Episode 4: Power Pretzel

[Intro Music]

[Intro]

Julie:

Hello. This is Stop, Collaborate and Listen! We are Julie

Eve:

and Eve.

Julie:

This is a podcast all about relationships, but not in the way that you might think. We're talking about partnerships for those of us who are connecting public audiences with science and science with public audiences. Today we're talking about power dynamics between larger institutions and smaller organizations. The big guy and the little guy.

Eve:

All right. And here's a letter from one of our listeners.

Dear Stop, Collaborate and Listen,

We're a small science center, only 12 full-time staff. But despite our small size, we're really proud of the outsized role we play in our community. We've been open for almost 30 years, and we're beloved by our members and other guests. Over the years, we've had a handful of collaborations with faculty at the major university in our town, and we're just now starting to think about how to formalize the process around these collaborations, hopefully to make it easier to work together in the future.

The challenge is that the university is so big and has so many established processes and regulations that we're just sort of at their mercy and some of our own organizational culture and priorities is at risk of being brushed aside. What can we do to hold our own in this partnership?

Sincerely,

The little guy

Julie:

Wow Eve, this is something we heard so much from all of the BID partnerships where there was a power dynamic in terms of the size of the organization and the power that the organization wields with its

bureaucracies and complexities of kind of finding the right person to talk to and understanding the best ways to connect in. So I'm really excited to get into the conversation a little bit more.

[Discussion with Guest]

Eve:

Yeah, I am too. And today we're really fortunate to be joined by Marsha Semmel, principal at Marsha Semmel Consulting. And Marsha, for decades has been a leader in the museum world and has been a part of a number of really significant partnerships with all kinds of power dynamics. She's also the author of Partnership Power Essential Museum Strategies for Today's Networked World and an editor for the forthcoming Changes Required: Preparing for the Post-Pandemic Museum. So clearly, Marsha, you are exactly the right one to help us make sense of all of this. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Marsha:

Oh, you're very welcome Eve, it's a pleasure to be here. I've had a lot of experience with partnerships. You're right.

Eve:

Can you tell us a little bit more about some of your work in this area, some of the partnerships you've been involved with over the years?

Marsha:

As the first CEO of a brand new museum, the Women of the West Museum, we were the little guy and we had to knock on a bunch of doors to prove our value in creating partnerships in a context where people were very suspect of us. So I've been in that position. I've also been the Head of Strategic Partnerships for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which is one of the biggest federal cultural agencies.

Where I was the lead for big national partnerships like IMLS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a partnership we did on museums, libraries and 21st-century skills with a group of people in formal education and other educational organizations. So I can tell you, I think I've been on different sides of this whole power dynamic.

Eve:

So, Marsha, what are some of the challenges that you've seen arise when you are thinking about partners who are different sizes or who have different degrees and types of power when they're trying to partner?

Marsha:

Yeah, well, I think the most important thing is to build an awareness of what the resources and assets are that you provide, and especially when you think about a big university and a small science center, there might not be very many people in that university infrastructure and bureaucracy who have a clue what you do in your community, who your audiences are, what kinds of programs you have.

And furthermore, they might not have so much respect for the work that you're doing in the community, depending on the set of values and even the award system and performance evaluation system that faculty or other administrators in the university are contending with. So I think that one of the most important things is laying the foundation for a successful partnership, and that doesn't start with just knocking on the door saying, we're here to partner with you.

Julie:

Marcia, you said something that piqued my interest. You said understanding the assets that you have to bring to bear on the partnership. And we've talked about this in other episodes, too, that sometimes people coming from the university, a nearby university, might think they know all that you do because they've visited the facility once without realizing all the programming that may be happening in the background that isn't part of the visitor experience necessarily. Can you talk a little bit about the hidden assets that science centers often have?

Marsha:

Most science centers, especially, I would say some of the smaller ones, they have relationships throughout the community. They have - they might have teaching artists. They may have guest scientists. They may know people, and they usually do in the public school system. And increasingly, as you know, the university is understanding or many universities are understanding that their student pipeline doesn't start with seniors in high school, but it's going to start perhaps even at the K-8 or K-6, certainly the K-12 level.

So those science centers have those programs, they have those relationships. They have people on their boards who represent important people in the community. They often have more diverse board members and increasingly more diverse staff members who play an important role. And hopefully, I think they will also understand that they're part of the community. They've listened to the community. They have a sense of the community needs and aspirations.

Julie:

That really tracks some of the things we've heard about being kind of a key player in the community and local, when you're at a science center. And then the professional trajectories of faculty, it almost requires that you move every few years until you finally settle somewhere. And that's a really important point, I

think sometimes for science centers still know about faculty, as they often are trying to learn, but don't necessarily have the historical context of the place in order to do that.

Eve:

It's also, you know, if we think about power differentials, you know, there may be a significant power differential between a university and a science center, but there's also a massive power differential often between community members, community groups, and the university. And so even if there are individuals on the university campus working hard and in many cases doing great work to build strong relationships within community, there's still going to be an inherent challenge because the sort of the heft, the power of a university can really get in the way.

Marsha:

The churn that's taking place in so many centers of higher education means that you know, there is a lot of turf fighting. There's budget issues. The deans are changing, you know, really rotating very quickly, you know. So you have even the president of the university may not be the same. So there are all of these power dynamics within the university that you also have to take account of.

And that's why when I would do my partners, I would spend a whole lot of time thinking about who are the individuals that I might know in a bigger organization with whom I might have gone to some conferences with or seen at a breakout table at another meeting who I might not know well, but who I could see a partnership for this person representing his organization having some payoff.

So, you know, I talk a lot about reciprocity. Reciprocity is based on the notion that you're going to get something in exchange for what you give. And I'm not talking about purely money exchanges, but to understand what someone might gain from that exchange. You know, and I know that's hard, but, you know, the people who are populating these organizations in these departments, they are people, they are people.

So, you know, how do you just have a conversation, introduce yourself, invite somebody over, understand the burden on their time, make your appointment worth their while, and vice versa.

Eve:

Yeah. And what you're saying so nicely aligns with really what we saw in this project. We started off with this notion that we could institutionalize things, and we envisioned that as being a set of clear, maybe even linear systems, infrastructure processes that we could put in place. And what we quickly realized is it's people. It comes - all these partnerships always do come back to the people. And we sort of we had that notionally in mind as we began, but we just saw it confirmed and reconfirmed over and over again as we worked through the project.

Julie:

It's almost like we tried to operationalize ourselves past the people to the harder, what seemed like the harder part, which is institutionalization. But as we reflected, we realized, oh, we constantly needed to come back and attend to the people, the administrative buy-in and both types of organizations, the relationship and the health of that relationship between two individuals.

The turnover that happens at these organizations that really takes away all that investment in relationships and kind of how you kind of continually are looking to start over and shift your attention between these different, different parts of these partnerships. And that that idea of institutionalization was like this gold standard that we hear about a lot in this.

But, you know, ultimately we had to kind of attend to all of these nuanced things that were constantly happening.

Marsha:

Absolutely. And, you know, to your point, part of what you have to attend to is the turnover that's going to happen almost invariably. And what that says to me is that if your organization is serious about the partnerships and the collaborations, you might need more than one person who's clued into what's going on. That's hard if you only have 12 people.

But, you know, I believe so deeply that somebody in the institution has to understand that the collaboration is more than an add-on after you do your regular job. It just simply has to be. And what that means is that for the people within the organization and frankly, I learned this a little bit the hard way, they have to understand the value in the partnership.

So I had to spend some time doing a kind of sales pitch to my colleagues and kind of cherry pick the ones I knew on the inside who really cared about this and then make sure that they got credit for what they were doing. You know, another really important piece of this that goes with the power dynamics and there's a lot more attention to this these days.

There's a very important article that was just published called Centering Equity in Collective Impact. And that piece revisits the whole Collective Impact Project that was started with, you know, it didn't really start, but it was sort of codified ten years ago in the Stanford Social Innovation Review and the point that they're making is that there are all these unspoken, hidden but felt aspects of power dynamics that you really have to consider.

And that has to do with who sits where at the table, who gets to lead a meeting, how and what kind of data are created that will really help shed light on whatever the project is. So that's a little different from what we're talking about. But I think increasingly though, that understanding of the nuance of how people see themselves and how they see the other and their openness to understanding the other's perspective is critical.

Eve:

I think that's such an important point. There are these subtle and often unseen and unacknowledged dimensions of power. How does it play out if we don't attend to those, if we don't acknowledge or recognize those dimensions? What have you seen happen?

Marsha:

Well, I think the requisite trust never really develops. I think there's always a sense of tentativeness. The most important thing, I think, at the beginning is to establish an understanding of what your mission, your respective missions are, what do you stand for? And then work together to define a kind of larger ecosystem for the project. So in other words, what is possible if we really work together and if everybody shares a vision for that, I think that can help people understand what each part of this partnership or collaboration has to offer, and that the vision can never be achieved without a kind of partnership that's at a more equal level, where there is that mutual respect and often, again, an understanding for the contexts in which each party works.

Julie:

You know, I think sometimes the grant cycle, it drives timelines that don't really allow for a lot of attending to power dynamics. I think that's a huge challenge in all of this.

Marsha:

I couldn't agree with you more. The other piece that I think is so important is building into the relationship cycles of reflection, of sharing, learning along the way. Of course, correction. It sounds like you guys have certainly done that. And just tracking what an old friend of mine used to call the sticky residue of the project. Even if the ultimate evidence or outcomes aren't what you predicted at the beginning, maybe something else is happening that you need to be mindful of and that can really make a difference.

Julie:

I love that, the sticky residue of the project. We often sort of say like, let's sit in the mess of this for a while, and that's as a reflective tool. And we really learn the value of reflection. And as we sort of watch these nine teams that we worked with be really intentional about that, be really intentional to take moments to say, how are we doing? What's going on here?

Marsha:

Absolutely.

Eve:

We spoke a little bit about some of the less visible dimensions of power. But I want to talk about one of the most visible dimensions, which is money. And of course, in many of these relationships, we saw that the money was coming from the universities or at least coming through the universities. And that really, I think, drove a lot of the power dynamics. So I'm just curious about your reflections on that, how to navigate the big money issue.

Marsha:

Well, again, that goes to being transparent about this and understanding that, you know, this might be soft money, that there might be tremendous inequity in money. But so what's really important is to try to get beyond that. Again, going back to what we bring to the partnership that you don't have and to acknowledge - and I would say even make some accommodations to the money piece, you know, I don't believe any of these things are 50/50 or need to be 50/50 in terms of money, 50/50%.

But, you know, again, I think this smaller organization can really help the university in some ways that are not necessarily only financial and transactional. And one would hope that that sense of mission, vision and possibility could take precedence over sparring over money. I also think, though, and, you know, I don't think the first thing you do with a partnership is create an ironclad contract or memorandum of understanding.

I think good faith precedes all that. However, I think it is important to have documentation not for a gotcha, but for being really clear on what each person or what each entity is bringing to the partnership or what the expectations are. And, you know, just clarifying those kinds of dimensions while allowing for some flexibility and assuming good faith.

Julie:

You know, I think you calling out the transactional is really important because I think we sometimes forget that just because somebody has access to the money and the authority to allocate the money, that doesn't necessarily mean they're in charge of the whole process. And we sometimes confound, I think, that transactional authority with the sort of authority within the partnership to design programs that really do create broader impact for the communities in question.

Eve:

So I really love the suggestion that you made, you know, getting down on paper early on, not necessarily some kind of a contract or MOU that is all about strict accountability but making sure that you spend the time to actually get on the same maybe literal page there could be so much value in that. Just doing some initial level setting I really like that suggestion.

Marsha:

Is really important to specify the roles that people play. I think one of the big problems with some of these collaborations is the lack of a carefully thought out communication plan, you know, and that has sunk many partnerships, you know, where they don't, where whatever entity doesn't realize they need to keep the other party informed that communication,communication, communication is essential to maintaining trust and, you know, and keeping the project going.

So and that relates to this issue of transparency. And the issue of transparency also relates to the issue of money, you know, being clear who is going to report what, if it's a grant, if it's an NSF grant who reports what to whom, you know, what is the indirect cost rate? How does that factor into the project?

What is the responsibility of the partner organization in terms of tracking costs, expenses and so on? What does everyone agree on and of a workable timeline to accomplish the goals of the project? Is there some elasticity? Is there a sharing out within the organization of what's happening with this partnership? Get it out there and then, you know, trust that there's some wisdom in the room to address the problem.

Julie:

I like that you said elasticity. It seems like a precondition, right, to have intentionality around building in elasticity, which maybe can help absorb some of the pains of uneven power dynamics. I wanted to come back to something you alluded to earlier, which was incentive structures. So, you know, I think most of our listeners will know that for researchers at the University, their incentive structure generally doesn't provide a lot of rewards for great broader impacts, great engagement with community organizations and external partners, although that's changing, and that kind of work is highly aligned with the values of most universities.

There's still a little bit of a lag time in how professors and researchers are assessed in their professional advancement. And I think that that really puts a lot of pressure on the PIs to take control, right, to take control and make sure that all of their activities that aren't very well or aren't directly rewarded kind of go as planned, don't take up too much energy, don't use up too much of their time.

And I think that that must have a huge impact on how they approach and interact, especially with new partners. And I wonder if you've seen some good ways to mitigate the challenges that come with that in the partnerships that you've worked with.

Marsha:

So there's a whole different set of notions, I think, that are coming out and growing around the nature of the research that we do, the insights and evidence that we get, kind of co-creating knowledge with members of the community. So the disciplines of science are changing. I would say, given the understanding, the increased understanding of cultural biases built into science, especially as it's practiced in so many halls of universities.

That said, I think what you're saying is absolutely true. So one museum I was involved with, the whole broader impacts project was the easiest add on that a faculty member could come up with, you know,

let's just get it over with. That's why I'm just going to go to my local public library for four weeks and do X.

I was going to go to the day camp where my kid is and do y. I think that's where the science center can help if the connection is made. If the science Center had mapped out what some of the opportunities are and the fact that they can be maybe the liaison they can make the researchers job a little easier in both selecting and creating the nature of their product and their project and implementing it.

I think that that's where the foundational work can be really important to really doing a little deeper dove having enough curiosity and enough humility to understand that there might be more than meets the eye in your local science center, no matter how big or small.

Julie:

Yeah, the getting to know each other first and kind of what is the workflow as is so important. Some of what you're talking about is making me think about epistemology and making sure that we kind of do approach partnerships with the humility to say, My way of knowing and understanding the world is a set of epistemology, but it's not the only way.

I think sometimes we fall into a science supremacy trap where we think of science and the processes of science as the best way of knowing and the best way of doing. And in order to have a good partnership and kind of get through the power differential, the size of organizations and access to resources and all of that, we have to kind of drop that to the side and approach it with humility like you suggest.

And I think that theme of intellectual humility has really run through a lot of our conversations on this show.

Marsha:

We know about perspectives of indigenous cultures. There's a lot more research now that is proving that the way we've practiced science has not necessarily covered the territory in a fulsome way. I think that's that's absolutely true. And that that's another reason for distrust. I'm also a big fan of Cecilia Garibay's work in looking at culturally sensitive modes of evaluation.

So in using our normal evaluative procedures and our normal evaluation measures of evidence and outcomes, what are we missing?

Julie:

Yeah, we're big fans of Cecilia's work as well. And another, I think, really nice sort of tool kit that's out there is the inclusive science communication starter kit from back at Institute. Right. They talk a lot about reciprocity, which you started this conversation with intentionality and reflexivity. And although they're talking about it in a slightly different context than we are it really applies to the types of partnerships and getting through the power differentials and, you know, allowing both parties, both

parts of a partnership, to shine for what they do bring to the table. I think those are really key concepts to keep our minds on when we're engaging in these partnerships.

Marsha:

Yes. And the Bradford Cohen model of reciprocity and currencies, it's an article that appeared several years ago, talks about that. So what's important for that is a sense of your own self-awareness, your own institutional self-awareness, right? Your own mission, your own goals, your own priorities. And an awareness of what the others, whoever the other partners, institutional contexts, goals, mission is.

So when you start to look at those two things, you can think about different currencies that will apply. You know, some of them are institutional, some of them are personal.

Eve:

Marsha, throughout the course of this conversation, you've shared some really good and even concrete sort of advice for both members of a party, you know, communicate, communicate, communicate, approach the partnership with humility. Try to think deeper than just a transaction. Invest in the relationships. But I want to ask before we leave, I want to ask for the little guy who wrote in to our listener.

What are other concrete pieces of advice you would give to both partners? So what can the little guy do to sort of bring more power? Own the power that they do have to a partnership? And what can the big guy do to be self-aware and a good partner?

Marsha:

Well, I think for the little guy, be very reflective of your own assets. I think so many times we work in different positions in these institutions. We know our own job, but we don't always do the best job of inventorying what we bring, you know, because we're too busy working. Everybody's working so hard so pause a little bit and do that inventory and share that among yourselves.

I've worked with so many museums where people in the next cubicle don't really know what the other person is doing or what the other person's project is. So I would just say, do that deeper dive into yourself, and for the person and the university, I think again, it's worth identifying what those currencies are that that person is dealing with.

What are the realities? Who needs to be signing off on broader impacts project? Who needs to be a champion of the project? So that's kind of a stakeholder analysis that should be happening in both institutions.

Eve:

When we think about partnerships, we often think about the work across the institutions. But what I'm hearing you say is there's just as much work at all times to be going on, looking inward, thinking about your own organization and the work and nurturing that needs to be done there.

Marsha:

Yes. And I also think going back to something I think Julie brought up earlier, think about what are the rewards and what are the credits that someone gives in either institution for doing this work. And that goes to the notion of currencies, right? One of the currencies is praise. One of the currencies is for potential promotion. One of the currencies is getting a little more political, small p presence in the organization.

So those are all real. You know, we all operate according to some sort of reward and reciprocity city and that's really, really important. And I guess the last thing I'll say is I think we do a dreadful job in the small museum and in the larger institution of celebrating successes, even celebrating small milestones. Call them out, put a note on someone's desk.

That point of recognizing, when you've done something good and you have a success is really important.

Julie:

I have this dream that somebody will celebrate one day. Their colleague, who they noticed, you know, took the extra time to be nice, took the time to be thoughtful, took the time to be generous in their collaboration and in their partnership or in a team. Those are the things that we always say. We don't actually have time to do it, but we just don't actually prioritize it in the right way.

And we almost never celebrate when we do that well. I agree with that. I think we run around feeling this, you know, time impoverishment, limits us from doing well in partnerships. And I just I love to apply this idea of celebrating this kind of like micro niceties of partnerships, right? Yeah.

Marsha:

I'm part of an organization where the CEO not a museum at all. He created generosity, post-its, and he would just put them on people's desks if they didn't just say thank you. They said thank you for…. And it was a very specific thing that you did. And I think that that makes a difference. I saved mine. He gave me one and I saved it.

Julie:

It's such a key is such a key tenet of authenticity. Right? Isn't just say good job, but what? Why what is it that you did and how did it change the situation for the better? That's really important.

Marsha:

Exactly. And in the times that we're in that are extremely stress-filled for everybody, I think that's more important than ever.

Eve:

Marsha, I want to thank you so much for joining us today and helping us work through some of this. I love that our final takeaway here is just be genuine, invest in the relationships, the interpersonal can't be replaced with anything else that we do. And I think that's a really kind of a beautiful place to end things. It's something we know to be true, but it takes some real reminding sometimes.

Marsha:

Well, I thank you for inviting me. This has been a wonderful, fun experience. Thank you so much.

Julie:

Thank you so much, Marsha.

[Outro Music]

[End Credits]

Eve:

Thanks for listening to Stop, Collaborate and Listen with your hosts. Eve Klein from the Institute for Learning Innovation and.

Julie:

Julie, Risien from the Oregon State University's STEM Research Center.

Eve:

There are so many partners who supported this work. For a full list, please see our podcast description. Specifically, we want to thank Liz Neely from Liminal and Julia Furlan for their guidance and consultation.

Julie: