Partners for a Competitive Workforce

INSIGHTS FROM SOLVING PROBLEMS THROUGH CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

CASE STUDY #1 | **OCTOBER 2013**

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Introduction

From the White House to the Harvard Business Review, state governments to local philanthropy, many institutions and individuals have expressed their belief in the power of cross-sector partnerships by funding and participating in them. As a result, these partnerships have multiplied in recent years. However, the collective understanding of what makes a cross-sector partnership successful is limited.

While there have been a number of case studies about cross-sector partnerships working on specific issues, and there is an emerging body of work on collective impact — an approach that has cross-sector partnerships at its core — there has not been extensive inquiry into the structure and behaviors of effective cross-sector partnerships.

At Living Cities, we believe in the power of cross-sector partnerships to address some of the toughest challenges our country faces today. We also believe there is a need for greater understanding of cross-sector partnerships so that practitioners, participants, and funders have a systematic way and shared language to reflect on whether their existing or planned partnerships are structured to achieve their intended goals.

Over the last two years, we have been learning from and with leaders about what it takes to set up and run a cross-sector partnership so that it can have real and measurable impact. Through our grants and research, site visits, and hours of interviews we learned so much that was useful, we knew we had to find a way to organize, define, and describe the ideas that were being mentioned time and again. In this work, we define a cross-sector partnership as an alliance of organizations, which together have a role in solving a problem and achieving a shared goal.

This case study is structured as follows:

A **About Partners for a Competitive Workforce**

B **A Closer Look: Traits, Factors and Behaviors Influencing Partners for a Competitive Workforce**

   1   Building a strong foundation for a cross-sector partnership

   2   Factors that influence the success of a cross-sectore partnership

   3   Behaviors of high-impact cross-sector partnerships

C **Three Insights that Emerge from this Case**

D **What's Next?**

This case study was developed as a companion to *What Barriers? Insights from Solving Problems through Cross-Sector Partnerships* with the goal of making the concepts explored in that paper concrete. Here are three key themes to look for in this case study:

1 **Aligning structure and representatives.** Having the right structure and the right people in place are keys for any organization to succeed. However, cross-sector partnerships often have flat structures that are supposed to be a one-stop shop for everyone involved. They seek to do all activities from vision-setting to accountability to strategy development to implementation. In addition, cross-sector partnerships often try to do big things with people who lack power, and little things with people who have a lot of power.

2 **Intervening in a way that can plausibly achieve your goals.** In order for any entity to succeed, it needs clarity about what it is trying to accomplish as well as a strategy that can plausibly yield that result. However, many cross-sector partnerships struggle to identify a specific result. Even those that are able to name one often struggle to intervene in a way that can plausibly yield it.

3 **The importance of building trust.** Trust is an important and underestimated ingredient to making a cross-sector partnership work. If members of a cross-sector partnership do not believe in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of their partners as well as the partnership itself, it is very difficult to achieve the partnership's intended goals.

About Partners for a Competitive Workforce

Partners for a Competitive Workforce is a cross-sector partnership in the Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana (Greater Cincinnati) tri-state region focused on meeting employer demand by growing the skills of the current and future workforce.

The effort was started in 2008, as the Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network (GCWN), which was convened as a regional public-private partnership aimed at growing the skills of the local workforce to match the needs of employers in key industries. GCWN had primarily been focused on supporting career pathways in health care, construction, and advanced manufacturing to help employers access skilled workers and help low-skill adults get the skills and preparation needed for in-demand careers.

In early 2011, leaders from the workforce investment boards (WIBs) and GCWN launched a planning process to figure out how to more closely align their efforts and build on their successes. The result of this planning process was the creation of Partners for a Competitive Workforce (Partners) as the umbrella that brings together all of the region's workforce efforts under a common mission.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce aims to achieve the bold goal that by 2020, 90 percent of the labor force will be gainfully employed. Its agenda articulates three strategies to achieve its goal:

1 Connecting businesses with qualified workers by building a streamlined approach to delivering demand-driven workforce solutions, promoting training and service opportunities to employers through a communications and outreach campaign, and coordinating the region's workforce and economic development activities.

2 Creating industry partnerships (among employers, school districts, colleges and universities, and community organizations), which support career pathways in priority industries to close skill gaps and develop the full talent supply chain.

3 Improve work readiness services to help individuals obtain and retain gainful employment.[1]

Partners' agenda articulates the work they are doing. Their philosophy of *how* they do the work focuses on collecting and analyzing data on current needs and future workforce trends, creating and implementing a comprehensive communications plan around workforce efforts, and aligning funding and policy to support improvements along the talent supply chain.

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1   Partners for a Competitive Workforce website: http://www.competitiveworkforce.com/Priorities.html (Accessed 4/25/13).

Since 2008, Partners for a Competitive Workforce has served more than 6,100 individuals across three career pathway partnerships. Of that total, they served over 5,000 jobseekers with 90% completing training and earning over 4,600 credentials, and 82% obtaining employment and 75% retaining employment after 12 months. They also helped more than 1,000 incumbent workers develop their skills and earn over 950 credentials.[2]

A Closer Look: Traits, Factors and Behaviors Influencing Partners for a Competitive Workforce

1 Building a strong foundation for a cross-sector partnership

In this section, we will examine how six foundational traits of cross-sector partnerships show up in Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
1. Results The result the cross-sector partnership sets out to achieve.	General	• Intended result is described in general terms • Provides a description of what the cross-sector partnership is trying to achieve • Helpful in communicating the aims of a partnership, but not for measuring progress or ensuring accountability
	Specific	• States a specific outcome (or set of outcomes) to be achieved • Communicates what success will look like for the partnership • Specified results serve as a foundation for organizing data collection, measuring progress and ensuring accountability

The mission of Partners for a Competitive Workforce is general: to meet employer demand by growing the skills of our current and future workforce. They also state a complementary, **specific**, and bold goal that by 2020, 90 percent of the labor force will be gainfully employed. To ensure accountability for achieving this specific result, Partners has created a dashboard that can track the Partnership's progress on a series of indicators that have been identified as key contributors to their intended result.

" The availability of common data enables Partners to do more than just create programs, it enables them to use those programs as experiments for determining how to best achieve their intended results around population-level employment."

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
2. Charge The work a cross-sector partnership has been "hired" to do.	Thinking	Recommends solutions to a problem, but isn't responsibile for implementing solutions
	Doing	Implements an agreed upon program, strategy, or advocacy agenda developed within or outside of the partnership
	Thinking & Doing	Recognizes that existing solutions aren't sufficient, and works to develop a course of action through learning and experimentation

Partners for a Competitive Workforce has a **thinking and doing** charge because it recognizes that existing solutions are not sufficient to achieve its intended impact, and is developing a course of action through learning and experimentation.

For Partners, this has meant that they have had to define the problems that contribute to the results that are being produced. An example of a problem they identified is that there are a lot of organizations providing workforce solutions to employers, but employers have difficulty finding one that could meet their specific needs, so employers instead opted out. To try and address this, employers supported an effort of the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB) called Employers First Regional Workforce Network which provides a streamlined approach to deliver workforce solutions in response to employer needs without having to navigate the bureaucracies of dozens of programs.

It has taken time for Partners to move from the work of doing (implementing an agreed upon strategy or program) to the work of thinking and doing. What has helped move their charge beyond just creating a program is the use of data. Partners has joined with local WIBs to create a common, region-wide workforce data collection and reporting system to track results and improve performance, and over 50 public and nonprofit agencies are utilizing this system. The availability of common data enables Partners to do more than just create programs, it enables them to use those programs as experiments for determining how to best achieve their intended results around population-level employment.

Near the end of 2011, Meyer noted, "What we're working on is building out the scope of our network to be a formal partnership. Not just the advancing of the specific programmatic strategies and career pathways,

but, really providing a backbone that will bring together the public sector, our workforce investment boards, chambers of commerce, economic development, education, community-based groups, and funders to coordinate workforce efforts for our regions."[3]

By August 2012, the shift to a thinking and doing charge was already being reflected in the *2020 Jobs Outlook* report that Partners for a Competitive Workforce commissioned in partnership with Agenda 360, Vision 2015, and the Strive Partnership. The study used recent Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data to

forecast employment trends and skill needs in our region through 2020. As Meyer noted about this work, "It helped us programmatically to identify additional sectors to develop career pathways. More importantly we created a data tool for our partners to use for target educational programs, to know where the demand is, but also for them to use with job seekers for career counseling. That was another example of doing research and using data. Providing analysis to our partners to be able to guide strategy and also provide more robust information for [those providing direct] services."[4]

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
3. Authority The cross-sector partnership's "right to do work"—either the powers they've been granted or assigned to themselves.	Authorized (Real)	• Right to do work granted or delegated by an authoritative body • Work that can be carried out is limited by the authoritative body's parameters
	Empowered (Apparent)	• Right to do work is self-actualized • Work that is carried out is only constrained by the limits the partnership sets upon itself

Partners for a Competitive Workforce authority type is **empowered**. Its "right to do work" was not granted by any authoritative body, and its only constraints are the ones that it sets upon itself. Partners came together because the Community Foundation and an economic development agency both recognized that they needed to address growing qualified worker shortages in their region. Partners was not delegated the right to do this work by any authority, but instead built their effort and its portfolio of work in a manner that was self-actualized.

3   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.

4   Author's interview with Ross Meyer, January 17, 2013.

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
4. Representatives — The stature and power of the individuals within their own organizations/ communities who are serving as representatives to the partnership.	Designee	An individual who represents the organization or community, but does not have decision-making or implementation powers within their organization or community
	Doer	An individual who may be responsible for implementing changes to behaviors and strategies in their organization or community, but lacks the formal authority to mandate them
	Decision-maker	An individual who has the authority or influence in their organization or community to require that it change its behaviors and strategies

The representatives who participate in Partners for a Competitive Workforce are decision-makers-individuals who have the authority or influence in their organization or community to require that it change its behaviors and strategies.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce has a governance structure called The Partners Council whose membership consists almost exclusively of **decision-makers**. These CEOs, Executive Directors and heads of organizations are representative of key stakeholder groups and are responsible for guiding strategy and reviewing progress of Partners' work. In addition to the Partners Council, each body of work—Employers First Regional Workforce Network, Career Pathways Partnership, and Work Readiness Collaborative—within Partners has a team of **doers** focused on developing and implementing the activities that will advance the partnership's overall strategy.

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
5. Level of Intervention The cross-sector partnership's action strategy.	**Project/Program Delivery**	• Creates and/or delivers an analysis, activity (or activities) to achieve a specific aim • The success of the project/program is the end the partnership hopes to achieve
	Systems Change	• Aims to intervene and reorient the set of behaviors, interactions, projects and programs in an existing system (or systems) in order to achieve its goals • This work often includes project/program delivery, but it is not an end in itself, rather a tool for identifying changes that need to occur at the systems level in policy, practice, or funding

Partners for a Competitive Workforce's level of intervention is **systems change** because it aims to reorient the set of behaviors, interactions, projects and programs in an existing system (or systems) in order to achieve better results.

This is evidenced through a number of aspects of Partners, including its focus on producing a different population-level outcome around employment, which is a complex problem, as well as the way it brings together the actors contributing to the current employment outcomes around the goal of achieving better results. This process enables these actors to learn directly from one another, which influences their perceptions, assumptions and behaviors and enables the development of new solutions based on these interactions.

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
6. Time Frame Period of time during which the cross-sector partnership's work is designed to take place.	**Time-Bound**	A partnership that is formed for a limited period of time
	Open	A partnership that is formed without an explicit time frame

Partners for a Competitive Workforce has an **open** time frame. It was formed without an explicit time frame for achieving its intended impact. Former Executive Director Ross Meyer refers to their time frame as "goal bound, not time bound."[5]

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5   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.

2 Factors that influence a cross-sector partnership's success

In this section, our focus turns from traits that are core to Partners for a Competitive Workforce, to the five factors that can accelerate or limit its success.

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
1. Formation Catalyst The reason or opportunity for creating the cross-sector partnership.	Leadership Interest	When leaders recognize an opportunity, or seek to address a problem out of perceived obligation or altruistic self-interest
	Key Opportunity	When policies, practices, data, innovations or new/redirected funding streams require or catalyze cross-sector partnership to occur
	Crisis	When an emergency event or increased awareness of a persistent problem galvanizes cross-sector players to come together to address the problem

Partners for a Competitive Workforce had a dual formation catalyst of **leadership interest** and a **key opportunity**. According to former Executive Director Ross Meyer, Partners for a Competitive Workforce "primarily came out of economic development planning work that both the Chamber and the City were doing, which highlighted the need to focus intensely on workforce development. Both of these economic development planning processes were highlighting the need to grow specific industry sectors in our economy and to make sure we had the talent employers need in those sectors to be successful."[6]

Meyer relays that the leaders at the Chamber of Commerce, the City of Cincinnati, the Workforce Investment Boards, and in philanthropy recognized that, "the economy is changing rapidly, and that the jobs of tomorrow are different than the jobs of today, and employers need a much higher-skilled worker than what was the case 10-20 years ago. [Greater

Cincinnati's] workforce was facing a growing shortage of the skills employers need—both the hard, technical skills measured by formal degrees and education, but also on the soft skills side. [The leadership recognized that] there are lots of great organizations doing work in this area, [but] there wasn't a regional agenda, and a regional entity that could help coordinate across sectors."[7]

The leadership interest in workforce development in Greater Cincinnati was an important catalyst of the work, but it might not have led to anything had there not been a key funding opportunity. According to Meyer, "[what] really pulled together the network was we had the opportunity to go for this grant for the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. The president of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Kathy Merchant, took the lead in pulling together stakeholders to go for this grant. The community will was there, but this provided some catalytic funding to make something happen."[8]

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6   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.

7   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.

8   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
2. Structure The arrangement of and relations between stakeholders in the cross-sector partnership.	Formal	Reflects an arrangement of and relations between stakeholders that have established procedures, roles, and commitments, which are codified through operating documents, MOUs, contracts, etc.
	Informal	Reflects an arrangement of and relations between stakeholders that possess fluid procedures, roles and commitments

Partners for a Competitive Workforce has a **formal** structure which reflects an arrangement of, and relations between, stakeholders that have established procedures, roles and commitments which are codified through operating documents, memoranda of understanding, contracts, or other documentation.

For instance, The Partners Council is a strategic coordinating body for the Partnership that helps set common goals, review data, coordinate efforts, address gaps, advance policy, and align resources. The Council has 33 members consisting of leadership from employers, chambers of commerce, workforce boards, educational institutions, service providers, labor, and other community volunteers from across the tri-state region.

The formal structure of Partners for a Competitive Workforce is made up of more than just the Partners Council. It also includes the teams focused on developing and implementing the strategy of key initiatives which includes participants from 150 organizations. An example of these teams is the Career Pathways work. According to Meyer, "Within the Career Pathways work, we're focused on three industry sectors. And within each of those, we have a team of employers and education and community groups that have a formal agreement for what they do and what's expected of each partner." [9]

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9   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
3. Financial Resources How the achievement of the cross-sector partnership's goal is supported financially.	None	The partnership's work is not financially supported
	In-Kind	The partnership is supported through in-kind contributions
	Dues	Members contribute money to participate in the partnership
	Fees	Stakeholders (within or outside partnership) pay fees for the products or services the cross-sector partnership provides
	Sponsorship	Stakeholders (who may or may not participate in the cross-sector partnership's work) fund particular components of the work
	Grants	Private and public grants support the work of the cross-sector partnership
	Redirected/Aligned	Existing public funding streams within stakeholder organizations are formally redirected or aligned to support the work of the partnership

Partners for a Competitive Workforce is funded through a mix of **in-kind** contributions, **grants** from national and local funders, and **redirected/aligned** public funding streams. Since 2008, Partners for a Competitive Workforce (and its predecessor the Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network) has leveraged more than $29M in public and private funds from local, state, and national sources towards their shared goals and strategies. This includes $6M in philanthropic funds, $9M in state and federal grants, and $12M in aligned training funds from the region's public workforce system, and $2M from employers.[10]

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10 Author's interview with Ross Meyer on January 17, 2013.

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
4. Positioning How the cross-sector partnership positions itself in relation to other individuals, organizations and partnerships working on the same issues and/or in the same geography.	Opposer	• May or may not be recognized in its area of work and/or geography, and does not possess the track record, relationships or membership to ensure that its own agenda can become reality • Positions itself to oppose the work of individuals, organizations and partnerships with which it does not agree. Outside stakeholders often do not work with this partnership, or if they do it is to prevent opposition to their own agendas
	Supporter	• Recognized as a "player" in its area of work and/or geography, but does not possess the track record, relationships or membership to ensure that its agenda will become reality • Other individuals, organizations and partnerships will work with this partnership because supporters are positioned in a way that adds value and legitimacy, but does not guarantee results
	Leader	• Recognized as the expert, authority or chief influencer in its area of work and/or geography based on its track record, relationships and/or membership • Positioned in such a way that other individuals, organizations and partnerships believe they need this partnership's blessing/support to get work done

Partners for a Competitive Workforce has positioned itself as a **leader** in relation to other individuals, organizations, and partnerships working on the same issues in Greater Cincinnati. This positioning is a reflection of:

1 how the partnership was created (as noted in Factor 1, its formation catalyst was a mix of Leadership Interest and a Key Opportunity for national funding),

2 its track record of progress on the challenging issue of employment (its outcomes and outputs over the last four years are impressive, especially compared to the status quo) and

3 its membership—at the table are the leadership of many major educational institutions, training providers, government agencies and employers.

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
5. Lifespan What happens to the cross-sector partnership when it accomplishes or abdicates its goal.	Sunset	When a cross-sector partnership ends either because it achieved its mission, it has reached its time boundary, or it has ceased to be relevant
	Institutionalization	When the cross-sector partnership continues and its role relating to an issue/in a geography becomes the norm
	Reboot	When the cross-sector partnership winds down or builds upon its existing work, and starts a new or expanded agenda

Since Partners for a Competitive Workforce is still relatively young, and its goal is big and audacious, its lifespan trait is yet to be determined.
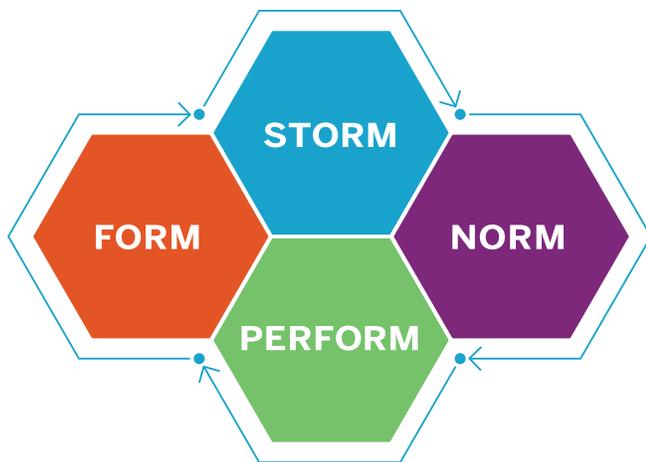
3 Behaviors of high-impact cross-sector partnerships

In the previous two sections, we focused on traits and factors that form the foundation and influence the effectiveness of Partners for a Competitive Workforce. In this section, we will turn our attention to how Partners exhibits two behaviors that we have observed to be key for all cross-sector partnerships which want to achieve their intended results.

BEHAVIOR 1:

Trust Building & Maintenance

Stage	Definition
Form	*Forming is the stage when partners first come together. It has been described as the 'honeymoon' period for a partnership because it is when partners are excited about the newness and potential of the effort.*
Storm	*Storming is when partnership members stop being polite and start getting real. This might involve airing fundamental differences of opinion and approach among partners, struggling to figure out objectives, roles, and leadership in the partnership and also feeling threatened by working with partners who you don't know, don't trust or view as competitors.*
Norm	*Norming is the stage when roles and partner conflicts are sorted out and the partnership's focus turns towards the work. Objectives and rules of engagement get clearer; a sense of partnership identity forms, and conflict moves from among partners to between the partners as a group and the problems they are trying to solve (ie us vs. us to us vs. them).*
Perform	*Performing is when the partnership reaches a steady state where it can do the work it needs to do to achieve its intended goals.*

How the partnership has built trust among its members and maintained it as work has moved forward.

The trust building and maintenance cycle is not set up in a way that makes it possible to assign a cross-sector partnership a specific type. Instead, it is a tool for reflecting on how a partnership has or has not built and maintained trust and engaged with the different stages—form, storm, norm, perform— that have been identified and explored for decades in the literature on group dynamics. As such, this section will share reflections on the role of trust within Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

In early conversations with Ross Meyer, the former Executive Director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce, the topic of building trust appeared repeatedly. When Meyer looks back on Partners' history, he reflects that the partnership fell into a common trap—trying to form and then immediately perform: "It's taken a couple of years to get to the point where we are now. In our evolution, we honestly started doing stuff in the beginning and tried to fast track the trust-building process. [It didn't work] and then we had to step back and go through the [whole or longer or complete] process."[11]

As Partners for a Competitive Workforce "restarted" its trust building and maintenance cycle, Meyer reflected that "initially, the how [of building trust] was really dependent on the convening power of the Community Foundation and its president Kathy Merchant. The importance of that convening of leadership was critical, not only for putting dollars on the table, and getting other funders to put dollars on the table, but the community that she brought. It was critical to getting it off the ground."[12]

The storming, norming and performing stages of Partners' work took several years. As Meyer notes:

It takes a lot of time to develop the deep relationships to even move the work forward. But, if you don't do it, it's just a superficial table. It just takes years of working together, being open, constant communications, on a daily basis, literally. And a lot of hard conversations. It takes people believing that there is something better that we can do by coming together. It takes people being persistent.

If there was a secret sauce, I'd say it's all about trust and relationship building in this work. In this work, it really depends on a level of trust and relationships among the key folks involved. That's what takes time to develop, you can't fast track it. It takes time and years to develop that level of trust, and you need to have really open communications and transparency and consistent working together. That's been the most important and difficult thing to achieve. But, I think that's what's going to make it work in the end.[13]

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11   Email from Ross Meyer on January 17, 2013.
12   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.
13   Author's interview with Ross Meyer on November 18, 2011.

Problem-Solving

Like Behavior 1, the problem-solving cycle is not set up to assign a cross-sector partnership a specific type. Instead, it is a tool for reflecting on the approaches that a cross-sector partnership has used to address a complex social or economic problem.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce started at the solution-finding stage in the problem-solving cycle, in particular with the work of developing projects, programs, and policies. In retrospect, Meyer thinks that Partners started its work here because this work was tied to the grant that enabled them to form and created an "artificial constraint." But once it became clear that to do the programs and projects and policies, Partners had to build relationships among its members, that led to a lot more work on interpreting and analyzing—both the incorporation of new ideas into the group's thinking, the letting go of discredited ideas, and the development of a plausible understanding of the world in which they could test proposed solutions.
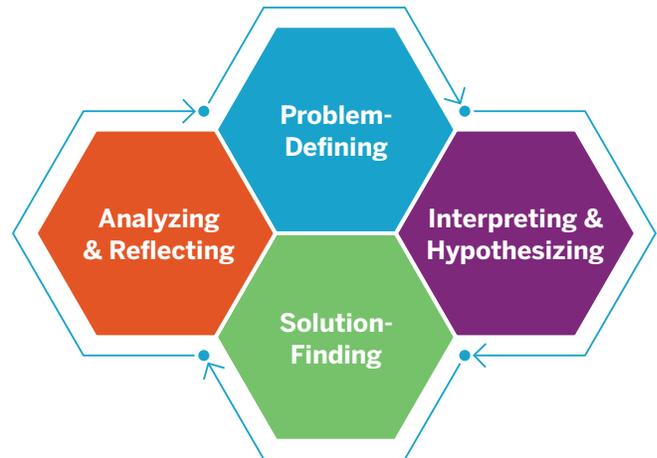
Stage	Definition
Problem-Defining	*Observing events and patterns to gain greater insight into the source and nature of challenges*
Interpreting & Hypothesizing	*Interpreting what has been observed, and then developing hypotheses about what needs to change in order to yield different results.*
Solution-Finding	*Identifying, and testing solutions to a recognized problem.*
Analyzing & Reflecting	*Determining if the solutions are effective, and learning from them to gain a better understanding of the problem and the solutions that are needed to achieve the partnership's intended result*

14 Author's interview with Ross Meyer on January 17, 2013.

In 2013, Meyer reflected:

I think the analysis has gotten much more clear and specific from when we first came together. We started with a broad mandate. It's gotten a lot clearer around where we specifically can add value, and the levers that we can pull on. And the context, and the environment have changed significantly since this launched in mid-2008, before the bottom of the economy fell out.

Both our understanding of the analysis of the problem got clearer, and the environment changed dramatically. This required us to be adaptable and flexible to the environment. Especially in some of the sectors; construction is a good example. The economy got decimated for that industry. We had to constantly reevaluate where we needed to focus. That's core to the value of the particular approach of this sector partnership: having close connection with employers to be on top of the market trends. That requires being nimble and adaptable to the change of the economy.

I would say the problem itself is still largely the same problem we set out to tackle. We got much clearer around our interventions, and the environment that we were operating in...by experimenting with different strategies. In terms of funding, different pilot projects, and experimenting with what's going to work.[14]

Three Key Insights from this Case

There is no one right way to structure a cross-sector partnership. Most partnerships possess—for legitimate reasons—a quirky set of traits. However, the case of Partners for a Competitive Workforce reveals some interesting and useful insights into structuring a cross-sector partnership to achieve impact. We'll highlight three of them here, but we know that there are many more.[15]

1 Aligning structure and representatives

Having the right structure and the right people in place are key for any organization to achieve success. However, cross-sector partnerships often have flat structures that are supposed to be a one-stop shop for everyone involved to do all activities from vision-setting to accountability to strategy development to implementation. In addition, cross-sector partnerships often try to accomplish big things with people who lack power, and little things with people who have a lot of power.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce utilizes a different and more effective approach to aligning structure (factor 2) and representatives (trait 4). Mainly, it has multiple tables within the larger partnership structure, and each has a differentiated role and responsibility. It has a governance table— the Partners Council—with limited membership that is representative, not inclusive of all institutional

actors in the system. This table is responsible for setting the vision and ensuring accountability. It also has a set of sub-tables focused on developing and implementing the strategies for different pieces of the work.

There is alignment between the structure and the representatives involved at each level. Since the Partners Council serves an executive function, its membership is exclusively decision-makers, primarily chief executives from large institutions within the workforce system. If need be these executives can mandate change in their own organizations. Whereas doers—whether the leaders of smaller organizations, or the employees of the Partner's Council members—connect into the structure through the teams responsible for strategy because they will be responsible for developing and implementing strategy.

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15 We hope you'll share yours with us at LivingCities.org or on Twitter using the hashtag #xsector. We can be found @Living_Cities.

2 Intervening at a level that can plausibly achieve your goals

In order for any organization to succeed, it needs clarity about what it is trying to accomplish as well as a strategy that can plausibly yield that result. However, many cross-sector partnerships struggle to identify a specific result. Even those that are able to name one, often struggle to intervene in a way that can plausibly yield it.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce recognized both of these potential pitfalls and worked to address them. As was noted in trait 1, they named a specific result, the goal that by 2020, 90 percent of the labor force will be gainfully employed. And while it endeavored to address this work initially through programmatic interventions, its level of intervention evolved to focus on the systems level, recognizing that it is nearly impossible for program and project delivery to yield a population level result like the one they had identified.

3 The importance of building trust

Trust is an important and underestimated ingredient to making a cross-sector partnership work. If members of a cross-sector partnership do not believe in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of their partners as well as the partnership itself, it is very difficult to achieve the partnership's intended goals.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce initially fell into a classic trap in this work—forming a partnership, and then immediately trying to perform. While skipping the storming and norming stages may seem to be a faster way to get to implementation, the Partners case is illustrative of the form-perform paradox: that undertaking the storming and norming will actually lead to performing sooner and more effectively than if you skip from forming to performing. This is because if you skip the storming and norming- the phases that establish trust and boundaries and clarity and consensus- it's very difficult to perform successfully. As described in behavior 1, Partners for a Competitive Workforce experienced the fallout of the form-perform paradox first hand, and then went back to square one to start the cycle anew, this time with a commitment to storming and norming.

What's Next?

At Living Cities, we have three goals in sharing this work. The first is that **we want to ground theory in the experience of a real partnership, to help other cross-sector partnerships achieve measurable impact.** The second goal is to **spur greater openness and learning about what has worked with cross-sector partnerships and equally importantly, what has not.** We believe that learning and problem-solving are open processes, and that by approaching them this way, the social change field can have better results more quickly. Our third goal is that we want to **"turn up the heat" on cross-sector partnerships, their members and funders.** With so many big challenges in the world today, and a limited amount of intellect, time, and money; funders and participants involved with cross-sector partnerships need to be using these resources to achieve measurable impact. And, if a partnership is not going to be able to do that in its current state, we want to activate people to change the way those partnerships are working, even if it means being brave enough to say that a cross-sector partnership is not going to achieve its goals and should come to an end.

Our hope is that this work is just the beginning of the conversation, and the learning that needs to happen to advance cross-sector partnerships to address the toughest challenges our world and its people face today. We recognize that many of these ideas are not new, and a significant number of partnerships have utilized some or all of these traits in structuring their own work. But, we also hope that this case study and its companion paper have piqued your interest in joining the conversation, sharing your insights and experiences, as well as providing feedback and ideas. Join us online at **livingcities.org** or on Twitter **@Living_Cities** using hashtag **#xsector**.

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Join the conversation and find additional resources about cross-sector partnerships at **LivingCities.org** or on Twitter **@Living_Cities**, or by using the hashtag **#xsector**.

DESIGN:

Bureau Blank

ABOUT LIVING CITIES:

Founded in 1991, Living Cities is an innovative collaborative of 22 of the world's largest foundations and financial institutions. In 20 years, Living Cities members have collectively invested almost $1 billion, helping shape federal funding programs, redirecting public and private resources, and helping communities to build homes, stores, schools, community facilities and more. However, our members are not simply funders. They shape our work and priorities by participating on the Living Cities Board of Directors, four standing committees and three working groups. In sum, our members contribute the time of 80-plus expert program staff toward improving the lives of low-income people and the cities where they live.

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