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**Is there a Future for Partnership?**

The next few months will see a renewed focus on partnership – what is it? Does it still have relevance? Can it generate solutions to the critical problems we are now facing with our economy, in our workplaces and with the delivery of services?

There is no doubt that compared with the dire economic conditions of the late 1980s when most of our young people had to emigrate to find a job, the period since the introduction of national partnership has been one of unprecedented economic and social success. Never before have we had so many people living in this country, so many people in employment and so many people enjoying a standard of living which is amongst the highest in Europe.

This successful transformation of our economy can be attributed to a number of factors, including our young, growing and better-educated population, the enormous increase in foreign companies investing here, the improved performance of managers and workers in both the private and public sector and a relatively benign external environment, including our membership of the European Union.

While those factors were extremely important, most people now accept that the underpinning contribution of govern-

ment, unions and employers working together in partnership was a crucial element in our escape from the deep economic, social and political crisis of the 1980s.

They did this most obviously by negotiating wage agreements which injected greater certainty and stability into industrial relations and in turn allowed strong economic growth to be converted into more jobs.

It would be a mistake, however, to see this working together in partnership as referring only to the negotiation of national wage agreements. At a time of conflicting demands on the fruits of economic growth, the partnership process also enabled government and the social partners to reach agreement on difficult economic and social priorities and to support each other in the reform and modernisation of the labour market.

This partnership process, against all the predictions, has continued for over 15 years because the agenda was continuously changed in line with the changing

needs of our economy, our workplaces and of Irish society – from the national debt crisis of the late 1980s, to tackling unemployment in the mid-90s, to more recently, sharing the fruits of growth more fairly. In some key areas, however, such as housing, transport, the health services and childcare, while the process may have anticipated changing needs, it was less than effective in generating solutions.

### New Agenda

So, what agenda do we now need the government and the social partners to work together on? There is no doubt that our prosperity and our achievements of recent years are at a crossroads and so, paradoxically, the agenda may be more complex and even more difficult than in the past.

For a start, the economy is in a critical period of transition with slower growth, many companies facing serious competitive pressures, little or no scope for tax cuts to subsidise wages and growing concerns about the public finances.

At the same time, to safeguard our jobs and living standards for the future, we need to move quickly to a knowledge-based economy and society and to accelerate the shift to higher skilled, high valued-added, high-income jobs with a sustained increase in productivity and R & D.

We also need to improve the delivery of public services and to move beyond the mass production of services to an enabling state that responds more quickly, effectively and efficiently with integrated solutions to the changing needs of people as individuals.

This new but more complex agenda, has significant implications for the private sector, the public sector, our wage bargaining system and indeed for the positioning of the partnership process itself.

### Private Sector

In the case of the private sector, it implies a much stronger focus on the workplace and the management of change with a recognition that co-operative working relationships are the key to higher business performance and a better workplace. This will require a partnership framework that enables managers, employees and unions to work together

to develop an ongoing culture of change, leading to:

- new and more flexible forms of work organisation and management, including team working, that improved productivity and organisational effectiveness and engage people's intelligence, commitment and energy;
- more modern workplaces adapted to the individual needs of people through continuous learning, the promotion of equality and a better balance between work, family involvement and leisure activities.
- innovative financial reward systems (such as gain sharing, profit sharing and employee shareholding) which improve performance, share the gains and recognise that in the modern company the knowledge and ideas of employees and their commitment to change and innovation are as valuable as the capital of shareholders.

### Public Service

In the case of the public service, the new agenda implies a stronger focus on improving the delivery of services and being open to new ways of meeting the diverse and changing needs of people and new ways of supporting a more dynamic flexible economy. It implies a clear recognition that the general public as users of services, be it health, education or transport, for example, are demanding better quality, more customised but integrated services, more information, a better response to complaints and more of a say in how services operate.

Equally, we must recognise that attracting, developing and retaining committed people to deliver these services requires an attractive and dynamic work environment, with opportunities for career development and learning, more of a say in how the job is done, greater equality and better work-life balance.

Achieving continuous adaptation and improvement in the delivery of public services, will require a partnership framework that is capable of addressing how best to move from the current centralist compliant culture to be a greater devolution of authority with scope for local innovation and a stronger focus on the needs of customers.

In the case of public servants as employees and managers, the partnership framework or indeed frameworks for the different sectors, would need to find, especially in the context of implementing benchmarking, new ways of balancing the centralist compliant culture with a greater devolution of authority for people management, employee development, new means of rewarding good performance along with more effective means for dealing with under performance.

### Wage Bargaining

As stated earlier, this new agenda for partnership would also have significant implications for the structure of wage bargaining. Because of our experience of partnership over the past fifteen years, the assumption is often made that the only choice is between a fully centralised pay agreement or no partnership programme. However, as developments in other countries with successful partnership structures such as the Netherlands and Denmark have shown, there are other options.

The key to finding the best option for this country may lie in devising a wage policy and structure that is consistent with firm-level competitiveness, reforms the delivery of public services and reinforces co-operative working relationships with new reward systems as the best way to bring about change and higher performance.

There is no doubt that the government and the social partners should continue to work together to help the country through this period of uncertainty and to consolidate our prosperity for the future. Doing so successfully, however, will require a remodelling of the partnership agenda, a repositioning of the process itself around stronger workplace and sectoral partnerships, and a suitable wage policy to underpin this new direction.

*Peter Cassells  
Executive Chairman*

## Organisational fitness: High performance through partnership

A key objective of the National Centre for Partnership and Performance is to highlight performance in organisations and to identify and promote the factors leading to high performance. Articles elsewhere in this issue of UPDATE, profile a number of Irish companies achieving high performance through partnership type arrangements.

This article explores performance in the light of the framework of “Organisational Fitness” which has been developed by Professor Michael Beer and his team at the Centre for Organisational Fitness at the Harvard Business School<sup>1</sup>.

The concept of organisational fitness is simple and effective because it not only denotes general organisational strategy and competitiveness, but also organisational capability and characteristics such as flexibility, adaptability and speed in responding to change. These latter characteristics are central in today’s environment where businesses must compete on the basis of speed of innovation and responsiveness, high skill, quality and productivity.

This is equally true of organisations in the public sector that must respond to the challenges of supporting national competitiveness and the demands of users for services of higher quality and greater accessibility.

The concept of organisational fitness concerns the question of alignment and essentially asks three questions:

1. **Does the organisation’s capabilities fit the strategy?**
2. **Do the various elements of the organisation fit together?**
3. **Does organisational behaviour fit the culture and the values of the organisation?**

Another way of assessing the relative fitness of the organisation is to apply one of the most enduring frameworks

for organisational effectiveness, the McKinsey 7Ss Framework. Is there organisational alignment across:

- strategy and objectives
- structure
- systems
- staff
- style of leadership
- skills and capabilities
- shared values and culture

Increasingly the focus of current thinking is on what were traditionally described as the “soft issues” such as

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Critical Path to Corporate Renewal’ by Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, published by Harvard Business School Press, in 1990; provides an excellent description of this work. For an overview of the Organisational Fitness programme see [www.orgfitness.com](http://www.orgfitness.com).

culture, staff participation and involvement, leadership and skills capacity. The organisation of the future in seeking to remain “fit” and achieve high performance seeks to find an alignment between all of the different elements, and places as much emphasis on the intangibles in the organisation as on the more tangible areas such as strategy and structures. The concept of an organisation as a system involves our appreciation of the value of people, the importance of organisational culture and dimensions now described as social capital, human capital and relationship capital.

So strong are these so called intangibles that failure to address them leads to what Beer calls ‘silent killers’. The silent killers are the real barriers to strategy implementation and performance and include the following:

#### Silent Killers

- Poor vertical communications
- Poor inter-functional teamwork
- Unclear or conflicting strategic priorities
- An ineffective top team
- Top down or laissez-faire senior management style
- Inadequate management skills/development

While the challenge for organisations in the last decade and particularly in the early 1990s centred around strategy and the extent of “fit” between the organisation and its external environment, the focus now is on the alignment of strategy and building the organisation’s capability to deliver on its strategy.

In Ireland, over the past decade, strategy development and strategic planning have become embedded in organisational practice both in the private and public sectors. For example, strategic

planning in the Civil Service is indeed one of the successes of the Strategic Management Initiative as noted in the in the recently published report *Evaluation of the Strategic Management Initiative* by PA Consulting Group.

However, organisational decision-making is often divorced from its stated strategic objectives and imperatives. The real strategy is:

*‘the stream of decisions that an organisation has taken over time’.*

In many cases this is not the same as that which is presented in the strategy documents!

The development of strategy and the ability of an organisation to successfully plan appropriate strategic direction, therefore, is only the first step in achieving success and building high performance in organisations. The characteristics of high performing organisations now and in the future concern the successful alignment of all the different elements of the organisation and crucially include high levels of adaptability, flexibility and involvement by employers, unions and employees – in essence, a “fit” organisation.

A central feature of the “fit” organisation is the degree of participation and involvement of the workforce. In this sense, in the words of David Guest and Ricardo Peccei “partnership, it seems, is an idea whose time has come.”<sup>2</sup> Effective partnership can underpin the drive to improve organisational fitness as partnership focuses the efforts of all those in organisations on high performance, adaptability and flexibility. Partnership offers a concrete way to develop and improve organisational fitness. It creates more involvement in decision-making, increases awareness of the consequences of those decisions, and insures that this effort creates mutual gain and advantage for all those involved.

In a further development of the 7Ss diagnostic framework, Michael Beer

proposes a framework organisational capacity around 7Cs as follows:

- communication
- commitment
- competence
- conflict management
- creativity and innovation
- co-ordination
- capacity management

There is strong correlation between this framework and the benefits that a partnership approach can bring to organisational performance.

Over the past year, the National Centre for Partnership and Performance has been collecting the evidence from national and international sources. In July 2002, the Centre published guidance on achieving organisational change through partnership including a number of case studies profiling successful partnership initiatives. Among the key benefits to these Irish companies is the ability to anticipate, respond to and manage change and the acceptance by all concerned that change is inevitable.

In this research the capacity to respond to change is allied to increased commitment and better quality ideas and suggestions from the workforce; and a greater emphasis on problem solving and innovation. This enabled these companies lay the foundations for the achievement of high performance. The Centre’s reports also highlighted the level of international evidence, for example John Knell’s research for the Work Foundation in the UK<sup>3</sup>, which supports this link between partnership and performance. Thus, the evidence is now emerging that partnership is a very powerful methodology in building organisational flexibility and adaptability, bringing about change successfully, achieving high performance and becoming “fit” organisations.

*Lucy Fallon-Bryne*  
Director

<sup>2</sup> Guest and Peccei wrote the ‘Partnership Company: Benchmarks for the Future’, published by the IPA: London in 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Managing Best Practice Series, Number 87 *Managing Partnership*, Industrial Society, UK.

## Research and Development

# Changing our Approaches to Change — Partnership in the Irish Workplace

Within the context of over a decade of successful national level social partnership, a consensus has gradually emerged amongst the political parties and social partners regarding the appropriateness of extending partnership-style arrangements to the level of individual workplaces and enterprises.

This article highlights key conclusions from the Centre's recently published case studies and argues that there is potential for all commercial companies and public sector organisations, to learn from the experiences of the four companies in *Working Together – for Change and a Modern Workplace*. In particular, the lessons drawn in relation to the key success factors: commitment for partnership, setting objectives, the interface with industrial relations and the mechanics of the process itself are likely

to apply in various degrees to all organisations with an interest in change and modernisation.

### Achieving Change through Partnership

In *Working Together* the activities and approach to change within four unionised companies, operating in Ireland, were examined. In each of the companies listed in Table 1, partnership is having a significant impact. Partnership underpins organisational change and improvement in areas such as

structure, performance, processes and decision-making, quality of life and employee financial participation.

It is clear that partnership in these companies has two important characteristics:

- It expands the strategic and innovative capacity
- It delivers mutual benefits for both employees and employers.

### Strategic and Innovative Capacity

If the strategic capacity of an organisation is the sum of those able and willing to solve problems then partnership in these companies expands strategic capacity. Employees with relevant expertise eg, electricians and engineers, technicians, housekeeping staff; are drawn into the design stage of problem solving. Employees participate more fully in the decision-making process, enhancing organisational strategic capacity, while making gains through greater employment security, improved conditions and terms and direct financial gains.

In addition, the impact on the innovative capacity of each company is striking. At the very least, there is greater opportu-

TABLE 1 Partnership and Organisational Improvement

	Aughinish Alumina	Tegral Metal Forming	Jurys Doyle	Dairygold
<b>Organisational Structure</b>	Teams	Skill-based system Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)	Empowerment	Autonomous teams Contracting
<b>Performance</b>	Cost competitiveness Process efficiency	Stability Costs	Cost competitiveness Market responsiveness	Enhanced adaptability and flexibility
<b>Decision-making</b>	Participative and inclusive	Monitoring / evaluation team	Workers as problem solvers	Employee involvement
<b>Quality of life</b>	Security of employment Soft skills – training and development	Improved work structures Flexible hours Reduced conflict	Flexible work – job sharing	Security of employment
<b>Financial participation</b>	Under review	Gainsharing	Gainsharing SAYE	Gainsharing

nity for new ideas to be brought to the table for discussion. An employee in one company described his role in problem solving;

*“We become involved early and move quickly to identify what the real problem is, we list options and agree solutions which are of a ‘try it and come back around the table’ variety.”*

The role of unions as a collective voice for workers in this decision-making process is significant. As participation and co-operation has evolved in each company, the relationship between management and unions has also developed. When discussing his role within the company one union official said:

*“In the past, I waited for plans to be passed down from management; then responded to them usually fairly negatively; now I think synthesise views and suggest changes to management.”*

The range of issues now under discussion and the level of information available to unions and individual workers has expanded. All of the companies emphasise that problems and difficulties still remain. However, there is clear commitment to working with partnership, in the words of one shop steward ‘to see just how far partnership can go’.

**Mutual benefits** A second reason why partnership is working and succeeding in these companies is the clear sense that there are mutual benefits which employers and management are willing to share with employees.

**Tegral Metal Forming (TMF)** highlights the mutual and creative nature of the partnership process. Overtime has almost been eliminated at the plant, yet employees’ earnings have not been reduced; there is gainsharing, a flexible approach to work; a focus on involvement and training, and increased concern for employee health and well-being.

Further, there is a strong commitment in all of the companies to the idea the employees should share directly in the financial gains that arise because of union and employee involvement. For

example, the maintenance team at Galtee Pigmeat share in the savings made in relation to annual budgets.

The gains are shared 3:1 on the first g24, 500 and 50:50 for rest. Since partnership commenced in 1993 gains have always been greater than g24, 500.

Financial participation is a complex subject due to the wide variety of schemes that can be established, the complicated taxation policies of government, and site-specific issues. In the coming months the Centre, in association with representational groups for employees and employers, will work to develop further guidance on sharing gains that arise when change is achieved through co-operative means.

### Key Lessons for all Sectors

Working Together provides guidance for companies, unions and employees on the development of partnership. Table 2 provides a summary of the areas in which guidance is offered:

TABLE 2  
Partnership — Guidance from the Unionised Commercial Sector

- Origins of Partnership Initiatives
- How Partnership is Implemented – The Structure Debate
- Getting Started
- The Dynamics of the Process
- Communications Within the Partnership Process
- Training and development
- The Use of Comparative Self-assessment (Benchmarking)
- The Use of External Facilitation in the Partnership Process
- Other Supports for Partnership
- The Relationship Between Partnership and IR
- Monitoring and Evaluating Partnership Initiatives
- Key Success Factors
- Key Barriers to Success
- Key Benefits from Partnership Initiatives

The focus of this research is unionised commercial companies, however it is clear that many of the lessons learned and offered will be useful in other sectors including non-commercial organisations. For example, the research draws attention to key success factors in a number of areas.

### Support and Commitment

Effective partnerships that achieved organisational improvement depended upon and received explicit senior management support and commitment. Further, the role and ability of union representatives to understand and communicate the benefits of partnership to employees was crucial. In all cases, partnership benefited from champions — advocates among employees, management and/ or unions who believed in partnership and its potential. Outside work by facilitators was important in each company, however it seems that the ability to persuade and convince individuals in unions, in senior management and throughout the workforce requires detailed local knowledge.

### Objectives and Benefits

In each company, partnership was linked to clear business objectives which highlighted benefits for all stakeholders. These objectives address specific concerns in relation to the future profitability of the company — organising and planning work, customer service, quality, health and safety and efficiency. They also addressed softer, though no less critical issues, such as the development of trust. In all cases concrete outcomes or ‘early wins’ were important.

### Industrial Relations

Each of the companies had to resolve complex and sensitive issues, such as the relationship and role of industrial relations. They have each worked to integrate industrial relations, wage determination and partnership in a meaningful way. The specifics vary in each case — some ring fence industrial relations issues for an initial period; and in another company unions and management retain the right to validate IR issues. However, a common aspect is that industrial relations and the role of unions are changing in all four companies to reflect a new agenda between employers and employees.

### Structures and Processes

The cases provide useful insights about partnership structure and process. In each case, partnership was customised to suit resource and historical constraints. There is a clear development of partnership, from an early focus on structures and agreements on less contentious issues to a more problem solving focus. Partnership is often adopted in response to a crisis or major organisational challenge. However, in the four case studies it is clear that its real contribution is as a deeply embedded approach to the continuous management of change in complex and competitive environments.

Monitoring, comparative self-assessment, evaluation, feedback, communication strategies and training and education are crucial to sustaining this method of organisational development. The focus is on providing information, which then becomes the basis for further discussion about how to improve activities in the company. Employees in the companies become knowledgeable about where their concerns stand in relation to other parts of the company and to wider economic and competitive issues. They also have sufficient discretion or empowerment to make real improvements in the way they work.

### Conclusion — Changing our Approaches to Change

Partnership as problem solving offers a way to re-connect thinking about how to do things with thinking about what to do. It connects levels of expertise and various roles, for example union expertise, people working in a given area and senior management.

Partnership in this sense does not replace existing structures - it straddles them. Senior managers continue to manage but management as a function takes on new priorities — greater attention is afforded to learning and to co-ordination. However, managers' overarching role and ability to place decisions in a wider context (i.e. policy and design) remains critical. Individual employees may take a broader perspective and work with others but their critical skill remains their ability to carry out particular tasks (i.e. implementation and execution).

In this context, the ability of unions to collate perspectives — as the collective voice of localised expertise — suggests an innovative role, which might be usefully enhanced to the mutual gain of unions, their members and the organisations in which they work.

*Larry O'Connell*  
National Co-ordinator  
Research and Policy Development

# Partnership Structures in Ireland

Partnership as an approach to decision-making and change has been introduced by a large number of Irish companies and public service organisations in recent years. As the cohort of individuals with experience of using partnership-based approaches increases, a sizeable partnership community is developing in

Ireland. In general, the community is made up of full or part-time facilitators of partnership, managers and trade union representatives who chair or sit on Partnership Committees and employees, trade unionists and managers involved in partnership working groups and project teams.

## The Civil Service

In 1996, the government published a strategy for civil service modernisation, Delivering Better Government (DBG) and an action programme, launched as the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI). In 1998, the civil service became the first part of the public service to negotiate and implement a partnership agreement, negotiated between the Dept of Finance, on behalf of the civil service, and the Civil Service Panel of trade unions. It set out the parameters of partnership, described as an ongoing process of participative management and provided for partnership structures at departmental and local level.

1. Each of twenty-eight departments and offices established a Partnership Committee, chaired by the Secretary General. They take each Department's unique staffing profile into consideration and co-opt committee members to ensure all grades are represented. As a result, the size of committees varies between departments. Each committee is supported by a Secretary, generally a member of the Department's HR or Corporate Services team
2. Where necessary, a departmental Partnership Committee with a large or geographically spread staff (e.g. the Dept of Social and Family Affairs) establishes permanent local committees to ensure that partnership is introduced at regional or local level
3. Departmental Partnership Committees also establish sub-groups to research and report on specific issues

Further information can be obtained from the Public Service Modernisation Unit of the Dept of the Taoiseach at 01 – 6194060 or [www.bettergov.ie](http://www.bettergov.ie)

## The Private Sector

A significant level of innovation and experimentation with partnership-based approaches to decision-making has taken place at enterprise level in Irish manufacturing and service industries. Very little partnership activity has taken place at sectoral or industry level. However, the social partners have undertaken a number of innovative projects to promote training and networking between companies interested in partnership as a decision-making approach. Recent examples include:

1. The National Partnership Skillnet, established in 2000 with the support of IBEC and ICTU. It comprised ten large private sector and semi-state companies that network with each other, train and develop employees and managers engaged in partnership activities. Training includes an accredited programme for facilitators, and participation in one of more of the thirteen IBEC/ ICTU Joint Partnership Training Modules. For further information contact Maureen Brogan, IBEC at 01 - 6051697 or [www.ibec.ie](http://www.ibec.ie)
2. SIPTU facilitated its own Skillnet for two years. It comprised ten companies, mostly SMEs, in a variety of sectors, including manufacturing, hospitality and service companies. Fifty participants, including senior managers, union officials, middle and front line managers, union members, employees, networked with each other and completed three training programmes - The Competitive Business Environment, The Changing Work Organisation and Developing Enterprise Level Social Partnership. For further information, contact Ron Kelly, SIPTU at 01 – 4530199.

## The Health Service

The objective of partnership in the health service is to promote a new, active relationship in managing change, characterised by employee participation and consultation, the development of joint objectives, co-operation and trust, and the delivery of patient-focused quality health services. The Health Services National Partnership Forum (HSNPF) was established in April 1999 with 24 management and trade union representatives. The role of the HSNPF is to provide a national level forum within which health service management and trade unions can agree the parameters by which partnership is advanced at regional and local level; to support partnership development and communications and to verify progress in the partnership process.

1. Each health agency employing over 1,000 staff, as well as other specified agencies, can establish a Partnership Committee and recruit a full-time facilitator to support the work of the committee. Currently, there are nineteen facilitators working in the regional health boards and in some of the large teaching hospitals. Each Committee develops an Action Plan for partnership in that sector;
2. Local Partnership Working Groups (LPWG) are the mechanism through which the action plan is addressed by committees at local level. LPWGs research issues and issue recommendations to their Committee, which then agree actions to be taken.

Further information on partnership in the health service can be accessed through the Health Services National Partnership Office at 01 – 6626966 or [www.healthservicenpf.ie](http://www.healthservicenpf.ie)

As well as keeping the partnership community informed of each other's activities and initiatives, the Centre hopes to develop networking between sectors, organisations and individuals interested in innovative approaches to partnership activities. As a first step, the following is a guide to the partnership structures currently in existence in a number of sectors.

## Local Authorities

A Framework for Partnership in the local authorities was launched in March, 1999. It proposes a methodology for employers, trade unions and staff to work together to ensure that the sector's modernisation strategy, Better Local Government, is delivered effectively at organisational level. The objective is to achieve joint ownership by management, unions and staff, leading to the implementation of strategic goals, service delivery objectives and associated action programmes. Partnership structures in the local government sector exist at three levels:

1. The Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) was established to support partnership at local level. LANPAG comprises nine management and nine trade union representatives and provides strategic direction, training and other supports to local partnership committees. The group is currently developing a new three-year strategy for partnership in the local authorities
2. Each of the 34 local authorities has appointed a partnership committee, comprising an equal number of management and trade union representatives. Committees are supported by a full-time facilitator in each authority
3. The Committees establish small task or project-focused groups to explore or make recommendations on issues identified by the committee as being of importance to that local authority. A number of issues have been dealt with successfully using this approach to partnership

For further information on partnership in the local authorities, contact LANPAG at 01 – 6718400, or [www.lanpag.ie](http://www.lanpag.ie)

## The Education Sector

The introduction of partnership, as an approach to joint decision-making and change, in the education sector was outlined in Partnership 2000. Following its publication, partnership structures have been introduced to the Institutes of Technology and the VEC sector and are also being put in place in the universities.

The Institutes of Technology have established a National Partnership Forum and have recruited seven facilitators to work at Institute level. The facilitators service partnership committees and project groups. The National Partnership Forum is jointly chaired by a trade union representative and an institute director and is currently recruiting a managing facilitator to support the further development of partnership at local level.

The Vocational Education Committees have also established a National Partnership Forum to drive partnership at national level. In addition, they have a full time administrator assisting the promotion of partnership initiatives at regional and local level.

Some of the country's universities have established partnership committees, but at this point, there is no national body overseeing local activity.

For further information on partnership in the education sector, please contact Pat Pyckett, Dept of Education and Science at 01 – 8734700

## The Semi-state Sector

Partnership structures are at varying stages of development in the commercial semi-state sector, with most companies operating a strategic committee or forum. These are generally chaired jointly by senior management and trade union representatives. Most companies have also established a number of departmental or functional partnership committees or forums, which are involved in partnership processes on an ongoing basis. Commercial semi-state companies with partnership structures include An Post, Iarnród Éireann, Aer Rianta, Bord na Mona and ESB. Many non-commercial semi-state companies and state agencies, such as FAS, have also introduced partnership as a way of approaching the change and modernisation agendas.

## Training and Facilitation

# Networking in the Partnership Community

The Centre proposes to work with other organisations and partnership support groups to re-energise the current Public Sector Partnership Networks (PSPN) and to provide regular networking opportunities at sectoral, regional and national level. The revitalisation of these networks will help to meet some of the recommendations made by the various partnership reviews undertaken in the public sector this year.

### Networking in Ireland

Networking between organisations is not new in Ireland. Following the 1996 NESR report *Networking for Competitive Advantage*<sup>1</sup>, the use of networks as a tool for improving competitiveness in Irish companies became increasingly common. As well as networking and clustering initiatives built by Enterprise Ireland, FAS and the IDA, other organisations began to use a networking approach to innovate areas such as training and technology transfer. An example of this is Skillnets, the business-led training and development networks that promote a more focused approach to training and development at sectoral and regional levels.

In addition, EU funded initiatives such as ADAPT, URBAN and LEONARDO encouraged the development of regional and city-based voluntary sector networks. These became useful knowledge sharing and learning tools for groups of organisations with common or complementary objectives such as urban regeneration and community development.

The success of networking in other sectors and the recent activities of the Public Service Partnership Network, which created links between partnership activists in public sector organisations, highlight a potential role for networking in the further development of partnership approaches in the public sector.

### What Kind of Networking?

Partnership in the public service has developed along sectoral lines, with agreements at national level in a number of sectors, including health, local government, education and the civil service. Although there are many similarities in approach at this level, experiential differences exist both between and within sectors. Although specific research on these differences is not extant, a number of partnership reviews have been undertaken in recent months that have highlighted issues of concern that might be tackled by networking<sup>2</sup>.

#### Provide learning opportunities

Each of the public sector partnership reviews completed in 2001/ 2002 identified training as a critical factor in the future development of partnership in the public sector.

#### Identify and share best practice

Each of the reviews highlighted pockets of excellence and innovation in public sector partnership and recommended the transfer of experience and knowledge within and between sectors. Networking is an ideal way to facilitate knowledge sharing of this kind.

#### Improve shared understanding and communication

Communications between partnership activists and those they represent are deemed to be positive but need improvement. Networking creates the

right environment for the development of a shared understanding of what partnership is and how it can be successfully communicated as an approach to change and improved performance throughout the organisation.

Research undertaken in a number of countries, including Ireland, has identified many types of networks. They range from loosely connected groups of organisation helping each other informally, through membership-based networks such as trade alliances and marketing groups, to structured learning and development networks, right up to formalised business networks that undertake joint ventures. Based on the needs of public sector partnership as outlined above, it appears the most suitable type of network for partnership in the public sector is what is known as 'developmental networks'.

### Developmental Networks

Developmental networks are groups of organisations and individuals that meet regularly to share information and experiences and to undertake collective learning activities. The activities that developmental networks undertake include networking between individuals and organisations, transfer of learning, sharing information, exchanging knowledge, sharing resources, joint purchasing, joint marketing, facilitating and innovating.

## Benefits of Networking

Cooke's study on behalf of the NESCC found that networking had developmental benefits for SMEs. It reduced barriers to learning by introducing a collaborative approach to collecting and circulating experience and knowledge. It is possible that public sector networks, which will offer time and other resources to those involved in partnership activities, will promote the same type of collaborative approach to learning.

Doyle's<sup>3</sup> study of best practice in networks found that networking provides psychological benefits. Networking reduces isolation among individuals with similar roles and similar challenges, as it offers opportunities to learn from each other and to become more adaptable and flexible in a rapidly changing environment. For example, facilitators in the local authority sector have decided to network on a regular basis and the Centre feels that this opportunity should be available to Joint Chairs and Committee Members as well.

Finally, networking offers material benefits to those involved, whether or not they are commercial organisations. Individuals and organisations in a network can focus on problem solving, training and development initiatives, research and development and knowledge management as a group. This reduces costs, increases efficiencies and enables innovation at a level above the individual or organisation.

## Critical Success Factors of Networking

Irish and international research is agreed that for networking to be successful, a number of critical factors must be in place.

### Brokerage

Networks need committed facilitation and brokerage during the first two or three years of their existence. If this assistance is available, the members of the network can concentrate on developing ground rules, objectives and opportunities for shared learning. Multi-sectoral or regional networks, in particular, need facilitation to ensure that communication between members is maintained between meetings and the momentum of the network is not lost.

## Setting Objectives

It is important that the members spend time setting joint objectives for the network and come to a consensus on its short and mid-term goals. Research shows that in general, this helps to create a common purpose and strategic orientation for the network. This consensus-building is important if networks are made up of large and small organisations, as it introduces a democratic feel to the network from the beginning and increases trust.

### Ground Rules

networks must identify and agree suitable joint problem identification, problem solving and decision making processes. In addition, ground rules on attendance, inputs and conflict should be laid down from the beginning, to promote trust and to ensure every member has equal access to involvement.

### Trust

The development of high levels of trust between network members is crucial to network success. As trust grows, members begin to support each other in a number of key areas, such as knowledge sharing, problem-solving, innovation and learning. Work in these areas often raises confidentiality issues and it is important that individuals trust their network colleagues to keep the ground rules developed at the beginning of the network.

### Members' Commitment

Network members must be committed to the network and attendance figures should be very high during the first two – three years of the network's existence. This ensures that none of the individual members feel that they are contributing more than they are getting out of the network's activities.

### Corporate Commitment

In addition, networks must have the commitment of the senior managers of member organisations. Senior managers must also commit the time and resources needed for staff to take part in network activities and to allow opportunities for network outcomes and activities to be circulated throughout member organisations.

### Well-planned Activities

Successful networks generally have well-thought out programmes of events

(for up to a year in advance) which assists in stimulating interest in the network and assists members to plan their contribution.

## The Role of the Network Broker

State agencies and funding bodies can offer a number of supports to networks and add value by providing resources as and when needed. The most important of these is a dedicated network broker who will drive the networks until members find their feet. The broker can play a number of roles on behalf of the network, including:

- Promote the network and build awareness of its existence;
- Explain the benefits to prospective members;
- Recruit network members and negotiate for resources;
- Provide group facilitation and assist network to achieve common goals;
- Assist networks to deliver a programme of activities;
- Develop links with other networks in Ireland and overseas, thereby creating networks of networks;
- Promoting innovation and joint problem solving through the identification of common issues among members.

Networking will help to develop a shared understanding regarding the role of partnership in the effective management of change and will promote greater clarity regarding its objectives. In addition, networking will increase the profile of partnership in public sector, so that it is seen to make a real and visible impact on the working lives of staff not directly involved in the process. Finally, a developmental network model will help to improve the skills and knowledge of participants involved in the process of modernisation and the effective management of change through partnership.

*Lorraine Glendenning, National Co-ordinator Training & Facilitation*

<sup>1</sup> Cooke, Philip, (1996), *Networking for Competitive Advantage*, NESCC

<sup>2</sup> Reviews of partnership have taken place in the civil service, the local authority sector and in the health sector.

<sup>3</sup> Doyle, Gerard M., *Making Networks Work*, 2000, Skillnets

## Organisational Change and Innovation

### Learning by Monitoring — A Pilot Study to Evaluate and Build Partnership through Shared Learning

An important concern for the Centre, in all its activities, is to assist partnership initiatives, in both the private and public sectors, to achieve their potential in becoming self-sustaining and viable approaches to change and improvements in performance. Many companies that have invested resources in trying to achieve organisational change through a partnership approach are beginning to consider the question of how to mainstream partnership into key business activities.

Similarly, recent reviews of partnership in the civil service, local authorities and the health sector have identified a need for partnership to develop further to engage more effectively with strategic change. This questioning does not underestimate the important role that partnership plays in addressing operational issues in many companies and sectors. However, it implies that further development of partnership processes has the potential to offer organisations an effective approach to complex change issues.

The Centre believes that many examples of good practice in partnership as an approach to change and improved performance lie within organisations themselves. People are a rich source of ideas, strategies and solutions for change, because their lives will be directly affected by its implications. The Centre has identified a need for an organisational learning tool or methodology to enable organisations

to analyse, compare and progress their own efforts at achieving organisational change through partnership.

With the assistance of funding and support from the *Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group* (LANPAG) and the Health Services National Partnership Forum (HSNPF), the Centre is developing an innovative approach to partnership development. The Centre's Learning by Monitoring project, which will be ready for dissemination in early 2003, will produce a methodology for partnership development that can be utilised by partnership stakeholders at every level of the organisation.

The project is extremely challenging in a number of ways. Firstly, a metric for the success of partnership in an organisation must take many factors into consideration. A key factor will be the initial expectations held by management, workers, union officials and others when introducing a partnership approach to the organisation. In the early days of

partnership in a company or public sector organisation different stakeholders may have had different expectations. This variance in expectation must be taken into consideration when measuring partnership outcomes.

The Centre faces a second challenge – that of creating an effective measurement of the extent to which stakeholder expectations have been met. Thirdly, the tool must be able to answer two key questions, namely “how far might partnership progress in an organisation?” and “how that might be achieved?”

The Learning by Monitoring project team plans to develop an approach that is both user-friendly and scientifically robust. An initial model has been developed (see Figure 1), which incorporates analysis, measurement and planning activities to assist organisations to engage in an ‘action learning’ approach to enhancing their partnership processes. The Centre's aim is that organisations will use the Learning by Monitoring tool

to develop processes and create structures robust enough to enable the mainstreaming of partnership. Once developed, the approach will be accessible to partnership stakeholders at all levels within the organisation. It will provide a framework to:

- Analyse the current strengths of partnership in the organisation;
- Identify areas for improvement;
- Identify alternative solutions to achieving improvement (through shared learning of good practice);
- Produce specific action plans for achieving these solutions;
- Relate partnership activities within the organisation to its current and future change agendas.

### The Centre's Workplan

The project team are currently operating in four research sites around Ireland: Beaumont Hospital, the South Eastern Health Board, Limerick City Council, and Meath County Council. In each of these locations, the project team is conducting an intensive analysis of partnership structures, processes and outcomes, examining the viability and success of:

- Individual partnership projects (approximately three in each location);
- The organisation's partnership forum/steering committee;
- Any partnership sub-groups operating in the organisation;
- The organisation's change agenda.

Having conducted this analysis, the data gathered will be used to frame a structured approach to partnership development. Upon completion, the Centre will disseminate the project's results and copies of the tool throughout the public and private sectors.

### The Benefits of Learning by Monitoring

The immediate benefit for organisations using the Learning by Monitoring approach is that it provides a structured analytical framework for partnership development that considers the development challenge from different perspectives. Secondly, the Learning by Monitoring approach can identify how closely the remit of the partnership forum corresponds with the organisation's change agenda. Thirdly, the approach will highlight how well the partnership forum's objectives are being met by specific partnership projects or working groups.

As well as providing a rigorous analytical framework, this approach will enable organisations to use their analysis as the basis for a development plan for partnership. This development plan will focus on individual partnership projects, the partnership forum and on the relationship of partnership activities with the organisation's business objectives. In this way, Learning by Monitoring will enable the development of a new phase of partnership activity, based on a joint analysis of what has gone before.

The approach will also encourage joint problem-solving and action learning, using analytical tools, comparison and measurement activities. Another important element of the approach will be a central information resource that will enable users to consider good practice in their own and other organisations and to incorporate innovative ideas into their own partnership development plans. Equally, the emphasis on comparison in the project means that organisations will be expected to contribute good practice from their own organisations to a central database or repository of good practice.

Further details about this project can be found at [www.ncpp.ie/projects/lbm](http://www.ncpp.ie/projects/lbm).

*Cathal O'Regan*

FIGURE 1 Learning by Monitoring Model



## Training and Facilitation

# Identifying the Competencies for Managing Change through Partnership

Following extensive consultation with many of those involved in the animation of partnership in both the private and public sector, the Centre recently completed a National Learning Strategy. The strategy is primarily aimed at developing the skills and competencies of those directly involved in introducing and managing partnership initiatives and those involved in facilitating such initiatives.

The strategy will also ensure that training and facilitation helps to position partnership in the context of organisational change. With this in mind, the Centre has agreed on a competence-based approach to learning for partnership and organisational change.

### **A Competence-Based Approach**

Competencies are generally defined as the knowledge, skills, behaviour, qualities and personal attributes necessary for an individual to perform a task or role effectively. These are organised into clusters of linked skills, which are then linked together to form a framework. (See table 1 below) Increasingly, organisations are adopting a competence-based, rather than task-based, approach to creating a template for individual and departmental roles.

A 'competency framework' is the term applied to the collection of competency clusters and behavioural indicators necessary for a role. The framework can be very narrowly focused, providing detailed behavioural indicators for a specific task or role. For example, a competency framework might identify the skills, attitudes and behaviours necessary to be an effective nurse or sales representative. Alternatively, the framework can be more broadly based, containing a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes needed by staff at different levels in an organisation. A good example of this would be a competency framework for leadership.

The most common uses of competency frameworks are in the areas of training and personal development and recruitment and selection. A recent CIPD survey found that many organisations do not carry out any formal evaluation

of the contribution of competencies to their organisation. However, when evaluation has taken place, a competence-based approach to training, recruitment and selection has had a positive impact on performance in the organisation.

### **Developing a Competency Framework**

In association with Pearn Kandola, organisational psychologists, the Centre is developing a competency framework for the management of change through partnership and hopes to publish the framework, along with guidelines for its use, early in 2003. The process by which the competency framework is being prepared is evidence based. It includes a review of literature on existing partnership competency frameworks, as well as skills clusters and behavioural indicators relating to organisational change and improved performance in general.

TABLE 1 Example of a Competency Cluster — *Working with People*

Competencies with Levels			
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS</b>	Builds relationships internally	Builds relationships externally	Maintains external networks
<b>TEAM WORKING</b>	Is a team member	Supports team members	Provides direction for the team
<b>INFLUENCING</b>	Projects a positive image	Influences the thinking of others	Changes the opinions of others

**Behavioural Indicators — for Managing Relationships**

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Builds relationships internally</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adapts personal style to develop relationships with colleagues</li> <li>Adapts form and presentation of information to meet needs of the audience</li> <li>Identifies and maintains regular contact with individuals who depend on or who influence own work</li> </ul>	<b>Builds relationships externally</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Takes account of the impact of own role on the needs of external contacts</li> <li>Maintains regular two-way communication with external contacts</li> <li>Identifies and nurtures external contacts who can contribute to the business</li> </ul>	<b>Maintains external networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Takes account of different cultural styles and values when dealing with external organisations</li> <li>Actively manages external contacts as a business network</li> <li>Identifies and makes use of events for developing external network</li> </ul>

In addition, the Centre is undertaking one-to-one interviews with individuals involved in partnership drawn from a wide range of sectors — health, local government, education, semi-state, civil service and the private sector. The individuals are drawn from the Centre's database of partnership activists, including joint chairpersons, facilitators and committee members, as well as HR and Employee Relations Managers and trade union representatives involved in partnership at sectoral level.

Each individual is asked to talk about the objectives and tasks of their partnership roles. They identify the skills and attributes they need for that role and are asked to identify what changes will occur and how that will impact their current skill set. All the responses will be analysed and the data used to develop a draft competency framework. Following this, the Centre will send the draft, in the form of a questionnaire, to

every individual on its database. This is to provide an opportunity for individuals and organisations to comment on the draft and to verify its suitability.

**Good Practice Guidelines**

When publishing the competency framework, the Centre will provide guidelines for its use in a number of areas, for example, as an aid in the recruitment of partnership facilitators, to assist in training and development planning and as a benchmarking guide in the evaluation of partnership activities. In the long term, the Centre hopes to promote the framework as a basis for the development of a core skill set for Irish workers, trade unionists and managers in a wide range of sectors.

**Benefits of a Competency Framework**

The application of this competency framework will contribute to the development of a clear and shared

understanding of what can be achieved using a partnership approach and the behaviours, attitudes and skills necessary for the effective management of change and improved performance through partnership. It will also assist in strengthening partnership processes already in existence by helping them to become more efficient, inclusive and transparent.

By identifying the competencies necessary for managing change through partnership, the framework will assist participants to develop their own skills and knowledge. In addition, the Centre hopes to use the framework to increase the level of awareness of and interest in partnership activities among Irish employees, managers and trade unions.

*Edna Jordan, National Co-ordinator, Training and Facilitation*

