



HOLDING SPACE

Language • Context • Time

What is meant by ‘holding space’?

The concept of ‘giving space’ is quite commonly used by professionals when someone is agitated or distressed and they need unpressurised time to come to terms with their situation or feelings. It is also used when there is no easy answer to a problem and / or when next steps are unclear.

In partnering (or other forms of group process) the concept of ‘holding space’ is where those brokering the partnership (or facilitating the group) suspends activities or decisions to enable the group to pause, take stock, reflect and take a broader / deeper view of an issue or an aspiration.

Many elements of partnering are complex – often because they are unpredictable or not yet understood – and the way forward is not obvious. Rather than rushing on and risking taking the wrong step, a structured opportunity is provided (space is held open) for a more open exploration and, with any luck, for a more imaginative, thoughtful or transformational way forward to emerge .

There is a skill to holding space and some basic ‘rules’ (see next slide). It is worth remembering whilst some partners may relish this kind of opportunity and respond very constructively, others may find both the concept and the practice rather strange.



Holding space – 7 golden rules:

1. **Guide** the group thoughtfully and with humility
2. **Avoid** overloading with too much / unhelpful information
3. **Enable** people to give voice their intuition and wisdom
4. **Create** a 'container' for deeply-felt emotions
5. **Believe** and demonstrate that everyone's contribution matters
6. **Encourage** silence – this is time for the group to reflect
7. **Focus** on what emerges not what you want to emerge



Knowing when to 'hold space'

Sometimes the need to have some space is identified by the partners / group but more often an individual (perhaps the partnership's manager / broker or one of the partners) has a 'hunch' that this is necessary. In other words it is an intuitive response to a mood or situation and / or a judgment call.

Examples of partnering scenarios where 'holding space' can be helpful:

- There are unexpected challenge from within the partnership
- External events are having impact on the partnership
- There are significant changes in one of the partner organisations
- Where there are different visions for the partnership's future
- To explore critical issues that have been left unspoken

Three critical issues (language, context & time) were explored by a group of partnership practitioners in a structured exercise designed to hold space for frank exchanges of views.

The outputs were recorded and collated so that could be used for reference in their partnering work in future.

The slides that follow are for purposes of illustrating the value of holding space.





LANGUAGE(S)

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

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



*“**Language** makes what we feel and think visible”*

*“Only when we speak in our own **language** do we speak from the heart”*

*“Until we **say** we often can’t see”*

*“The main thing is to have (and help others to have) the courage to **speak** and the capacity to say things in ways that those listening can hear”*

context

customer plan analysis planning implementation monitor risk retention impact management opportunity process risk opportunity process cost treatment strategy research resources risk performance evaluation score



Context challenges include:

- 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

Possible actions:

- 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:

- 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)

Building better understanding:

- 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'

"Remember that people won't change unless / until they feel acknowledged and understood"



*“It is really important for everyone to be honest and open about the **context**”*

*“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 what the **context** is”*



TIME

<p>Time as an indicator of commitment:</p>	<p>Advice:</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



*“Taking **time** to do things carefully / well and committing time to partnership building is a mark of respect for other partners”*

*“Help partners to: **re-frame time** as a friend rather the enemy; make time for the partnership and challenge each other when time is used as an excuse for poor participation”*



Material for these slides from:

www.remotepartnering.org