

# How to Build the Trust that Every Partnership Requires

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## **Why trust?**

Recently, a county team successfully negotiated a groundbreaking, performance-based partnership agreement with a state team. In the same period, the negotiation of a companion agreement between the county team and a local neighborhood team broke down. The following descriptions illustrate why trust is important to partnership.

- Trust between negotiating teams is the visible tip of the iceberg. Trust within negotiating teams is often the unseen body of the iceberg that sinks the emerging partnership. In the state/county negotiation, trust was built within both teams. The conflicts within the local team surfaced and only sufficient trust was built to allow the team members to reach an amicable, mutual agreement not to proceed with negotiations. It was not sufficient to sustain the partnership.
- Potential benefits have to be powerful enough to foster the willingness to build trust. The benefits to both the county and state were important enough to create this willingness and to support tradeoffs around taking and mitigating risk. At the local level, the interests were too divergent to allow for the creation of these powerful benefits acceptable to all members of the local team.

## **What is trust?**

Webster's defines trust as: "a reliance on the integrity, veracity of another person or the confident expectation of an event." Trust is often identified as an essential ingredient for successful partnerships. You know you have a high level of trust when those in a partnership:

- are safe enough to express ideas others may disagree with or may make them vulnerable;
- seek more information before making negative assumptions about what they hear;
- do what they say they will do;
- tolerate conflict enough to resolve it;
- sustain relationships in the face of negative emotions; and,
- stay in an agreed process and not make end runs to other power forums to get what they want.

## **How Much Trust is Needed for Partnership?**

Partnership is a joint venture that requires making choices about the sharing of purpose, investment, benefits and risk. Reliance on the other party is necessary to enable those choices to be made in a meaningful way. In this context trust is a continuum. The level or degree of trust needed in a partnership is directly proportional to:

- the scope of the shared venture; and,
- the risk as defined either by the uncertainty of the outcome or the level of consequences.

For some performance partnerships, very little trust is needed and what already exists is enough to sustain the partnership. For others, a great deal is needed and very little exists. Many times those working to forge performance partnerships do not recognize the "trust equation" explicitly enough to create strategies to match the level of trust built to the level of trust needed.

## **How to Build Trust**

In balancing the "trust equation" one set of strategies leads to the reduction of scope and the limiting of risk. Another set of strategies can actually build trust. The trust building strategies are about behavior and relationship. The "how to" of trust building requires people to behave in ways that build trust and not to behave in ways that destroy it. The following are examples:

<b>Trust Builder</b>	<b>Trust Buster</b>
Sit side by side at a table and be friendly.	Sit across from each other and be defensive.
Force conversations to be fact-based and work towards a common set of facts.	Use rhetoric and anecdote, try to trump the other parties data with your own to prove them wrong.
Take time to get to know each other as people, share food.	Stay in role, address others by their first names, and expect them to address you by title.
Create a behavioral definition of trust, that is define: what you need and expect from each other; live up to it; and build on it over time.	Talk of your lack of trust in the other party in the hallway and not at the negotiating table. Interpret any variances from unstated expectations as further proof of untrustworthiness.



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## **Introduction**

The past few years have seen a growth in the use of performance partnerships to better serve the public in the environment of increasing devolution. Partnerships – often called collaboratives, local management boards, or community partnerships – are being formed to get results that individual members can't get on their own.

One key ingredient for success of many such endeavors is trust – trust in other members of the group and trust of the other groups. Trust is often a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. However, there are many examples of successful, negotiated agreements in the atmosphere of distrust – the “trust but verify” school of thought. Little trust may be needed if the results sought are modest or represent incremental changes from the status quo. When groups are formed to explore the new ways of doing business that are required in devolving program funding and accountability, higher levels of trust becomes a necessity.

The dictionary defines trust as: “*a reliance on the integrity, veracity of another person or the confident expectation of an event.*” The alignment of groups around common interests is simplified and interest-based negotiations can proceed if members can rely on the integrity and veracity of others.

This paper describes examples of how partners build and sustain trust. In addition, some examples of do's and don'ts for trust building are given.

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## **Where on the Continuum?**

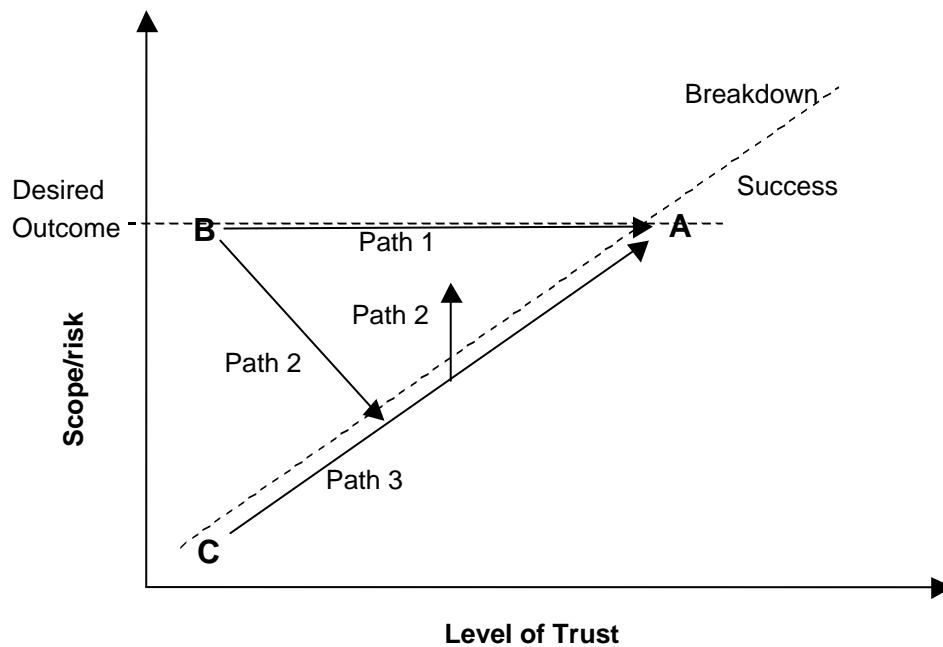
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Figure 1 shows two axes that represent scope /risk and trust, respectively. There is a line between breakdown and success that indicates higher levels of trust are required when the scope and risk of the joint venture is higher. Most partnerships are formed with the expectation of achieving high scope/risk results indicated by line labeled “desire outcome.” For success, they need to get to the point A, which is the intersection of the lines success and desired outcome. There are many possible starting points and many paths to get to A.



**Figure 1: Partnership Paths to Success**

Many partnerships start at point B, which is somewhere on the desired outcome line, but at a point with insufficient trust to sustain the effort. From point B, two possible paths to success are: (1) to build trust while maintaining the desired outcome level; or (2) reduce the desired scope/risk while increasing trust until intermediate success is achieved and then increase the scope/risk and trust until the partnerships gets to point A.

Path 1 is the most straightforward and the most difficult. The challenge is it requires the sustained efforts of the partners to build trust in the face of continuous, pending breakdown until final success is achieved. Alternatively, Path 2 allows intermediate successes that serve to build commitment and trust. The challenge of Path 2 can be a tendency to accept a lower level of scope/risk.

One other starting point is denoted as C. In this case, the starting point of the partnership is at a level of risk/scope that allows success at the starting level of trust. This gives immediate positive feedback. The challenge of path 3 is to continue to ramp-up the scope/risk while building trust. An additional challenge is if there has been no conflict or potential for breakdown with the “soft entry,” and there may not be for handling conflict and breakdown.

Three examples of these possible paths to partnerships are described below. They are distillations of actual events as seen from the point of view of someone invited to support partnership building as a facilitator or consultant. They are offered for the purpose of learning and are grounded in fact, but are not case studies or factual reporting. All characterization and conclusions are the author's. Care has been taken to share the stories without attribution.

### **Path 1 Partnership:**

An example of a Path 1 Partnership is where the "big vision" is generated and partnership across sectors and/or levels of government coalesces to accomplish the vision. Characteristics of a Path 1 Partnership include a high level of initial energy, often followed by dwindling interest and activity as potential partners struggle to find ways to move from where they are to where they would like to be. Path 1 partnerships come in many forms, such as: a state sponsored initiative grounded in community planning with a systems reform agenda; a federally sponsored initiative with a program reform agenda; or a locally sponsored initiative with a community renewal agenda. The benefit of Path 1 Partnerships is the possibility of creating fundamental changes in relationships and improving results on a large scale.

Path 1 Partnerships are a comparatively recent phenomenon. However, they have proliferated to the point where in one community or state there may be a number of Path 1 Partnerships under construction and at different stages of development. From a community's perspective, this leads to the challenge of how to "collaborate the collaboratives."

### **A Story of a Path 1 Partnership:**

A national foundation, with a program and systems reform agenda, sponsors a multi-state, multi-year initiative. The initiative strategy involves forging community partnerships to improve outcomes for children. The foundation supports the partnership building with resources, technical assistance, and strategic planning approaches. Over a period of a few years, the potential partners convene, create a strategic plan, and then move to implementation.

There were many potential partners with very diverse backgrounds and experiences. They included: public and private service agency managers, supervisors, and workers; teachers and school staff; parents and residents; health professionals; council members; faith community representatives; day care provider staff; representatives of the business community; public housing project staff and residents.

The initial convening focused on a vision. The vision of the future was sufficiently different from the present that a partnership to sustain the breadth of vision would need a very large scope – many program changes, many policy changes, many people changes, many practice changes in many places and in many organizations. Attaining the vision would entail making decisions and choices to try things that had never been tried before and where, due to the nature of the work, failure would be subject to public scrutiny and people's lives could be affected in a negative way. Therefore, the risk was high.

In addition, the relationship context for the potential partners had some negative history, negative perceptions, and divergent approaches to decision-making and working together. Overall, the existing level of trust was low in comparison to the level required to attain the vision. For example, parents and residents had had negative experiences with public and private agency staff; agency staff from different disciplines had negative perceptions about each other; and, within and between agencies and the community representatives there were very different ways of communicating, thinking about problems, and solving problems.

The strategic planning and community engagement process was exhaustive, exhausting and lengthy. The starting level of trust was low. From the beginning, there was a high level of skepticism among the residents, council members, and parents as to the authenticity of their influence and power in the decision-making and in access to resources.

Over the course of the multi-year process, the trust level was increased to the point that the parents and residents became partners in decision-making and problem-solving, the cross-sector and cross-agency staff became partners in sharing resources and decision-making; and, shifts occurred within agencies and organizations to align managerial, supervisory and front-line behavior. The partnerships are recognized nationally as leading edge examples of innovation. Implementation is underway, although it will be years before the full impact on improving outcomes of the innovations and partnership will be known. Early indicators show that measurable improvements are occurring.

The success of these partnerships was not accomplished by reducing the scope or risk of the “big vision.” Instead, it was accomplished by building the trust relationships between and among partners to the point that a strategic plan and implementation strategies could be crafted that reflected the input, participation and perspectives of the partners. This was truly a Path 1 Partnership approach. In particular, the convening core team invented ways of building relationships with the parents and residents in large “playful” events: where professionals and parents danced, ate, and sang together; in small discussion and problem-solving groups where parents and professionals looked at facts and generated solutions together; and in engaging in group decision-making processes where parents and professionals had been trained in a form of consensus-based decision-making.

As the level of trust grew, more candid communication led to partners changing their perceptions of each other and more easily recognizing the value of each other’s contributions. Several breakdowns occurred along the way because of the gap between level of trust available and that needed for such expansive scope and risk. These breakdowns were resolved by reconstituting decision-making groups, training partners in new ways of communication and decision-making to equalize perceived power differentials, and by investing time together over meals to break through the barriers of position and cultural differences.

At the inception of the strategic planning and community engagement process in one of the communities, the chairman of the community council, who was a parent and resident, was openly distrustful of the public sector partners and the partnership. Over a period of years, the partnership developed new ways of making decisions that were consensus-based, used a discipline of making and building on proposals, and changed the composition of the decision-making bodies to include more parent and community participation. All the partners stayed through times that were tough on their emotions to deal with disagreements, differences in style and perception and they changed their behavior. By the time of implementation, there was a conscious recognition that certain ways of working together (e.g., making proposals) are effective. The chairman/parent-resident is now actively involved in the partnership decision-making processes and is spearheading aspects of the implementation in the community.

Trust Builders	Trust Busters
Create open methods of communication including story telling, imagery, visual displays of available data to explore varying definitions of the problem and form the basis of open inquiry for the solutions.	Assume your perception of the problem and solution is the right one.
Develop norms for defining the parameters of authority and accountability of the partnership, methods of consensus based decision making, and meeting management techniques that support authentic participation by all partners.	Transplant hierarchical and bureaucratic meeting formats and decision-processes to the partnership. Do not directly discuss the relationship of the partnership and it’s decision-making to those of partner agencies or groups.
Label conflict and provide partners with methods of conflict resolution. Constantly examine partnership processes and recognize lack of participation as a signal to change something. Build in communication and renewal mechanisms for managing the turnover in membership and intermittent participation.	Cover over or avoid conflict. Ignore apathy and dwindling interest on the part of partners. Assume continuity of participation over time.

**Path 2 Partnership:**

Path 2 partnerships are those where potential partners start with a “big” vision, discover the available trust and other factors mitigate against the success of accomplishing the “big” vision and reduce the scope or risk to a sustainable level with the clear intent of moving from that level to a higher level in the future. The benefits of Path 2 partnerships are that they provide a framework for matching trust with scope and risk over time by simultaneously implementing trust building and scope/risk reduction strategies.

Interesting examples of Path 2 partnerships are emerging in the context of devolution. In a number of states this devolution is being attempted in the context of partnership building or negotiations. In these states, there is conscious system reform agenda that includes the transformation of the relationships among and between the partners as well as an intent to improve results in a measurable way, use resources more flexibly, and establish a more results focused accountability.

In some instances, capacity building and partnership building activities support these Path 2 partnerships. These activities engage potential partners in a process of learning, joint problem solving and “negotiating” a partnership agreement. It is particularly important that these partnerships be mutually accountable for an agreed on a set of results that have available trend data that reflect indicators of progress. If the data doesn’t exist there must be a willingness to create performance measures.

### **The Story of a Path 2 Partnership:**

A state, as part of it’s system reform agenda, moved toward building community based partnerships that incorporated partners from social services; health; education; juvenile justice; mental health; the private, non-profit sector; the business community; and residents. These partnerships were chartered within the context of local elected structures including both the county government and school board.

After a number of years of development at the state and county level, the opportunity was offered to counties to negotiate with a state team representing the pertinent state agencies. The goal of the negotiation was to forge a partnership agreement between the state and the county. The agreement would create a higher level of results based accountability with a higher level of flexibility in the use of resources, a design of service delivery systems and invention of cross-sector strategies to improve outcomes at the community level.

The year-long negotiation process started with an initial exploration of a partnership that would have been very broad in terms of risk and scope. It moved to a negotiated set of boundaries between the state and community teams that enabled the alignment of risk/scope to the (building) level of trust. The agreement also institutionalized an ongoing process of joint partnership work to move to a larger scope in concert with the growing trust and capacity. This on-going work would occur over a three to five year period.

The negotiating process was consciously designed to use win/win or interest based negotiation as a framework for building trust between the partners to enable them formulate a partnership agreement. In addition, an explicit framework of results based accountability was adopted. Initially, neither party realized the depth of work needed to negotiate this type of partnership agreement. Both parties recognized that the current level of trust between the state and the county was not sufficient for the proposed partnership. The trust level rose when the county team specifically framed proposals based on the ability to identify and act on shared interests rather than engaging in positional bargaining. Key events that enabled the trust to be built were crafting negotiating sessions to include meals, specifically identifying common interests to find common purpose; and working diligently to create mutually agreed upon sets of data.

At a crucial moment in the negotiations, there was a conscious decision on the part of both parties to reduce the scope of the agreement in a particular program area. The risk mitigation occurred when the state team was willing to offer “hold harmless” clauses for the first years as an acknowledgement of the need for innovation and problem solving. By this point, the trust had been built through fact-based research and joint problem solving so that it was possible to have a joint program management and decision-making process for the first years. The willingness of the both the state and county to mitigate risk would not have been possible at the inception of the process and reflected the gains in trust level.

The initial negotiation process had envisioned a companion agreement between the county and a local neighborhood team to bring this approach of flexibility and accountability even closer to the level of a neighborhood based partnership. The process had originally been designed to build trust between county and neighborhood. What emerged was the need to build trust within the local neighborhood team.

The potential partners at this level represented very divergent perspectives and purposes. The negotiation broke down due to this lack of trust within the local neighborhood team. An interest-based process was used to enable the potential partners to build enough trust among themselves so they could make a joint decision to either proceed or not proceed with the negotiations. Even though the team

chose not to proceed, it was done in a way that trust had been built even during the dissolution process and left the possibility of future work with the neighborhood at a later date.

Currently the county is at the stage of implementing the initial stages of the agreement and a refined negotiation process is being replicated with other counties.

<b>Trust Builder</b>	<b>Trust Buster</b>
Sit side by side at a table and be friendly.	Sit across from each other and be defensive.
Force conversations to be fact-based and work towards a common set of facts.	Use rhetoric and anecdote, try to trump the other parties data with your own to prove them wrong.
Take time to get to know each other as people, share food.	Stay in role, address others by their first names, and expect them to address you by title.
Create a behavioral definition of trust, that is define: what you need and expect from each other; live up to it; and build on it over time.	Talk of your lack of trust in the other party in the hallway and not at the negotiating table. Interpret any variances from unstated expectations as further proof of untrustworthiness.

### **Path 3 Partnership:**

Path 3 Partnership involves opportunistically choosing the desired outcome commensurate with the available level trust. Such partnerships are usually more project oriented or time-bound. The value of Path 3 Partnerships is that they can build the partnership over time to accomplish larger results or dissolve once the initial outcome is accomplished. Examples of successful Path 3 Partnerships are whole communities coming together in a crisis – e.g., staving off a flood. The goal is clear and compelling; the crisis or danger creates connections and trust; and people’s contributions are clear. Another Path 3 partnership might be an inter-agency or cross-sector Task Force, with a specific agenda and comparatively short-term results. There are also emerging examples of Path 3 partnerships that are consciously formed to share resources or problem-solve across boundaries.

Characteristics of Path 3 partnerships are that they either succeed fairly easily or they fall apart fairly quickly. The ones that fall apart quickly are those where there is not a good initial match between the scope/risk of the partnership and the available trust level. The following is a story about such a Path 3 partnership.

#### **The Story of Path 3 Partnership:**

A national association of state public sector administrators decided to use a portion of their annual meeting to explore whether there were partnerships that could help them do their own work in their own states more effectively through sharing resources across state boundaries. Resources were defined primarily as knowledge and the time of technical staff. A champion in the association was very committed to testing the possibility of partnership as a solution to declining resources and increased demand.

At the two-day annual association meeting approximately three hours were devoted to exploring the possibility of partnership by the approximately 50 state public administrators. The group developed definitions of partnership and then developed a “continuum of partnership” to facilitate the conscious matching between the level of trust available to level of trust required.

The group identified the seven levels of partnership shown below. Increasing levels of partnership require increasing trust. Part of the process involved canvassing the participants about their own experiences. All had experienced the first four levels. However, as the trust required moved into joint decision-making and reliance on others the experience rates fell dramatically.

### **Levels of Partnership**

Level	Type	Definition	% with experience
I	Informed	Communication between people	100%
II	Consulted	Opportunity to influence through giving feedback to what is already designed	100%
III	Developers	Participate in developing solutions, changes, and proposals	100%
IV	Input in decision	Opportunity to influence final decisions, par-	100%



	making	participate in monitoring and taking corrective action	
V	Involvement in final decisions	Full partners in reaching decisions, formulating plans, monitoring, and taking corrective action, assisting goals and activities	70 -80%
VI	Loose alliances	Agreement to use each others' services to create a product	10%
VI	Shared Investment	Each partner putting resources and expertise on the table to accomplish a common goal	20 -25%
VII	Shared accountability and implementation	Working together to implement jointly developed plans and taking equal responsibility for the success or failure in accomplishing a common goal	20 -25%

Within this framework, the potential partners then identified other areas where partnership might produce desirable results. From this open process, a number of partnerships were formed at different points on the continuum. One was at the “deeper” end of shared resources and shared product development. This partnership was completed and ultimately deemed a success by the two partner states. The others were at the “lighter” end of the continuum of information sharing and led to association members getting more from their participation with each other and the association staff.

The trust builders and trust busters

<b>Trust Builders</b>	<b>Trust Busters</b>
Support potential partners in them creating for themselves a clear definition of partnership and frame the utility of partnership as situation and context dependent.	Argue about what constitutes a partnership and be skeptical about any partnership being worth the time.
Create a process that enables potential partners to assess the value of a potential partnership result vs. the available level of trust and the investment required in time and effort to accomplish the result.	Advocate loudly that partnership is a better, more righteous way to work and dismiss people’s fears and doubts as un-enlightened.
Support potential partners in them creating a conscious and clear decision-making framework and process to facilitate people exploring options and freely making choices.	Confuse process and results and frustrate people by lots of talking about things and very little framing of choices and decision-making.

***The Overall “how to”:***

These paths to partnership illustrate the process of trust building in the context of the existing level trust and the level of trust needed to sustain the partnership and create successful results. The trust builders and trust busters are examples of the behaviors that either build or diminish trust under varying conditions – different partners, different purposes. Each of the trust builders is useful in different situations; they are just expressed in different ways.

For example, trust building often requires the ability to span the boundaries of racial, cultural, and class difference. This can be accomplished by building a foundation of mutual experiences through dealing with each other as people first. It can occur in many forms: within organizations these efforts are often called team training; in the business world, between marketers and customers it is called golf. We may not yet have a word for it in the world of partnership but it is essential and takes many forms.

For example, a Native American tribal leader tells the story of trying to form a partnership with government representatives. Meeting after meeting were going no where because of the lack of trust. Then the elders invited the government representatives to dinner at tribal headquarters. After dinner the elders said to government representatives “and now we dance.” The leader reported that “never have I

seen such a look of pure terror in someone's eyes. But they danced with us, and from then on we made great progress."

The fundamentals of trust building require a conscious commitment to building relationships FIRST. Peter Block author of *Stewardship* formulates trust building as having to get the sequence of our work in a different order. The "4 R's" of trust building for partnership work best in the following sequence:

1. Relationship building to establish the foundation of understanding each other as people;
2. Results definition to find common purpose;
3. Resource definition to find out the amount and type people are willing to commit to the purpose; and,
4. Requirements definition of what it will take to produce the results in the form of an action plan and commitments.

Unfortunately, the common instinctive approach in most organizational settings is to do this work in the reverse sequence. Generally people assume the common definition of results and the willingness of others to commit the level of resources needed to achieve results, avoid any work around relationship as "too touchy-feely" and plunge right into action planning. This often does not work well, hence, the efforts called organizational development, total quality management, or team effectiveness. These are essentially organizational devices to sustain work within the organizations around Steps 1, 2 and 3.

It is apparent in the partnerships described in Paths 1, 2 and 3 that the sequence is even more critical. It is also necessary to iterate through this sequence at all levels and places of work. In each meeting do some work on relationships, results, resources and requirements, however briefly, or the partnership will not last. In addition, as time goes go deeper into these processes of relationships, results, resources and requirements.

Trust is about the people and the behavior. If we see individuals working in ways that:

- build trust and connection for partnership;
- focus on and accomplish results that benefit the broader community;
- inspire the dedication of resources for the greater good in new and more effective ways, and
- manage action to produce results efficiently

we call it leadership. This kind of leadership is built on a conscious or unconscious uses of trust builders and the how to's of trust building. Roger Fisher in *Getting To Yes* – a handbook for trust builders and leaders – says that trust builders and how to's are not new. All of us already know them. The challenge is remembering what we know and using it where it will do the most good – in those scary and exhilarating places where partnerships are being built to improve the world for ourselves and our children.

### **The Starter Kit of Resources to Help**

- *The Fifth Discipline Handbook* by Peter Senge -- especially developing the skill to distinguish between advocacy and inquiry, and the inference ladder to explore underlying assumption.
- *Fisher, Ury and Patton; Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In – 2nd Edition, Penguin Press, 1981.* – especially developing the skill of distinguishing interest from position, the development of options and criteria for decision-making. (Also excellent tips on how to build trust through the process of win/win negotiation)
- *Trading Outcome Accountability for Funding Flexibility*; Friedman; especially developing the skill of using information in a way that leads to fact based strategy development, resource allocation, accountability and decision- making.
- *A Guide to Developing and Using Performance Measures in Outcomes-Based Budgeting*; The Finance Project.
- Results oriented Consensus based decision-making and meeting management techniques by Jolie Bain Pillsbury. Especially the skills of speaking, listening, and creating alignment in a way that builds trust through the process.