

PARTNERING

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PARTNERING AS TEAMWORK BETWEEN TEAMS

Organizations typically recognize the value of effective teamwork. In appreciation of this need, they are often willing to invest considerable time, effort, and money to ensure that people can and do work effectively with other members of their organizational team.

Just as important as teamwork – and perhaps even more important – is working effectively across organizational functions, between teams. For example, successful product development requires the efforts of several teams working together, not just creative groups working in isolation. Bringing a product to market requires close coordination between engineering, design, marketing, and other groups. In these situations, very strong teamwork within teams can actually get in the way of their effectiveness across teams. It can lead to an “us against them” attitude in which teams resist each other’s demands and even compete with each other for resources, rewards, or credit.

This cross-team rivalry is in some respects a very ‘natural’ behavior. People have always worked within teams, in groups, in communities, in tribes. Working between teams is not such a natural phenomenon. Through much of mankind’s history, rivalry with other groups – whether the tribe on the other side of the hill, or the marketing group on the other side of the hall – has been one of the factors that strengthened within-group teamwork. Working team-to-team has not been a common practice, and is often not one that comes easily. Ironically, though organizations often invest heavily in strengthening the comparatively natural tendency toward teamwork, they are likely to give little attention to helping people accomplish the more difficult transition to working more effectively between teams.

Often, then, a major issue for organizations is building effective **partnering** relationships across groups. Partnering becomes critical when groups or teams with different interests must work together toward mutual goals.

The term “partnering” is very positive one for most people. It summons images of people working together to create something of value for all. For some it suggests the joint effort of families in a community coming together to build a school, create a park, or repair roads. To most of us, the term conveys a sense of linkage, of working together in harmony. All of this creates a good feeling; it conveys a spirit of partnership. Our question here is how to define that spirit in concrete terms — and, more important, how to go about making it a practical reality.

There are a variety of ways that people can work together. What makes partnering unique? As the community school-building example suggests, partnering efforts are focused on producing an outcome that benefits everyone. *For a working partnership to exist there must be **mutual goals**.*

In any cooperative work relationship, people are motivated by the benefits they receive or expect from working together. Sometimes groups have individual goals that are unique to each party, but can be satisfied through temporary cooperation. But for a genuine working partnership to form, a clear **mutual** goal is a necessity. It is this mutuality that makes partnering unique as a form of cooperation. If groups cannot define a mutual goal, there is probably no reason to consider a long-term partnering relationship and they should move to a transactional or contractual one.

Partnering, then, is a way of working interdependently with other groups or organizations to achieve mutual goals. Although both partnering and teamwork are interdependent relationships, there are some real differences between the two. Work teams typically have a single overriding mission; in partnering relationships, the overall missions of the groups may be quite different but the existence of one or more mutual goals binds them together.

In analyzing successful partnering relationships, we have identified four key components. The first of these is the ability to define mutual goals, which is a fundamental requirement for the existence of a partnering relationship. The remaining three components determine the quality, or effectiveness of the partnering relationship; they are

- openness,
- respect, and
- shared power.

MUTUAL GOALS

The key to avoiding the destructive "us vs. them" mentality that sometimes afflicts the parties to a potential partnering relationship is clear agreement on mutual goals. For example, vendor-purchaser relationships can become adversarial when vendors see the goal as selling the most product for the highest price or least effort. Purchasers are then encouraged to set a goal of getting as much as they can from the vendor at the lowest possible price.

In practice, both parties have a mutual interest in seeing that the product or service functions effectively, **and** in seeing that the other gets a good deal financially. Purchasers who help a vendor get a good deal also ensure themselves a healthy, cooperative supplier who can perform well for them and will be likely to put out extra effort. Vendors who help a purchaser get a good deal also ensure themselves a loyal, supportive customer.

While all this sounds simple and logical, behavior in customer-supplier relationships is often adversarial. This occurs because the parties are focused on areas in which their goals are not congruent, to the detriment of areas in which they have mutual interests. Agreement on mutual goals sets the stage for clear expectations about the outcomes of a partnering relationship.

DEFINING THE SPIRIT OF PARTNERSHIP

While mutual goals are the foundation for partnering, a truly effective working relationship needs more than that. The “spirit of partnership” needs to govern interactions between the parties. Many writers have conveyed that spirit very well in descriptions of partnering events. Often, however, their examples seem like exceptions — models that we should try to follow, but that are seldom actually encountered. The question, then, is what does the “spirit of partnering” mean in terms of the way people behave toward each other — and how can we produce that spirit reliably?

We began work on this question more than ten years ago while working with a group that sought to improve its working relationships with other departments in the organization. The group had considered trying to define other departments as internal customers, but found that metaphor difficult to apply. One of their objections to viewing other departments as internal customers was that it seemed to place them in a “one-down” position; they wanted to work better *with* other departments, not *for* them.

Our own experience tended to confirm their reluctance to view other departments as internal customers. We found that defining the relationship between internal departments in this way often caused both groups to lose sight of the overriding organizational goals and *external* customer needs that they should be serving. In addition, it sometimes led groups to take on a “demanding customer” role with their colleagues from other departments, which was almost always counterproductive.

We began by conducting research into the practices that distinguished between successful and less-successful working relationships. This led to the identification of three broad “how-tos” — three principles of working together that characterized effective partnering relationships:

- Openness
- Respect
- Shared power

These are not just nice-sounding “motherhood” statements. They are based in, and defined by, specific behavioral practices that can be demonstrated, observed, and measured.

OPENNESS

Openness includes being both candid with others and receptive to ideas and information from others — with receptiveness often being the more important of the two. One of the most powerful signs of openness in a partnering relationship is that each party feels free to raise any issues or concerns they may have *and* expect a considered response from the others. There should be no “sore points” that can’t be raised on either side. Neither should the parties be protective of information that is relevant to their mutual goals.

A free and open exchange of relevant information is required for partnering to work. Withholding key information usually becomes evident very soon. When it occurs, it creates the impression that the other party is trying to gain an edge — and almost always lends an adversarial note to the relationship.

Sample practices that an organization might want to strengthen to build more open working relationships include:

- Listen as carefully to ideas that differ from your own as to those that are in agreement.
- Respond constructively when others disagree with your views or concerns.
- Give honest and straightforward opinions on controversial or contentious issues.
- Make others feel confident that they can raise any honest issue or concern, and expect a considered response.

RESPECT

Partnering should be viewed as an understanding between equals. There are many ways to signal respect; one of the most powerful is clearly acknowledging other viewpoints as legitimate. This does not necessarily mean agreeing with those viewpoints. Rather it means treating others as if you expect them to have good reason for their disagreement — and avoiding behavior that suggests they must be stupid, stubborn, or seriously misguided.

True respect has little to do with showing deference to "betters." Rather, it means behaving toward others in a way that assumes they have value: that differences stem from legitimate motives, and that people will typically behave responsibly. When differences are respected as legitimate, they can be an energizing force, as well as a source of innovation and flexibility. Lack of respect for differences, on the other hand, can destroy a partnership through mistrust and misunderstanding. Differences among people provide great opportunities for synergy or dysfunction.

Most people want and intend to behave responsibly and competently. When we respect that, and behave accordingly, we are likely to get responsible, competent behavior from others. Yet all too often, organizational behavior sends signals suggesting lack of respect for people's intentions. For example: when we institute restrictive and overly-detailed expense control systems, we signal an expectation that people will not behave responsibly without them; when we give overly-detailed instructions for an ordinary task, we may signal an expectation that the person will otherwise make a mess of things.

Sample practices that an organization might want to strengthen to build greater respect in working relationships include:

- Openly acknowledge that others have legitimate reasons for views that differ from your own.

- Act as if you assume that others will take intelligent and responsible action.
- Focus on how to avoid problems in the future rather than on reviewing the past in order to place blame.
- Show sensitivity to issues affecting others.

SHARED POWER

Partners must work *together*. Partnering, unlike contracting, is manifested in a shared working experience, and that in turn requires sharing power. Partnering relationships will not work if people focus on trying to avoid responsibility or risk. And they will not work well if shared responsibility is taken to mean that groups carve out independent roles for themselves: e.g., "We'll do our part, and you do yours."

An effective partnering relationship requires mutual commitment to goals, decisions, actions, and the consequences of those actions. That means sharing the effort — but even more important, sharing responsibility for making things work and taking a fair share of the risks when they do not. Successful partnering requires the commitment of all parties to all aspects of the joint effort, even though one may take primary responsibility for implementing a given area. All too often, groups try to control responsibility and risk by finding a limited role that they are comfortable with — and by avoiding involvement in the other party's role. In so doing, they limit apparent risk to themselves, but often increase the overall risk of failure of the joint effort.

We can and should limit risk, of course — but we must take risks. In partnering, this risk must be shared. In fact, one of the differences between a partnering understanding and a contractual agreement is that in the contractual agreement we often establish “penalty clauses,” or in other ways eliminate risk to one party and assign it to the other.

SUMMARY

The principles of partnering provide a base for building solid working relationships between groups or organizations that have different interests, agendas, or objectives — but that must nevertheless work together to achieve mutual goals. They can be used at the beginning of a relationship to develop clarity and forestall misunderstandings, or at **any** time during the relationship to resolve or prevent problems.

Partnering works. It has resulted in significant improvements in the working relationships between:

- internal departments
- customers and vendors
- manufacturers and distributors
- contractors and subcontractor
- parties to a joint venture
- unions and management

And it can produce substantial savings and efficiency gains by reducing duplication of effort, errors and rework, misunderstandings, and "patch" wars.

When problems occur in working relationships, the first place to look should **not** be the behavior of the other party. Rather, it should be the behavior **between** the two parties: the extent to which it is characterized by openness, respect, and shared responsibility.