managing Effectively in a Networked World

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Recent public-sector research points to nine key management skills, values, and attitudes essential to success in managing partnerships.

In an era of globalization, devolution, decentralization, “new governance,” advanced information and communications technology, and the growing complexity of public problems, public-private partnerships have become an increasingly popular vehicle for delivering services and generating solutions to our most pressing societal problems. Others have already discussed the growing use of partnership arrangements and looked at their benefits. This article is interested in something else—elaborating on the specific skill sets managers need to excel in this increasingly decentralized, collaborative, and networked environment. On the basis of in-depth interviews with over two dozen educational partnership directors, we detail the nine key management skills, values, and attitudes essential to success in managing partnership arrangements.

Competing Values

Public-private partnerships have emerged as a vital tool in the delivery of public services and addressing important societal concerns. These partnerships inevitably pose new challenges for the public- and private-sector managers involved. This is due not only to the inherent complexity of such arrangements, but also to the fact that the managers engaged in intersectorial arrangements often find themselves working

with colleagues who, at least initially, do not speak the same “language” or share the same set of incentives or experiences.

Academics and practitioners alike have thus discovered that managing in non-hierarchical, multiplayer collaborative settings is, in many respects, different from and more challenging than managing in single, autonomous, hierarchical organizational settings. As a result, key players understand that managerial techniques and skills designed for the traditional command-and-control hierarchical administration need to be modified to succeed in collaborative partnership settings.

A potentially useful framework for understanding the managerial skills, values, and attitudes important for public-private partnerships is a method Richard L. Edwards and others call the “competing values approach.” This analytical framework posits that public and nonprofit managers, confronted by a series of competing values or demands pulling them in many directions concurrently, must play multiple roles and have multiple sets of skills. More specifically, the framework posits two dimensions in organizational contexts from which competing orientations or values flow: (1) flexibility versus control and (2) internal versus external. Owing to the interplay of these dimensions in organizational settings, administrators need four distinct sets of management skills:

- ◆ *Boundary-spanning.* Defined by environments that are “flexible” and “external” in orientation, these skills are consistent with the managerial roles of innovator and broker, and concentrate on envisioning change and acquiring resources.
- ◆ *Human relations.* Defined by environments high in “flexibility” and oriented to the “internal,” these skills are consistent with the managerial roles of mentor and facilitator, and focus on developing human resources and facilitating interaction.
- ◆ *Coordinating.* Defined by the “control” and “internal” dimensions, these skills are consistent with

the managerial roles of monitor and coordinator, and focus on information management and the maintenance of organizational structure.

- ◆ *Directing.* Defined by environments oriented to the “external” and high on “control,” these skills are consistent with the managerial roles of producer and director, and concentrate on planning, goal setting, and providing direction.

To what extent are these sets of skills necessary for managing effectively in networked settings? And in what combinations? Are any other sets of skills instrumental in the management of partnerships? To answer these questions, empirical research is needed that explores the precise set of skills, values, and attitudes that make managers in the field effective in such settings. Our study aims at shedding light on this issue.

Voices from the Field

For our study, we conducted semistructured, in-depth telephone interviews with twenty-seven partnership coordinators or directors. All were heavily involved in formal, sustained partnerships between K–12 public schools and private for-profit or nonprofit organizations in the United States. Because of their relatively long history and widespread use, multisectorial educational partnerships are an excellent setting for gleaning advice from a set of practitioners having considerable, sustained experience in dealing with the managerial challenges posed by the collaborative environment.

To select practitioners to interview for the study, we employed intensity or elite sampling, approaching participants because of their experiential expertise or authority. Specifically, we recruited participants from the Partnership Directors Network, an affiliate of the National Association of Partners in Education, a nationwide, multisectorial membership organization dedicated to improving the number, quality, and scope of public-private educational partnerships. Seventeen of the participants worked for K–12 public school systems, while ten worked in partnering nonprofit organizations. The great majority had a role in the partnership as either partnership director or coordinator; of the seventeen public-sector interviewees, eight were superintendents, five were assistant superintendents, and three were directors for school and community relations. They were also an experienced and well-educated group: 44 percent had twenty-five or more years of pro-

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essional working experience, and 41 percent had ten years or more of experience dealing specifically with public-private partnerships.

To elicit their recommendations, we initially asked about the kinds of skills, values, and attitudes or orientations people like them—partnership directors or coordinators—must have to be successful or effective. When necessary and appropriate, we asked probing questions to encourage participants to elaborate on their thoughts.

To come up with our final set of recommendations, we followed an inductive approach throughout the analysis stage (for an overview, see Creswell). In plain English, after transcribing the interviews, we coded the answers via an analysis of the patterns and categories found implicit in the data. We did not impose these categories prior to data collection but generalized them through careful analysis of the interview material.

The Nine Cs

In the following subsections, we elaborate on the nine discrete categories of managerial competencies that emerged from our analysis. In line with our inductive approach, we describe, explain, and elaborate on these categories (in order of popularity) using specific examples from the interview data. Through a concerted and continuous effort, we aimed for what Weiss calls the “inclusive integration” of the interview material throughout the analysis, presentation, and discussion of the findings.

Communication Skills

The highest priority skill, cited by twenty-five of twenty-seven respondents, was the ability to communicate effectively. Within this broad category, the interviewees focused on various elements. Several focused on the ability to “spread the word” and serve as a type of public relations agent for the partnering organizations; for instance, one practitioner noted that it was essential to be a “communicator” within the community: “I am always going out, with any kind of method that I can use, for spreading the word about the partnership program. I am basically the public relations agent for the program to speak to groups, to go on TV, to do the radio, anything that is necessary to spread the word about our partnerships.”

Another group of respondents, as seen in the following interview excerpt, concentrated on the importance of communication style and tools:

“Communication is also important in terms of follow-up, realizing that you may actually even need various forms of communication. You have to find out right from the get-go [whether] this person wants to follow that up by e-mail, fax, phone call, or whatever. So, the style and the tools that you use for your communication [are very important].”

Third, respondents highlighted the partnership coordinator’s abilities in terms of the presentation of information: “You have to be able to deal with all the different protocols. I think you need to be a very strong communicator, both orally and in writing. And you have to be able to take the information you collect and put it in such a way that it shows people that they are making a difference.”

Connectivity and Connective Skills

The second most-frequently cited category of managerial competencies, noted by twenty-one respondents, concentrated on partnership coordinators’ ability to connect with a broad array of constituents. As one partnership director noted, “I am constantly networking [and] constantly matchmaking. It is a matter of knowing what is going on in the community and pairing it with what is going on in the schools.”

This is in line with a large literature that stresses the importance of social networking skills in business, government, politics, and the nonprofit sector. Among the benefits that accrue from successful networking, as noted by the following interviewee, is that it acts as glue, which can bind the diverse organizations involved in multisectorial partnership arrangements: “You are the go-between [in] two different worlds, and you have to find ways to connect them and keep them connected.”

Several respondents noted a third benefit, such as the following interviewee, who stressed that connectivity was important for helping “to recruit prospective adopters” and facilitate the development of the partnership: “At the beginning of the partnership, I serve as the facilitator to help the schools verbalize ... what their needs are and to look at the adopters and see what their resources are and try to help them find a way to match those two.”

Collaborative Attitude and Skills

Not surprisingly, given the nature of the partnerships, the third most-frequently cited competency (noted by eighteen respondents) centered on the ability and disposition to work “collaboratively.” One practitioner made it the top priority: “Well, number one ... is teamwork. I think you have to know how to work with teams. ... You have to be a collaborator.” The same interviewee stressed how crucial compromise and consensus-building are to the collaborative enterprise: “You have to be a consensus maker ... You ... just can’t go in with your ideas; you have to go in and exchange ideas, come forth with common ground. And as we develop beliefs for every single one of our partnerships, this is very, very important ... I have to take from both sides and help them mold together ... the belief statement and a vision.”

Others echoed this sentiment in stressing the degree to which flexibility and empathy are essential for working collaboratively with the various stakeholders involved in successful partnership arrangements: “I think the ideal person for a job like this would be diplomatic and flexible. Because you are dealing with people often whose primary focus is not the partnership; it may be the second, third, or fourth thing on their list of ... job responsibilities. Meanwhile, it is your primary focus, so you have to be understanding and flexible.”

Convening and Coordinating Skills

Because the partnership members often do not see each other regularly, almost two-thirds of our practitioners stressed the importance of what we call “convening and coordinating” skills. The first element, as stated by one participant, is the role as “a convener, bringing partners together on both sides periodically.” The “coordination” element also flows from the decentralized, more horizontal nature of these partnerships. Several interviewees, such as the following, stated that such work often constituted a large portion of their day-to-day work: “[You are] sometimes half an event planner and half a journalist.” Others noted that it was important to “be able to juggle multiple tasks at once. Be able to plan and run meetings as well as big events.”

Congeniality and Collegiality

A complement to the networking skills noted earlier is the ability “to get along and easily establish rapport with people.” In fact, more than half the survey participants mentioned the capacity and disposition to

deal with people in a congenial and collegial manner. For some, these more “soft” skills are paramount: “Well, number one in the skill area, you need people skills. Be able to meet people that you don’t know and establish a relationship.” A salient finding in our analysis is that congenial and outgoing dispositions appear to deliver clear benefits to the partnership; for example, one participant stressed, “You need to be a person that relates well to other people and enjoys other people. Because that is what develops your program—relationships with people. ... [P]ersons with nice, warm personalities are much more likely to bring people on.”

Caring for and Championing Clients

Just under half of the study’s participants focused on the inherent caring and compassion of the partnership coordinator. One interviewee’s description of her own motivations highlights the importance of the innate passion one brings to his or her work:

Well, caring about children and really enjoying them like I do [is critical]. I tutor either in a homework club, or individually ... every year. And that is the high point of my week. So, I like the little kids, they are so cute. ... [You should try to] change a life. Advocate ... for children and adults. One population I really enjoy is our at-risk teens. I think that is a huge challenge. And I am ... interested in that area.

In short, several participants made an explicit connection between caring and the passion one brings to the job. The implication is that it is passion that will energize other participants and help propel much of the positive work of the partnership. Indeed, some noted it as a fundamental prerequisite:

You ... have to have a passion for this. And you have to have a commitment that is beyond anything else that you are doing. I think it is critical that there is a tremendous energy and passion for what you do ... It needs to be an individual who has the ability to empower others to share the same vision. ... It needs an individual that not only has the passion and energy, [but also] the ability to create that in others to build those relationships.

Coaching and Consulting Skills

Thirty-seven percent of the partnership coordinators we interviewed cited the importance of coaching and consulting skills. One respondent described her work this way: “I am constantly supporting the coordinators at the schools by continually teaching them an easier, better way to do it.” This essentially “training”

role was echoed by another coordinator who maintained that “I also consider myself a trainer ... I am responsible for the training of all of the coordinators.”

Others stressed the importance of helping coach potential partnerships in the development stage, as in the following excerpt where the director argues for the importance of acting

“primarily as a coach for the school coordinators ... I try to serve them as a resource. I get calls daily on, you know, ‘we have got a call from this business, they want to be a partner, but we have nowhere to use them,’ ... sometimes I go out to the site and meet with the school coordinator and the business coordinator and help them discover some mutually beneficially ways that they can work together. So, I am kind of the resource person, I coach them through something; I try to create the handbook, but also serve as a guide for them.”

Put in different terms, many of our study’s practitioners see an important knowledge management role in their jobs. This is perhaps not surprising given the novice’s lack of familiarity with how partnerships work in the schools and the for-profit and nonprofit organizations. This does, however, stress how managerial competencies are different in the multisectorial collaborative environment.

Creativity

Slightly under one-third (eight) of the interviewees listed a creative and entrepreneurial orientation as one of the essential characteristics of partnership directors: “You have to be entrepreneurial in the sense that you grow something out of circumstances that may seem infertile for a partnership.” A recurring theme throughout the interviews was how creativity was important given that most potential participants might not be familiar with partnerships or necessarily know where opportunities exist for collaborative efforts. One participant thus argued that it is essential for partnership directors to have the following traits:

“Forward-thinking, visionary ... They need to be looking ahead at what are the upcoming issues, and in my case education, and what are the burning issues in the community, and be thinking ahead about the potential partnerships so that it can be tilling the soil and planting the seeds for that kind of relationship to grow. So, I think they need to be looking ahead, always planning, and forward-thinking. ... Innovative. Not happy with the status quo, but always looking at ways to creatively make things better through partnerships. So, it may not be a partnership that has ever been developed before, but it does not

mean we cannot start one now! So, innovation is probably critical.

Creativity also helps with the public relations role of the partnership coordinator: “I think it also requires a creative person, always coming up with new ideas to keep the excitement there. You never want a partnership to get dull. You never want the public to forget about the partners program. So ... you have to be creative and find new ways to entice them, and to also inform them about what is going on.”

Credibility

Last, 30 percent of the partnership coordinators we interviewed stressed how credibility was a key trait of managers who wish to be successful in collaborative environments. As one interviewee noted, “You need to be reliable. If people can’t depend on you, they would just not be involved with you. That to me, what I see as the primary ... People need to be able to trust you and feel comfortable with you.” In fact, our practitioners were well aware of the instrumental benefits that can accrue from credibility and, conversely, the harm that can be done when credibility and trust are lacking:

“There is an old saying ... ‘people give to people.’ Therefore, if you are not an individual that is visible in the community with an unblemished reputation ... and a person that people generally like, a person that is trustworthy, and builds relationships, builds consensus, [then] chances are [people] are not giving anything to that.”

In effect, credibility is important from a fund-raising, resource-development perspective. As noted by the following interviewee, it is also critical for the successful implementation of the partnership arrangement at the school level:

“[As a partnership coordinator, I need to be] well-respected, both within and without the organization. ... If I don’t have a good reputation and I am not respected by the school’s staff, no matter what I try to do or to say when I go in there, they won’t listen. So, they need to be credible within their organization, and be well respected within the community and the schools ... Follow through: do what you say you are going to do.”

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, awareness is growing among scholars and practitioners alike of the challenges posed by the increasingly collaborative, decentralized, and multisectorial environment in which twenty-first century public managers operate. At the same time, little

empirical research has been done on what constitutes the basis for managerial expertise and competence in multiorganizational, multisectorial networks, partnerships, and alliances. For this reason, we went straight to the source and interviewed twenty-seven public-private partnership coordinators.

As stated previously, these experienced practitioners identified nine key skills, values, and attitudes that partnership directors must have to be successful, which we characterize as the nine Cs of effective partnership management:

- ◆ Communication skills
- ◆ Connectivity and connective skills
- ◆ Collaborative attitude and skills
- ◆ Convening and coordinating skills
- ◆ Congeniality and collegiality
- ◆ Caring for and championing clients
- ◆ Coaching and consulting skills
- ◆ Creativity
- ◆ Credibility.

A comparison between the nine Cs that emerged from our data and the four sets of skills identified by the advocates of the competing values approach shows an interesting pattern. The competencies as perceived by partnership practitioners fall predominantly in the category of “human relations skills” (communication skills, connective skills, collaborative skills, congeniality and collegiality, and coaching and consulting skills) and to a lesser extent, in the category of “boundary-spanning skills” (creativity and credibility). By contrast, no competency revealed by our study can be clearly identified with the category of “directing skills,” and only one (convening and coordinating) falls into the category of “coordinating skills.”

Such a pattern suggests that effective management in networked settings is more about ensuring the flexibility of the partnership and the commitment of partners than maintaining control and maximizing output. One of the competencies (caring for and championing clients) does not fall into any of the four sets of man-

agement skills identified by the competing values approach. It is, however, an important competency inasmuch as it highlights the value of supporting the mission and purpose of the partnership; in the case of education partnerships, it is ultimately about caring for and championing our children. In a setting where hierarchical authority is absent, a focus on mission may effectively guide managers in their navigation of the relatively uncharted waters of multisectorial, multiorganizational collaboration.

To succeed in a collaborative environment, managers need to foster this set of competencies. We deliberately refrained from asking these practitioners to distinguish between learnable “skills” and innate personal attributes, dispositions, values, or orientations. We wanted to know instead simply what practitioners themselves thought were the most important competencies for successfully managing in a multiorganizational, multisectorial collaborative environment. As seen from the practitioners’ own words, these competencies involve a mix of “nature” and “nurture,” but managers can certainly improve at least some aspects of their managerial repertoires in each of the nine areas. In the end, it’s clear that managing in a “networked world” requires a different set of managerial competencies; for this reason, inter-organizational collaboration needs to be given more attention in public administration curricula. If the quality of public service is not to suffer, specific and concerted efforts should be undertaken. ❖

References

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We are face to face with our destiny and we must meet it with a high and resolute courage. For us is the life of action, of strenuous performance of duty; let us live in the harness, striving mightily; let us rather run the risk of wearing out than rusting out.

—Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919)