



LANGUAGE, CONTEXT AND TIME

Three issues at the heart of partnering remotely

During the design lab...

...we held three brief sessions (15 minutes each) with participants working in pairs and holding a 'back to back' conversation (sitting with their backs to each other). The intention was to mimic long-distance conversations where those conversing were not in the same place and having to listen and speak with the constraints that remote conversations can bring.

With the first (language) the pairs were invited to start by using their own first language and to record (in their individual journals) how it felt not to understand or be understood and how much harder it can be to operate in a second or third language. After this, to go on to a more general exploration about the issue and impact of language in partnering remotely.

With the second (context) the pairs were invited to try and convey as vividly as possible their typical partnering context (head office, field etc) so the other could understand the drivers, constraints and possibly very different set of circumstances in which they each had to operate and see how well they could convey this in words rather than images.

With the third (time) the pairs were asked to explore the issue from a range of perspectives considering, for example, how often 'lack of time' is used an excuse for poor partnering, slow delivery, lack of contact etc. and also explore examples of where time had been a key influencer with regard to a partnership's effectiveness and in what ways.

What follows are the 'post it' note comments participants shared from their reflections after the three conversations.





LANGUAGE

Language as a key issue:

- Careful / precise use of language is critical to all partnerships but even more so in remote partnering
- Non native speakers have a more restricted repertoire and this can cause critical misunderstandings
- Language can reinforce difference and isolation – can become a ‘blank’ communication
- Being understood is very important to being known and acknowledged
- Should be addressed up front as a key issue to make sure everyone is understood and able to say what they want / need to
- The dominance of English in partnerships worldwide has a major impact on power dynamics
- The risk of those speaking the dominant language having too much ‘say’ in who sits at the table

Ideas for doing things differently:

- Check out and check often that speakers are really being understood
- Avoid cultural use of language that may not work in other cultures (irony, sarcasm etc.)
- Co-create a non-linguistic motif / image to communicate in other ways
- Be very conscious of the culture, norms and use of technology across diverse contexts / sectors
- Cultivate partners’ capacity for diplomacy especially in feeding back with partners
- Find a ‘common language’ using music, visuals and other forms of communication

“Language makes what we feel and think visible. Until we ‘say’ we often can’t ‘see’. The difficulty is often having the courage to speak and the capacity to say things in ways that others can hear”

Specific challenges include:

- Emotional responses eg isolation, uneasiness, sense of being left behind / feeling unimportant
- Loss of accuracy and / or depth
- Risk of misinterpretation / misunderstanding
- Those who start the conversation set the tone and ‘position’ how the conversation will go (making it hard to step away or disagree)
- Heavy reliance on those translating / interpreting – how to check for accuracy?

Potential of language to change things:

- Addressing language barriers can be a ‘door opener’ to addressing real communication challenges and to being honest and open
- Use the opportunity to interrogate the meaning and values underlying choice of words
- Choose partnership-building words, use new terms to change language habits / assumptions



CONTEXT

Context challenges include:	Possible actions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance / language / culture / knowledge • A sense of constraint from not really knowing each others context (gets worse when not spoken about) • The definition of 'success' can be context specific and very different within one partnership • Context can strongly influence both organisational and individual behaviours • Risks may be very different in each partners' context • Transparency can be especially difficult in different contexts and across distance • Many feel very isolated and locked into their context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk analysis and mitigation measures should be context-specific • Always ask each other about context 'rules' and norms and why they are important • Explore and establish what can be challenged and changed and what cannot • Use remote partnering approaches in ways that build sense of connectedness and an individual's authority and confidence to challenge context limitations • Work on the partnering principles together to take account of context constraints and opportunities
Advice:	Building better understanding:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check out assumptions / preconceptions about other partners' contexts • Examine institutional and locational issues in advance of the partnership • Stop using 'context' as an excuse for doing nothing • Fit our plans into the space available and stop complaining about the size / limitations of the space • Build understanding of context so it becomes part of the whole picture of diversity rather than a 'problem to be solved' • Develop skills in 'shuttle diplomacy' • Respond rather than react (makes a big difference) <p><i>"Remember that people won't change unless / until they feel acknowledged and understood"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell each other stories that illustrate / explain context • Develop communication skills (speaking clearly / vividly, listening carefully, checking understanding, using images) • Exchange photos / images (of community, work environment, local newspapers) • Meet (even on line) in each other's context rather than 'half way' <p><i>"Be honest and open about your context. Often the context defines the work and limitations for the partnership. It may be beyond our capacity to change but it is important we understand and work with it"</i></p>



TIME

<p>Time as an indicator of commitment:</p>	<p>Advice:</p>
<p><i>“Taking time to do things carefully / well and committing time to partnership building is a mark of respect for other partners”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How you allocate time to the partnership is a conscious choice about your sense of responsibility, respect and making the partnership a priority • The amount of time allocated is often a good indicator of the value partners give the partnership • The amount of time needed for partnership-building is always underestimated and under-valued • Building trust takes time and cannot be rushed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using time well is a discipline • Think of time as a driver not an impediment • Partners need to be both patient and impatient! • Take time to build confidence and skills of all partners • Factor in some ‘social’ and ‘quality’ time (especially long-distance where this can easily be overlooked) • Take account of partners’ time zone and cultural realities (eg public or religious holidays) • Spend time preparing for remote meetings • Manage time on calls well and creatively • Build in ‘buffer’ time around important calls – don’t always rush to finish
<p>Other issues around time:</p>	<p>Practice using time better:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time can also mean ‘pace’ – ie are things going too fast / too slow • It takes time to get to understand and by the time you understand the situation has changed • Everyone works to different time schedules / expectations • Huge variation in what time people are willing to give • Time zone differences can be very challenging (with some always having to get up in the night to join a call) • Short time frames (‘blind panic’) can be useful in bringing focus, energy, dynamism, movement, results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore different activities that can make the most of time – including social time, using the senses, giving space to get to know each others contexts / constraints / mood etc • Above all, be realistic and enable partners to operate with a good work-life balance – time for sleep, family etc. – when they partner they will be more relaxed and engaged <p><i>“Help partners re-frame time as a friend rather ‘the enemy’ and help partners get better at making time and challenging each other when time is used as an excuse for poor participation?”</i></p>

In addition to these insights, how might this methodology be used with partners in a long-distance partnership?

- Identify a key topic or underlying issue that is having an impact (probably presenting as an unspoken discomfort or challenge) and set aside a specific time to explore (probably quite short and focused sessions, maybe initially in pairs and then shared with the wider group)
- Agree as a group whether there are any lessons / suggestions for how to address any specific challenges in the way the partnership works going forwards
- Perhaps experiment with some options and decide which work best for the group as a whole
- Consider whether these could form the basis of (or be added to) a series of 'principles' that will underpin this partnership going forwards
- Agree whether these should be added in to any collaboration agreement to ensure they are adhered to (and changed when appropriate)
- Use this as a model for the partners to co-create their own version of partnering good practices

