The evidence base for successful alliancing

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Introduction

Collaborative and integrated working is seen as essential to meet the challenges faced in UK public funded services. Alliances and alliance contracts have generated interest as a possible tool that commissioners can use to drive collaboration. There are examples in healthcare from New Zealand (Timmins and Ham, 2013) and recent alliance developments in services in England (LH Alliances, 2015).

As we adopt alliance methodologies for the context of public sector commissioning and provision it is imperative to consider the evidence for creating successful alliances. A literature search was conducted in the summer of 2015 to address the question of what makes alliances successful. It commenced with Google scholar searches for variations on the word alliance and alliance contracts. Further material came from reference lists of papers identified and requests to alliance specialists.

We found extensive literature on performance in alliance contracting in the public sector, in particular in the domain of government funded capital build projects commonly used in Australia and New Zealand and typically known as 'project alliances'. Strategic alliances across industries often seen in the private sector are also well documented. There is a more limited view on performance of more hybrid forms of alliancing which have evolved to accommodate requirements for collaborative service design and planning or strategic integration. Papers relating to joint ventures and other similar types of collaboration were included where the concepts can be directly applied and are equally relevant to alliances.

This literature review encapsulates the spectrum of the alliance discourse and creates a framework of key components that maximise performance in an alliance. The negative aspects that can hinder progress or lead to failure of alliances are also described.

Types of Alliances

Alliances can take many forms and the term alliance conjures different meanings depending on the context used. There is no one universal formal or type of alliance contract typically because alliances are flexible and should be adapted for the local context (Davies, 2008). However, general characteristics are recognised that define alliances regardless of applicability (Billings and Weger, 2015):

i. *Cooperation, collaboration and value creation*, distinguishing alliances from conventional contracts involving a closer and more interdependent relationship between parties (Bruner and Spekman, 1998; Zoller, 1999; Mayer and Treece, 2008);

ii. Critical focus on relational aspects relating to *trust, loyalty and commitment* for the long term (De Jong and Klein Woolthuis, 2008);

iii. *Goal congruence* further to clarity on the common goal, as a prerequisite to alliance formation. Continuous goal congruence is evident for smooth alliance functioning affirming commitment to achieve the alliance performance outcomes and to reassure confidence in the intent of the partners (Das, 2005, Das and Rahman, 2009);

iv. *Unanimity in decision-making* is fundamental to alliancing to foster shared responsibility and collective ownership of resolutions and to support behavioural commitment to the common goal (Lloyd-Walker, Mills and Walker, 2014);

v. An *alliance agreement* (or contract) to express the relational contractual terms and outcomes is a key distinguishing feature of alliancing (Davies, 2008). In the alliance literature the agreement is described as a central part of an alliance as it provides a means for codification of behaviour and to provide clarity on roles and responsibility of each party (Mayer and Treece, 2008). Project alliancing (see below) is distinct from consortia and partnerships in the explicit contractual terms on the sharing of risks (Davies, 2008, Hutchinson and Gallagher, 2003).

There are numerous attempts in the literature to classify different types of alliances. For the purposes of this paper we will refer to the two main forms of alliances, described below.

Project alliance

Project alliancing is a form of project procurement to deliver activities in a complex environment where all partnering organisations share equal responsibility for outcomes and decision-making is based on unanimity and 'best-for-project' objectives (Lloyd-Walker, Mills and Walker, 2014). The concept of project alliance contracting is well defined and keeps to strict contracting features to operate:

i.   Risk is shared equally between the owner/commissioner and provider organisations;

ii. The alliance contract typically contains a 'no-disputes' clause which prohibits recourse to external dispute resolution (including litigation);

iii. The alliance contract precludes liability between the alliance participants for loss, damage or negligence;

iv. All transactions are of an 'open book format' and all cost escalations or savings are shared between the parties (Davies, 2008).

A fundamental contrast with strategic alliances (see below) is a focus on target and transaction cost calculations associated with delivery of a defined project (Davies, 2008). The alliance structure and mechanisms enable and drive performance on

the basis of principle-based frameworks to align commercial interests (Ross, 2009). The commercial parameters are a key driver as well as a performance outcome for the alliance agreement (target out-turn cost). A project alliance is perceived as beneficial to conventional contracting for its flexibility to deal with complex interfaces, unpredictable risks and circumstances of uncertainty (Ross, 2009). The the no-disputes and no-liability framework create an environment free from contractual barriers that typically constrain complex projects (Davies, 2008, Lloyd-Walker, Mills and Walker, 2014).

> **Examples of project alliances:**
> - **Project Andrew, North Sea**
> - **Construction of the National Museum of Australia**
> - **Terminal 5 Heathrow Airport**
> - **Thames Water Network Alliance**

Strategic alliance

Strategic alliance refers to a broad notion of cooperative arrangements among businesses. They are described as "interfirm cooperative arrangements aimed at achieving the strategic objectives of the partners" (Das and Teng 1998, p.491). Building new sources of competitive advantage for partners involved is often an important driver for these types of interorganisational designs (Lei, Slocum and Pitts, 1997). The characteristics of strategic alliances focus on relational coordination and control between the parties to achieve competitive advantage. The parties:

i.   Remain legally independent after the alliance is formed;

ii. Share benefits and managerial control over the performance of assigned tasks;

iii. Make continuing contributions in one or more strategic areas, such as technology or products (Yoshino and Rangan, 1995:5).

Compared to project alliances there is more focus on gaining intangible benefits such as capability and increase of influence and control in relations with other organisations, partners and governmental regulators. Delivery of the strategic alliance may be associated with the delivery of projects or services which have a physical outcome, or those which do not have a physical outcome (also referred to as intangible benefits). In the literature these intangible benefits are often linked to reducing competition and control of market and non-market transactions to achieve competitive advantage (Webster, 1999). Some scholars argue that the competition element of strategic alliances do not suit a public service environment (Davies, 2008), however other tangible and intangible benefits are still relevant.

> ### Examples of strategic alliances
> - **One World Alliance**
> - **Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI)**
> - **Starbucks and Barnes & Noble**
> - **Canterbury (NZ) Health Alliance**

Other terms for alliances

Hybrid forms of alliances is a term used by some for alliances which do not fit into either of the above categories. There is accommodation for particular circumstances for cooperation, governance or a project environment (Todeva and Knoke, 2005, Davies, 2008). The core principles of alliance contracting remain central to the approach but with flexibility in formation and operating terms of the alliance. In addition, Todeva and Knoke (2005) highlight that variations in alliance forms are adopted to control resource allocation and distribution of benefits among the partners.

Another dimension often highlighted in the literature is a dichotomy between equity and non-equity alliance structures. Various scholars (Pisano, 1989; Oxley, 1997; Gulati and Singh, 1998) suggest that the distinct governance properties of equity and non-equity partnerships have differential effects on their functioning, for example on attributes such as control, resource transfer and sharing and alliance investment (Gudergan, Devinney and Ellis, 2003).

Definitions of alliance success

There is a broad field of theoretical conceptualisation of alliance success, linking major organisational and strategic theories to effectiveness of alliance performance outcomes.

Traditionally economic measures such as target costs and transaction savings have been measures of alliance success, as is still seen typically in project alliances (Davies, 2008). However over time scholars have argued different indicators to define alliance success well-beyond financial indicators (Geringer and Herbert, 1989) including more intangible views on performance outcomes and process-related dynamic outcomes (McCutchen, Swamidass and Teng, 2008). Generally speaking the main streams of research can be categorised into four areas:

i. *resource-based* focusing on complimentary and synergy in bringing resources together;

ii. *competence-based* focusing on development of organisational skills and capability to drive competitive advantage through alliances;

iii. *relational factors* evaluating durable relationships and cooperative efficacy;

iv. *competitive advantage* relating to securement of unique positioning in the marketplace (Hunt, Lambe and Wittmann, 2002).

Research has suggested that these different theoretical areas of alliance success and performance provide explanatory factors that are important independently (Wittmann, Hunt and Arnett, 2009).

The above perspectives on alliance success give a notion of the wide range of views in the alliance discourse. However, conceptualisation of measurement of success and empirical supporting evidence is limited and studies often isolate a single perspective. In addition, the range of alliance forms and their flexibility makes it difficult to compare variables and alliance attributes that influence success.

Dimensions of successful alliancing

Despite the different views on perspective of alliance success, recurring themes in the literature exist with regards to determinants for alliance performance. From these we have defined four interrelated dimensions to construct a framework that reflects the key components of successful alliancing. The following paragraphs discuss each dimension in more detail.

> **The four dimensions critical to alliance success**
> - **Trust and loyalty between parties**
> - **High quality decision making processes**
> - **Management capability and skills**
> - **Flexibility and dynamism**

Trust and loyalty between parties

Trust is often seen as a predictor of alliance success. To some extent it substitutes for more formal control mechanisms such as hierarchy and contract specifications (Gulati, 1995) and in a more social psychological explanation reflects social exchange principles such as conformity, commitment and reciprocity (Todeva and Knoke, 2005).

Various researchers have asserted that the most critical challenges in a given interfirm collaboration revolve around the uncertainties associated with the cooperative motivation of the partners (Axelrod 1984; Williamson, 1985; Parkhe, 1993; Das and Teng, 1998; Khanna, Gulati and Nohria, 1998). Uncertainty about the behaviour and intent of partners is an evident complexity in establishing trust in alliances. The strategic motives to undertake an alliance and desired outcomes for each party can be various. Any diversities not surfaced in a transparent way at an early formation stage

could create trust issues and affect overall confidence in the partner cooperation (Todeva and Knoke, 2005). Partner selection is a critical stage in the formation of an alliance to assess congruence of goals, incentives and strategies. Das (2005) amongst others emphasises the need to assess potential partners in a systematic way to understand potential relational risks that may strain the alliance.

Relational risk is defined as the probability that a partner will not cooperate fully with the resultant adverse impact on mutual interest and commitment in an alliance (Das, 2005). Potential of opportunistic behaviour is a well-studied theme and is regarded as a critical aspect of relational risk. Examples of such behaviour are evasion, refusal to adapt, breaking promises, mispresenting, not sharing resources or facilities as per agreement and deliberate actions to force renegotiation (Wathne and Heide 2000, Das and Rahman, 2001). The concept of opportunism in general and of partner opportunism in particular have been central to alliance theory (Das, 2004, 2006; Das and Rahman, in press).

Das and Rahman (2009) present a comprehensive framework of the key determinants of partner opportunism, using empirical studies to support their framework. Their findings present three distinct groups of determinants which may influence the potential for partner opportunism:

i.   *Economic determinants* (eg. equity involvement, asymmetric alliance specific investments, mutual hostages and pay-off inequity) are most widely acknowledged in the literature to affect opportunistic behaviour (Das and Rahman, 2009). Although often studied in a transaction cost context involving equity stake (Das and Teng, 1996; Gulati, 1995) economic considerations would still also be applicable for non-equity alliances in particular asymmetry in alliance specific investments (resources) and pay-off inequity (perception of alliance gains between partners, in monetary terms);

ii. *Relational determinants*, are the interpersonal interactions and legitimacy as a result of cultural diversity between partners and goal compatibility (Kumar and Das, 2009; Goshal and Moran, 1996). Misinterpretation of actions and intent could give rise to potential self-interest seeking behaviour and withholding of information (Gassenheimer, Baucus and Baucus, 1996);

iii. *Temporal determinants* are concerned with time dimensions for the existence of the alliance (the alliance horizon) and expected time span to produce performance results (Das, 2006). It is assumed that a short alliance horizon would foster opportunism, whereas a long alliance horizon would deter such behaviour (Das, 2004, 2006). With regards to pressures for quick results scholars argue that congruence in expectations and commitment to the common goal is key to avoid opportunistic behaviour (Barkema and Vermeulen, 1997, Brown, Dev and Lee, 2000).

Das and Rahman (2009) take these further in making the distinction between equity and non-equity alliance. Summarising key determinants for *non-equity alliances* (ie. alliances that do not involve any equity or transfer of ownership) pay-off inequity,

goal incompatibilities and pressures for quick results are pointed out as significant negative influences on the cooperative relationships. In contrast key determinants for *equity alliances* are equity involvement, cultural diversity and alliance horizon. (Das and Rahman, 2009). In conclusion, the publication emphasises that different type of alliances have different determinants, suggesting that each type allows certain determinants to become more salient than others in affecting potential for opportunistic behaviour.

Building on to the theoretical foundation on trust and loyalty further research focuses on defining coordination mechanisms and routines to control and avoid opportunistic behaviour (Das and Kumar, 2011; Das and Teng, 1998; Walter, Lechner and Kellermans, 2008).

High quality decision-making processes

Alliances create a unique context for decision-making. Alliance-related decision making is distinguished from other forms of collaboration by the unanimity aspect of joint decision making and high degree of interdependence (risk share and pain/gain framework). High quality participatory decision-making processes are critical to the collaborative sphere needed for successful alliancing (Nielsen 2000).

Unanimous decision-making is contrary to traditional hierarchal structures to facilitate decision-making (Gulati and Singh, 1998). Fundamental to alliance decision-making principles is reliance on coordination mechanisms such as reciprocity norms, trust and social capital embedded in interactions (Todeva and Knoke, 2005). This requires significant coordination between leaders and alliance managers to facilitate decision-making and coordination of activities on the basis of relational contracting principles (Walter, Lechner and Kellermans, 2008). Careful selection of delegated staff and leaders participating in the alliance governance is critical. They form the linkage between the alliance and the partnering organisations and are responsible for liaison management and navigation of multiple decision-making centres and influences (Mockler, 1999; Walter, Lechner and Kellermans, 2008).

In the alliance literature various scholars have addressed coordination mechanisms to support effective governance arrangements. Appropriate governance arrangements are fundamental, however they do not safeguard against the uncertainties, ambiguities and disputes that surface as the alliance progresses (Das and Teng, 1998). The ability to employ various coordination mechanisms in support of effective governance is important to sustain the alliance and maximise performance outcomes. Examples of coordination mechanisms include exchange of critical resources and alliance specific (resource) investment, monitoring of activities and partners of the alliance, training or facilitated events to facilitate congruence on goals and behaviour (Das, 2005).

Scholars have identified factors that influence the decision-making processes throughout the life cycle of an alliance:

i. *Multiple decision-making centres* involved in the decision processes, between partners and outside of the alliance in the single organisational entities (Gulati and Singh, 1998);

ii. *High degree of uncertainty about the behaviour of partners* due to potential competition (Khanna, Gulati and Nohria, 1998; Yan and Gray, 2001, Zajac and Bazerman, 1991);

iii. *Ambiguity about the evolution of the alliance* (Das and Teng, 1996; Ring and van de Ven, 1994);

iv. *Appearance of politicality and micropolitical actions* due to significant internal and external uncertainties (Walter, Lechner and Kellermans, 2008).

Interpartner conflicts and tension usually exists in alliances throughout each stage from development to the operation of an alliance (Das and Kumar, 2011). Examples which cause potential conflicts are tensions between cooperation and competition, rigidity and flexibility and short term versus long-term orientation between alliance parties (Das and Teng 2000). Balancing these tensions is essential for effective alliancing and decision-making processes. In addition, politicality should be seen as a contextual variable. A heightened political context makes decision-making processes more vulnerable to individual or self-serving goals and shadow decision-making influences (Doz, 1996; Walter, Lechner and Kellermans, 2008).

General literature on partnership forms suggest that equity governance could serve as a means and reflection of control by partners to facilitate effective coordination and thus prevent opportunistic behaviour (Hennart, 1988; Blodgett, 1991; Gulati, 1995). In equity alliances the governance structure is more facilitated by contractual terms, whereas with non-equity alliances governance structure is dependable on agreed norms and decision-making principles between parties (Das, 2005). Amongst others Bleeke and Ernst (1991) and Das and Teng (2000) suggest that failure rates for alliances are higher when there is a lack of joint financial equity in the partnership. It is of interest that there is a relative growth in the use of non-equity alliances compared with equity alliances despite these views on presumably less effective control mechanisms and success in non-equity partnerships (Gudergan, Devinney and Ellis, 2003).

Alongside robust governance structure and mechanisms scholars emphasise the relationship process elements to coordinate high quality decision-making processes (Doz, 1996; Dyer and Singh, 1998). These include fine tuning of relationship processes, management behaviour, organisational capability and management skills (Schreiner, Kale and Corsten, 2009).

Alliance management capability and skills

Based on prior research and additional field work Schreiner, Kalen and Corsten (2009) conceptualise alliance management capability in three distinct areas: *coordination* to manage interdependence between partners and joint task execution; *communication* to share and convey relevant knowledge and information; and *bonding* a process of social integration to facilitate alignment and interpersonal linkage. Their empirical studies suggest that these highly interrelated skills influence the ability to expand joint activities in an effective way and to maximize value creation potential from that alliance (Schreiner, Kalen and Corsten, 2009).

Previous research has shown that alliance performance differs greatly with some organisations benefiting significantly and consistently from alliances (Harbison and Pekar, 1998, Schreiner, Kalen and Corsten, 2009). Hence there is an increased interest in organisational-factors such as capability and skills as determinants for alliance success.

Three main challenges are recognised in the literature on alliance management capability:

i. *Divided authority structure and the physical, cognitive and cultural distance between partners* causing coordination failures in establishing appropriate interfaces and boundary-spanning mechanisms, as well as unclear roles, procedures, responsibilities and control (Doz, 1988; Bronder and Pritzl, 1992; Larson, 1992; Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Park and Ungson, 2001; Gerwin, 2004; Luo, 2006);

ii. *Adversarial effects of information asymmetries* due to a lack of effective information sharing and communication (Borys and Jemison, 1989; Powell, 1990; Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Larson, 1992; Mohr and Spekman, 1994);

iii. *Underdeveloped personal relationships* which are necessary to establish norms of trust and reciprocity as well as creating and maintaining expectations of mutual cooperation (Larson, 1992; Seabright, Levinthal and Fichman, 1992; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Madhok, 1995; Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone, 1998; Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter, 2000; Luo, 2001; Yli-Renko, Autio and Spienza, 2001; Luo, 2006).

A recent study by Schilke and Goerzen (2010) defined capability to manage coordination through progression of the alliance over time as a key factor. In addition to a focus on coordination and learning (knowledge transfer and sharing) they added characteristics of alliance proactiveness and alliance transformation. *Alliance proactiveness* is defined as the extent of routines to understand the environment and identify new opportunities to gain valuable resources (ie. through new partnerships). *Alliance transformation* is defined as the skills and routines to manage interactions and adaptation between partners as the alliance evolves over time, referring to the ability of the managers to modify the alliance as necessary. (Schilke and Goerzen, 2010). Doz and Hamel (1998) recognise the benefit of alliance management for testing general management skills where purpose and flexibility, analytical powers, entrepreneurial

instincts, and organisational and political skills must come together.

Next to alliance management capability as a distinct determinant empirical studies have also found *alliance experience* as a key organisational-level determinant of alliance success (Anand and Khanna, 2000; Hoang and Rothaermel, 2005; Sampson, 2005; Reuer, Zollo and Singh, 2002). Research suggests positive implications of prior alliance experience on management effectiveness to exchange information with partners and the ability to establish routines to manage complex activities and coordination (Schilke and Goerzen, 2010), as well as providing an advantage in the formative stage of the alliance when selecting partners (Hoang and Rothaermel, 2005).

Although these notions are not new the construct of alliance management capability based on empirical studies provide further guidance to develop high performing alliance management teams.

Flexibility and dynamism

Within all the above dimensions, there is a need to change and adapt over time. Doz and Hamel (1998) summarise their research on alliances as showing that the most important starting point for successful alliances is a mindset and set of attitudes by managers that allows them to function in environments characterized by instability, few fixed objectives, ambiguity, and evolving partner relationships.

Some alliances are inherently temporary going through a dynamic process from formation to termination (Das and Rahman, 2009). The duration an alliance is expected or intended to be in existence from formation to dissolution is generally referred to as the *alliance horizon*. The time span can be short, long or in cases even open-ended. (Das and Rahman, 2009). Research suggests that variations in alliance horizon have implications for post-formation evolution and stability of partnership relations. It is suggested that longer term alliances have better chances for success as there is sufficient time to mature the alliance and to strengthen the relationships (Axelrod, 1984; Heide and Miner, 1992; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Das, 2006; Das and Rahman, 2009).

The dynamic process aspect of alliancing has received increased attention lately in the alliance discourse (Bell, Den Ouden and Ziggers, 2006). There is a strong recognition for temporal stages throughout the life-cycle of an alliance and the behavioural dynamics and coordination required at each stage (Ring and Van De Ven, 1994; Billings and Weger, 2015).

Although researchers agree that alliances evolve in stages, there is no consensus on the specific stages or gated process to define the alliance life-cycle (Jiang, Li and Gao, 2008). However, there seems to be unanimity on the importance of sequencing the partner selection and relationship formative process before setting up the governing structure for the alliance (Das and Teng, 1999).

Focus on the developmental process of alliances allows better understanding of the implications for stability throughout the life-cycle of an alliance (Jiang, Li and Gao, 2008). Several scholars emphasise that the alliance must go through a formative period to establish and institutionalise collective behavioural principles (Inkpen and Beamish, 1997; Das and Rahman, 2009). Institutionalisation in the alliance of implicit and explicit social rules and mechanisms provide a binding context to maintain collaborative efficacy when coordination or complexity issues arise (Todeva and Knoke, 2005; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994).

Another area of consensus is recurrence of stages as the alliance evolves (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Doz, 1996; Arino and de la Torre, 1998), balancing structure rigidity and strategic flexibility in order to address unforeseen changes (Das and Teng, 2000). For example, due to changes in the environment or delivery risks the alliance leadership could decide to reassess or renegotiate activities, or reiterate formative stages when bringing new partners into the alliance. Coordinating these changes poses significant managerial challenges to sustain harmonious relationships. The ability to navigate ambiguity, responsiveness and adaptability on the basis of shared principles and high quality decision-making processes is key to maintain the stability of the alliance (Todeva and Knoke, 2005).

Conclusion and implications for public services

Despite a commonly held view that there is little evidence for alliance contracting in public services we found a wealth of material from basic research, observational studies and enquiry and theoretical frameworks. Apart from project alliances with their more established methodologies, alliances are characterised by flexibility and adaptability. This does not mean a lack of rigour or absence of structure. Success does not happen by chance and the literature we reviewed highlights a wide range of determinants that can lead to success or, through their absence, can lead to difficulties or even failure.

The different meanings of alliances, definitions of success and the multitude of contexts means that direct comparisons or aggregations are difficult to construct. However there are commonalities in findings and four themes emerge as critical for alliance success. These are trust and loyalty between parties, high quality decision making processes, alliance management capability and skills, flexibility and dynamism.

The emphasis on partner selection, goal congruence and early relationship formative processes stands out. These key building blocks for success should not be overlooked or rushed. In forming alliances, specific focus needs to be given to creating trust, robust decision making, adequately resourced co-ordination and management and ensuring those in leadership and key management roles can operate with uncertainty and ambiguity so that they are able to flex and adapt as the alliance evolves.

For those of us who are working to apply the benefits of alliancing to UK public services the implications are critical. The interdependent dimensions of success require continued active attention and management.

Drawing on extensive practical experience of developing and operating alliances as well as this study of the academic and management literature on alliances, LH Alliances has developed a four step framework for the preparation, commitment, formation and operation of alliances. This ensures the key components are planned and executed and there is maximum chance of achieving alliance success.

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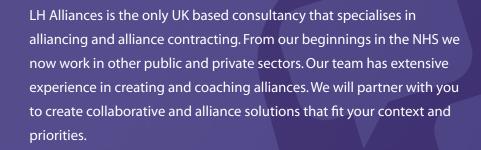
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