



Performance Culture in Partnerships

What do we mean by ‘performance culture’?

‘Performance culture’ is widely seen as a desirable goal for partnerships to achieve, with a starting point where each partner organisation and interest group brings its own distinctive culture to the table. Differences in culture – in values, ways of thinking and ways of behaving – can present obstacles to successful partnership working, as well as being positive, a source of creative tension and innovation.

For *partnerships* to develop their own discernible culture, rather than be a place where partner cultures clash, there must be a conscious approach to partnership development and shared learning to the extent that members develop sufficiently similar values and behaviours. A focus on the results that partners want to achieve, the added value that they can provide through collaboration, and partner mutual advantage are keys to this, along with a well-managed process to ensure successful delivery.

‘Performance culture’, however, can be defined in different ways. These definitions may not be made explicit, and can themselves be a source of partnership difficulty. The term may be used as shorthand reflecting a desire for greater control and holding other partners to account – leading to frictions within the partnership – or may reflect a more creative approach to maximising partnership benefits.

Performance improvement and performance management

It can be helpful to view ‘performance culture’ as comprising elements of ‘performance improvement’ and ‘performance management’, where:

- ‘performance improvement’ features values and behaviours associated with learning and striving for more effective strategies and delivery
- ‘performance management’ features values and behaviours relating more to how strategies, projects and services are monitored and measured

There is a balance to be struck, given that ‘performance improvement’ is hit or miss without performance management, while ‘performance management’ can place too much emphasis on “are we doing the things right?” rather than the more strategic question, “are we doing the right things?”. There can also be unintended consequences where the target becomes more important than the desired outcomes for individuals and communities.

The design of performance management systems will be shaped in part by organisational cultures. In turn such systems will influence on culture and ways of working, given that they can have powerful effects over what gets done, how it is done and how performance is rewarded.



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Developing a performance culture typically needs to combine systems development (to ensure workable performance management processes) with a conscious approach to change management, with leadership and backing from partnership decision makers and efforts to ensure understanding and ownership of all those with a part to play in improving partnership performance.

What behaviours characterise a ‘performance culture’?

Favourable		Unfavourable
talk of “us”	→←	talk of “them”
ask & listen	→←	tell
plan the future	→←	go over the past
accept responsibility - and act	→←	parcel blame
be willing to be held to account	→←	pass the buck
report honestly	→←	paper over the cracks
challenge each other constructively	→←	let important things pass
seek robust evidence to inform decisions	→←	seek evidence after the decision has been taken
seek shared understanding of the logic/ theories behind partnership interventions	→←	stick to the ways of looking at the world in one’s own field
question assumptions in the light of feedback on what’s working and not working on the ground	→←	take the assumptions behind strategies and services for granted
use common language in defining and measuring performance	→←	use different terms, with different meanings
view performance management as part of the day job	→←	view performance management as a chore
be positive about change	→←	be cynical about change

What actions may be needed to instil more of a performance culture?

What community leaders/ agency managers can do – eg:

in providing direction

- set clear objectives
- value good evidence in decision-making
- invest in performance management systems that are fit for purpose and backed up by good quality data (including *shared data*)
- encourage shared understanding of partnership vision and goals, including the ‘golden thread’, linking community-wide goals through to programme and project objectives and performance management



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- allow adequate time for strategic thinking by partners to consider the implications of performance evidence
- support innovation and risk-taking - and ensure that there is evaluation and that worthwhile practices are spread

in contributing as partners

- model positive behaviours
- promote mutual challenge
- pursue supportive leadership practices within own organisation/ sector
- accept collective responsibility within the partnership, and be prepared to be held accountable for delivering on organisational commitments made
- take action where services/ projects/ staff are underperforming
- seek to understand the organisational cultures of partners

What partnership managers can do to promote change – eg:

in promoting performance management and improvement

- help people see the benefits from their personal and organisational perspectives ... and understand the *why* of performance management (target setting, trajectory appraisal, etc)
- keep the approach positive – give recognition to successful progress
- encourage partners to consider the skills and capacity needs that flow from what needs to be done to improve performance – and take opportunities to build learning for new and better skills and understanding into performance management and improvement activities
- consider peer review and/or the use of an external advisor as a sounding board in implementing performance management and in assessing the robustness of evidence and plans
- promote agreements between partners where there are particular needs to formalise joint working (eg, in data sharing, to ensure better quality data for decision-making)

in implementing performance management systems

- take every opportunity to streamline systems – and avoid an approach that people see as a chore, or imposes disproportionate costs
- don't try to make the same progress everywhere at once – pursue quick wins in areas where progress is more likely and where individuals may be expected to champion the benefits of performance management to others
- ensure that performance data is well-presented, in forms which aid interpretation and debate.

Help to tell a story:

- ◆ where are we now?
- ◆ where did we start from?
- ◆ where are we going?
- ◆ how will we know if we've reached there?
- ◆ what do we need to do to get there?



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What evidence is there of ‘performance culture’ when reviewing partnership effectiveness?

When conducting reviews of partnership effectiveness, either internally or with the help of peer reviewers, there are questions which can usefully be asked:

How effective is the partnership in:

- understanding the delivery process from analysis to option appraisal to plausible interventions to improved outcomes?
- collating and analysing data?
- accessing and using the evidence base (‘what works’)?
- preparing concise, SMART plans setting out how a partnership is to get from where it is to where it wants to be?
- challenging and testing these plans?
- learning from other areas and drawing on external support and advice?
- putting in place the means for project managing the delivery of these plans?
- ensuring there is management information available to track delivery?
- monitoring and reporting on progress?
- changing what isn’t working?

Find out more

- Audit Commission www.audit-commission.gov.uk/
 - ◆ Acting on Facts
 - ◆ Aiming to Improve: the principles of performance measurement
 - ◆ Performance Breakthroughs: improving performance in public sector organisations
- IDeA – Performance Management and Monitoring Initiative
www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=76209
also content on Performance Culture
www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=76225
- Improvement Network website www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk
- Integrated Care Network (2004) ‘Culture’ in Partnerships – what do we mean by it and what can we do about it www.integratedcarenetwork.gov.uk
- E H Schein (1992) *Organizational Culture and Leadership* San Francisco: Jossey Bass