



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A COORDINATOR?

Briefings, reminders, perspectives

VERSION 1 2014

The guidance offered is not based on theoretical knowledge, but on 15 years of practice in European projects.

The guidance consists in short statements linked to a certain coordinator challenge; however, each of the statements can be used as a **platform for longer and more in-depths discussions**, especially at moments of coordinator self-evaluation.

Project management “manuals” are neither possible, nor valuable. Instead the small statements in this guide should be discussed and reflected on over and over again, and linked closely to practical experience.

BRIEFINGS on ways to work with partners and to exploit the project



THE IMPLEMENTATION CHOCK

Many coordinators are somewhat “choked” when turning from application to implementation. Sometimes they find out that the coordinator itself does not fully understand the project and need to work with this early in the project. Then also they find out that most partners do not fully understand the project - signing up as a partner does not guarantee anything.

This is the main focus of the kick-off phase for any coordinator.



GETTING IN FLOW

Partners might not be in flow with the project and its missions. They need time and guidance to get deeply into the project. The kick-off phase is crucial as to ensure the full understanding of the project among all partners, also if the project needs to spend more time on this than expected...



CAPACITY BUILDING

One of the most important roles of the coordinator in most projects is to help build capacity among partners. Partners need to build capacity to carry out the project, to work with the community and to learn how to practice new ideas and mentalities. This means that all project activities - from partner meetings to online dialogues - should have a capacity building dimension: constantly working to enhance the partner competences and motivation to implement the project.



MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Partners come from very different cultures and traditions and are used to think and act in different ways. The kick-off phase should be used to establish a platform of mutual understanding of the project; but partners will be strongly influenced by their background all along the project, and the coordinator should pay attention to this.



THE COMMUNITY CHALLENGE

Not all partners are used to work out of their own institution and address the community and other institutions. They might need considerable support and guidance on how to approach and work with the community - even in projects in which the very mission is working with the community.



INSTRUCTION, INDEPENDENCE

Partners come from different cultures with very different authority cultures. Some partners might be depending on clear instructions from the coordinator, while other partners will act on their own. The coordinator should try to mediate those extremes along the project, at the same time encourage partners' initiative-taking, even if it goes somewhat beyond the direction project objectives.



BALANCING

It is extremely important for the coordinator to balance between instructions to partners and allowing partners to find their own ways. Establishing such balances along the project is one of the most important coordinator tasks. On one hand, it

is positive that some partners act on their own; on the other hand they must follow the general direction of the project. On one hand, it is necessary to give partners some instructions; on the other hand they should “learn” to take initiatives in the project, and especially in their local community.



PATIENCE

Even if a mutual understanding of the project has been established, this is still “theory”. Implementing a project in practice is another matter, and partners need time and space to find out how to do that. The coordinator should not worry too much if the project and the partners seem to move too slowly in the first for example 6 months of the project. Normally the project and the partners will catch up, so to speak, and create what is needed later on in the process.



DIFFERENT RHYTHMS

The coordinator should not worry about if the work plan is not followed strictly in the first phases of the project. The coordinator just needs to feel that it is possible for the project to work towards its goals along the entire duration of the project. Projects have very different “pulses”, “rhythms” and “dynamics”: some work steadily towards its goals; others intensify the progression towards the goals at the end of the project.



LOCAL EXPLOITATION

Few partners are able to spot even evident opportunities to use the project in all sorts of local, national or even European contexts. Partners need constantly guidance to link the project, its mission and achievements to other activities to create synergy or wider benefits.



CHANGED MIND-SETS

Most partners come from the public administration, educational or social sectors and it should be expected that they will need to struggle a lot to develop more open and innovative mind-sets along the project.

Even if they agreed to be a partner in an innovative project that does not mean that they are able to act in innovative ways - one thing is theory and application, another is the real world and how one is used to see and do things.

The coordinator needs patience, but also the will to constantly encourage partners to act according to the values and principles in the project.



THE LANGUAGE CHALLENGE

Language is a much underestimated problem in many projects. Even though partners claim to be able to work in English at a certain level, this is not always the case, and it can cause considerable problems in the project if several partners are “excluded” for language reasons.

It’s not that partners are “lying”; it’s just that communication in English is not that easy... Dealing with language is very important all along the project, also if solutions might seem time-consuming.

And even if one or two professionals from a partner are able to work in English, what about the partner community?



WE ARE PART OF THE CHANGE, NOT OBSERVERS

Even if partners are participating in innovative and entrepreneurial projects, they do not always see themselves as part of such mind-sets. This means that a

lot of work is needed, if the project needs to mobilize additional resources from the community and in creative ways...



WE BEHAVE DIFFERENTLY

Partners come from different cultures; some from the north, some from the east and some from countries in which religion plays important roles. Partners' social behaviour can be extremely different - as to politeness, food, how to treat women and many other things - and it is the burden of the coordinator to make sure that the partnership develops a community of mutual respect and paying attention to other peoples values and principles.

Basically, no partner has the right to force its own value systems upon other partners.



CONFLICTS

Sometimes conflicts occur, like in life. The coordinator should address such possible conflicts in open, calm and clever ways, not taking dramatic action or deepening the conflict. Usually such conflicts are resolved in calm and informal ways. In the case of more heavy conflicts, not occurring very often I European projects, experienced project managers or the National Agency should be consulted.



SELF-REFLECTION

Being a coordinator is not an easy job, as it includes many different tasks and things to attend to - professional, social, and cultural.

The coordinator therefore needs to insert time-outs along the project in which the coordinator, preferable in collaboration with experienced project managers, review and evaluate the different roles of the coordinator and the outcomes of the coordinator practices.



ALWAYS TEAMING

Sometimes a coordinator gives the coordination to one single person in the organisation. This is not a good idea. It can lead to isolation and even to burn-out in some cases...

It is strongly recommended to involve one or two more people from the organisation to share the responsibilities and to build more broad capacity in the organisation. A project coordination is not simply a practical task to overcome but an opportunity to build capacity in the organisation.



AVOID THE QUICKSAND EFFECT

It happens that a coordinator is so concerned with reaching the project goals that it starts to act in a very nervous and pushing way towards partners.

This way does not work well. Soon the coordinator will be struggling in quicksand, building up resistance among partners.

No matter the urgency of such matters, the coordinator must always work closely with the partners and accept that collaboration is more complicated than instruction.



DOCUMENTING, TELLING

One of the most important challenges for the coordinator is to make partners document their activities and tell about them, sharing them. We all know this, and we talk a lot about it, but few partners are doing it!

Therefore the coordinator should constantly encourage and invite partners to document what they are doing and share this with the project. At the same time the encouragements should include documenting in creative ways, not simple writing a document. Most partners need inspiration and guidance to start doing that...



THE PROJECT AS INCUBATOR

Implementing European projects also means generating new initiatives! Often the coordinator is the driving force in identifying challenges along the project implementation and suitable for further local or European initiatives. Sometimes such new initiatives can be developed in collaboration with a group of partners in the project or from their communities, offering such initiatives a solid start-up base.



A COMMISSION BLUEPRINT

Coordinating a European project, regardless of the volume of the project, is a blueprint from the European Commission that can be exploited locally in very many ways. In fact the coordinator is on a mission from the European Commission and this fact can open doors to different forms of local initiative-taking that might have been difficult prior to the project.

In short, this means that a European project, funded by the Commission, is a platform to promote various ideas and collaboration in the community.

Unfortunately, few coordinators are aware of these almost unlimited opportunities and how they can generate further activities and even economies, and are too focused on the project itself.



STRATEGIC LEVELS

Any European project should be taken to a strategic level in the coordinating institution: establishing dialogues with the managers or managing board on how to exploit the project situation, how to take new initiatives and how to promote the organisation as a strong European player, locally and regionally. Thus European projects should be used to reinforce and to innovate the organization's growth strategies and action radius.

Many managers regard a European project as an isolated and stand-alone activity, and need help to see the further perspectives of such European engagement.



NETWORKING

One of the criteria of quality applications and projects is a strong and relevant partnership. All organisations interested in widening their European involvement need to constantly build up new networks of partners.

Of special interest are the partner communities. Along the project, and especially in connection with workshops with the community, the coordinator will be introduced to and collaborate with a number of institutions in the partner community. It is very useful to the coordinator to establish an ongoing contact to such institutions, as they might be of great importance to future initiatives - and as good networking might offer the coordinator interesting invitations to join new initiatives driven by partner communities.



REACH FOR HIGHER LEVELS

In some cases, a European project is very important to the European strategies and might even be regarded a pioneer initiative, and in such cases the coordinator should exploit this, even sometimes by blowing up the importance of

the project to some extent, and if possible start communicating directly with higher levels in the Commission and in regional and national governments. If the project is really addressing key challenges it can present itself as a role-model and pioneer that should attract special attention at policy-maker levels. If well-designed, such policy initiatives might produce remarkable results.

REMINDERS on practical, collaborative and organisation things



OPERATIONAL WORK PLANS

The coordinator should be able to present an operational work plan for the first partner meeting. Operational means detailed as to the level of concrete actions for the coordinator and the partners.

This operational work plan must be explained carefully to the partners.



OPERATIONAL PHASE PLANS

The coordinator and the partners cannot act on the basis of long-term plans, and therefore the coordinator should, at every partner meeting, offer a detailed phase plan for the next phase and explain, how this phase plan fits into the total work plan of the project.



INFORMAL COMMUNICATION

Monitoring the project progression means establishing a friendly and informal online dialogue with the partners, as well as with other key resources like media people, experts and financial administrators.

It is very important that the coordinator is able to establish small everyday dialogues with the partners, asking questions, showing interest, offering support.

It is not enough to discuss with the partners at partner meetings.



SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

The coordinator must assume a very systematic approach to monitoring and progression assurance. In the coordinating team as well as in connection with partner meetings and similar events, the coordinator must systematically describe the present project situation and relate it to previous and future activities, pointing to specific actions to be taken and allocating these tasks to specific project resources.

All this to allow partners and collaborators to understand the meaning of actions linked to a specific phase in the project: where are we now and where are we going from here?



ADVANCED STATE OF THE ART REFLECTION

This crucial task is very demanding, as it requires strong strategic competences.

The advanced state of the art and progression reflection is the permanent linking together the different project activities to the strategic aims of the project, and finding *new ways* of developing the project activities into activities that would increase their contribution to those strategic aims.



EXPLOITING THE PROJECT MILESTONES

The direct meeting of people is still the most important activity in the project.

Also from a professional point of view, partner meetings and similar events should be exploited to the maximum. The coordinator must reflect on the potentials and exploitation of every single collective event in the project, as it represents great and unique dialogue potentials, formal as well as informal.



VISIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

The coordinator must be visible to the partners and also to the coordinating team. He/she must take the scene, intervene and support.

The coordinator should also be visible in the local partner environments.

Furthermore the coordinator must be visible in the project communication from day one till the termination of the project.

Moreover the coordinator should make sure that all project processes, including the financial processes, are fully transparent. He must make sure, that decisions and actions from the coordinator are fully understood and accepted by the partners and that the partners can identify with the decisions and actions because they have been involved in the process.



ENCOURAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

One of the most challenging arts in project managements is to encourage partners to take responsibility, to trust in the partners' skills, to involve them as partners and not "assistants" or second class participants or students. This requires the ability and the patience to empower partners during the project. Some partners might not be able to fulfill their obligations in the beginning of the project, but the skilled coordinator will regard the project as a learning process at many levels, and will support the learning of the partners along the project.



THE PARTNER MEETINGS

No matter how much on line communication the project practices, it will never replace the partner meetings and the live dialogue.

Thus partner meetings should have very high quality, and the coordinator should put a lot of effort in the design of the meetings.

The first partner meeting might for instance primarily aim to create a strong mutual understanding of the project among the partners.

Still, the primary role of a partner meeting is to take the project from one phase to the next.

To ensure productive partner meetings and events, the coordinator should:

- › Manage time pressure in a constructive way
- › Balance the coordinator needs caused by the coordinator responsibilities against the partner needs
- › Establish a stronger team work in the different meeting activities
- › Choose simple tools and methods at the meetings allowing the inclusion and participation of all partners
- › Change the agenda to meet unforeseen project and partner needs
- › Foster a relaxing, clear and intelligent communication at the meeting
- › Openly explain and admit mistakes made by the coordinator and ask partners to help solve problems
- › Establish a strong link between the work tasks, allowing partners to build a holistic view of the project and the individual activities
- › Ensure that all partners involved in the different phases and tasks have a clear understanding of the common aims and specific roles and tasks
- › At the end of the meeting the coordinator should draw a clear picture of the relation between the present project tasks and overall project aims and outcomes



PARTNER MEETINGS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Partner meetings can have a strong impact on the hosting project partner's community relations.

Key resources from community might be invited to participate in the meeting or in a concrete session, or a number of partners could establish a dialogue with key community players during the meetings days. Often the coordinator decides to arrive before other partners or to stay one more day after the meeting to dialogue with the community players...



SMALL BUT IMPORTANT THINGS...

- > A quality preparation of a partner meeting is crucial. The partner should attend the meeting with a clear understanding.
- > A clear and simple and flexible agenda with clear partner tasks. The material should be distributed at least 2 or 3 weeks before.
- > The English language must be loud and clear. The strong English speakers should not dominate the meeting.
- > Make sure to have many breaks and time-outs: this will encourage reflections and informal dialogues...
- > Try to avoid power-pointing, long speeches and microphones...
- > The coordinator and perhaps a key partner should establish community activities in connection with the partner meeting.
- > The coordinator should be highly focused on following up on initiatives and decisions at the partner meetings. Partners need guidance to implement the plans made at the meeting.

