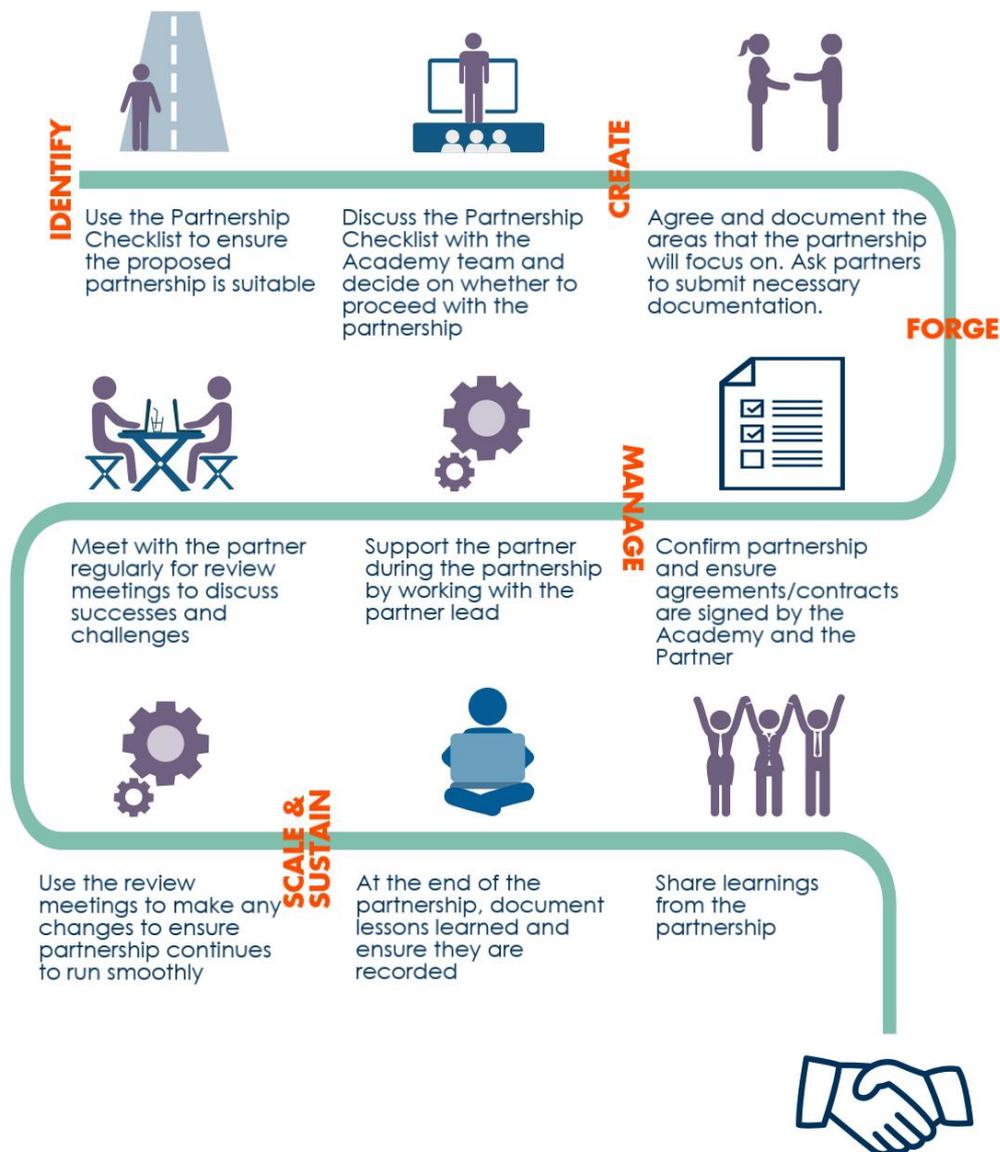


Partnerships: Our Learning stories

Story 1: “Learning from collaboration” - Relationships and expectations

Collaboration is the cornerstone of the Humanitarian Leadership Academy; for the Academy to achieve its mission and mandate it has to work in partnership with many different shapes and sizes of organisations, and it is the Partnership Team's responsibility to ensure the integrity and consistency of these collaborative relationships.

PARTNERSHIP APPROACH



This series of stories explores the Partnership Team's learning from collaboration and takes the team's 'learning log' as its starting point. Each story identifies a particular aspect of collaboration and highlights experiences and insights that can inform and guide future approaches; it is not intended to be a case study on a specific partnership or staff member's experiences.

A focus on relationships and expectations

The focus of this story is the way in which relationships develop and expectations are managed, particularly during the early stages of a partnership. Although the Academy was launched in 2016 with a handful of partnerships already in place, most of our partnerships are still in their early stages, with the majority less than one year old. At the time of writing we have two country level academy centres, and 50 partners, with many more partnerships at the early stages of development. As a result, staff in partnership roles have frequently found themselves picking up work that was initiated by colleagues who have since changed jobs or moved on, and the most pressing task has frequently been to address mis-matched expectations and to strengthen - or in some cases re-build - trust.

Relationships and expectations: challenges in the early days?

We have identified a number of challenges associated with the early stages of collaboration, and in this story we will briefly consider some of the significant learning points with regard to relationships and expectations. Challenges identified include:

- Working with 'inherited partnerships', especially those where partner expectations differ substantially from ours, requiring considerable work and investment to 're-calibrate' the partnership;
- Working with remote partners;
- Working with smaller partners where the balance in power is marked and there are unspoken dependencies or expectations (of the Academy) from the smaller partners;
- Working with partners from outside the humanitarian sector.

'Inherited' partnerships?

In many cases, we find ourselves having to work with partners that have already been identified by colleagues that have since changed jobs or moved on. Some of these partnerships may be at or beyond an agreement stage – either way this presents a unique set of challenges for staff who have to quickly familiarise themselves with the context and back-story to the relationship, and then rapidly establish rapport and build trust with their counterpart/s. One of the hardest challenges to overcome here is where unrealistic expectations have been set (on either side) by staff no longer closely associated with the partnership, leaving current staff the job of re-setting expectations while preserving the partnership.

The challenge of making an 'inherited' partnership work is not unique to the Academy, or indeed to the humanitarian sector. However, it is more common for newly established organisations that are growing quickly to find collaboration a challenge, as jobs and work-plans tend to change frequently and unpredictably. Collaboration therefore requires regular and transparent communication between all stakeholders, and the breakthroughs that have emerged can be attributed in part to regular, open communication, and courage (on the part of Academy staff) to address difficult issues that were perhaps being ignored.

Remote partners

Working with remote partners presents its own unique set of challenges, not least in terms of establishing a working relationship and developing the rapport required without regular opportunity to meet face to face. The nature of the Academy's work means that partners are often based a long way from the Academy centres or the global office. Even where partners are based in the same country, there are often practical constraints that limit the opportunity for face to face interaction, and these include lack of transport infrastructure, travel restrictions or limited resources (time and money).

'Remoteness' can result in 'difficult' issues that need to be discussed being put to one side or ignored, in favour of other 'easier' agenda items; Progress can also be slow or faltering in the absence of face to face encounters (which create a different sense of accountability) and mismatches in expectations can linger or even increase over time.

Smaller partners

Our relationship with smaller partners is also an area where there has been considerable learning, much of it related to understanding power and how the power dynamic [imbalance] impacts trust-building and open communication. Where sub-grants are involved (particularly where there are grants to smaller partners and the Academy is essentially a 'donor') then our staff have had to work hard to establish clear lines of communication and to ensure that the partnership is based on shared expectations and a sound mutual understanding of what each partner brings to the collaboration.

Partners from outside the humanitarian sector

Partnerships with organisations outside the humanitarian sector are vital for us, particularly with private sector organisations such as technology firms, academic institutions such as universities, and implementation partners such as local government. However, learning to collaborate with organisations that often have very different ways of working, whether at a governance and decision-making level or at a practical local-implementation level, is an ongoing challenge for us.

It is perhaps these partnerships – the ones with non-humanitarian partners such as universities and governments – that require the greatest reserves of energy and patience on the part of the Partnerships Team, for while they hold the key to massive impact and present transformational learning opportunities for huge numbers of individuals, public sector organisations can also be somewhat bound by complicated and extensive administrative procedures and an inability to change quickly. Sign off procedures can be elaborate, and involve many stakeholders, meaning decisions take time to materialise.

The challenging funding environment for public sector organisations such as local government and universities over the last few years also appears to have resulted in the Academy being seen as a potential donor or source of funding, rather than a collaboration partner. In some cases this mismatch of expectations has taken some time and effort to overcome, and later in this story we look at how this delicate situation has been handled by our staff.

Achieving breakthrough?

All our staff - particularly those in 'partnership' focused roles - have a responsibility to understand our approach to collaboration and to model collaborative behaviours in their day to day work. It is clear that establishing a successful partnership, and collaborating effectively cannot be attributed

to a single specific competence (whether skill or behaviour) or activity and in fact, each example of a breakthrough demonstrates the multi-disciplinary expertise of managing partnerships.

Moreover, there are clearly other factors that determine whether a collaboration achieves a breakthrough, and these include the involvement of leadership (in both partners) and on occasions there are other external factors which can create a climate for collaboration and offer incentives for collaboration.

Managing partnerships– a multi-disciplinary skillset

In the early stages of a collaborative relationship, partnership leads have to be on high alert and especially sensitive to the spoken and unspoken / written and unwritten communications and to the behaviours of all those involved in the partnership. Arguably they need to continue in this state of alertness, but the point here is that in the initial phase of the relationship there are a number of challenges that could derail, damage or even destroy the partnership and its collaborative potential.

We know that issues that are ignored in a collaboration, (and these could be different expectations, emails or messages left unanswered, decisions delayed, high volumes of paperwork, impenetrable legal documents) tend to result in a deterioration in the main relationships. There is a common theme in the examples of partnerships that had developed successfully: in effect, success directly related to individuals having chosen to confront the issues that needed to be addressed - in this case mis-matched expectations - and in so doing demonstrating a unique blend of humility and courage. Humility in the sense that where expectations were mis-matched (whether raised inadvertently or through ignorance) then our staff have apologised, and courage in the sense that despite misunderstandings, (or even frustration and animosity), our staff have restated the vision for the partnership and clearly and confidently articulated the necessary next steps.

The other notable aspect underpinning success is the way in which key partnerships have been consciously 'nurtured' by individual staff members: Our staff have been able to draw on their past technical and professional experience, (often accumulated over many years and through their work experience to date), and use collaboration success stories and descriptions of how similar challenges have been overcome in the past, to negotiate a common understanding and shared expectations. Our staff have also chosen to pro-actively leverage their social capital, i.e. they have proactively made reference to the different contacts and networks they have within the partner or the sector, to demonstrate credibility or to persuade these contacts to influence counterparts within the collaboration. And finally, this conscious nurturing has included the kind of 'shuttle diplomacy' often associated with high level government representatives as our staff 'just got out there' and invested considerable time in face to face meetings with partner representatives in order to accelerate the trust-building process, and 'thrash out' different expectations in order to arrive at a common and shared understanding.

Effectively managing a partnership also involves being a visionary and metaphorically 'painting a picture of successful collaboration' so that the individuals look forward to that and thus beyond their momentary frustration or current obstacles and frustrations. In real terms it is about being an excellent (and patient) communicator: able to articulate the benefits of collaboration in a clear and compelling manner and frame these as incentives on both an individual, corporate and sectoral level. And then patiently continuing to encourage and facilitate the partnership towards achieving the shared vision.

Partnering with smaller organisations and/or non-humanitarian organisations

As we noted, partnering with smaller and/or non-humanitarian organisations presents a unique set of challenges for the Humanitarian Leadership Academy. However, as the Academy has examples of Local Authorities and Universities which both demonstrate, where there is a clear and compelling vision, plenty of determination and stamina, and a willingness to persevere through the twists and turns of the partnership and very different business processes, breakthroughs can be achieved.

The particular example of the partnership with a Local Authority highlights the need for flexibility on the part of our staff (in terms of being able to meet face to face, and go back and forth to agree expectations and responsibilities), and it demonstrates the benefits of 'proving collaboration' at a small [county] scale, in order to make the case for scaling up and involving more and bigger partners. Partnerships like this offer a manageable scope of work, with a reasonable level of risk.

On the other hand, the example of the partnership with the University has been an eye-opener for our staff in terms of what it takes to collaborate effectively with academic institutions. Expectations around funding, accountabilities and sign off have taken time to navigate and it also took time to realise that the collaboration's success was dependent on both an institutional commitment to the vision as well as individual and departmental commitments.

The critical importance of leadership, and the involvement of those at the very top

At certain points, especially in the early stages of collaboration, we are reminded that there is no substitute for the presence and involvement of a senior staff member, and in an the example of a partnership with a national member of a large INGO it is notable that breakthrough was achieved when our CEO and the organisation's Secretary General were able to build on the hard work of their respective key staff and cement the partnership through their own face to face meetings in late 2016 and again in early 2017.

Senior buy-in (as a pre-requisite for a collaboration's success) is often referred to in passing as vital, yet it is not always clear what this means or translates to in practice. In the example of the Academy and this national society, it meant ensuring the senior leaders had a full briefing, and were able to reference the work already done by their staff, and then choosing to invest their time personally in meeting and discussing, sharing the vision for the partnership, taking time to listen to each other, and understanding what effectively partnering would entail for both organisations.

Other important factors in the early stages of collaboration

From time to time external factors can encourage collaboration. We will return to this theme in future stories but for now it is worth highlighting the progress made (in terms of collaboration) by Academy centres in two countries: Kenya and the Philippines. Both these locations have been the focus of much discussion by humanitarians about how to shift power (from global entities to local actors) and how to collaborate in emergency preparedness and disaster response (particularly with regard to the impending famine in the Horn of Africa and the recent cyclones and typhoons affecting the Philippines and South East Asia).

At a time when humanitarian activities are subject to such close scrutiny, our staff have been able to draw on their knowledge and experience and have brought their insights to bear on the partnerships they have been involved with, and there is little doubt among team members that this, combined with what might be called a 'climate for collaboration', has helped 'force the pace' of collaboration, and incentivise collaborative behaviours.

In summary – learning through experience

Over the last six to twelve months, the partnerships team has had to draw on its individual and collective experience and wide range of skills and expertise in order to consolidate important relationships and deliver on ambitious strategic goals. The net result has been ‘doing a lot of things at the same time...’ In other words, when establishing a collaborative relationship and ‘setting and managing expectations’, there is no single action that solves the issue – rather it is about thoughtfully applying a range of tools, approaches, actions and behaviours in careful combination, to address the issues in hand.

In the conversations about partnerships and collaboration, some team members described their learning curve as being steep, while others explained how they quickly realised they needed to draw on their deep experience and adapt their approach to the immediate and pressing needs of the partnership. Knowing - whether intuitively or by a process of deduction – what a partnership needs in the moment is a key skill for managing partnerships. Being able to ask oneself ‘what do I need to be now?’ or ‘what does the collaboration require of me now?’ and use the answer to guide the next steps is a vital skill.

The learning log provides a useful summary of the challenges faced. Looking forward, we will also document the collaboration breakthroughs and high points in addition to the inevitable frustrations and challenges.

When thinking about how frustrations or challenges were overcome, questions that might help include:

- At what point did a way forward emerge?
- Who took the initiative to have the important conversation?
- What happened next? Who initiated or catalysed the next action?
- Did the challenge arise again? How was it dealt with next time around?
- What did we need to invest to achieve breakthrough, in terms of time or money?