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# Alliancing Development

## The Essentials in Working in an Alliance or Joint Venture Partnership

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## 1.0 Introduction

It is often practical and expedient to work in an alliance with others. An alliance is a combination of separate entities for a common purpose. Alliances can be informal and formal including, treaties, contracts, Memoranda of Understanding and coalitions. Alliances are often formed to increase diversity and capability through the specialisations of each alliance partner. In undertaking work in an alliance a range of fundamental controls and protocols should be considered in order to maintain the health of the alliance and sustain its capability over the life of the alliance period. These fundamentals are the subject of this paper.

McLaren (1996) explains culture as:

value-based interpretations; artifacts; shared experiences; interaction, adaptation, and survival; social customs and social norms; the expressive forms of social and material life; a distinctive 'way of life' of a group or class; historically transmitted ensembles of symbols; 'maps of meanings' that make social life intelligible to its members; systems of knowledge shared by large groups of people; the quotidian, self-interpreted conduct of particular groups and communities; historically shaped forms of consciousness; contradictory forms of 'common sense' that shape public and popular life; everyday activities and patterns of actions; an evolving totality of meanings; a living tradition; socially transmitted patterns of behaviour; meanings alive in institutional life as well as in ordinary behaviour; socially embodied differences and performed' at the level of everyday life; the symbolic production of material structures; a conception of the world or worldview; human 'webs of significance'; the reconstruction of symbolic meaning; and so on

Given the scope and breadth of McLaren's discussion it is little wonder that most authors and researchers tend to avoid a strict and narrow definition of culture but rather provide a narrative approach in describing what a culture looks like. For the purpose of this paper a narrowing down to some sense of commonality appears as the following:

- Common and exclusive language/knowledge
- Accepted terms of reference by a group
- Clear identifiers
- Common values, attitudes and beliefs
- Explicit and implicit symbols
- Shared experiences
- Social customs and social norms
- Historically transmitted ensembles of symbols
- 'Maps of meanings' that make social life intelligible to its members

The more practical or "instrumental" layers of culture namely, systems, technology and standards (legislation and regulations) need to be supported by extensive interventions in the "existential" layers of organisations namely, cultural, psychological, social and behavioural dimensions, what has become known as "the human dimension", what I call "the psychosocial dimensions of culture".

## 2.0 Culture Fundamentals and Aliancing Skills

The following concepts are introduced for consideration in developing, maintaining and sustaining a healthy alliance culture. For the purposes of this paper the term “aliancing” will be used in relation to the action of working in an alliance.

### 2.1 Identity

The identity of each alliance member changes whenever they enter an alliance. There is a “trade-off” and compromises must be made in: ideology, practicalities and policy. Each alliance member will have key symbols, artifacts and processes which when altered, will generate feelings of insecurity, resistance and discomfort. These emotions need to be effectively managed through a careful change management process. It is likely that values, beliefs and attitudes will be similar but should be clearly articulated so as to make expectations and prioritisation clear regarding such values.

### 2.2 Change Management

Joining others in an alliance (especially if this has not been experienced before) can be a frustrating process for some personalities and types. People do not easily trade off key ideas, processes, indicators of identity and territory easily. Change Management is a structured approach to transitioning individuals, teams, and organizations from one state to a different desired state.

It is critical for leadership to utilize the essentials of a psychosocial approach to motivation, learning, use of power and change and to know how these are developed through the establishment of:

#### (a) Trust

There can be no change, development or transition without the establishment of trust. To establish trust takes significant time and skill. The emphasis here is on relationships, what Martin Buber called the I-Thou in meeting. In the psychosocial approach the development of the dynamic community is central to the establishment of trust.

#### (b) Climate (*Ethos, Place and Space*)

The rate and embracing of change will be limited unless people come into an atmosphere which generates trust, engagement, motivation, recognition and learning. A climate of acceptance and respect is foundational to establishing a positive climate.

#### (c) Structure

Change relies upon a structure (providing a degree of certainty, security and meaning) which demonstrates through the methodology of organisation that people are valued and supported. A structure which disempowers people and limits freedoms and choice is essentially de-motivating.

#### (d) A Change Culture

The essence of all change requires the inclination to change, the “want” or “will” to change. Recognition and reward in a measurable form are critical to this process, as is methodology and how people are engaged.

#### (e) Engagement

The key to engagement is acceptance of “the other” and valuing people’s contribution despite circumstance and history.

#### (f) Meaning and Purpose

People will not change unless they see “sense” in the change and some positive outcome for themselves. The change management process needs to be a “sensemaking” process which is intertwined with other key change elements such as trust, motivation and engagement. It is meaning and purpose which drives the development of resilience.

#### (g) Ability and Capability

Change will not be effective unless the change agent has the ability to drive and direct change (without overpowering others) and unless the employee has the capability/capacity to change

## **2.3 Language and Communication**

The greatest impediment to communication is the belief that it is happening.

Developing a common language and way of understanding is essential in alliancing. Language is one of the key elements in cross cultural translation. This is why “double speak” is so destructive to maintaining an alliance culture. “Double speak” is evidence that the alliance is not really working. One of the most important skills for leaders and middle managers to possess in an alliance is highly effective communication and an understanding of communication styles.

## **2.4 Badging**

How the alliance represents itself is critical in managing identity and ensures that fragmentation, siloing and factions are not “fueled” by indicators of difference.

## **2.5 Territory**

Most conflict is over either ideology and or, territory. It is important that ownership, possessiveness and identity attached to territory is not fueled by language, badging or symbols.

## **2.6 Political awareness**

Key leaders and managers need to be skilled in understanding the politics of alliancing and the key elements of resistance such as wedging, triangulation and double speak. Leaders and managers need to be skilled in assessing and detecting indicators of alliance division and have the skills to realign key stakeholders..

## **2.7 Leadership and Power**

One of the most important understandings in alliancing is knowing the nature of power and influence. Leaders and managers will be caught off guard and easily fragmented if they do not have a solid understanding of how power is exercised and the fundamentals of influencing others.

## **2.8 Rules of Engagement**

The best way to ensure an effective alliance is to be very clear on how people will be engaged, contracted, disciplined and communicated. Clear protocols and processes should be negotiated and accepted by all alliance members.

## **2.9 Clarified Expectations**

Alliances often are stressed and strained when expectations are not clear and communications have to be managed on the run. It is important at the outset that all objectives, outcomes and goals are clearly agreed and what should be done if agreed processes and policies are broken.

## **2.10 Relationship Management**

Managing mediation, dispute resolution, grievances, engendering respect, trust and conflict resolution are critical in maintaining healthy and effective relationships. If and when things go wrong leaders and managers need to be skilled in how to manage and communicate in times of stress and conflict. To this end it is advisable that either an executive staff member include the role of alliance relationship management in their position or that a distinct position on the executive be created for this purpose. The following are key alliancing skills in regard to managing relationships.

- Stress Management
- Time Management
- Communications Skills
- Conflict Management
- Team Dynamics

## **2.11 Organisational Learning Capacity and Resilience**

There are several layers on which an organisation learns. Learning is essentially in accepting change in ones thinking, knowledge, behaviour, values, skills or capability. Learning is not just about a response to what is overtly “taught” (surface learning) but includes “hidden learning” , what is referred to as “below the line” or “implicit” learning. It is critical for alliance development that a climate of learning is fostered and encouraged. Sub-cultures of punishment, blame or complacency restrict the capacity of the organisation to learn and develop. The resilient organisation is able to learn and bounce back from set backs and challenges.

## **2.12 Dissonance**

Dissonance occurs when actual values, attitudes and behaviours are in contradiction to espoused values, attitudes and behaviours. What often happens is such tension drives scepticism, negativity and cynicism. These new dissonant attitudes and behaviours undermine and “white ant” the capacity of the alliance to be effective. Leaders and managers need to be skilled in detecting and intervening in the development of dissonant attitudes and behaviours.

## **2.13 Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is much more than simply “having your wits about you” in a similar way that sensemaking is much more than just making sense. Mindfulness (Weick) is the key to managing workplace culture and risk. Research into High Reliability Organisations (HRO) has established the key qualities needed to manage mindfully are:

- Preoccupation with failure
- Reluctance to simplify interpretations
- Sensitivity to operations
- Commitment to resilience and,
- Deference to expertise

## **2.14 Systems and Prioritisation**

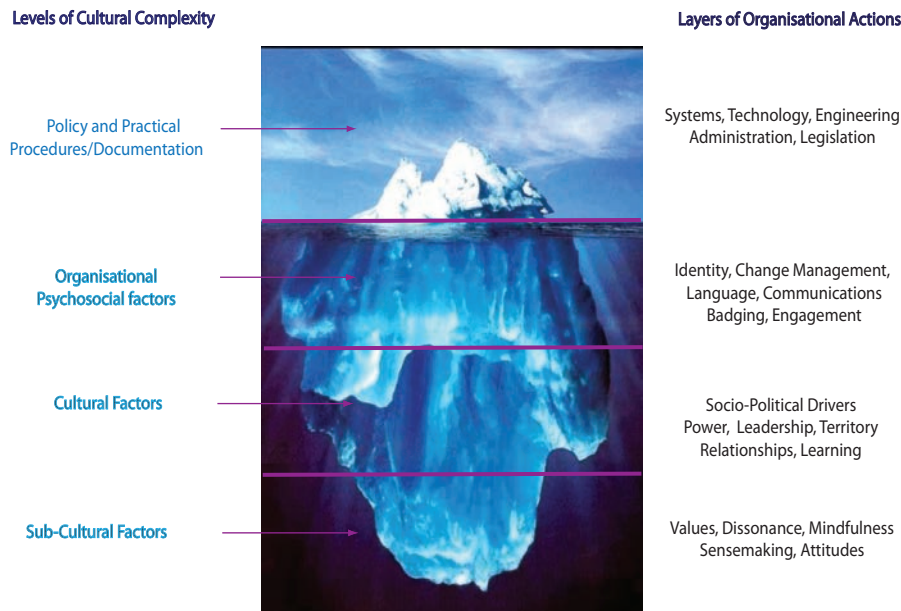
It is important that the systems put in place serve the goals and objectives of the alliance. Systems should not be put in place just because they are convenient because they also drive frustration, negativity and scepticism. The system needs to serve the goals of the alliance rather than the system driving the alliance. For this reason systems design should follow and be aligned to alliance values, goals and expected outcomes. Systems which are an enbuggerance or cumbersome can take on a life of their own and drive a destructive sub-culture.

## **2.15 Sensemaking**

One of the most subtle but dangerous drivers of poor organisational culture is the myth of common sense. The belief that somehow good sense is objectively self evident is a nonsense. The value of experience, training, learning and community should not be underestimated in driving communication and alliancing behaviour. The reliance on assumptions of others understanding, context, purpose, meaning, values, goals and expected outcomes is unfounded. The myth of common sense should not be allowed to prevail in an alliance culture and any discussion of it should be devalued in comparison to effective training, experience, maturity, systems and sensemaking.

### 3.0 Understanding Layers in Organisational Culture

The metaphor of the iceberg helps explain the dynamics of organisational cultural layers at work in alliancing. The diagram below indicates the hidden nature of the most powerful drivers of culture and how the more visible aspects of organisational culture are most apparent but least determinate.



### 4.0 Practical Fundamentals

Once the essentials of culture have been considered there are a range of practical steps including: documentation, planning and thinking strategically which should be undertaken, these are:

1. Strategic thinking and planning
2. Scope and purpose
3. Goals and objectives
4. Commercial framework
5. Governance and leadership
6. Agreed policies and procedures
7. Inductions
8. Staffing
9. Resourcing
10. Succession planning
11. Establishing KPI's
12. Sub-contractor management
13. Safety culture
14. Measurement and reporting
15. Probity
16. Recognition
17. Training

## **Dr Robert Long – Director Human Dymensions Pty Ltd**

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Rob has extensive experience and expertise across risk management and OHS in construction, mining, government, education and community sectors. He holds formal qualifications in OHS and is a member of the Safety Institute of Australia and the Australian College of Education. Rob's was a senior consultant in OHS for SAFEmap International and Safety4Life Australia and is currently Director of Human Dymensions Pty Ltd specialising in organisational learning and the psychological and cultural dimensions of OHS in organisations. Rob developed and implemented the Nationally awarded PROACT OHS program for the MBA in 2005/2006 and has developed a range of innovative safety cultural training and assessment tools which are currently deployed in industry with great success.

In 2006 Rob was requested to be on the Emergency Coordination Operations Group at Beaconsfield Mine following the rockfall disaster and later served as Manager of the Beaconsfield Mine Community Recovery Taskforce. Rob was also a Manager of an emergency centre during the Canberra Bushfires in 2003. More recently in 2008 Rob developed the Risk Management Plan for World Youth Day for the Canberra Goulburn Archdiocese.

Rob is able to use his expertise in analysis, training, organisational psychology, research, cultural evaluation and human behaviour to serve a wide range of needs. He has provided OHS, organisation, leadership and management consultancies to National and International companies including BMA Coal, BlueScope Steel, Pt Kembla Coal, Master Builders Association, Universities, Government (eg. Defense, CSIRO, Finance), Brambles International, Baulderstone, West Gate Freeway Alliance, Port Botany Extension Project, United Group and BOC Gases. Rob is particularly skilled in organisational, security, risk and safety cultural analysis having developed a unique survey methodology based on the work of implicit research at Harvard University and the work of Prof. K Weick at Michigan University. Rob uses this unique cultural "iProfile" tool and iRIM methodology to assist organisations develop OHS solutions-focused interventions, evidence-based training and support for change management for effective OHS outcomes.

Rob is currently undertaking organisational and cultural organisational analysis for: West Gate Freeway Alliance, Baulderstone, Department of Defense, Department of Finance and CSIRO. Rob has more than 20 refereed papers in journals and 3 chapters in books and is regularly requested to speak at National and International conferences on OHS and organisational learning. Rob is a certified DiSC and Myers-Briggs (MBTI) trainer.

Rob has been a lecturer in Education, Curriculum Design, Learning Theory, Social Work and Management at University of Canberra, ACU National and Charles Sturt University.