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Project Management

Leadership plays a critical role in the creation of a joint action space and the emergence of a healthy, productive partnership. Creating and maintaining a joint action space requires a manager role that is dedicated to the project, to differentiating it from the partner organizations, and to nurturing relationships, a common language, and unique rules of the game. However, coordination is not enough for a healthy, productive partnership to emerge. Rather, the coordination role needs to grow and develop into leadership.



What happened in the Incubator project?



The management structure of the project was designed so that each partner CSO had its own internal project team. The overall management of the project, director, finance and program manager, and research officer were situated inside Masar Institute. Most positions in the project were part time positions taken on by existing staff of the CSOs. The only position solely dedicated to the project was that of the program manager. The project director (the director of Masar Institute) recruited for this position a teacher and member of the management forum at the Masar School, which is affiliated with Masar Institute. Since the program manager was recruited only after funding was secured for the project, she was not part of the preliminary process in which the directors of the partner CSO designed the proposal outlining objective, strategies and main activities.

Through the first year of the project, the three directors, who were working intensively together, in facilitating the ToT, loosely shared leadership for the project. At that time, the role of the manager was limited to mainly coordination as well as operational and technical functions. The manager was, de facto, working under Masar's director, first meeting with him and then with the other partners. Moreover, to gain a better understanding of the project, the manager chose to take part in the ToT facilitated by the three directors, as a participant, in order to gain a full understanding of the project. Being a participant in the ToT put the program manager in an ambiguous position. The ToT facilitators (who were the directors of the partner CSOs) related to her as just another ToT participant but, within the ToT group, she was not seen as just another participant. During this period, the manager kept a reflective journal and reflected in which she recorded her questions, ideas, and thoughts. "I kept them to myself," she said, "because I didn't yet have enough confidence to really share them."

The intensive collaboration between the three CSO directors diminished drastically as the first stage of the ToT came to end. This led to a leadership vacuum because the CSO directors turned their attention back to their own organizations rather than to the project. The vacuum was strongly felt at the beginning of the second year of the project, and was accompanied by a sense on part of many members that the project is starting to drift. The program manager herself was aware of the drift, but did not feel she had the authority to step into a full leadership role. A role that would oblige her to advocate for the project, differentiating her from her home organization, and putting her in an ambiguous position vis-à-vis her direct superior. However, it was becoming clear both to the manager as well as to the project director, that she is the only person who has a full view of the project and whose employment is dedicated

mainly to the project. The need for a new type of leadership for the project became evident during the CSOLF second seminar, at the beginning of the second year of the project, In the last day of the seminar, the program manager decided to propose to the forum that she step into the leadership role. The proposal was discussed and agreed upon by the directors and representatives of all partner organizations. This transformation required the program manager to reframe her place in the partnership and her relationship with the directors of the partner organizations. “By taking on the leadership of the project,” said one of the Directors, “you (the project director) are working for the Project and not for Masar or Ibrahim (the director of Masar).”

Once the program manager stepped fully into this leadership position, she quickly became an important force for holding a collaborative project space – that is, both the joint action and the learning spaces – and clearly differentiating it from the partner organizations. She succeeded in performing collaborative leadership that enabled her to move easily across organizational boundaries in order to keep the project moving forward. >>

The leadership challenge

There is a fundamental dilemma involved in the leadership of a partnership. A true partnership implies that the partner organizations share leadership at the highest levels (e.g. CEO's). This kind of leadership, however, demands active, on-going, collaborative decision-making among people who are already extremely busy. When this intense degree of collaboration becomes unsustainable, shared leadership may actually lead to no leadership, leading to stagnation and even failure. If one of partners assumes leadership in order to fill in the void, then the others may be reduced to relative passivity and marginalization. In this case the project may simply be assimilated by the dominant partner organization rather than becoming a differentiated joint action space out of which a true partnership emerges. In order to avoid either domination or a leadership gap, it is important to create management roles dedicated only to the project.

Who should be the manager?

The manager can be an outsider from all the partner organizations recruited especially for the partnership's project, or a member of one of the organizations. However, there is no hard and fast rule about which

one of these options is best. An outsider may be in the best position in standing up to the partner organizations and differentiating the joint action space. An insider from one of the partner organizations brings an important knowledge base, but also faces the problem of being identified with one of the organizations. Insiders have to work hard to differentiate themselves from the partner organizations. Another advantage of assigning an insider to the coordination roles is that it gives at least one of the organizations and opportunity to develop its people.

The process through which project management emerged in the Incubator reflects the fact that, in most CSO partnerships, the partners are not equal. There are nearly always differences between organizations and individuals in influence and power that stem from a variety of factors. In the Incubator project, Masar held more power vis-à-vis the project because it initiated it, brought the three other partners together and was recognized by the funder as bearing responsibility for project execution. These facts were recognized by the partners, so the recruitment of the program manager from within Masar appeared to be natural and uncontroversial. However, as the discussion around the role shift of the program manager revealed, these differences did generate conflicts and tensions. At the end of the three years of the project, members of all partner organizations pointed to the ability to recognize, acknowledge and discuss the differences in influence, responsibility and power between the partners within the project as a crucial element in creating a sustainable partnership.

Nurturing the joint action space

At the early stage of the process, it is important for the formal leaders of partner organizations to be directly involved in the project and to work together. Their involvement has a high symbolic value in opening the joint action space and generating a sense of shared leadership. At this stage, the mission of the manager is to address the administrative and logistical details so that interaction takes place and project activities take place on time, in the right places and with the right people.

The beginnings of joint projects are usually characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. No matter how much planning was done, there is a tremendous gap between the words on paper and what actually needs to be done in practice. A key mission of the manager at the initial stage is to continually stand back, reflect, and see the joint action space as it differentiates itself. This period is a very difficult one because both the project and the project management are emergent processes that shape and, hopefully, strengthen each other. As illustrated above, the program

manager took the relatively limited role of coordination during this stage, focusing mainly on technical task allowing the three directors to lead. Furthermore, she depended primarily on the project director, which was the head of her organization and her direct superior, for supervision and guidance. This supervisory relationship continued throughout the life of the project, but the more the program manager took on the leadership role, she became less and less dependent.

The transition from coordination to leadership

As the project takes shape, the formal leaders should move to a more background role and the manager should step into the leadership role. However, the program manager rarely has a strong position of authority over project actors whose real superiors are in the partner organizations. Program managers cannot impose their values on project actors. Under these conditions leadership means working with project actors, meeting them where they are at, and helping them use participation in the project as means of realizing potential that can be met in their regular organizations. The manager symbolizes the emergent partnership and is the only person fully identified with the project. This position, however, is often a very lonely one. The manager is neither a member of the formal leadership (CEO) group nor one of project actors.

The most important task for the manager is winning the trust of the partner organizations. The partners need to believe that the manager is working for the partnership and not for any one of the partners. Although the partnership is differentiated from the partner organizations, the joint action space cuts across organizational boundaries. The manager must be free to cross these boundaries, move in and among partner organizations, and have the authority to work with actors in order to carry out project activities, solve problems and deal with conflicts that arise in the course of a project.



Relationships

Masar

- “Family”
- Mini-society
- Non-hierarchical
- Same relationships at all levels

Sawa

- “Partners”
- Non-hierarchical

Duroob

- Non-hierarchical

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- Non-hierarchical
- Mutual respect