

Makesfive



maximising performance

Successful partnerships: the art of the blindingly obvious?

Motherhood and apple pie; teaching grannies to suck eggs; the blindingly obvious. No one wants to be told how to do what comes naturally: what's as plain as the nose on their face.

So when it comes to making a real difference to the performance of partnerships not everyone recognises the need to actively apply key "dos and don'ts": but it's there.

One of the problems about "partnership" is that the very "p-word" itself is becoming tired and overused. For a start it applies to all sorts of organisational collaboration such as strategic alliances, networks and joint ventures, even think tanks and quangos. It's so well used that the UK Financial Times ran an article a couple of years ago with the headline "Concept Suffers from Partnership Fatigue". The trouble is that it is often used loosely to mean almost any kind of "working together", and at times stands in as an umbrella term for a contract. It's not always tackled as what Makesfive Ltd calls "*A cross-organisational group working together towards commonly held goals which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve if tackled alone.*" But what's new about this? Haven't people, companies, organisations always been doing this?

Well, maybe. But today business and social structures are at the centre of fast moving change and monumental challenges. In business, companies recognise that it's increasingly harder to host all the skills, technology and know-how under one roof: and anyway, in such a climate, who wants to? One response is large company takeovers and acquisitions: another is the formation of strategic alliances and joint ventures which, by their very nature are flexible and temporary. And this means that strong partnerships must be in place. In the social field, there is clear recognition that the tough challenges presented by, for example, environment, health, housing, social inclusion, education, crime, can *only* be tackled through genuine partnerships.

So, there's much at stake. And, as many will testify, partnerships don't always deliver, don't always work and aren't always fun: more like a necessary evil. "Cross organisational" working is a big challenge: it's not normal fare for most. Even for those

with experience the news isn't good. Research by Accenture indicates that 61 % of private sector alliances either fail to satisfy or actually fail. Why? Because "Most companies have yet to master the art of the alliance". And Peter Drucker, the management guru's guru suggests that "Today, businesses grow through alliances, all sorts of dangerous liaisons and joint ventures, which, by the way, very few people understand."

Which suggests two things: one, that partnership can be testing and two, that successful partnerships don't just happen: they have to be worked at.

Nevertheless when successful, they can deliver results that can't be achieved otherwise. The synergy and power that strong partnerships generate are worth all the hard work and angst.

So, what are the secrets of success? A top five might be:

(i) *Partnership rationale*. The need to be clear about why partnership will work where going it alone won't. And, moreover, hanging on to this when (not if) the going gets tough.

(ii) *Partnership purpose*. Partnerships are there to *do* something. Sometimes the difficulties of partnership working overshadow this. At others partners don't always continue to check that they're working to "commonly held goals". This is when partnerships lose direction, fold in on themselves and, with recriminations, either die altogether or completely fail to capitalise on opportunities.

(iii) *What's in it for me?* While working to "commonly held goals" is at the heart of all good partnerships, almost all partners are in it for their own organisations: of course. And why not? The secret is to recognise that it's by *promoting the partnership* that the individual interests of all involved will be served: not the other way round.

(iv) *Relationships count*. That's what "partnership" *means*. The willingness of individuals to respect, trust and listen to each other is at the heart of partnership. And whether they refer to the partnership as "we" or "you" or "they" or "it" is something of a litmus test. Partnerships will not create the maths that allows 2 and 2 to make 5 unless relationships are worked on.

(v) *Accountability*. Partners who are prepared to share the glory *and* accept the blame, together, have a future. Those who head for the hills when trouble looms, leaving others to hold the crying baby do not belong to productive partnerships.

But none this happens by itself. The idea that forming a successful partnership is just a matter of calling a few people together around a table is, even with good ideas and plans, decidedly chancy. But this is what often happens. Without actively addressing the complexities that arise from, for example, different organisational cultures, intellectual property, confidentiality, interpersonal trust, sharing sensitive information and a host of others, partnerships frequently run into difficulties that may have little to do with achieving their goals.

Experience shows that developing high performing partnerships that last requires active partnership building. This is becoming increasingly less of an option as more creative partnerships – including virtual partnerships across the internet that span international tax and legal regulatory systems – are explored.

Partnership *is* worth it, but it can be *challenging*, and, like leaders, partnerships aren't necessarily born – they are made.

It's blindingly obvious - isn't it?

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