

## POWERFUL PARTNERING

“Asking is the beginning of receiving. Make sure you don't go to the ocean with a teaspoon. At least take a bucket so the kids won't laugh at you.”

Jim Rohn

“You get the best out of others when you give the best of yourself.”

Harvey Firestone

"Collaboration will be the critical business competency of the Internet Age. It won't be the ability to fiercely compete, but the ability to lovingly cooperate that will determine success. Rather than focusing on stomping the competition into the ground, true leaders of the Internet Age will focus on creating value for their customers, intelligence and skill in their talent, and wealth for their investors and shareholders."

James M. Kouzes

You would think that after years of being married, I would have realized that powerful business partnering requires the same attention, perseverance, courage and skill as does personal partnering. However, it's taken me several years to understand and negotiate the complex process of forming successful business partnerships.

Research from the Harvard Center for Negotiation reveals that 70% of all strategic alliances fail because people don't know how to manage complex relationships which, of course, involve many difficult conversations.

My colleagues, Peter Norlin and Judith Vogel, define partnership as “a successful relationship in service to a specific task...this collaboration requires the creation of a special interpersonal connection, [and entails] putting the relationship to work.”

In any collaborative endeavor, there are two streams of activity occurring concurrently. What's visible - above the water line - is the focus on goals and task accomplishment. This is typically where people focus because it's easier – usually less personal, less threatening, and it's what we're used to doing.

However, it's the invisible stream below the water line that is equally if not more important. This is the stream of interpersonal interaction and process ever present in a group of two or more, which often goes unaddressed because many people have less practice and ease in this domain.

Yet successful partnerships require self-awareness, discipline and intention in “working” the relational issues.

Below the water line, there are two foundational elements that must be explored and discussed if you want to create high-performance formal partnerships – the self as it relates to the other(s), and the identity of the partnership as an entity.

The latter involves clarifying the business vision, values, guiding principles and purpose for the business which I'll address at another time.

Working the relationship depends on being able to effectively communicate about one's self to the other, and depends on several critical abilities of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, transparency, and influence.

In the Norlin-Vogel partnership model, people forming partnerships start to pay attention to three deeply significant qualities in the other person. These are the status, motive, and competence of the "other."

Competence issues relate to the actual work. It's useful to make explicit the similar and different skill sets that people bring to the partnership, and where problems might emerge as a function of that. A successful partnership is based on the belief and experience that we can work together in a *positive* interdependence.

Motive issues relate to whether I experience the "other" as trustworthy, and whether I trust their underlying motives for entering the partnership. Here, the ability of transparency comes into play for there must be a certain degree of self-disclosure to engage in mutual exploration built on integrity and authenticity.

Each person must answer the question "*Will I be able to trust this person as we work together?*" Other useful questions at the beginning of the exploration are "*What is my/your biggest fear about this new venture? What is the worst thing that could happen? What compromises are you willing to make to ensure that it does not occur?*"

The third concern that potential partners hold is that of status, which reflects the balance of power and control that each person experiences in relation to the other. The core ability of influence is pivotal here, for each partner must feel that they have the ability to influence the other, and at the same time, be willing to be influenced.

Without self-awareness, the ability to consciously develop the relationship is limited. Similarly, self-disclosure on such deeply held inner experiences as status, motive and competence becomes easier and richer to the degree that one is able look at oneself objectively.

If you're entering, or considering a new partnership, spend some time thinking about these issues. While you don't need to put "motive, status, and competence" on your agenda, find a structure for the conversation that allows you both to explore these issues. Your partnership will only be the richer and more likely to succeed for the intention you put into it.