# Four Pillars of Successful Cross-Agency Partnering for Environmental Remediation – 14349

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## ABSTRACT

Cross-agency partnering is a formalized program of communications often used in environmental remediation programs between the regulated and regulatory agencies. It helps bring together their interests, perspectives, and values constructively and efficiently to streamline and improve remediation. Often attempts to partner fall short due to a lack of understanding of what is required. To help fill gaps in understanding, this paper identifies and describes four pillars of successful cross-agency partnering that can guide those who initiate or implement partnering between the regulated and regulatory agencies. Practical and specific methods to establish each pillar are presented along with examples as to how these have been applied in environmental remediation partnering.

## INTRODUCTION

Government agencies (the regulated and regulatory agencies) along with their contractors and national laboratories employ partnering on environmental remediation programs [1, 2, and 3] for a variety of reasons, for example to:

- Streamline decision-making so that remediation may occur sooner rather than later
- Resolve conflicts or disagreements between agencies
- Address projects that have risen to the level of a formal dispute
- Improve communications and coordination among agencies and their support organizations
- Optimize remediation strategies
- Develop solutions that represent a real breakthrough.

Not all partnering efforts, however, are successful. While the U.S. Government provides cross-agency partnering guidance [4, 5], the more practical, detailed guidance along with actual case studies are not readily available. This paper helps fill that gap.

The four basic elements or "pillars" of cross agency partnering (Figure 1) are: cross-agency teams, an invented future, protocols and agreements, and relationships of integrity.

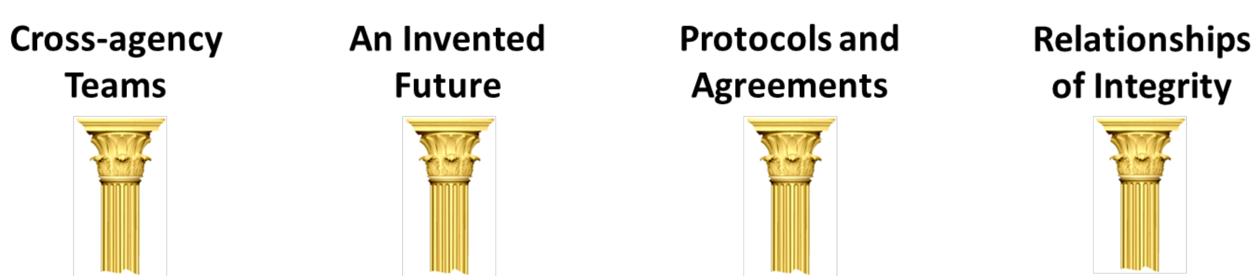


Figure 1 – The Four Pillars of Cross-Agency Partnering

## PILLAR 1 - CROSS-AGENCY TEAMS

Once agencies agree to partnering, they work together to assemble cross-agency teams comprised of designated representatives of the regulated agency, the regulatory agency, support contractors and/or national laboratories. It is important to:

- Assemble teams according to functional level
- Distinguish between different types of membership
- Designate a "link"
- Limit team size.

**Assemble teams according to functional level.** Each partnering team is best organized to fulfill a particular purpose or function. For example, an executive team is assembled to organize, direct, and monitor overall partnering efforts and to make the "big" decisions. A project-level team is assembled to develop technical or programmatic recommendations.

Two benefits of assembling teams according to functional level are:

- Members share similar levels of decision-making authority making it possible for the team to make decisions "real time."
- Discussions can focus on more specific (rather than general) areas of mutual interest.

**Distinguish between different types of membership.** Typically not all members participate in decision-making, so it is appropriate to distinguish between levels of membership. Three suggested levels are: core, adjunct, and guest.

Core members are typically the key representative(s) of each agency. They are the "essential participants" in team meetings/teleconferences, and they have a "vote" on key team decisions.

Adjunct members are agency support members, contractors or representatives from national laboratories. The, too, may be essential participants in team meetings/teleconferences, but they do not have a "vote" on key team decisions.

Some teams include contractors/national laboratory personnel as core members, some as adjunct members.

Guests engage with the team at certain points, for example to present technical data or to participate in certain discussions. The do not have a "vote" in team decisions.

**Designate a "link."** A link is a member of a cross-agency team that serves as "information conduit" between teams. A link from the executive team typically attends a portion of a project-level team meeting as a guest, presents information on behalf of the executive team, and serves as a conduit from the project-level team to the executive team. This streamlines communication process and helps build integrity into the team system.

**Limit team size.** The ideal number of participants in a cross-agency partnering team is from six to ten. Less than six does not offer a sufficient variety of opinions and perspectives. Larger than ten makes it impractical for each person to express their thoughts and opinions and makes it cumbersome to develop consensus.

Following are two examples of cross-agency teams organized according to functional level.

**Example 1 -** In 1997, the Albuquerque Operations Office, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) organization responsible for oversight of the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) and the Sandia National Laboratory (Sandia), identified the need for improved communications between DOE and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) for the LANL and Sandia environmental restoration programs. With the assistance of a professional skilled in designing cross-agency partnering programs, these agencies and national laboratories designed a tiered approach according to functional level (Figure 2).

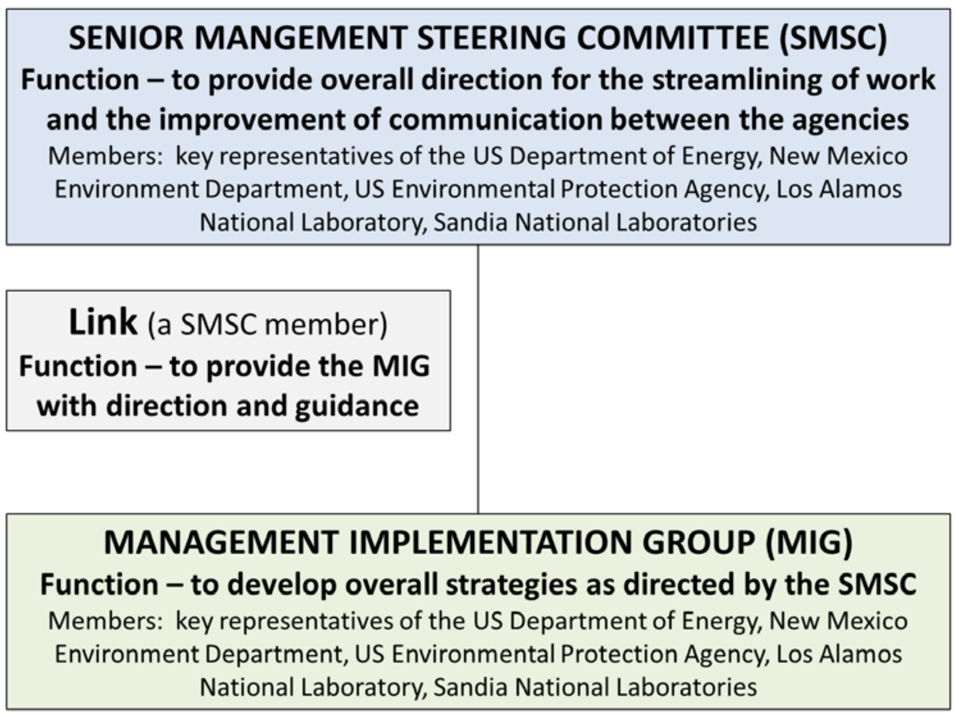


Figure 2 - LANL and Sandia Developed a Tiered Cross-Agency Partnering Structure

The executive team (SMSC) contained nine members, all of whom were “core” (voting) members. The project-level team (MIG) contained seven members, all of whom were “core” (voting) members. While the SMSC provided overall direction, the MIG conducted much of the technical analysis that formed the basis for the SMSC decisions.

**Example 2 -** In 1998, the U.S. Army, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Illinois EPA signed an Interim Record of Decision for remediating the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant. The land was to be transferred from the U.S. Army to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for the development of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. These agencies could not agree of ecological risk protection levels. The debate escalated to their respective agency headquarters levels which in turn mandated partnering. A professional experienced in designing cross-agency partnering was brought in to mediate and to help these agencies develop a partnering program. Senior-level managers from the agencies agreed on a cross-agency team approach structured according to functional levels (Figure 3). The Management Team contained seven members, one from each participating agency. Each member was a core (voting) member. Each Work Group contained nine members, one from each agency and two individuals from the general public.

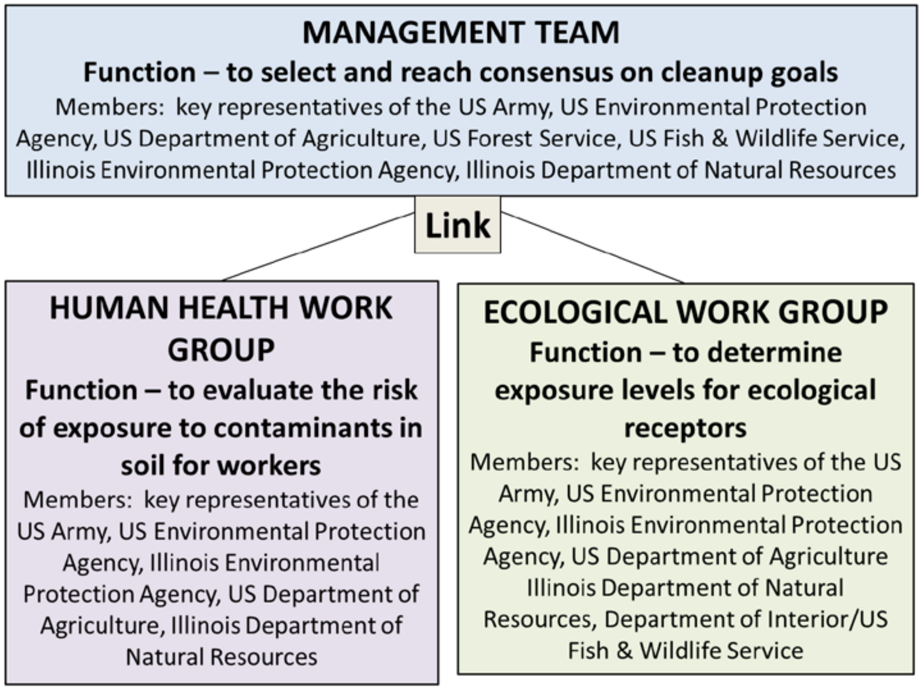


Figure 3 – Joliet Adopted a Tiered Cross-Agency Partnering Structure

## PILLAR 2 – AN INVENTED FUTURE

A team's most empowering act is that of inventing a new future and setting a new course. The distinction of "inventing a future" is identified by Zaffron and Logan [6]. This exercise helps a team visualize and articulate a future based not on what's happened in the past or what's now occurring but rather what is entirely new.

This is generated using future-based language in the form of a declaration. An example is provided (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Example of an Invented Future

| Issue/Concern Being Addressed | Future of Cross-Agency Team XYZ One Year from Now |
|---|---|
| **Dispute between a regulated and a regulatory agency regarding an environmental remediation** | 1. We are unified in our approach to implement a plan for the remediation of all operable units.<br>2. This plan has both a solid technical and regulatory basis.<br>3. We are being leaders of change for the better (e.g., streamlining the schedule, reducing costs, applying innovative technologies and solutions).<br><br>We fulfill this future because we recognize its importance, especially to the local community and citizens of this state. |

## PILLAR 3 – PROTOCOLS AND AGREEMENTS

*"Good fences make good neighbors."* --- Robert Frost

Protocols and agreements define how a partnering team operates and what types of behaviors are acceptable. These, more than any other factor, the development and adherence to protocols and agreements determine whether or not a partnering team will be successful [7]. While most people will not intentionally harm a team's success, the absence of team protocols and agreements creates the potential for misunderstanding and conflict [8]. Therefore, it is best not to leave the development of protocols and agreements to chance.

Figure 5 provides examples of protocols and agreements cross-agency teams have used on environmental remediation programs.

Figure 5 - Example Protocols and Agreements

| Subject | Protocols and Agreements |
|---|---|
| **Meeting management** | • Teams meet in person at a minimum every two months.<br>• A designated scribe records and distributes highlights of team meetings and conference calls.<br>• Side conversations, cell phone calls, and texting are taken outside of the meeting room. |
| **Communication** | • Team members agree to monitor their "contribution rate," i.e. extroverts step back a bit and introverts step forward. |
| **Confidentiality** | • What is said in private meeting discussions stays within the confidence of the partnering group. |
| **Decision-making** | • The team makes key decisions by consensus.*[1] Consensus implies agreement by all voting members and is demonstrated by a physical sign (e.g., thumbs up, sideways, down).<br>• Reopening a consensus decision (for example due to new information) requires agreement by all consensus members.<br>• Consensus decisions are documented in meeting notes. |
| **Team behaviors** | • Team members accept accountability by giving each other permission to point out when they violate the protocols and agreements.<br>• Team members agree to cultivate both "task-oriented" and "social-oriented" behaviors and to minimize "self-oriented" behaviors [9] as modified by the author:<br>o Task-oriented behaviors focus on what a team needs to do to get the job done and include: initiating, giving information or opinions, clarifying and elaborating, summarizing, consensus testing, and coordinating.<br>o Social-oriented behaviors focus on the personal and/or social needs of the team and include: encouraging, harmonizing, expressing team feelings, compromising, facilitating communications, initiating protocols and agreements, pointing out violations to protocols and agreements, and apologizing.<br>o Self-oriented behaviors neither advance the goal nor support the team and include: blocking, digressing, recognition-seeking, withdrawing, and sniping. |

*[1] In cross-agency partnering, it is important to take into account the various legal and contractual relationships of parties and to not use consensus decision-making to in any way impact existing legal and contractual agreements.

The entire team participates in identifying protocols and agreements so that each member has ownership. Protocols and agreements are put in writing and agreed to by consensus. These are posted (on the wall, handout, on meeting agendas) so that team members are reminded of their agreements.

Team members *will* violate the protocols and agreements at one time or another. If the team does not deal with violations, this creates an unwritten rule that protocols and agreements are unimportant [10].

It is important, therefore, to include a protocols and agreement that addresses this. For example, the team may agree that “Team members accept accountability by giving each other permission to point out when they violate protocols and agreements” and include this in its protocols and agreements. Figure 6 offers some methods team members have used to point when its protocols and agreements have been violated.

Figure 6 - Methods to Notify Team Members When They Have Violated a Protocol or Agreement

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- A team member or facilitator discusses the violation with the team member(s) privately.
- Team members use props (colored cards, hankies, foam balls, "shaking eggs,") to call attention to the fact that protocols (for example, no side conversations) are being violated.
- The partnering team evaluates and revises its protocols and agreements periodically and inquires, "How are we doing in observing these or this protocol?"

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**PILLAR 4 – RELATIONSHIPS OF INTEGRITY**

Successful partnering requires team members cultivate relationships of integrity --- relationships that are sound, unimpaired, respectful and trusting. In the absence of such relationships, team members are at best only partially effective working together.

While no magic formula exists, certain practices improve the likelihood. The following ten practices help team members cultivate these relationships.

**Three Essential Practices**

**1 - Team members honor their word.** A fully functioning partnering team requires team members at some point commit to decisions, plans, and actions. Similar to a team’s protocols and agreements, if team members don’t honor their word, a team’s decisions, plans, and actions have little or no value.

Most team members at some point will not follow through on a decision, plan or action. Rather than being an issue of morality or honesty, the failure to follow through may be due to forgetfulness, misunderstanding, or a choice to focus on other priorities. A practice that helps a partnering team cultivate a relationship of integrity is that of “honoring one’s word.” This is a practice in which a team member who has not followed through acknowledges this and “restores” their word by recommitting.

**2 - Team members cultivate task- and social-oriented behaviors.** Team members need to pull together and behave in ways that help the team accomplish its task. Two categories of behaviors necessary for proper group functioning identified by Kroeger [9] and modified by the author are:

- Task-oriented behaviors focus on what a team needs to do to get the job done. These include: initiating, giving information or opinions, clarifying and elaborating, summarizing, consensus-testing, coordinating, and preparing.

- Social-oriented behaviors focus on the personal and/or social needs of the team. These include: encouraging, harmonizing, expressing team feelings, compromising, facilitating communications, initiating protocols and agreements, calling out violations to protocols and agreements, and apologizing when necessary.

An additional category identified by Kroeger [8] and modified by the author is that of self-oriented behaviors that neither advance nor support the team in meeting its goals. These include: blocking, digressing, recognition-seeking, withdrawing, and sniping.

These three categories of behaviors are introduced during the development of a team's partnering protocols and agreements (see Figure 5 under the heading "Team behaviors").

**3 - The team regularly meets face-to-face.** For team members to have sound and unimpaired relationships, they need to get to know and work with each other. People need to meet face-to-face, especially early in the team's development. Teleconferences and emails are inadequate substitutes for direct interaction.

**Four Important Practices**

**1 - Team members explore what they have in common.** Team members build rapport through learning what they have in common. Lencioni [11] suggests a "Personal Histories Exercise." In this exercise, team members are encouraged to share personal information with each other, for example: hometown, number of siblings, unique challenges they experienced in childhood, favorite movie, first job, worst job. This exercise is a good "ice breaker" to use during a team meeting.

**2 – The team employs a joint problem-solving method.** Many partnering teams, at least initially, ineffectively solve problems as a group.

- People go off topic.
- People have different problem-solving approaches. Some go right to a solution while others stay in the brainstorming process. Some people search for practical solutions while others explore theoretical approaches.
- Some people do most of the talking while others do most of the listening.
- Problem-solving is too general ("We have a communication problem") and not specific enough to be useful.

Relationships are impaired when the team is ineffective at solving problems. Employing a joint problem-solving method helps a team avoid this problem.

**3 - Team members learn partnering skills and are open to being coached.** Most team members need to develop skills to help them cultivate relationships that are sound and unimpaired. Skills can be learned through a combination of training and coaching. Areas of interest training and coaching might include:

- The stages of team development
- The difference between a team and a work group
- Consensus decision-making
- Personality profiling
- Conflict management styles
- The Johari Window
- Active Listening
- Question Thinking
- The use of "I" messages
- Emotional IQ
- Conflict management strategies
- Self-empowerment strategies.

**4 - The team employs a competent facilitator experienced in team development.** Most cross-agency teams --- to be high performing --- require the services of a competent facilitator for at least some period of time. The primary purpose of these professionals is to help the team successfully navigate through its developmental stages. And from a practical perspective, a competent facilitator can:

- Help agencies assemble cross-agency teams
- Guide a team to articulate an invented future
- Help a team develop its partnering protocols and agreements
- Call attention to violations
- Articulate a team's consensus decisions
- Guide a team through the stages of team development
- Assist a team or a subset to "clear the air"
- Introduce a group problem-solving method and guide a team in using it routinely
- Design and facilitate meetings such that everyone is engaged
- Coach individuals in maximizing task- and self-oriented behaviors and minimizing self-oriented behaviors
- Provide on-going partnering training and coaching.

Facilitation may be ongoing and last several years or be used for a limited period of time.

**Three Useful Practices**

**1 - Meeting locations are rotated among the cities where the offices of each agency are located.** This creates a sense of fairness as it requires each individual on the team to share equally in the amount of travel required to meet. It also creates the opportunity to interact socially outside of meetings for those away from home.

**2 - The team creates opportunities to socialize.** Socializing outside of regular work activities allows team members to get to know one another more wholly and fully. Examples of social activities include: a team meal at a restaurant or team member home, a golfing outing, a sporting event, a visit to a museum or other cultural event, group paintball, or a group barbeque.

**3 – The team uses information seating arrangements.** When one agency sits on one side of the table and the other agency sits on the other side of the table, this (visually) establishes as "us/them" situation. The ideal seating arrangement is circular, with individuals from different agencies sitting next to each other. This arrangement creates a sense of equality, allows individuals to more easily see/engage each another, and encourages informality and small talk during breaks.

**Example (**Joliet Army Ammunitions Plant mentioned previously) - Initially, a great deal of tension and adversity existed among many Management Team members. Two individuals in particular, representatives of the agencies that arguably had the most at stake, had a relationship with each other characterized by impatience, stubbornness, and disregard. Months and months later, when the Management Team completed its work and met for a close-out session, one of the two openly praised the other as "one of the very finest professionals with whom I've had the pleasure of working." A variety of practices helped this turn-around occur which transformed their relationship into a positive lifelong bond.

- The team was facilitated by a professional facilitator with experience both in team development and cross-agency partnering on environmental remediation projects.
- The three groups employed a successful group discussion process.
- Each of the three groups met in face-to-face meetings every six to twelve weeks.
- Although the distinction between task-, social-, and self-oriented behaviors was not discussed, the team did incorporate these behaviors through coaching by the facilitator.
- The facilitator participated in partnering training early on and as needed. Individual members were coached by the facilitator.
- The team rotated the cities in which it met.
- The entire team typically met for a social even, typically dinner, each time it met.

## CONCLUSION

Successful implementation of cross-agency partnering, in addition to a broader understanding, requires an understanding as to how to go about it using practical, proven methods. Such methods have been introduced under the heading of the four pillars of successful cross-agency partnering:

1. Cross-agency teams
2. An invented future
3. Protocols and agreements
4. Relationships of integrity

The practical and specific methods presented, when applied, improve the chance for a partnering effort to be successful.

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