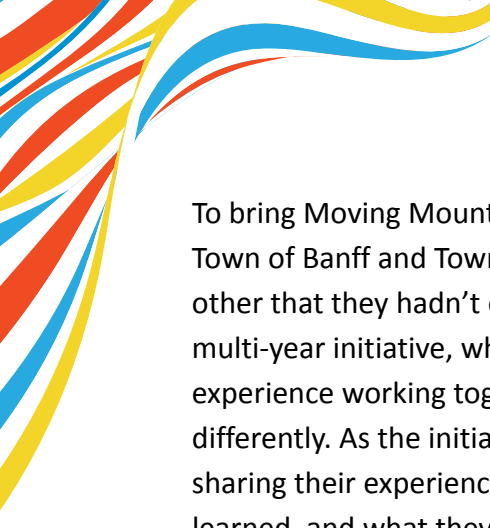




8 Insights to Strengthen Collaborative Partnerships





To bring Moving Mountains to life, the Banff Canmore Community Foundation (BCCF), with Town of Banff and Town of Canmore FCSS stepped into a way of being in relationship to each other that they hadn't experimented with before: that of partners in collaboration. Taking on a multi-year initiative, whose primary goal focused on increasing collaboration, they see their experience working together as a core team as a chance to “walk the talk” of doing things differently. As the initiative wraps up, the Moving Mountains' core team reflects, in the spirit of sharing their experience with other new or potential collaborative partners, on what they've learned, and what they might do differently next time to increase their collaborative capacity.

INSIGHT 1: Visit and Revisit Alignment to a Shared Purpose

It's important to invest the energy upfront to explore together, to identify which pieces of your shared purpose you're committed to, and which pieces you are willing to adapt or negotiate as more information becomes available. A regular practice of reviewing where you're at and where you're headed as the work progresses would help to pick up weak signals of potential misalignment and facilitate course-correction.

Try asking: *Why are we doing this? Are we certain about what needs to happen? Who needs to be involved? Do we agree on how to get there?*

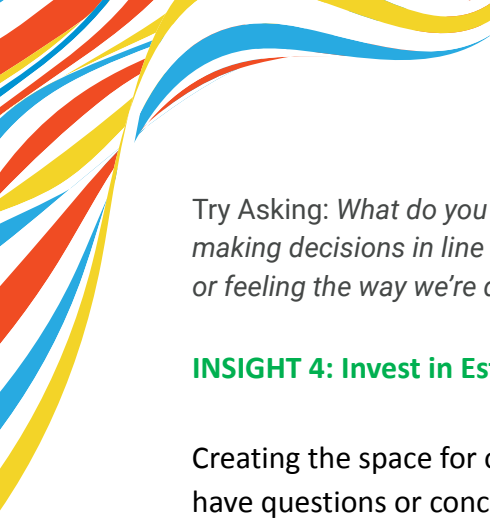
INSIGHT 2: Seek to Understand Each Partner's Existing Context

Make it a priority to recognize the value of understanding where each partner is coming from, how they are used to operating, and the challenges they contend with will help the group check assumptions about what is important if and when pivot points surface.

Try Asking: *How does work typically get done in your context? Where does your funding come from? Who has power and how do decisions get made in your organization? How do your stakeholders need - or want to be engaged?*

INSIGHT 3: Articulate Shared Values

Discuss and articulate shared definitions of the core principles of the work. Words mean different things to different people. Going beyond just naming the values, articulating shared definitions helps partners to understand what “walking the walk” might look and feel like for those involved.



Try Asking: *What do you mean when you say X is a value? How would you know we're living into and making decisions in line with this value? How might we hold ourselves accountable to the work looking or feeling the way we're describing it right now?*

INSIGHT 4: Invest in Establishing the Conditions for Courage and Transparency

Creating the space for open communication, and then having the courage to speak up when you have questions or concerns is essential - but even more important is being present and responding to what is being expressed. Treating pain points as opportunities to pause and check in about how to move forward can prompt important insights. This might take extra time, but it's worth it.

Try Asking: *How do we want to work together? How might we make differences in opinion safe to share? How can we support ourselves to navigate conflicting perspectives?*

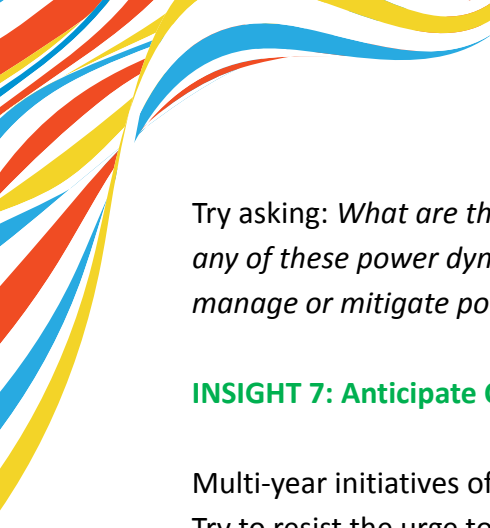
INSIGHT 5: Design your Approach

Multi-year agreements can take on lives of their own. Identifying natural breaks in the scope of work can be useful to contain key activities and allow for some flexibility to adapt your plan as needs change, or capacity and resources shift. Each phase is an opportunity to come together to assess and course correct.

While it might not always be possible to “plan the work, work the plan,” getting clearer on your goals, and the strategies you believe will help you achieve them, creates a helpful structure for understanding where the opportunities for learning are. When unanticipated outcomes occur, you can revisit the goals and adjust your strategies and create contingency plans accordingly, so you don't lose sight of the bigger picture or unwittingly take on too much “scope creep.”

INSIGHT 6: Discuss Inherent Power Dynamics and How Decisions Will be Made

Collaborative Partnerships are acts of shared leadership. There are many different ways that deliverables, resources, and financial assets can be managed and it's up to the initiative's partners to develop a shared understanding of how this power will be distributed amongst them and how decisions will be made. Power imbalances amongst partners can reduce commitment and willingness to invest time or energy in the work, and prioritize needs of one partner over others.



Try asking: *What are the explicit and more subtle power dynamics between the partners? Are any of these power dynamics potentially problematic? How will we know? How might we manage or mitigate power imbalances as they arise? How do we know when to walk away?*

INSIGHT 7: Anticipate Complexity

Multi-year initiatives often end up emerging differently from any best laid plans or intentions. Try to resist the urge to simplify or control the complexity, instead support each other to stay open from the very beginning. In complex systems, outcomes are revealed as you engage with the work, as you try different things and then engage in a practice of visiting and revisiting alignment to your shared purpose.

Try asking: *What is becoming clearer through this work? What are we learning? What are the implications for our next steps?*

INSIGHT 8: Be Prepared to Learn and Adapt Together

When partners have a sense that the work is getting away from original intent, come together as soon as possible to explore the challenges and determine how to proceed. Deciding to pause, shift - or change elements of the work altogether can be difficult - it can feel like failure. In these moments, double down on the good will between partners and be transparent about what's happening. Listen to each other and commit to integrate learning. Seek alternative pathways on which to proceed.

Try asking: *Where are we now? What are we learning? Now that we know what we know, what can we do differently?*

Katrina Donald is a Banff-based developmental evaluator, and the principal consultant at [ever-so-curious](http://ever-so-curious.com). Her work with Moving Mountains supported the collaborative partners as the initiative progressed - as a friend to the process in the thick of it, and in helping them to gather data, reflect, and contextualize their learning so it could inform the initiative's strategy.