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**JUDE BUTCHER, MICHAEL BEZZINA,
WENDY MORAN**

Jude.butcher@acu.edu.au, michael.bezzina@acu.edu.au, wendy.moran@acu.edu.au

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

**Engagement in Action: University-School
System Partnership for Teacher
Development**

Engagement in action: University-School system partnerships for teacher development.

Jude Butcher, Michael Bezzina, Wendy Moran: Australian Catholic University

Abstract

Over a period of over 15 years, the system of schools in the diocese of Parramatta and the Australian Catholic University have built a partnership which is significant for its scope and its penetration. It has involved the individual schools and the system as a whole in a wide range of initiatives with three of the university's schools within the Faculty of Education – Educational Leadership, Education and religious Education. The partnership has touched on innovative delivery of preservice methodology courses on school sites, support for classroom teachers, jointly delivered post graduate courses (and programs), international study tours, extended residential leadership programs, secondments and joint appointments, adjunct appointments, joint research initiatives (including Linkage grants), review activities and innovative school focused leadership for learning programs.

In the context of increasing interest in university engagement, this paper will describe the key joint activities and will seek to determine the factors which have contributed to the evolution of such a rich and textured relationship, which has found expression in so many different ways. It will explore, among other factors, the significance of commitment of key personnel, a sense of the importance of mutual benefit, strong ongoing structures for communication and a capacity to support innovative practice.

Context

On the face of it, faculties of education in universities and the school systems in which their students and graduates work have so much in common that their relationships should be reciprocal and unproblematic. However, as those who have worked in either field can attest, there are differences in culture which can serve to render relationships at best mechanical and at worst dysfunctional.

The differing domains have been described by Jasman (2002, p.1) as “territories”, which are constituted, she says:

as Connelly and Clandinin argue 'in terms of professional knowledge contexts constituted by professionally shared stories' (1994, 89). They argue that teachers and university academics share 'theory/practice' stories about each other 'in which the university is a place of knowledge and reflection and the school is a place of action'. As with our journeys to new countries we seek to understand the 'stories, myths, rituals and symbols' that are part of these often taken-for-granted and silent manifestations of the professional knowledge context.

Scholarship, research and publications are the ways in which academics customarily come to know things and share what they have. They tend not to be the ways in which school practitioners think or share. Boud (in Benn, 1998) argues that the relationship between teaching and research is problematic in all fields. In the context of developing understandings of engagement, such differences can act as significant barriers. This paper attempts to reach beyond the tendency of differences to divide, in order to demonstrate ways in which they can, in fact, contribute to relationships which are genuinely transformational.

In relationships which are transformational, both parties are open to – indeed they actively pursue – the possibility that in engaging with the other they may be themselves changed. Both parties work for a synergy, within which “one plus one equals two and a half”. In the leadership literature (eg Starratt, 2004), transformation is seen as having a strong moral and

ethical dimension. This view can be contrasted with an approach to engagement in which each party seeks simply to address its own needs and interests through processes of negotiation within which each seeks maximum gain at minimum cost, and which will essentially leave each unchanged. This approach might be described as a “transactional” approach to engagement.

This paper will use the lens of transformation/transaction to explore approaches to engagement. It will demonstrate that many of the traditional approaches to engagement can be understood in transactional term and will explore a number of recent engaged activities as examples of a more transformational approach.

Transactional practices

By and large, engagement between Universities and schools/school systems can be characterised as transactional. Each party is intent on its own agenda, and comes to the table with its own priorities and its own world view. They are differently motivated as they consider cooperative approaches. What is the nature of the engagement? In a transactional world, it looks different depending on which side of the negotiating table one chooses.

From the point of view of schools, engagement with universities allows the recruitment of staff, the purchase of expertise for consultancy, research or evaluation, contracting professional development and (minimally) access to professional literature. This set of purposes reveals an underlying sense of both the school and its understanding of university. The school sees the university as having the task of preparing teachers (and practicum is really a university task which is shaped elsewhere and imposed on the school). Schools by and large do not have a sense of themselves as having well developed skills in the gathering and analysis of data for purposes of review or evaluation. That is seen as academic work, and best done by them. Being a part of a university can bring with it a certain cachet, a necessary but not sufficient qualifier for delivering professional development in schools. Just as important is the credibility of grounded experience. The provision by academics of professional reading is a complex point of engagement, because as will be noted later, much of what academics write does not have practitioners as its intended audience.

In a transactional world view, why do universities seek engagement with schools? They need practicum sites, they need research sites and they need undergraduate students.

The great challenge for universities is to find the sheer number of places necessary to accommodate the numbers of students who need a practicum. This process can, at times, involve much more focus in the discussion on the placement than on its substance.

Educational research is, by definition, largely conducted in schools. Very often its purpose, focus and methodology is decided long before the school/system is approached, and the results are produced in forms that are not easily accessible by the research subjects (Note the label.).

In an era of increasing competition among universities for the best students for their programs, schools provide the source of such candidates – both among their students and their staffs. With an increasing sense of an education marketplace, universities have become more sensitive to student needs in the ways in which courses are offered.

The two viewpoints as described so far are largely focussed on the separate needs and interests of each party, although the areas of mutuality are clearly implied. Why then, do these differences persist?

What gets rewarded gets priority

One explanation for the differences relates to participants' perceptions of what is rewarding and what is rewarded.

For school personnel there is no immediate tangible incentive for superior performance, more elaborated professionalism or even better student outcomes. As Daniel Lortie noted as long

ago as 1975 – their careers are front-loaded. They are as well off when they start in the profession as they are ever going to be. Thus, satisfiers tend not to develop around salary, but around what is valued by colleagues and supervisors, which can be simply a well managed class with well behaved and happy students. These too can be seen as significant criteria for promotion.

In this context, research and theory are far from what is rewarded either formally or informally. The knowledge teachers value is situated squarely in the classroom and is valued most highly when it is gathered from the inside. Teachers come to know in fairly isolated ways about their craft. This is necessarily the case where there may be few avenues for oral interchange and even fewer for sharing in writing. While the discourse of the staffroom shows signs of becoming more professional, it has tended to be quite limited in its link to shared professional knowledge – including theory.

Teaching has been described by Keith Tronc (2004) in *Practising Administrator* (the kind of journal practitioners read) as a sub-profession, because among other things, its members do not, by and large, contribute to their own professional development, expecting their employers to do so. Moreover, in a context where what they come to know is what works in their classrooms, and what is valued is what will help them there, the work of universities seems somewhat remote, and, in the absence of a shared “jargon” even the language in which academics express themselves is alien and unhelpful.

Thus, in many schools, knowledge is developed and held by individuals. Despite the widely accepted exhortations of leading researchers like Fullan (eg 2001) and Hargreaves (eg 2003b) it is still not universal that there is a culture that values explicitly evidence based practice, and a professional discourse which allows the enunciation of what makes practice good. For the most part, though, not only is there little opportunity for synergy, but even the aggregation of learning is difficult. Pressure on teachers’ time can see to this.

On the other hand, in universities the knowledge which counts is that which has the backing of good research methodology and the authority of scholarship. It is the creation and sharing of this knowledge which is valued and encouraged in the promotion process. This knowledge is, of itself, generally quite different from that prized by teachers and is expressed in language and published in places which teachers accommodate with difficulty. Where teachers can be slow to share professional discourse with each other, academics are quick. Where teachers are absorbed in a highly subjective experience, research and academic scholarship can objectify this experience. Even when research attempts to capture the experiences of practitioners it is most often seen by them as a view from the outside.

The fact that academics are keen to share their learning is a good thing, but the kinds of publications which are valued are those written for other academics – in refereed journals – and the focus, language and style tend not to be appealing or easily usable by teachers. Taylor (1999) wrote that:

The current relationship between education research and the application of practical knowledge in the field is almost nonexistent. There is little common language between university researchers and practitioners, which may explain the lack of communication between the two groups.

Writing for the kinds of journals that teachers and practitioners do read is a worthy, but not necessarily career-enhancing activity for academic staff. By corollary, teachers need to become better readers and to develop a more sophisticated approach to the literature.

The scenario so far described is one in which the territories of the teacher and the academic seem to overlap, but the overlap occurs in places where the residents are pursuing different priorities. In situations like this, the likelihood in any encounter is that individuals and groups will pursue their own agendas in a transactional way, seeking to gain from the other that which they need for their own pursuits, with no commonality of purpose. Until and unless such common purposes emerge, there is little likelihood of genuinely transformational engagement.

The sections which follow explore some specific examples of engagement which show at least the first signs of an environment in which transformation might flourish.

Transformational engagement

The essential difference between transactional and transformational engagement is that where the former seeks individual benefit, the latter seeks shared benefit through mutuality. Parramatta Catholic Education Office (CEO) and Australian Catholic University (ACU) have developed and maintained a number of joint initiatives designed to offer people new opportunities for learning, development and capacity building. The scope of these initiatives extends across a wide range of locations, cultural groups and age groups. The ventures stemmed from the desire of the partners to make a difference, and from a commitment to work in genuine partnership, with mutual benefit.

The initiatives have been grouped for this paper within three focus areas. The areas were identified on the nature of the outcomes the initiatives were to achieve:

- Mutual capacity building;
- Learning that makes a difference; and
- Creating new knowledge.

Initiatives for each of these focus areas are presented below. The transformational and transactional aspects of the partnerships are examined with respect to each initiative and focus area.

Mutual capacity building

Both ACU and the CEO have maintained for five years their commitment to educational capacity building in East Timor. This goal has been pursued in partnership with the Catholic Teachers College Baucau and other educational organisations in Australia. This capacity building partnership was based upon a transformative vision of contributing to the development of a sustainable system of teacher education and continuing professional development in East Timor. An extended timeframe, minimum of ten years, was envisaged for the development of sustainable education systems in this emerging nation. The trust established across countries, institutions and personnel provided an effective basis for honest communication and an openness to change. The CEO and ACU negotiated, independently of each other, the strategies and resources involved. The College at Baucau has made significant developments institutionally for the people of East Timor. The East Timorese have assumed senior roles at the College and the first group of primary teacher education graduates will be the first such graduates in the country since independence.

Papua New Guinea has also been a focus for educational capacity building particularly in the area of Religious Education. A younger group of Religious Education teachers and coordinators are now working in the schools. This is a significant outcome of the ten years of the CEO's professional development work in that country. The CEO took the leading role in sustaining this venture and involved the University in early stages of teaching the professional development courses and the accreditation of what had been studied. The resources involved were largely from the CEO who adopted this project as a priority for their system of schools.

Capacity building for the Sudanese community within Australia is a priority for the CEO, ACU and Catholic Education Office Sydney together with other educational, community and corporate groups. The Sudanese people, committed to quality education for their children, wanted to be qualified as primary or secondary school teachers. Pathways into these programs were developed so that applicants' prior study and learning in the Sudan were examined as a basis for credit and appropriate entry levels. These pathways have also been developed into nursing and business courses. While the initiative was based upon an explicit transformational vision the transactional requirements of resources, strategies and learning requirements needed continuing attention. Financial resources came from the catholic education offices, teacher unions and the corporate sector. The roles of people in the carriage of the initiative varied across organisations. The longer term oversighting of the project was addressed by key people in the University and the CEOs.

New educational opportunities have been made available to the people of western Sydney especially in the greater Mt Druitt area. Year 11 and 12 students, through the UniLink program, undertake university units as part of their Board of Studies approved Higher School Certificate course. The students and their families saw how they could realise a vision that was seen previously as being outside their world. The CEO, as an expression of its commitment to justice and equity, approached ACU for appropriate learning opportunities as a basis for building the students' capacity for university study. CEO negotiated the units of study and associated costs with ACU.

ACU and CEO have been very much aware of how these capacity building initiatives have been very beneficial for themselves as well as for East Timor, Papua New Guinea, the Sudanese community and the people of Mt Druitt. Knowledge and stories have been shared across institutions and people's appreciation of differences in cultures and traditions have led to more culturally appropriate approaches to teaching and learning.

Learning that makes a difference

New capacities are built upon learning which transforms the learners as people. Such learning has been valued explicitly in a series of joint initiatives with the CEO and ACU. These initiatives have involved other Catholic education offices which have contributed substantively to the sustainability of the programs.

Leaders Transforming Learners and Learning (LTLL) has involved four dioceses and ACU in prizing the creative visions and strategies of school principals and teachers. All participants knew that transformative learning was valued and celebrated at all levels of their organisations. The new learning that has been emerging has been derived from the sharing within schools, across dioceses and across schools and the University. The vision was owned by the consortium of partners with the projects and resources being negotiated at the levels of the individual catholic education offices and schools. Regular meetings were held of ACU, CEO and school staffs in planning, implementing and reviewing the projects.

Transformative learning was the focus for the Teaching Learning Consortium (TLC) which has been in place for 10 years and is now in 38 schools across four dioceses.. What new learning can occur when we work together rather than separately? How can the learning of school students, university students, teachers and lecturers inform each other? CEO and ACU were committed in these experiences to ensuring that the student teachers' involvement in schools was based on mutual and transformational goals. All stakeholders prized a view of university-school engagement which was different in nature from the transactional focus upon arranging practicum placements. CEO and ACU sought new learning based upon a mutual sharing of knowledge and stories across universities and schools. TLC A joint ACU-CEO review of TLC is in place which will consider TLC structures and procedures and the implications of new contexts and changes in personnel.

Another expression of the joint ACU-CEO commitment to transformational learning is found in Step Up Into Teaching (SUIT) which like UniLink involves students studying University units as part of their HSC. This program, offered in two dioceses, provides the opportunity for senior students to trial their vision of teaching as a career. They were able to see themselves in a new light and with a new identity. Through SUIT both CEO and ACU expressed their shared vision of making pathways to teaching attractive and accessible to quality students.

ELIM is a joint CEO and ACU residential leadership program for school principals and senior staff to have special time and space to reflect upon, critique and re-vision themselves as educational leaders. ELIM was structure across two residential blocks (total of 20 days) during which participants participated in a community of leaders committed to learning, reflecting and examining new ways of being leaders and learners. Here people from schools, CEO and ACU shared experiences and insights which all realised were mutually enriching.

Creating new knowledge

ACU and CEO share a commitment to developing new knowledge needed by educationalists to address the changing educational and social contexts. ACU and CEO together with other

systems provided resources and public spaces for the difficult educational questions of today to be addressed. The new knowledge needed for schools and other institutions also had to address the ethical questions, often implicit, in educational policies and practices. Together they examined the nature of the questions leaders and frontline people face and strategies they use to address them. Ethical practice and being socially responsible were the explicit focus of two research projects SOLR and SRI. The voices of the people in the field together with the capacity of the university and other members of the research team provided a valid basis for developing new knowledge for today's leaders and organisations.

Creating new knowledge for addressing questions of learning, management or leadership in the field today has been valued by both the Catholic Education Office and the University. Addressing the need for new knowledge together has occurred in small scale as well as in larger projects. The sustained focus upon research by ACU and CEO has involved a joint commitment of financial and personnel resources. CEO and ACU have valued the development of new knowledge which has affected planning and practice at the levels of the institutions and individual staff.

The preceding three focus areas presented examples of transformational initiatives developed from the joint engagement of ACU, CEO and other partners. These are different in nature from reviews and evaluations which are seen by both institutions as being more readily transactional than transformational in nature. CEO and ACU have given more emphasis to the transformational in reviews or evaluations through involving people from the alternate organisation in their reviews. This principle bridged the inside and outside worlds so as to enhance the validity of the studies and their recommendations.

Such bridging of worlds was facilitated further by joint and adjunct appointments of staff. Structurally the engagement of ACU and CEO was maintained through mutual committee memberships and the establishment of a liaison committee which met at least five times a year.

Enabling Factors

The preceding initiatives were analysed as a basis for identifying factors that have enabled CEO and ACU to engage in an effective and sustainable partnership across the three focus areas. Seven key enabling factors emerged. Shared vision, Communication, Relationships, Openness to change, sustainability, resources and benefits for both partners.

Shared Vision

A commitment to a shared vision expressed in these projects as capacity building, transformational learning and creating new knowledge was a critical factor in the initiatives just described. Sharing the same vision and purpose has been seen as paramount from the initial phases of emerging partnerships or alliances (Butcher, Howard, Dockett and Perry, 1999). Transformational partnerships are directed 'beyond self' and call for a vision of creating a new form of learning for the participants. The altruistic approach of pursuing goals benefiting others places the partnership from the beginning in an outward looking mind-set. In turn, this ultimately underpins the endeavour resulting in a commitment and recognition of mutual priorities that further deepens and strengthens the partnership. A shared vision is foundational to six other factors: communication, relationships, openness to change, sustainability, resources and benefits for partners.

Communication

Effective communication was integral to the success of the initiatives. At times regular communication between the partners was maintained throughout the initiative such as with UniLink and SUIT. At other times effective communication at the beginning such as in East Timor Capacity Building was sustained with less frequent but well targeted communication during the five years. With the TLC the regular communication at the beginning of the project was lessened with the extension to new contexts and the involvement of new staff. The impact of this reduced communication is one focus of the current review of the TLC.

The transformational partnership was built upon timely discussion of questions and issues. The regular communication effected through liaison and other committees was a means of becoming aware of questions that needed attention.

The quality of the communication was enhanced through the relationships that existed among the leaders and participants from CEO and ACU. Critical to the enhancement of communication were the celebrations or events marking the beginning and pivotal steps of the partnership.

Relationships

The constructive and open relationships existing between CEO and ACU staff have been acknowledged by people within and beyond these institutions. Such relationships which are characterized by trust, respect and honesty are highly valued in a transformative partnership. Recognizing the importance of these relationships and the time that it takes to develop them is equally important. As Tschannen-Moran and Hoy note: positive transformation requires that attention is paid to issues of trust and that trust is essential 'in order to cooperate toward accomplishing a common goal' (2000 p556).

Respect for each other's work and capabilities was usually acknowledged in the development, implementation and review of the projects. McFadden (citing McFadden and Hastings 1997) emphasised how 'equality of status; mutual respect for diversity of expertise and knowledge; and significant and meaningful consultation' (24:2001) are essential characteristics of a democratic partnership. The same can be said of a transformational alliance.

Openness to Change

The goals of the different initiatives were to create new experiences and/or programs that would enhance learning for the participants and students. Each initiative involved the partners moving into uncharted territories of new agendas. At times there was some anxiety or unease as a result of people moving out of their own 'comfort zone'. In such situations there needs to be an interdependence between the partners based upon a high level of trust (cf Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). The development of trust was facilitated in this partnership by the emphasis given to relationship building. A commitment to engaging in new and innovative practices required people being prepared to weather the temporary state of discomfort, both at a personal and professional level, for the good of the vision. The formal and informal reviews of the initiatives were based upon an openness to assess the current situation and implement new strategies or approaches where needed.

Sustainability

The partners were committed to the sustainability of the initiatives with many of them existing for more than five years. East Timor (continuing for 5 years), ACULink (6 years), SUIT (7 years) and the TLC (10 years) are evidence of sustainable initiatives emerging from a transformational partnership between ACU and CEO. Sustaining these initiatives has been based in part by the willingness of the people involved to adapt to changing contexts and circumstances.

Sustainability has been critical in the CEO-ACU partnership as a basis for educational improvement. Hargreaves emphasises how the key to sustainability is commitment within the relationships and 'not fleeting infatuations' (2003 a:693). Such sustainability contributes to capacity building as a long-term investment for educational improvement.

Resources

Resources committed by both partners in the areas of the most appropriate personnel, time and expenses led to the effectiveness of the program(s) being undertaken. The commitment of key personnel who understand the vision and have carriage of the process has been very important to the success of the initiative. In most instances, these key personnel have 'passed-on' the vision and significant features to those who work within their own organisations and within the program.

CEO and ACU varied at times in the ways they addressed the transactional aspects of the resources for the initiatives. At times one partner had assumed more responsibility for the commitment of particular resources (eg capacity building in PNG). Questions of sharing costs, the length of commitment to what has been originally negotiated, and the monitoring of increasing and decreasing resources were addressed in the initial stages of the project. A shared vision for transformational partnership requires clear procedures for addressing the transactional aspects of the initiatives. Failure to address this transactional aspect of an initiative can lead to tensions that have the potential to undermine its success.

Benefits for both partners

The transformational partnership between CEO and ACU was built upon a commitment to achieving mutual benefits and providing a win/win environment (Butcher 1998, p4). The benefits are based upon a shared vision of building of personal and institutional capacities with regard to skills, knowledge, and/or relationships for its members. These benefits were not only named but also clearly acknowledged and celebrated within the organisations the partners represented as well as from within the partnership itself.

The above seven factors which were found to be key to the effectiveness of the transformational partnership between ACU and CEO are presented diagrammatically below.

Implications

This paper showed how in today's contexts many existing relationships between universities and schools as largely transactional – “trading” with each other in pursuit of one party's agenda.

In contrast to these transactional relationships an overview of a range of initiatives based on a more transformational approach was provided. These initiatives - built upon the joint pursuit of shared benefit and openness to two-way learning - identified three significant areas of shared agenda: mutual capacity building, learning that makes a difference and the creation of new knowledge. In reviewing the ways in which the partners engaged around this agenda, it was possible to identify seven key enabling factors. Seven key enabling factors emerged. These were the existence of a shared vision, open and frequent communication, positive interpersonal relationships, genuine openness to change from all parties, long term sustainability, appropriate resources and a clear benefits for both partners.

Universities are becoming more consciously focussed on engagement with their communities, and in particular the school systems which they serve. Schools and systems of schools are not so explicitly focussed on this as a key element of their agenda, but at the same time there is a growing awareness of the need for cooperation in the provision of education to their students. As individuals and groups identify possible areas for engagement, the tentative observations of this small set of case studies would tend to suggest that there will be greater likelihood of success if they build the seven enabling factors explicitly into their planning. If we are to avoid the shortcomings of traditional transactional forms of relationship, engagement must express itself in something that is done “together” – not “to”, and it must seek “our” benefit – not “mine”.

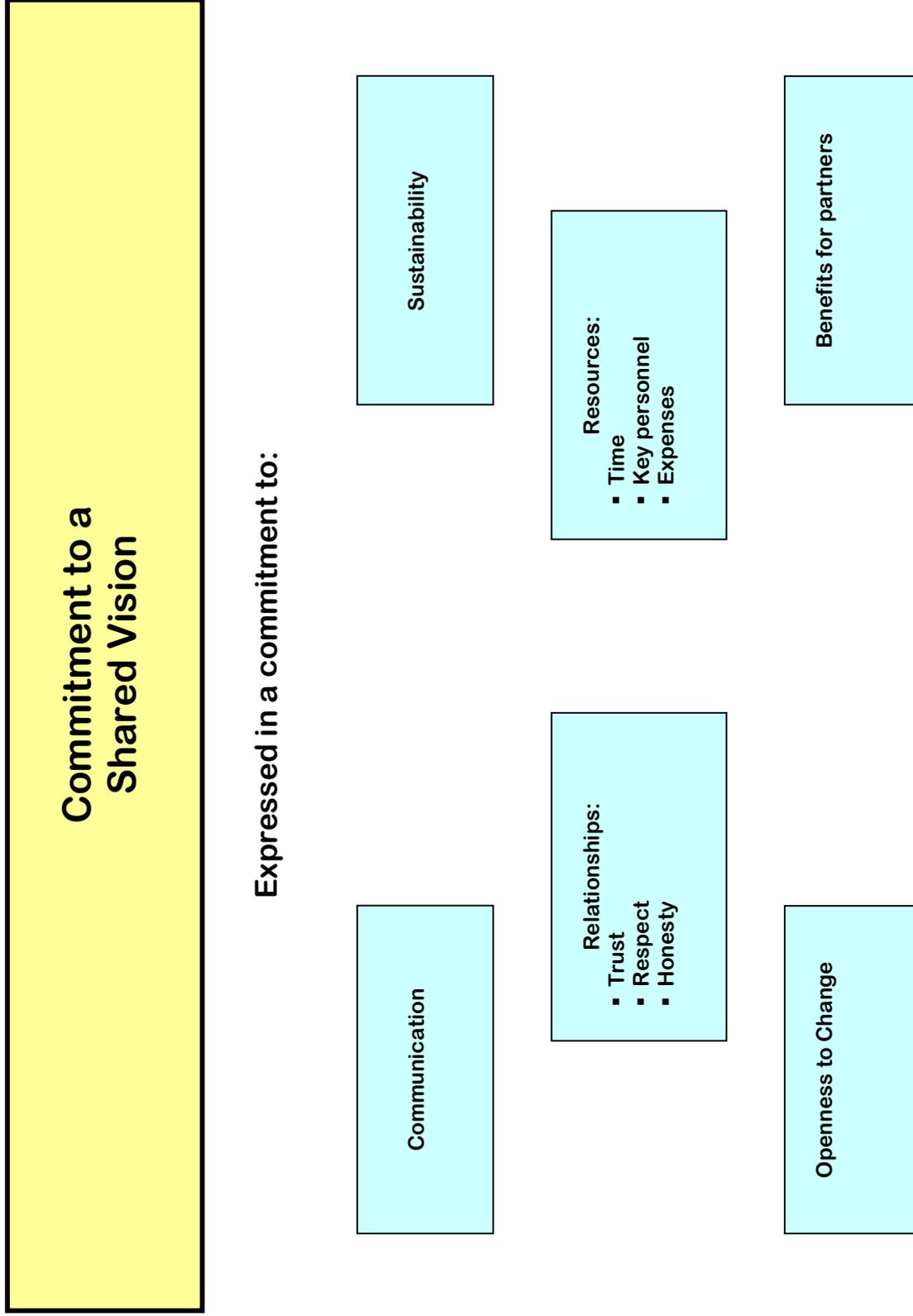


Figure 1: Factors Enabling Transformational Partnerships

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