When we think of change we inevitably think of the negative aspects and that we may lose something. The other way to look at change is to embrace it and seek out the opportunities that it can provide, however, we must first accept that change needs to take place. The next step is to take a proactive approach and design the changes rather than wait for them to be imposed by others.

Mental Health is undergoing some major transformation right around the country. With greater recognition of this area and significant reforms on the horizon, such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme, moves towards fully individualised offerings and significant additional funding from the Federal Government announced in 2011, it is a sector poised for change.

The recent conference held by VICSERV, titled ‘Reframing Mental Health: a new state of mind’ was very appropriate given the massive changes that are looming and the need for people operating in the Community Managed Mental Health sector to embrace change and to look at ways of doing business differently.

But how can the sector capitalise on these changes and develop a sustainable delivery model for the future?

While there was much discussion at the conference about ‘collaboration’, ‘working together’, ‘integration’ and ‘partnering’, this can all sound very threatening to organisations currently delivering services in this sector.

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Partnering by design

So how does partnering fit into the possible future for the Community Managed Mental Health Sector?

Well partnering is all about change and a truly ‘integrated partnering approach’ provides the opportunity to undertake transformational change if it is undertaken well. It provides the opportunity to explore different ways of working together to maximise the impact of projects, initiatives or the delivery of services.

But this type of partnering takes time and needs to follow a structured process to maximise the benefits. It also needs those who come together to explore partnering to let go of preconceived ideas and solutions. The surest way to limit the potential benefits through partnering is to come to the table with ‘your’ solution and try and impose it onto others!

One of the greatest benefits of partnering is that it enables organisations to come together and explore how they could
work together differently and to truly co-create solutions. It provides a space to innovate and create and to do things in new ways that may not have been envisaged before.

But partnering is not easy. It takes time and requires an ongoing commitment and significant buy in both externally with other partners and internally within our own organisations if it is to be successful. The other critical aspect is that every partnering process is very much context specific, as it depends on the organisations and people involved at any point in time.

While every partnering context is different we believe there are some simple frameworks and models that can be applied to partnering that can help people to do it effectively and maximise the outcomes.

**The Critical Components of Partnering**

Based on our many years of experience in this field we believe there are three critical components that need to be addressed in any partnering process, namely:

- **Purpose** – being clear about ‘what’ the partnering is about. What is it intended to achieve and how broad or limited is the scope of the partnering process? This may seem like a simple task but what we often find is that people interpret intent in different ways and getting absolute agreement on ‘what’ is intended to be achieved can often be challenging. However, it is critical that time is spent to get this very clear and agreed between the partners, as it has significant implications for getting buy in from others as you move through the partnering process.

- **People** – getting clear on ‘who needs to be involved’ and what their underlying drivers and interests are is also key. Ensuring that relationships are developed and maintained throughout the partnering process is essential. Another important aspect is whether people who engage at the partnering table have ‘permission to partner’. Are they fully empowered to participate and make decisions on behalf of their organisation?

- **Process** – having a structured process is the third important component of effective partnering. As mentioned earlier every partnering context is different hence our approach is to utilise a 3 stage process as a broad framework. This framework (shown below) enables us to assess what activities need to be addressed at any particular time in the process and most importantly what questions need to be asked.

  ![Partnering Process™](image)

  **Partnering Process™**

The initial creating stage is very much about clarifying the purpose and getting the right people involved, while the developing stage is about how the partnership will actually deliver on the ground and sustaining is all about maximising outcomes.

**Getting started**

One of the most important issues for anyone considering working with others is just how to get started. How do you approach another organisation and get them engaged rather than being seen as a threat?

Our approach has always been to try and engage in some exploratory discussions with an individual from the other organisation(s) first and preferably someone that you have some personal relationship with as well. In doing so we believe it is critical not to have a position or solution that you are taking to the other organisation but rather provide an opportunity to sit down and have a conversation about where each organisation is at and what potential you may see in working more closely together, whatever this may look like.
If there is some positive reaction to this approach then it would be worthwhile arranging for a small group discussion between one or more of the organisations to learn more about each other and start to explore possible opportunities. In these early stages it can be difficult as people may not be willing to share information until enough trust is built between the potential partners. Taking the time to get to know each other and each of your organisations will start to build the ‘trust bank’ that is so critical as the partnering develops.

Another important aspect at this early stage is developing an understanding within your own organisation about what partnering means and why your organisation may want to venture down this path. Being clear about what your parameters are when engaging with others will make it easier to have those early discussions and to progressively build internal buy in as the partnering moves forward.

**Maintaining Momentum**

Once discussions have been initiated the next challenge is to maintain momentum. It can take some time for potential partners to all come to the same place in terms of understanding and commitment to any partnering activity, hence actively facilitating this process is essential.

Clarifying expectations and working through all the various steps to create a partnering agreement can provide a solid basis for the partnering to then proceed.

However, while the early creating stage of partnering is all about getting engagement, action will not take place from the partners until there is sufficient commitment and shared ownership between all the partners. The partners have to see it as their partnership and not just owned by the person or organisation that initiated it.

As mentioned above, partnering nearly always starts with one individual approaching another to explore some opportunity. The challenge is to move from individuals to organisations partnering – this is essential if the partnering is to withstand the inevitability of people coming and going.

**Where to from here?**

As we look ahead it is clear that the Community Managed Mental Health sector has many challenges ahead.

How the sector embraces change and seeks to co-create and co-design its own solutions to meet these challenges will be critical to the level of services delivered and the wellbeing of the clients it serves.

Partnering may offer many solutions to meet these challenges but only if it is done well and used in the right circumstances. Building partnering skills and knowledge within the sector is one way of ensuring that if partnering is undertaken it will achieve results greater than could have been achieved by working individually.

*Ian Dixon is Principal of Dixon Partnering Solutions, the leading specialist in cross sector partnering within the Australasian Region. Ian is an internationally accredited partnership broker through the Partnership Brokers Association based in the UK. Ian was a keynote speaker at the recent VICSERV Conference, ‘Reframing Mental Health: a new state of mind’.*

Further information about Ian and his organisation are available at [www.iandixon.com.au](http://www.iandixon.com.au)