

# The One Water Council's Leadership Guide #2: Designing and Maintaining Cross-Sector Partnerships



## The Leadership Challenge

One Water approaches can outperform traditional water management methods, but bringing them to life requires getting others on board and grappling with the systems geared toward existing siloed practices.

Champions who successfully enlist others to implement One Water approaches are skilled at overcoming common barriers, namely:

- Communicating about One Water approaches and benefits
- Designing and maintaining cross-sector partnerships
- Navigating siloed regulatory systems and funding sources to pave the way for more innovative and holistic programs and projects

The One Water Council is proud to present three interconnected guides designed to help practitioners and leaders enhance their effectiveness at solving complex water and community challenges.

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### CHECK OUT THE OTHER GUIDES IN THIS SERIES:

- » [Guide #1: Being an Effective One Water Communicator](#)
  - » [Guide #3: Navigating Regulatory Silos and Building Toward Flexibility](#)
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## Acknowledgments

This series is by and for One Water practitioners. The One Water Council and US Water Alliance extend gratitude to the Council members on the advisory group for this project, including experts from public water and wastewater utilities, nonprofits, consulting engineering firms, and academia.

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- Trent Stober, *HDR, Inc.*
- Michelle Stockness, *Freshwater Society*
- Judy Sventek, *Metropolitan Council*

We also extend special thanks to Gabriel Evans, Laura Miller, Michael Mucha, and Emily Simonson for their contributions and leadership in managing this effort.

# Fundamentals for Developing Strong and Lasting Partnerships

Building from the first guide in this series on being an effective One Water communicator, this guide can help One Water champions develop skills to build effective and lasting cross-sector partnerships.

Cross-sector partnerships can be key to successfully implementing multi-benefit One Water approaches. Cross-sector partnerships often start at organizations leading innovation in the water sector, such as utilities or community-based organizations. While these organizations are often well-positioned to lead partnerships, they may have different definitions of success or lack strong connections with others who can advance the work. We encourage One Water leaders to consider partners from across the water sector, like agricultural producers, upstream land managers, and water restoration groups. This guide encourages and assists with developing cross-sector partnerships through which partners can contribute in unique and meaningful ways.

When using this guide, we encourage you to remember:

- **Understanding is more important than being understood.** Enter a new partnership with a learning mindset. Working across sectors will introduce you to new people, practices, beliefs, and procedures. Don't assume others think like you or share your values.
- **Developing partnerships can be challenging—particularly the most important ones.** Start small with exploratory conversations and seek easy successes to build trust. With a strong foundation, new partnerships can grow into long-term relationships that address today's and tomorrow's challenges.
- **A partnership can be effective before full trust is built.** Partnerships work best when rooted in trust, but until trust is established, a shared understanding that you are more effective working together than apart can suffice.
- **Stay resilient when challenges arise.** Every partnership presents complexities, which can be influenced by staff, boards, stakeholders, or unforeseen crises. When difficulties emerge, step back and seek growth opportunities. Challenges are a chance to strengthen relationships, showcase leadership, and build trust.
- **Resist a one-size-fits-all mindset.** Each partnership is unique, and previously successful approaches may not achieve similar results with other partners. Early engagement can foster collaboration, shared ownership, and a tailored, successful partnership approach.

## Six Skills to Become a Successful Partnership Builder

One Water champions can actively cultivate six skills to become more proficient in designing and maintaining cross-sector partnerships.

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### Skill 1 / Designing Partnership Foundations and Governance

Cross-sector partnerships are set up for success when they have clarity about roles, responsibilities, decision-making, and accountability measures.

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### Skill 2 / Establishing Effective Norms

Establishing effective group norms is a crucial skill in shaping culture. Culture forms over time and impacts the way people think and operate, thus intentionally shaping the culture of a partnership can foster success.

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### Skill 3 / Resource Strategy and Money Management

A well-designed funding model takes into account each partner's ability to coordinate, carry out tasks, and cover essential costs for implementing solutions.

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### Skill 4 / Planning for Continuity

Establishing redundancy and succession plans creates continuity by helping preserve buy-in, momentum, and institutional knowledge.

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### Skill 5 / Nurturing an Open and Effective Dialogue

Open communication cultivates environments where ideas can evolve into innovation and progress—especially if conflicting interests or doubts about partner motivations arise.

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### Skill 6 / Addressing Tension and Disagreement

Effective leaders address tension and disagreement proactively.

## Skill 1: Designing Partnership Foundations and Governance

Cross-sector partnerships are set up for success when they have clarity about roles, responsibilities, decision-making, and accountability measures. These governance components can range in formality but should be explicit and established early to minimize future conflict. The ability to define parameters for cross-sector partnerships requires a strong foundation in the Guide 1 skills: cultivating clarity of purpose, strategic partnership design, and understanding and advancing the interests of others. Users of this guide are encouraged to practice pre-engagement as described in Guide 1 to establish shared interests and goals before designing governance.

### Practice This Skill with “Chartering”

Chartering involves writing down the essential elements of partnerships to create a shared understanding. Key elements include common goals, partner roles and responsibilities, success factors, and processes for decision-making, communication, and conflict resolution.

Initial charters might also consider whether and when partners will “re-charter” based on what they learn through their work together. A chartering exercise may become a formal agreement, such as a memorandum of understanding or contract, or an informal memo between parties. Formal arrangements can increase the longevity and continuity of the partnership, support the onboarding of new partners, and mitigate risks to individual participants. Informal agreements may make it easier to initiate the partnership as you build trust. Understanding your partners and their goals will help determine the type of agreement that will work best for you.

Want to take it further? [Check out WEF’s work on clarity in the context of the circular water economy.](#)

### YOUR THOUGHTS HERE:

## Skill 2: Establishing Effective Norms

Establishing effective group norms is a crucial skill in shaping culture. Culture forms over time and impacts the way people think and operate, thus intentionally shaping the culture of a partnership can foster success.

Communicating on elements such as values, norms, and language helps create an environment that minimizes risk and supports shared goals. For more on this topic, please see the “headlining” and relationship mapping exercises offered in Guide 1. These exercises deepen the understanding of the people and organizations that may support or challenge efforts and where norms are needed. Consider the balance of power, influence, and availability of those in your relationship map to better navigate group dynamics.

Discussions among partners can uncover assumptions and preferences that inform operating norms. Consider:

- **Identity:** What kind of shared identity, if any, would best serve the partnership? Should leadership be concentrated in one or two individuals, or should the group lead collectively? How do each partner’s identities contribute to or challenge the formation of a strong group identity?
- **Knowledge:** What knowledge can each partner provide and how is that knowledge shared and valued?
- **Creativity, Innovation, and Risk:** What parameters are important to support creativity and innovation and improve partners’ tolerance for measured risk?
- **Cohesion:** What strategies can support the type of cohesion the partnership needs to succeed (e.g., social networking or celebration norms)?

### Practice This Skill by Facilitating a Group Agreements Exercise

Collaboratively developing values and working agreements is one of the most effective ways to shape group culture. Start by grounding the discussion in the partnership’s goals. Then, have each participant write down values and working agreements they believe the group should adopt, placing their notes at the front of the room. Next, distribute an equal number of stickers to each participant and invite them to place their stickers next to the notes that resonate most. Guide the group in

reflecting on which ideas have strong support and facilitate a discussion about any additional agreements that should be included. A successful exercise will not only establish shared values and agreements but also outline how the group will revisit and uphold them throughout their work.

### Group Agreements in Action: [Water Equity Taskforce Working Principles](#)

- » **Be open.** Give full consideration to new ideas and approaches.
- » **Honor each other’s time.** Come prepared and have given thought to the topics of the meeting. Respond to emails and requests promptly, or let people know if you don’t have the capacity.
- » **Assume good intentions and keep our shared goals in mind.** While we may disagree over certain aspects of the work, we are committed to working collaboratively toward greater water equity.
- » **Honor confidentiality.** What is said here stays here. What is learned here leaves here.
- » **Respect all kinds of knowledge.** We value the full spectrum of knowledge in our group—from personal lived experience to technical expertise.
- » **Move up/move back.** If you’re a “sparkler,” make room for “mullers.” If you’re naturally quiet, take time to speak your mind.
- » **Embody equitable and participatory practices.** Make internal decisions collectively and ensure that the outcomes of the project are shared among all participants.
- » **Understand history and power dynamics.** Be aware of power dynamics (authority, prestige, access to funding, and connections) and how they may affect our work. Hold awareness of histories of injustice.
- » **Commit to project sustainability and institutionalization.** Find opportunities to institutionalize equitable practices so they outlast this project.

## Skill 3: Resource Strategy and Money Management

A well-designed funding model takes into account each partner's ability to coordinate, carry out tasks, and cover essential costs for implementing solutions. Often, the full cost—both in money and time—can be underestimated. Conflicts are more likely when some partners are compensated for their involvement while others are not, when one partner contributes significantly more resources than others, or when there is perceived competition around resources.

Cross-sector partnerships that adopt One Water approaches can lead to cost savings, but they may not be able to rely solely on traditional water funding sources like the Clean Water or Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, which have strict limitations on how the funds can be used. Designing funding models for such partnerships requires creativity, long-term planning, and the ability to leverage multiple funding sources. In some cases, this may involve transferring funds between municipalities or partners.

Consider the following strategies for partnership financing:

- **Strengthen Long-Term, Integrated Capital Planning:** When possible, get ahead of funding conundrums by building current and anticipated One Water projects into capital plans that guide rate schedules and combine and look across future drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater needs.
- **Explore Rewards That Align with Values and Outcomes:** Common examples include designing rates and fees that reward conservation and pricing pollution for its true cost. Explore whether regulators or state legislatures can support with complementary policy or lawmaking.
- **Ensure Fair Cost Sharing, Considering Ability to Pay:** Ensuring financial fairness is key to partnership sustainability. Partners should agree upon principles such as accounting for the value of assets partners bring to the partnership, ensuring that growth pays for growth, and making sure that rates are equitable. Since ratepayers cover many expenses, it's important to understand their varying abilities to pay and how costs impact them. Consider affordability strategies like rate designs that distribute costs fairly and reduce affordability burdens on those least able to pay.

**Practice this skill by establishing an early agreement on costs and revenue sources.**

Create an estimated budget for the time, expertise, and funds needed to achieve the partnership goals, including a contingency for unexpected resource needs. Budgeting and work planning should go hand in hand and can be prepared in phases with clear checkpoints indicating when the budget will be re-evaluated.

Preparing the budget early encourages partners to collaborate on a funding and financing strategy to secure the needed resources and assess what is achievable. When building the budget and funding strategy, keep these key considerations in mind:

- **Identify All Costs:** Accurately account for all required resources and their source, including funding, time, and expertise.
- **Seek Grants:** To augment your revenue stream, consider grants favoring partnerships that may not have been available when working alone. Keep in mind many One Water approaches require a mix of funding sources.
- **Expand the Team:** If intentional budgeting highlights resource gaps in your partnership, consider inviting others who can contribute what you need for success.
- **Establish Controls:** Designate one entity to manage shared resources and a separate oversight body to ensure accountability and transparency.
- **Consider a Regional Partnership Structure:** If your issue is of regional interest, consider forming a partnership that extends beyond a single municipality. These can range in formality and reduce the burden on a single leader to have cross-jurisdictional trust and responsibility.

### YOUR THOUGHTS HERE:

## Skill 4: Planning for Continuity

Agreements and plans create the structure for partnerships, but people carry out the vision. In traditional partnerships, a few passionate individuals drive most of the work, which can create challenges if they retire, change jobs, or become unavailable. Establishing redundancy and succession plans creates continuity by helping preserve buy-in, momentum, and institutional knowledge. Engaging a broader group strengthens continuity and resiliency, reducing the risks of stalled progress, lost trust, investments, or efforts due to turnover.

### Practice This Skill with Succession Planning

Sketch an initial continuity plan considering these best practices:

- **Create a Leadership Team:** This team owns the effort, provides regular updates to partners, and delegates responsibilities when necessary.
- **Mentor a Second-in-Command:** Leaders should actively involve this person in oversight responsibilities, helping them build relationships with key stakeholders and understanding the initiative's inner workings.
- **Maintain an Organized, Accessible Project Folder:** This folder will be where partners store key materials needed to maintain partnership operations.
- **Connect with Communities Undertaking Similar Efforts:** These relationships can offer external support to new partners and help maintain momentum if turnover occurs.

Want to take it further? [Check out WEF's work on continuity in the context of the circular water economy.](#)

### YOUR THOUGHTS HERE:

## Skill 5: Nurturing an Open and Effective Dialogue

Open communication cultivates environments where ideas can evolve into innovation and progress—especially if conflicting interests or doubts about partner motivations arise.

Effective communication is shaped by participants' emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. While improving every individual's emotional intelligence is not realistic for most partnerships, champions can focus on a key factor that fosters open dialogue: facilitation.

Effective facilitation provides the structure and resources needed for a group to make progress. One Water leaders should have strong facilitation skills and be able to identify when a group can benefit from a neutral third-party facilitator. A neutral third party can build trust in the process and allow key leaders to fully engage. An effective facilitator often has insights into multiple partners, helping to navigate both organizational and individual dynamics.

Seek facilitators who can effectively:

- **Guide:** A facilitator's role is to guide, not lead. They should remain neutral and help the group reach its own conclusions.
- **Provide Structure:** The facilitator designs the process, preparing questions and exercises that spark creativity and manage conflict productively.
- **Delegate Back to the Group:** Instead of providing answers, facilitators encourage participants to work through challenges and develop their own solutions.
- **Practice Patience:** Tough questions take time. A good facilitator allows for productive struggle, helping only when necessary by pausing, reflecting, or adjusting the approach.
- **Provide Safety in the Discussion:** Strong emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills help facilitators foster participation and a sense of ownership, uphold group agreements, and redirect unproductive discussions.
- **Adapt:** Facilitators should be flexible—adjusting plans based on participants, managing conflicts, and ensuring meetings end on a constructive note.



## Practice This Skill Through a Real-World Meeting Design Exercise

Unstructured meetings can stall collaboration while well-planned meetings drive progress and motivation. Inspired by the Results-Based Facilitation framework, this exercise will help you refine your facilitation skills and identify strong facilitators within your partnership.

**Step 1:** Choose an upcoming meeting you are responsible for leading. Intentionally prepare for the meeting by outlining the following:

- **Expected Results:** Define clear, specific, and achievable outcomes (e.g., decisions made, work completed, and shared clarity). Ensure they are realistic within the available time.
- **Participants and Roles:** Identify attendees, their decision-making authority, their interests or contributions toward the goal, and potential areas for conflict.
- **Meeting Context:** Prepare statements or pre-meeting materials to align participants on focus and boundaries so everyone can join prepared to contribute.
- **Guiding Questions:** List well-framed questions in order, noting what insights, opinions, or points of confusion to listen for.

**Step 2:** Reflect after your meeting on the following questions:

- Did you achieve the intended results?
- How well did the information you provided prepare everyone to engage?
- How well did your questions guide the group on where they needed to go?
- What did you learn about designing meeting processes that you want to carry forward?

## Skill 6: Addressing Tension and Disagreement

Cross-sector partnerships drive innovation through the diverse strengths and perspectives within the partnership. These differences can also create tension and foster disagreement, especially when amplified by crises or other external pressures.

Effective leaders address tension and disagreement proactively. When disagreements occur, negotiating a compromise may seem like the simplest solution. Over time, though, this can create perceived inequities and weaken the group. Instead, investing in consensus-building helps ensure long-term collaboration and shared success.



*Revisiting skills from Guide 1—such as understanding others' interests and building trust—can be valuable.*

### Practice This Skill with Interest-Based Problem-Solving

Interest-based problem-solving (IBPS) is a structured process used to build consensus. Navigate a recent conflict you encountered using a basic IBPS process:

- **Describe the Issue:** Clearly describe the problem and how it relates to the group's goals.
- **Gather Perspectives:** Have each partner share their views.
- **Identify Interests:** Listen for underlying hopes, needs, and concerns, then summarize and confirm your understanding with each partner.
- **Assess Data Needs:** Determine what information could clarify and align perspectives and assign someone to gather notes and report back.
- **Brainstorm Solutions:** Generate options that address as many interests as possible.
- **Evaluate Options:** Compare and discuss promising solutions.
- **Weigh Against Inaction:** Consider whether moving forward is better than doing nothing to help guide the decision.

## Cross-Sector Partnership Case Study: The Yahara WINS Approach to Phosphorous Reduction

The Yahara watershed in Wisconsin faces high phosphorus levels from agricultural runoff, urban stormwater, and wastewater discharges, threatening water quality and aquatic life. To comply with stricter state regulations from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) needed to reduce phosphorus loads.

In 2012, MMSD launched the Yahara Watershed Improvement Network (Yahara WINS) as a cost-effective alternative to expensive treatment plant upgrades and rate increases. Using watershed adaptive management, all polluters collaborated to meet water quality goals more effectively and affordably than working independently. However, this approach carried risks for both the DNR and MMSD.

Yahara WINS united cities, villages, towns, wastewater treatment plants, agricultural producers, and environmental groups in unprecedented partnership. Significant financial contributions funded a mix of rural and urban phosphorus reduction projects. Projects ranged from traditional solutions such as stormwater retention ponds, harvestable stream buffers, and strip tillage to innovative new solutions like low-disturbance manure injection and no-till farming.

Initially met with skepticism, success depended on building this partnership from the ground up. Governance design (Skill 2) eased partners' concerns; MMSD and DNR developed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) by establishing mutual interest in this adaptive management plan. The agreement also established a pilot period to assess the feasibility before both parties committed to full-scale implementation. Together, they outlined a timeline and methods to measure progress toward compliance.



Image courtesy of Yahara Wins

With the MOU in place, MMSD engaged communities in the watershed to formally establish the Watershed Improvement Network and seek dedicated funding. An independent board of directors oversaw resources while MMSD received accounting and fund management responsibilities (Skill 3).

A multi-disciplinary team led by a skilled relationship builder with deep technical knowledge drove the project forward (Skill 4). This team ensured knowledge continuity despite staff turnover, and the MOU secured long-term DNR support. Formal check-ins (Skill 6) every few years allowed partners to refine agreements and adapt to evolving needs.

Yahara WINS has made long strides in its first phase. The watershed has consistently surpassed phosphorus reduction targets at just 10 percent of the cost of traditional compliance methods. The program has driven innovation in phosphorus reduction and climate resilience, making it a national model for watershed management. This success earned Yahara WINS the 2018 US Water Prize for innovative collaboration.



## Revisit and Build Upon Skill 6 from Guide 1: Honest Evaluation and Adjustment

Regularly reassessing partnership goals and frameworks ensures effectiveness and adaptability. Leaders can refine their skills in honest evaluation and adaptation—introduced in Guide 1—by applying structured check-ins on partnership norms. This includes establishing methods for evaluating progress, managing feedback, and making necessary course corrections to strengthen collaboration and impact.

### Practice This Skill with After-Action Reviews

After-action reviews provide a structured way to assess progress, refine plans, and ensure the partnerships remain effective and relevant. These reviews should occur regularly or after key milestones to evaluate effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Conduct an after-action review by:

- **Reviewing Activities and Outcomes:** Assess what has been accomplished and whether the partnership is meeting its goals.
- **Ask Key Questions:** Questions can include what remains to be tackled together, the steps needed to create meaningful progress, and if there are additional stakeholders to involve.
- **Identify What Works:** Recognize successful strategies and determine what should continue.
- **Identify Areas of Improvement:** Discuss what could work better and what adjustments may help improve outcomes.
- **Decide the Partnership's Future:** Evaluate if the effort should continue, evolve, or be celebrated and concluded.

## Final Thoughts

Strong cross-sector partnerships have the power to drive lasting impact. This guide underscores the importance of approaching collaboration with sustained openness and intentionality.

Look beyond today and structure partnerships as capacity-building ventures. The project may run its course, but the connections you forge will position you to tackle future challenges with a stronger and more resilient network. Partnerships—and your investment in them—build capacity for your organization and can act as an extension of your team.

Finally, effective communication is the foundation of successful partnerships. Leverage this guide and the first guide in the One Water Council series as a framework to strengthen collaboration and amplify your impact.

### YOUR THOUGHTS HERE:

One Water, One Future.

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