

## CHAPTER 25

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# INTERVENING TO IMPROVE INTER- ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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## INTRODUCTION

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ACTORS who envision gaining collaborative advantage from aligning with others in an inter-organizational partnership face the often-daunting prospect of trying to integrate their diverse perspectives and frequently competing goals. The complexity and challenges of initiating and maintaining such partnerships have been chronicled extensively (Gray 1995; McCaffrey *et al.* 1995; Vansina *et al.* 1998; Faulkner and de Rond 2000; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Gray and Clyman 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2000a; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; Gray and Schruijer 2007). For example, while initially intrigued about proposed alliances, partners often lose interest when the desired benefits are not quickly realized. While ostensibly pursuing a common goal, partners often espouse diverse aims that provoke difficult-to-reconcile conflicts (Huxham and Vangen 2005). Consequently, many partnerships succumb to collaborative inertia; that is, they experience slow progress or truncate their efforts without any tangible outcomes (Huxham and Vangen 2004). What

actions are necessary to achieve one's inter-organizational aspirations? How can collaborative inertia be prevented? To what extent can would-be partners build successful alliances, or is the fate of partnerships left to political manoeuvring or covert power brokering (Hardy and Phillips 1998), environmental exigencies (Sharfman *et al.* 1991; Denis *et al.* 2001), serendipity (Huxham and Vangen 2005), or pure chance?

In this chapter, I review a variety of interventions to improve the quality and the likelihood of alliance success. I define interventions as deliberate actions taken by an alliance partner or a third party to influence the formation, design, or process of interaction among alliance partners. While there are many names for these partnerships, I refer to five types in this chapter: strategic alliances, joint ventures, policy planning forums, community forums, and multi-sector collaborations (MSCs).

Interventions can originate from four sources. They can be either invited by the partners themselves or imposed if others (such as government agencies or resource providers) have authority or leverage over the alliance. They can be undertaken by the partners or by third parties who are invited to offer assistance. I argue that interveners can improve inter-organizational alliances by undertaking several intervention tasks. Many of these interventions have their roots in the organizational development, social ecology, and conflict resolution or mediation literatures but have evolved and been adapted to meet the needs of developing inter-organizational forms. Additionally, the interventions have been tested and refined through practical application in numerous contexts, often using action research methodologies (Lewin 1951; Elden and Chisolm 1993), and thereby reflect the best of theory-to-practice wisdom. In this chapter I review the underlying theory behind each intervention and assess its utility for improving inter-organizational partnerships.

I have organized this chapter into four sections. The next section reviews obstacles to successful partnerships and introduces a model of factors that motivate and block collaborative efforts. It conceives of the intervener's role in Lewinian terms (1951) as either decreasing the restraining or increasing the motivating forces for successful relationships. In the following section I introduce eight generic tasks that interveners can undertake to shift these forces in positive directions. These eight tasks offer a framework for organizing an array of more specific intervention activities. For each task, I review the theoretical premises undergirding it and outline specific intervention techniques that accomplish that task. I then provide an appraisal of each intervention technique and its utility for intervening in different types of IORs and link the intervention techniques to specific stages in the life-cycle of inter-organizational partnerships.

## WHY INTERVENTION IS NEEDED: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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Working across organizational boundaries is neither easy nor straightforward. Partnerships are born of diversity and require capitalizing on that diversity to achieve joint ends (Gray 1989). Still, simply agreeing to work together does not automatically ensure success. Achieving collaboration is equivalent to becoming multi-voiced or polyphonic (after music of the same name that emphasizes the equitable juxtaposition of multiple melodies) (Bouwen and Steyaert 1999). This means 'both generating an appreciation for the diversity of viewpoints that multiple parties bring to a problem (or opportunity) and, at the same time, to corralling and channeling this diversity into problem solutions that all parties can accept' (Gray and Schrujijer 2007).

Many factors have been identified that contribute to the potential for collaborative inertia noted earlier. In a study of a business/education collaboration in New York City, several factors including differences in organizational cultures of the participants, histories of misunderstanding and the erosion of trust among parties, cultural differences, and institutional disincentives were identified as obstacles to successful collaboration (Gray 1995). Also, when parties frame the issues or the reasons for their interdependencies through different lenses, the quality of their agreement diminishes (Curseu and Schrujijer 2005), and sometimes the potential for finding any areas of agreement disappears (Lewicki *et al.* 2003). Additionally, partnerships require the construction of new identities (Koot *et al.* 2003) that often live in tension with past affiliations, and partners may refuse to team up in the first place or exit the partnership rather than compromise their identity if its loss proves too threatening (Rothman 1997; Beech and Huxham 2003; Gray 2004). For example, the merger between a service-delivery and a teaching hospital ended in divorce after two years when neither would compromise their core mission. Even when partners freely join up, another major detriment to success is the absence of process skills among the partners (Wondolleck 1985). Sometimes psychodynamic factors that arise in the subconscious work of the group can also derail collaborative efforts (even when the parties are well intentioned about working together) (Vansina 2000; Gray and Schrujijer forthcoming). Finally, at a more systemic level, institutional forces and power differences create imposing obstacles to success (Gray 1995; Himmelman 1995; Hardy and Phillips 1998; Denis *et al.* 2001).

Building on Kurt Lewin's (1951) notion of force fields, the driving and restraining forces that affect collaborative alliances are depicted in Figure 25.1. Driving forces are those factors that propel the formation or continuation of collaborative efforts;

	Driving forces	Restraining forces
Strategic/ organizational factors	Knowledge generation Need for resources Economies of scale Interdependence Hurting stalemate	Limited vision of domain Perceived loss of control Perceived loss of constituent support Internal conflict
Institutional/ societal factors	Government incentives Legal/regulatory mandate New opportunity arises	History of conflict and mistrust Disincentives Power differences

Fig. 25.1 Factors motivating preventing collaboration

Source: Sharfman *et al.* (1991).

restraining forces, those factors that slow or impede collaborative initiatives (similar to success and failure factors discussed by Hibbert *et al.*, this volume). Both driving and restraining forces can be further classified into strategic and institutional factors. Strategic factors are those over which collaborative partners have some control; institutional factors reflect forces beyond the purview of the partners. Strategic driving forces that motivate partners to ally include the need for knowledge or resources possessed by partners, desire for economies of scale within their operations, high levels of interdependence on other organizations, and hurting stalemate (Zartman 1981) in which rivals realize that perpetuating a conflict is worse than settling it. Institutional driving forces include incentives offered by government or other stakeholders as well as legal and regulatory mandates that make partnering with other stakeholders either required or highly desirable. Changes in the institutional environment also introduce new opportunities to initiate partnerships (e.g. funding agencies offer incentives for collaborating or make partnerships a necessary condition for funding).

Restraining forces create what Huxham and Vangen (2005) refer to as collaborative inertia by slowing or inhibiting the formation or continuation of collaborative relationships. Perceived loss of control, fear of loss of constituent support, and internal conflicts within the alliance partners are considered strategic restraining forces because partners can take steps to ameliorate them. Institutional restraining forces include economic or government disincentives, power differences, cultural mores, and a protracted history of conflict and mistrust—factors that have become institutionalized and therefore impossible for organizations to surmount individually.

Drawing on this model, then, intervention can be conceived of as a process of either reducing restraining factors or increasing driving factors among the partners within an inter-organizational system. Some interventions primarily reduce restraining forces; others enhance driving forces; but most accomplish both simultaneously.

## INTERVENTION TASKS AND TECHNIQUES

To advocate intervention implies that one believes that inter-organizational relations are at least partly malleable and can be intentionally or strategically designed, managed, or guided towards someone's desired ends. While theories of IOR may not agree about the extent of control that interveners can exercise (Faulkner and de Rond 2000), most attribute some agency to the parties involved. If alliance partners are not totally at the mercy of exogenous forces, then, through intervention, individuals can exert leverage over how partners are interacting.

The tasks that interveners undertake to assist alliance partners in working more effectively have been described in a variety of different ways. Generally, interveners serve as matchmakers (Gray and Yan 1997) or conveners (Carlson 1999) who bring partners together, design experts who help partners structure their interactions, and process consultants who can play practical roles that include facilitators, mediators, recorders, educators, and advocates (Strauss 1999). In this section, I organize these roles into eight overarching tasks by which interveners can promote partnership effectiveness: (1) visioning; (2) convening; (3) process design; (4) reflective intervening; (5) problem structuring; (6) conflict handling; (7) brokering; and (8) institutional entrepreneurship. While it is possible that the same person(s) may execute more than one task within a given alliance, for analytic ease I describe them separately. I explain each task, present the theoretical rationale that informs it, and introduce specific intervention techniques for carrying it out within alliances. While the list of techniques is illustrative rather than comprehensive, it reflects a wide array of practices, grounded in theory and documented in the literature, that have been utilized in a host of inter-organizational contexts. Table 25.1 provides a summary of this information.

### Visioning

A critical task for launching a new partnership is that of *visioning*, which involves recognizing the potential value of a collaborative alliance, imagining how the parties

**Table 25.1 Core roles, tasks, and phases of interveners for IOR types**

Task	Description	IOR type and phase	Specific techniques	Conditions for use
Visioning	Appreciative work; recognizes and conveys need for IOR	All IOR types Phase 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shared strategy maps</li> <li>Search conference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifies and clarifies future directions; trust exists; doesn't address implementation</li> <li>Finds common ground; doesn't resolve conflicts</li> <li>Intervener seen as neutral, legitimate, and has clout</li> <li>Representational issues are dealt with</li> </ul>
Convening	Introduces partners; organizes means of identifying, selecting, and enlisting participants	All, Phase 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feasibility assessment</li> <li>Inviting partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High trust in intervener; transparency of process critical; respectful of confidential issues; large investment of intervener's and participants' time</li> <li>Values the positive aspects of partners' experiences</li> <li>Partners recognize they need process help; high mistrust, rivalry; cognitive overload; complex and novel</li> <li>Many skilled facilitators; keypad technology desirable; large space needed; limited time possible; authorities remain ultimately accountable; issues are public</li> </ul>
Reflective intervening	Collects data from/with participants to assess the issues and stimulate dialogue and reflection on them	All, Phases 1 and 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action research</li> <li>Appreciative Inquiry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Useful for volatile, transient problems; can't handle complex and continuous problems; any level of policy-making; parties are willing to assign MAUTs</li> <li>Partners need rapport and modicum of trust</li> <li>Geographically dispersed partners; liaisons need to be authorized and trusted by other partners</li> <li>Interveners need rapport and clout with low and high power groups and can handle conflicts</li> </ul>
Process managing	Designs and manages the process of participant interaction	All, but JVs Phases 1, 2, and 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative design</li> <li>Large-scale system interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partners need rapport and modicum of trust</li> <li>Geographically dispersed partners; liaisons need to be authorized and trusted by other partners</li> <li>Interveners need rapport and clout with low and high power groups and can handle conflicts</li> </ul>
Problem structuring	Introduces analysis of shared problem and option and method for deciding among them	Phase 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysing interconnected decision areas (AIDA)</li> <li>GSS (SODA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partners need rapport and modicum of trust</li> <li>Geographically dispersed partners; liaisons need to be authorized and trusted by other partners</li> <li>Interveners need rapport and clout with low and high power groups and can handle conflicts</li> </ul>
Brokering	Coordinates exchange of critical information among relevant parties; bridges low and high power partners	All, Phases 2 and 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Liaisons</li> <li>Bridging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partners need rapport and modicum of trust</li> <li>Geographically dispersed partners; liaisons need to be authorized and trusted by other partners</li> <li>Interveners need rapport and clout with low and high power groups and can handle conflicts</li> </ul>
Conflict handling	Helps work through conflicts and disagreements	All, All Phases, especially 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mediation, facilitation, consensus building</li> <li>Perspective taking</li> <li>Trust building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intervener is neutral and accepted by partners; useful for resolving conflicts; may take considerable time; parties accept responsibility for agreements</li> <li>Parties willing to explore differences</li> <li>Time commitment may be substantial</li> <li>Follow-up on agreements needed, new organization created</li> <li>Multiple sites; need to get buy-in from partners in new setting</li> </ul>
Institutional entrepreneurship	Promotes establishment of norms to govern institutionalization; transfer of design to other settings	JVs, Strat. Alliances, MSCs; Phases 3 and 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structuring</li> <li>Replicating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parties willing to explore differences</li> <li>Time commitment may be substantial</li> <li>Follow-up on agreements needed, new organization created</li> <li>Multiple sites; need to get buy-in from partners in new setting</li> </ul>

can collaborate, and conveying this vision to them (Gray 1989; Maguire *et al.* 2004). While any stakeholder can propose a collective appreciation for the others, this task is usually performed by someone who knows the issues, has legitimacy (in the eyes of other stakeholders) and enough political clout to frame the collaborative vision in a way that others cannot ignore (Gray 1989). According to Bryson and Crosby (1992: 33), visionaries need to understand the social, political and economic 'givens' in a situation as well as the relevant people involved.

### *Background Theory: Social Ecology*

The notion of appreciation was introduced by Vickers (1965) and adopted by social ecology theorists Emery and Trist (1965). They pointed out that when a group of interdependent organizations take unilateral, maladaptive actions with respect to the problem, these generate unanticipated and dissonant repercussions for each other (Emery and Emery 1977). Rather than decreasing uncertainty, this increases the level of turbulence (or uncertainty) at the domain level (Emery and Trist 1965; Trist 1977; Trist 1983). Effective intervention can help reduce turbulence in inter-organizational systems by encouraging partners to adopt a system-level perspective and develop an understanding of how each one's actions influence choices and outcomes for their partners. The process of appreciation enables stakeholders to develop common knowledge about the domain and about their interdependencies (Friend and Jessop 1969) and to design correlated responses (Trist 1983).

### *Visioning Techniques*

There are several techniques that interveners can introduce to promote joint appreciation. One appreciative technique involves the construction of *shared strategy maps* (Eden 1989; Bryson and Finn 1995). This process involves querying each individual stakeholder and constructing a cognitive map of their views on a topic. Then, individual maps are combined into a computerized composite map that reflects the perspectives of all. In a group setting, the composite map becomes the basis for discussion, revision, and, hopefully, agreement about future directions. This mapping process facilitated identification of a common vision and mission for 45 representatives of a school district engaged in strategic planning (Bryson and Finn 2005).

Another appreciative technique is actually called visioning. 'Visioning is a process in which people build consensus on a description of their preferred future—the set of conditions they want to see realized over time' (Moore *et al.* 1999). Visioning processes can take many forms including *search conferences*, *priority boards*, and *charettes* among others (Moore *et al.* 1999). Visioning processes are designed to build common awareness of domain issues among diverse stakeholders.

In a search conference, a dialogue is constructed among stakeholders about the broad contextual influences affecting the domain as well as their individual and collective aspirations and preferred strategies for influencing the future of the domain (Emery and Emery 1977; Emery and Purser 1996; Weisbord and Janoff 2000). Two critical early steps in the search conference promote domain-level understanding: (1) identifying common futures directs partners' attention to their mutual aspirations for the future of the domain; (2) identification of current and anticipated trends likely to affect the domain encourages partners to build a common interpretation of the various factors governing their interactions and promotes understanding about how each one's actions influence the others' outcomes. Often the realizations produced through such analyses break down boundaries among potential collaborators and promote awareness of their common plight. As Weisbord and Janoff (2005: 80) note, 'a short, intense, whole system meeting enables something not available in any other way: A gestalt of the whole in all participants that dramatically improves their relationship to their work and their coworkers'.

## Convening

A second intervention task is *convening*. The primary tasks of conveners are to assess whether a partnership is feasible and to identify and motivate potential partners to participate (Carlson 1999). While conveners are sometimes the same individuals who initially appreciate the potential for partnerships in the first place, separate conveners are often hired to test the feasibility and assist in the launch of a potential collaborative alliance. If critical stakeholders withhold participation, a convener may advise against going forward.

### *Background Theory: Social Ecology*

Like appreciation, convening has its origins in social ecology theory (Trist 1983). Successful convening hinges not only on recognizing who has a stake in an issue, but also on having sufficient influence to attract or persuade stakeholders to join a collaborative alliance. In joint ventures and strategic alliances, individual businesses may rely on third party matchmakers to help them identify appropriate partners. In multiparty contexts, conveners need breadth of vision, legitimacy, and clout (Gray 1989).

### *Intervention Technique: Feasibility Assessment*

A primary intervention technique employed by conveners is *feasibility assessment* (conflict assessment if the presenting issues are conflictual). This activity involves

determining whether the potential partners (or disputants) have the requisite motivations to form an alliance. In preparing for a joint venture, partner selection has been shown to be a critical component of success. As Beamish and Banks (1987: 8) have argued: 'If one or both partners were dissatisfied with the performance, the venture was considered unsuccessful'. Consequently, careful assessment of several potential partners is valuable before embarking on business-to-business partnerships.

In policy and community partnerships partners often have less, if any, discretion in selecting each other. In these contexts, getting the right mix of representative points of view to participate becomes paramount in solving the problem. Representation involves decisions about who can participate in a collaborative initiative and for whom they can speak. The degree to which representation needs to be circumscribed will differ depending on the purpose of the partnership, but alliances often falter because representational issues, such as how inclusive the group of participants will be and who has 'authority' to act on behalf of the collaborative group, were neglected during initial discussions (Carlson 1999). When partnerships are convened primarily for information exchange, decisions about who should be included to ensure availability of needed information is critical, but including parties with redundant information may not be necessary. Also, groups engaged primarily in information exchange may not need firm decision rules. For example, social service agencies collaborating to keep track of common clients or promote client referrals may want wide and open-ended representation whereas a policy-making partnership should have explicit criteria about stakeholder representation and decision-making guidelines. However, 'being representative of' is not the same as 'representing' (Carlson 1999: 186). When there are too many stakeholders to effectively participate in consensus decision-making, the larger group can be asked to select a smaller group to represent them (Carlson 1999). Process designs can also distinguish participation levels between those parties that only provide input and others with decision-making authority.

Ineffective resolution of representational issues can cause collaborations to fail. When a federal agency tried to organize ten local partnerships to address issues related to the spotted owl controversy in the US Pacific Northwest, the agency didn't enlist community members in each location in issue identification or selection of partnership representatives, but instead made decisions unilaterally (Carlson 1999). Consequently, participants 'were concerned . . . about the federal government's motives, the balance of power at the table, and the availability of resources to enable all groups to participate on an equal footing (KenCairn 1997)', as cited in Carlson (1999: 173). Ensuring psychological safety in the ensuing discussion and reaching agreement upfront about decision authority and ownership of outcomes can prevent later withdrawal by participants (Carpenter 1999), misunderstandings, and accusations of failure to negotiate in good faith (Bingham 1986). Such accusations

and attendant mistrust often derail negotiations when parties later announce they don't have the authority to make decisions for their organizations and must seek ratification of an agreement with higher ups. Achieving clarity upfront about representatives' levels of decision-making authority and necessary feedback loops can reduce such trust violations. In general, ensuring process transparency is critical to maintaining trust.

## Problem Structuring

A third intervention task involves *problem structuring* in which alliance partners faced with a challenging problem attempt to dissect it, identify and compare possible solutions, and select the best one. Problem structuring approaches range from very simple visual arrays to comparisons of multiple probabilistic scenarios, often with the help of computer models.

### *Background Theory: Cognitive Mapping and Multi-Attribute Utility Theory*

To the extent that partnering is viewed as involving a series of choices that need to be made by the alliance partners, each partner has an idea of the key factors that impinge on the problem and the levers for influencing it. This image of the problem or joint task can be thought of as a cognitive map (Bougon *et al.* 1977). Cognitive maps show what each partner sees as key components of the problem and how they believe these components are linked together. Thus, they reveal chains of reasoning (Eden 1989). One model of partnership construction, then, involves building a joint map of the key constructs and levers that affect the problem of interest.

Multi-attribute utility theory (MAUT) offers another basis for problem structuring. From this perspective, partners are presumed to be boundedly rational decision-makers (March and Simon 1958) whose task is to decipher the various options that are possible within a problem context. This approach draws heavily on the belief that decision-makers have sufficient information about the parameters of the problems under consideration and also that they are able to assign values or utilities to their preferences (Keeney 1992). A utility function ascribes rankings to a decision-maker's preferences among all possible outcomes. By quantifying preferences, partners can determine where their priorities converge and can search for trade-offs among the various choices that satisfy the most important issues for each partner (Keeney 1992). Quantification also enables aggregation of preferences and prioritization across a large group. A fundamental premise of this approach is the notion that there is a single dimensional value measure that can be used for

ranking choices, but for some sensitive issues (such as the value of life), this premise has been challenged by participants.

### *Problem-Structuring Interventions*

When interveners adopt a *problem-structuring* role one technique they can use that draws on multi-attribute utility theory is called *analysing interconnected decision areas (AIDA)* (Friend and Hickling 2005). A decision area refers to an opportunity to act in at least two alternative ways with respect to a problem. Interdependent decision areas can be linked to produce decision graphs. After selecting a set of decision areas (or problem foci), decision-makers map out the decision options associated with each decision area and then compare the compatibility of options across decision areas. The AIDA approach offers various visual methods for distinguishing viable from infeasible options. Once a feasible range of options is identified, a multi-attribute utility process is employed to help decision-makers weigh the advantages and liabilities of each option.

Other approaches to problem structuring enable the partners to identify the various components of a problem and examine their interrelationships through cognitive mapping. Rather than structuring a choice among alternatives, as in MAUT, these approaches use a 'modeling method to capture, analyze and play back to participants the substance of the issues under discussion' (Huxham 1996: 142). An important variant of these approaches is utilization of *group decision support (GDS)* to help manage the data and map the interactions among problem components. For example, interveners using Strategic Options Development and Analysis (SODA) (Eden 1989) build cognitive maps from issues suggested by participants, thereby enabling them to better visualize a composite set of interrelated components of the problem. A secondary consequence is that concerns about the partnership also frequently emerge during this process (Huxham 1996).

## **Reflective Intervening**

The task of *reflective intervening* refers to interveners seeking information about the alliance in concert with the partners. The reflective aspect of this role stems from the activities the intervener promotes in which participants study themselves, their past and current interactions, and decide on needed changes to the partnership arrangements.

### *Background Theory: Organization Development/Action Research*

The underlying theoretical perspective that informs reflective intervention is rooted in the literature on organizational development and action research.

While originally designed to guide participatory interventions *within* organizations, organization development processes (diagnosis, feedback, intervention, and evaluation) have been extended to inter-organizational systems (Cummings 1984) in order to facilitate learning among the partners. Similarly, action research processes involve the co-creation of reality by those involved (Reason 1994), and, in inter-organizational settings, stress the active involvement of stakeholders in shaping the outcomes of or changes to the alliance along with the interveners.

### *OD/Action Research-Based Interventions*

Although there are many strands of action research (Elden and Chisolm 1993; Reason 1994), some common tenets are particularly relevant for interventions in inter-organizational settings. One key premise is involvement of the partners in diagnosing the primary reasons for seeking alliances and the primary obstacles preventing an alliance. By building this *joint diagnosis*, collaborators then agree on action steps to take to rectify these limitations. Many approaches to action research stress the importance of developing an ongoing learning process among the partners. These learning models intervene by trying to instil double loop learning (Argyris and Schon 1978; Argyris *et al.* 1985)—observing and reflecting on how one learns, among partners, and then initiating change in their interactions.

One particular reflective technique is called *appreciative inquiry*. This technique stresses the positive potential inherent in working together (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Barrett 1995). Participants are encouraged to ask questions about each other's strengths, achievements, visions, and the possibilities each envisions for what they might jointly create. By valuing the positive, rather than emphasizing threats or problems, appreciative inquiry tries to minimize social-psychological resistance to change.

Some forms of action research (known as participatory action research) stress the importance of levelling the playing field among partners. Community empowerment is an express premise of participatory action research interventions (Tandon 1989; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Elden and Levin 1991; Himmelman 1995). This approach 'aims to confront the way in which the established and power-holding elements of societies worldwide are favored because they hold a monopoly on the definition and employment of knowledge' (Reason 1994: 328). Key tasks of interveners in these circumstances are to take preliminary actions to guard against cooptation and to ensure lower power partners have a legitimate, independent base from which to raise their concerns. For example, interveners may need to mobilize low power groups to present a coherent voice and gain the attention of more powerful parties in order to initiate a partnership (Schumaker 1975).

## Process Design

Process intervention makes a critical distinction between the content (or task work) of a partnership and the process (or interactions among the partners) (Schein 1978). Paying attention to the stages in which collaboration unfolds (McCann 1983; Gray 1989; Ring and Van de Ven 1994), to how meetings among the partners are conducted, and the patterns of interactions occurring over time, constitute important tasks for process designers (Gray 1989; Schuman 1996, 2006). Explicit consideration of the principles by which the deliberations will be conducted and decisions will be undertaken can mean the difference between a well-managed process and one in which various parties feel 'used' by others.

### *Background Theory: Process Design*

Process interventions have their roots in the action research/organization development tradition informed by Lewin's (1951) early work, but are also informed by the Tavistock tradition of group dynamics (Bion 1961) and by more recent work on group facilitation (Schuman 1996, 2006). The group dynamics approach argues that individual behaviour is highly influenced by group membership and that understanding dynamics at the group and intergroup levels is essential for intervening to facilitate inter-organizational relations. For example, groups often divert from the task of joint problem solving to address members' underlying anxieties and needs (such as concerns about belonging, influence, and dependence versus independence) (Bion 1961).

Attention to process dynamics helps groups address these underlying anxieties and redirect their attention to the task of alliance building. Schuman (1996: 128–9) identified three types of process: cognitive (dealing with the information, values, beliefs, and ideas of partners), social (concern with interpersonal interactions and communication), and political (focus on shifts of influence and resources). While many inter-organizational partnerships proceed without explicit attention to the processes by which the stakeholders interact (e.g. those which evolve very organically over time; see Cropper and Palmer, this volume); 'conveners and negotiators frequently underestimate the critical role of process in ensuring successful collaboration (Patton 1981; Wondolleck 1985)' (cited in Gray 1989: 265). Process designers can advise partners and encourage discussion among them about the principles governing representation within the partnership, expectations regarding participation, decision-making processes, ownership of and responsibility for outcomes, power sharing, and interactions with constituents, the media, and with the larger community in which the partnership is occurring (in the case of policy and community forums and MSCs). These issues are discussed in detail below under mediation because of their importance in fostering transparency and constructive norms for inter-organizational interactions.

### *Process Interventions*

Interveners engaged in process design assume responsibility for thinking through and executing a design for how the parties will interact and gaining commitment to the process from them. 'Agreeing on what would constitute a fair and sufficiently comprehensive process is usually easier than agreeing immediately on the solution' (Potapchuk and Polk 1993). Not all collaborators have or think they even need a process designer, but someone with knowledge of meeting design and group dynamics can help to ensure the parties' interactions are constructive and to avoid classic pitfalls that can derail even well-intended partnerships. In addition to building in a discussion of the ground rules or norms of interaction, process designers wrestle with 'shape of the table' issues and decide when plenary versus small group meetings, caucuses or joint data collection may be productive. They can also introduce or design computerized tools to aid the partners' deliberations (Huxham 1996; Ackermann *et al.* 2005) and procedures to ensure that the two-table problem (Colosi 1985)—gaining consent of back-home constituents for any agreements reached—is satisfactorily addressed during implementation.

Mistrust of the process, and the anxiety associated with it, also arises when participants have differing conceptions about what will happen. Tensions can arise because partners have different ideas about the issues and about how to collaborate, and alliance partners differ in the degree of process knowledge they want to assume (Huxham 1996). 'Conferring with the parties about what is going to happen next and who is going to do it ensures that expectations are not mismatched and that the parties retain ownership of everything that happens' (Gray 1989: 266). Still, since collaborating frequently involves coordinating in the face of ambiguity (Huxham and Vangen 2000b), even the most careful designs can go awry because of environmental exigencies, unwitting behaviour by participants, or deliberate power plays (Hardy and Phillips 1998). For example, in an MSC, a collaborative agreement unravelled because, within a six month period, several key members left the alliance to pursue other career opportunities. In this situation, a useful 'process' remedy would have been to ensure redundancy of representation so that institutional memory of the agreements negotiated through collaboration is not lost when key participants leave the process (Gray 1995). While this remedy might have prevented collapse of the partnership, in reality, increasing the size of the partnership may reduce the group's ability to work together effectively.

In some collaborative settings it is desirable to involve large number of participants in the process to ensure diversity of viewpoints and widespread support for agreements that are reached. In these *large-scale interventions* sponsors may employ interveners to assist with the convening function and to design and conduct a large-scale system intervention. Particularly on public issues when incorporating the viewpoints of a wide array of participants (as in deliberative democracy projects)

is desired, process facilitators can bring both the technological expertise and the process skills to assist in convening and managing the process. For example, using what they refer to as the 21st Century Town Meeting, *AmericaSpeaks* successfully convened a citizen engagement effort in which 4,500 New York residents, representing the city's demographic diversity, offered reactions to the initial site plans for the design of the World Trade Center memorial (Lukensmeyer and Brigham 2005). The participants met in face-to-face facilitated roundtable dialogues and used simultaneous voting via electronic keypads to test for group consensus on the major issues. The consensus recommendations informed the next phase of planning for the project (Lukensmeyer and Brigham 2005). For a helpful review of process methods, see Bryson and Anderson (2000).

## Conflict-Handling

The task of *conflict-handling* can be performed by one of the partners or by a third party. Since conflicts can arise at any point during inter-organizational partnerships (Gray 1989) and are likely to negatively impact performance (Lyles and Salk 1996; Steensma and Lyles 2000; Gray and Schruijer forthcoming; see also, Schruijer (this volume) for a discussion of conflict from a social psychology perspective), without formal or informal means of working through these disruptions, potential collaborations may succumb to inertia (Yan and Gray 2001; Huxham and Vangen 2004). Interventions designed to address and resolve conflict often distinguish successful from failed partnerships. Thus, conflict handling is a critical skill for interveners and it becomes increasingly important when the number of partners is large and when historical animosities among partners are imported into new partnerships. While there are many approaches to resolving conflicts effectively, I focus here on mediation.

### *Background Theory: Mediation*

Mediation is a dispute resolution process in which a third party neutral helps disputants to jointly educate each other about the issues and interests involved in the dispute and to design and possibly implement a solution (Moore 1986). 'The goal of formal mediation is to change a competitive conflict to a cooperative interaction characterized by (1) effective communication, b) less obstruction, c) orderly discussion, d) confidence in one's ideas coupled with support for the ideas and concerns of other participants, e) coordinated efforts to resolve the conflict' (Deutsch 2000: 25). The advantages of mediation over other forms of dispute resolution (e.g. negotiation, arbitration, litigation) are: (1) the parties are treated with respect, their personal worth is confirmed, and they experience

psychological success and are more willing to accept change (Argyris 1970); (2) the process is voluntary (which ensures a sense of personal control over one's participation); and (3) the parties themselves, who are the most knowledgeable about their own needs relative to the issues under consideration, design and select alternative courses of action (rather than having solutions imposed by a judge or arbitrator).

Even with mediation, some stakeholders are highly resistant to partnering because they hold incompatible frames about the issues. By framing I mean 'shaping, focusing and organizing the world around us' (Lewicki *et al.* 2003). When parties frame their worlds in ways that cast other stakeholders as their enemies, view them as antithetical to their interests, experience threats to their own identity framing and/ or construe options for overcoming their differences with these others as hopeless, launching a successful partnership will be difficult if not impossible. If an intervener cannot assist parties to reframe their experience (e.g. a trusted visionary creates a plausible argument for partnering) or exogenous factors call attention to unrecognized interdependencies, frames can inhibit parties from even searching for joint interests (Lewicki *et al.* 2003; Gray 2004).

### *Conflict Handling Interventions*

Mediators search for ways to reframe disputes and construct social accounts of the parties' various needs to promote win-win solutions (Moore 1986; Gray 2005). Mediators also help partners assess the value of partnerships, design the process and ground rules for partners' interactions, facilitate disclosure of interests and construction of alternative solutions, and ensure sustainability of the agreements reached (Gray 1989; Susskind 1999; Carpenter 1999).

Mediators also help to build trust among partners in contexts where trust is absent. Trust issues can arise from the moment parties consider joining forces. Decisions about whether to enter into an alliance with a partner are based on trust levels in past alliances (Gulati 1995), and many collaborators decry the lack of trust in their partnerships (Vangen and Huxham 2003). If a history of trust already exists, interveners can reinforce it by asking potential partners to recount instances in which they behaved trustworthily (Moore 1986). When partners' relationships are characterized by mistrust, trust must be demonstrated repeatedly to be restored. An iterative process of forming expectations followed by demonstrations of good faith will be necessary to overcome the vulnerability they may feel towards one another (Vangen and Huxham 2003). 'Through increasing the number of promises and congruent actions that reinforce the belief that the commitment will be carried out, negotiators gradually build a relationship of trust' (Moore 1986: 142). 'When business, government and civic leaders attempted to revitalize the city of Newark, New Jersey, community groups refused to begin work on the process design until the business sector demonstrated its commitment to the city' (Strauss 1999: 142).

Several concrete short-term projects were identified and completed as a demonstration of good faith before a longer consensus-partnership commenced.

When parties harbour ingrained stereotypes about each other and mistrust is long-lived, multiple experiences of matching experience to expectations may be necessary before they begin to trust one another. Research has shown that unless parties spend time within positive interactions with each other (Amir 1994), they continue to employ stereotypes in their views of each other. Supplanting stereotypes with more realistic appraisals of other stakeholders can be accelerated through joint data-gathering trips (Redford 1987; Gray 1989), in which participants share common experiences and get to know each other as individuals, and perspective-taking exercises that enable groups to acknowledge and work past their biased views of each other. These perspective-taking activities encourage parties to reconsider the ways they have framed each other and try on alternative interpretations (Sessa 1996; Tenkasi and Mohrman 1999; Gray 2006).

As noted earlier, process interventions that establish clear ground rules also enhance trust if they are actively enforced by facilitators and participants (Dukes *et al.* 2000), as does transparency in the agenda and efforts to ensure voice for all parties. Use of interest-based negotiation techniques also help to honour everyone's preferences to promote the search for win-win alternatives (Fisher *et al.* 1991). Interveners may also elect to conduct preliminary interviews with participants (as part of the feasibility assessment) and then feed back a composite of this information so that parties learn the level of issue consensus and gain a clear understanding of the issues. In situations where the potential for defection from a trusting relationship is perceived to be high, interveners can assist parties to construct contractual provisions that mitigate against breaches of trust and ensure that future interests are protected (Ring and Van de Ven 1994; Das and Teng 1998).

## Internal Brokering

*Internal brokers* handle information-sharing among partners. Like conflict handlers, these individuals are usually partners themselves (although third parties can also perform this task). Brokering becomes increasingly important as partnerships extend in duration or grow in size. The task involves ensuring that all relevant parties have opportunities to provide input and receive information about domain issues. In alliances with geographically remote partners, brokers may be their primary link to a larger network of organizations.

### *Background Theory: Social Network Theory*

Network approaches have been used to explain how firms can create collaborative relationships and to distinguish effective from ineffective alliances. Social

ties provide access to reliable, inexpensive information about the quality and trustworthiness of others in one's network (Burt 1992; Stuart 1998; see also Kenis and Oerlemans, this volume). Because acquiring information is costly, relying on trusted network sources is prudent as is engaging in repeat alliances with trusted others (Gulati 1995). How a firm is situated within a wider network of other firms will affect its propensity (Walker *et al.* 1997) and its ability (Stuart 1998) to form strategic alliances. In the context of organization development (OD), 'the reported success of OD interventions, such as whole system design and search conferences, can be explained at least partially by social network theory, in that such forums enable the creation of networks and strong ties between networks of actors in an organization' (Tenkasi and Chesmore 2003: 297). Effective innovators, for example, have critical cross-departmental linkages (Tsai 2000) and a greater density of ties (Provan and Milward 1995). Network perspectives emphasize the dynamic and reciprocal nature of alliances, which are shaped by and can reshape networks over time. For example, search conferences can reorient the centrality and influence patterns of actors within a collaborative group (Clarke 2005: 43).

Other network interventions can adjust the power structure within the network. Centrality in networks is associated with power, but some intervention theorists explicitly conceive of alliances as arenas for power-sharing (Gray 1989; Bryson and Crosby 1992; Himmelman 1995). Others emphasize the role that discursive power plays in shaping collaborative agendas (Lawrence *et al.* 1999). When more powerful parties have discursive legitimacy (Hardy and Phillips 1998) and/or control access to the decision-making arena (Schumaker 1975; Bouwen *et al.* 1999; Gray 2004), a critical challenge of intervention is to ensure that cooptation (Selznick 1957) of lower power partners does not occur.

### *Network-Inspired Interventions*

One network-based intervention strategy is *establishing brokers* at key points in the network. Brokers play vital roles in joining actors from unconnected networks by filling structural holes (Burt 1992; Fernandez and Gould 1994; Gray *et al.* 2005). Brokers 'intervene' by building linkages and increasing information flow among unrelated parties (Westley and Vredenberg 1991). By inserting themselves into key positions, brokers also serve as entrepreneurs (Burt 1992) and as conflict handlers (Gray *et al.* 2005). Brokers with cultural fluency can serve as *translators* to facilitate alliances across cultural boundaries. Cultural fluency refers to the capability to 'experience from as many angles as possible the multiple levels of meaning, identity, and communication in cultures' (LaBaron 2003) and is an important skill for bridging cultural conflict within alliances. One concrete way this can affect collaborative design is in the selection of the ground rules. 'Most common ground rules in use today have evolved from a Western tradition that emphasizes efficiency and

individuality' (Dukes *et al.* 2000). If participants hail from non-Western cultures, then sensitivity to selecting ground rules that respect the values inherent in these cultural traditions would go a long way to beginning to reduce stereotypes and engender trust.

A second network-inspired technique is *power bridging*, which is particularly important in networks when there is considerable asymmetry among stakeholders. When the field is not level, a key task of interveners is to mediate between stakeholders who can exert different levels of power. Power bridgers can be powerful stakeholders themselves or third parties who have the necessary clout to bridge the gap between low and high power partners. Their primary function is to provide standing for low power partners and to play bridging roles (Westley and Vredenberg 1991) in the negotiations among partners of differential power. For example, the Catholic Church played this latter role in Ecuador in 1995 to garner a role for indigenous people in land reforms negotiations with the government and the International Development Bank (Treacle 1998).

Once at the table, interveners can help to level power differences by building checks and balances to prevent cooptation and ensure elite compliance with collaborative agreements. For example, independent watchdogs can be enlisted to oversee the fairness of the proceedings or sanctions agreed upon in advance can be evoked if powerful parties abuse their power during implementation. Powerful parties can voluntarily make themselves dependent on other stakeholders. For example, the partners can stipulate that if any of them fail to comply with the agreement, decisions can revert to traditional enforcement procedures (such as agency enforcement of codes).

## Institutional Entrepreneurship

The task of *institutional entrepreneurship* involves promoting the institutionalization of norms and agreements within an emerging field or organizational actors (Lawrence *et al.* 2002). Their role becomes salient during the implementation and institutionalization phases when agreements reached by the parties need to become routinized and monitored for consistency.

### *Theoretical Background: Institutional Theory*

Osborn and Hagedoorn (1997: 272) have noted that 'alliances and networks can be seen as experiments in institution building'. Forging new relationships and new ways of working not only requires a cognitive shift, but also a shift in routines and practices and may require forging new structural arrangements. Emerging fields are devoid of norms that specify legitimate behaviour so these need to be agreed to and specified, which Trist (1983) refers to as structuring. If the new practices

can be embedded in existing routines and align with prevailing values, they will be easier to institutionalize, but when partners are initiating new fields, the task of norm construction and implementation must accommodate values and practices from diverse partners (Maguire *et al.* 2004). For example, partners may differ in the degree to which they find formal rules procedures and contractual specification advantageous. While under-institutionalization may thwart coordination, over-institutionalizing—by establishing tight boundaries, formal structures, and clearly specified rules and procedures to regulate partners' interactions—may backfire, by curtailing the flexibility needed to incorporate diverse views (Westley and Vredenberg 1997), reduce partners' ability to learn from each other, cause alliances to revert to pre-alliance power relations, and lead to disappointment when expected outcomes are not realized.

### *Institution Theory-Based Interventions*

While no specific intervention techniques for institutional entrepreneurs have been identified, some guidance can be offered. This includes anticipating resistance from back-home organizational members not part of alliance-building efforts and designing in a way to bring them on board. *Replicating* a partnership involves translating a successful inter-organizational design to a new context. This work may involve a corporation starting up additional joint ventures in a venue, duplicating an MSC among new partners in a new venue, or promoting multiple innovative alliances simultaneously in multiple locations and/or on different topics. As noted in an earlier example, a critical step in the success of replications is to get buy-in from stakeholders in the new context before proceeding.

## APPLYING THE INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES

Interveners who are not caught up in the dynamics and concerns central to an inter-organizational partnership can prove potentially useful in navigating the minefields that lead to collaborative inertia. While most of the evidence for this statement is case-based, it is possible to speculate on when specific intervention techniques may prove most useful. Phase models of partnership formation involve distinct periods of sequential activities. While these have been demarcated and labelled slightly differently depending on the type of IOR (cf. McCann 1983; Gray 1989; Ring and Van de Ven 1994; Doz 1996; Strauss 1999), here I work with four phases: problem setting, direction setting, implementation, and institutionalization. In Phase 1, intervener tasks of visioning, convening, process design, and brokering, across power differences are most useful. In Phase 2, process design, reflective intervention, problem

structuring, brokering, and conflict handling are beneficial. For Phases 3 and 4, brokering and institutional entrepreneurship are valuable.

Table 25.1 provides an overview of all eight intervention tasks and indicates the phase of alliance formation in which they are advantageous and some general conditions for their use. While a more extensive analysis would require another whole chapter, I can offer some general considerations here. Assessment of which intervention technique to apply should consider the phase of development of the alliance, the extent of mistrust and conflict that characterizes the partners' interactions, the type of IOR problem (e.g. public policy development or joint venture formation), the complexity of the issues, and the number of participants. While many of the interventions can be adapted for multiple contexts, careful review of the strengths and weaknesses of each technique should be undertaken before selecting one. Finally, returning to an initial point, while partners themselves can serve as interveners, many of the techniques described here require considerable knowledge, training, and skill, best provided by a third party.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have made a case for why intervention in inter-organizational partnerships is often necessary and advantageous. I have also identified multiple tasks that interveners can undertake with the hope of improving partnership formation and evolution. While this review has emphasized interventions for improving inter-organizational partnerships that have grown out of well-reasoned theories of group and organizational dynamics and change, it is worth noting that to date there has been no systematic basis for evaluating or comparing the utility of these intervention techniques. Alliance formation does not lend itself to laboratory study, and few, if any, natural experiments permit such comparisons.

In lieu of more experimentally based evaluations, future researchers might carefully scrutinize each form of intervention to discern its major strengths and weaknesses and the conditions most conducive to it producing its desired ends. Research should also articulate the requisite competencies for individuals attempting such interventions and which interventions are most appropriate for different types of inter-organizational partnerships. With this additional knowledge, skilful interveners (those equipped with theoretical knowledge about organizational change and unassailable process skills) will have the best chance of making interventions to improve inter-organizational partnerships that have the greatest likelihood of success.

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