

## **Skills of successful partnership working: the ThemUs model**

The ThemUs model was developed through our work with consultants and business leaders, exploring the challenges of leading and influencing change in complex environments.

All organizations, across the sectors, are facing increasing turbulence caused by the churning between society, politics and economics, and the impact of globalization. The culture of work has changed. People expect involvement and empowerment, organisations are flatter and there is increased project team and matrix working. The focus now is on how to effect change and get the best out of people without undue reliance on the direct reporting line or formal hierarchical authority.

The focus on delivery in both private and public sectors has led to the recognition that to meet our targets we always rely on the support and cooperation of others. No longer can there be reliance on top-down command and control mechanisms. This is true for whole organisations who need to engage a multitude of stakeholders, and also for internal directorates, business units, and individuals tasked to deliver specific objectives. “Working in partnership” is a phrase used often to convey this sense of collaboration, engagement, joint problem-solving and consensus-building.

Many organisations have recognised this change as it applies to their internal service providers. Groups such as specialists in IT, strategy, finance, HR, efficiency, and others, find that it is no longer enough to present themselves to their customers as the “experts” and rely on people to act immediately as advised by said experts.

Some of the problems associated with partnership-working come from the difficulties of satisfying various agendas; ensuring that all parties have genuinely “bought in” to the project; and gaining the required commitment to action from all parties.

Unfortunately our current technology doesn't allow for downloading the ThemUs model graphically. However, here is a verbal description. The model plots the relationship between two partners Them and Us. The vertical axes represent increasing degrees of control. A diagonal line maps the range of different relationships, showing the way that control is shared. This will be played out in such activities as:

- leadership (who sets the direction and agenda, who initiates action)
- decision-making (who makes decisions, who is involved)
- ownership (who takes the responsibility, where does the buck stop)
- involvement and participation (who does the work)

### **Who are “Them”?**

The people on whom we rely to deliver our targets: stakeholders, clients, customers, staff, other Departments, agencies or groups.

### **Who are “Us”?**

Departments, agencies, groups or individuals tasked with specific targets.

Thus, at one side of the continuum most of the control is left with the consultant or project manager, with little engagement from the other parties. This is often where projects start. At the other side, ownership lies almost completely with stakeholders, with minimum input from the consultant or project manager. This is often the desired place to be at the final stages of delivery. The challenge of effective partnership working is to find the appropriate place to be, at any time during the project.

### **What are the skills?**

Making things happen through partnership working requires a different skill-set from traditional operational management. It includes true collaborative working; abilities in influencing; consulting; relationship-building; handling conflict and leading through coaching and developing.

The general requirement is for more emotional intelligence to be deployed throughout the whole process of both identifying what needs to be done, and implementing the change. The process, and relationship, becomes as important as the outcome, as the outcome cannot be achieved without full attention to the process.

### **Some questions**

If you are currently engaged in work which requires you to work in partnership with others, or which depends on the full engagement and collaboration of multiple stakeholders, here are some questions to help you identify where there might be an opportunity to develop more effective relationships.

### **Considering the ThemUs model:**

- Where on the scale are you operating?
- Where on the scale would your stakeholders/customers/clients put the relationship?
- Do you have the level of engagement that you need from your stakeholders?
- In order to operate most effectively, does the partnership relationship need to shift along the scale?
- If so, in what direction?
- In order to make this shift, how does the relationship with your stakeholders need to change/develop?
- What do you need to do more of, less of, or differently?
- What will be the challenge for you making these changes?

### **Developing the skills of partnership working**

Learning how to work effectively in partnership generally involves some personal development to increase one's repertoire of working style. For some people, this could mean learning more about building robust relationships with others. For others, it sometimes means learning how to listen at a deeper level, to really understand underlying issues and bring them to the surface. For some it means learning how to be more assertive, for others it could mean learning how to stand

back. There needs to be more listening, less telling; more consultation, less prescription; more “letting-go”, less direction; more trust, less suspicion. Our experience is that for many leaders and consultants this is fertile ground to build skills that are relevant and transferable to other work contexts.

If you would like more information about our work in this field please contact us