

Partners in mines

As the resources sector embraces partnering with communities and governments, the key challenge is how to make it work, writes Ian Dixon, Managing Director of Dixon Partnership Solutions.

Partnering is becoming more accepted as a way of doing business, especially within the resources sector.

There are many examples of companies partnering with communities, not-for-profit organisations and governments to achieve desired outcomes, whether it is gaining a social licence to operate, developing and managing community relations through the mine development phase, or providing community services in remote areas.

But those involved realise that partnering is not for the faint-hearted. While there can be significant benefits, it can also be complex, challenging and result in high transaction costs. Knowing when to partner and then how to do it effectively will be essential for the resources sector in the future.

There are commonalities to companies who have developed successful and enduring partnerships and the following tips may serve as a guide.

A clear purpose

Take the time to get clear on what you are all seeking to achieve and why you want to partner.

Getting buy-in

Building and maintaining support internally for a partnering approach is crucial.

Getting all levels within the organisations committed, all the various government agencies aligned or all of the members of community groups talking with one voice and supporting a partnering approach is extremely challenging.

Develop a simple business case with clear, consistent messages that can be easily communicated throughout the organisation

Building relationships

Relationships established and developed between people will form the foundation for any partnering initiatives. Getting to know people upfront and

developing trust and mutual respect is essential.

Once relationships are established, they need to be maintained throughout the partnering activity. As partnering can continue over long periods of time, managing the transition from one key individual to another is important.

Plan relationship building activities from day one, revisit regularly and manage people entering and leaving the partnership.

Managing stages

There are three main stages of partnering, and each has distinct activities: create, develop, sustain.

Problems can arise where there are differing perceptions of the stage you are up to. Set up a clear process to manage each stage and have someone coordinate the partnering activities – if necessary, seek outside assistance.

The partnering agreement

Partnering agreements can take many forms, ranging from overarching framework documents, which are often developed quite early in the process, to more detailed agreements which specify just how the partners will work together.

The best agreement depends on the objectives of the partners. All partners are involved in developing the agreement and it should reflect the relationship and working arrangements between the partners.

Use the partnering agreement process to build trust between the partners and, where necessary, involve all key people early in the process.

Adequate resourcing

Inevitably what occurs is that partnering processes start off with great enthusiasm, but as time goes by this enthusiasm wanes and resources (such as people, skills or capabilities) are withdrawn.

Make sure there is ongoing commitment of resources from all partners so that each partner's expectations can be met.

Review and evaluation

Keeping on track is crucial to ensure outcomes are being achieved. As mentioned earlier, partnering activities can involve many people and take a lot of time and resources, so regular reviews of the process as well as an overall evaluation of the impact of partnering activities need to be undertaken.

Build in regular evaluation and review process into the partnering agreement.

While the partnering journey can be a simple process, it can also be fraught with hazards and obstacles. Getting a clear process in place and asking the right questions at the right time will give you a better chance of delivering results.

One of the keys to success is creating the time and space



to do it properly. Without the commitment of time and resources to make it happen, partnering efforts can drift and results diminish. Partnering is not for all situations and if you do embark on the journey, be prepared and commit to it!

Ian Dixon is an internationally accredited partnership broker and was the Independent Chair of the SA Native Title Resolution process from January 2000 to February 2009.

