

ENDEAVORING TO NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

Too often we talk of smart partnerships, referring to those that embrace key principles of relationships in general, e.g., respect, trust, sharing. But rarely do we stop and think hard about how to make smart or true partnerships happen in practice. And how do we sustain them once they are formed? And how do we begin to rectify some of those principles between partners when we see, for example, that trust or respect is in danger? These partnership principles are a difficult promise to keep and are always going to be more difficult to implement in practice than when writing about them! This piece argues that true partnerships do not simply happen, and so it is not enough to just declare them. Rather, they must be “cultivated” over time with sincere commitment, dedication, and determination.

It is our premise that partnerships are more effective and sustainable if they resist the tendency to exercise differential power. Power differentials create obstacles to partnership.

A SHORT DIVE INTO THE PRINCIPLES

Respect—everyone desires respect.

This is based on the idea that everyone is worthy and recognizes everyone’s right to self-determination. If we embrace this principle, then we will treat our partners with respect and honor their opinions and views. True partnership is impossible without mutual respect. In the context of being respected, it also follows that everyone must be heard. This principle is based on the statement “seek first to understand” (Covey, 2011). It calls for, and requires one to have a positive mental attitude about the partner, his or her opinion, or what he or she is going to say—differences in educational qualification, social status and appearance notwithstanding. Respect also carries the recognition that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It recognizes that all people have many resources, past successes, abilities, talents, dreams, etc., that provide the raw materials for future

success. As “helpers” we become involved with people because of their problems; these problems then become filters that obscure our ability to see strengths. Acceptance of this principle doesn’t mean that one ignores or minimizes problems. It means that one works hard to identify strengths as well as problems so that the helper and the client have a more balanced, accurate, and hopeful picture (Appalachian Family Innovations, 2003).

It is our premise that partnerships are more effective and sustainable if they resist the tendency to exercise differential power. Power differentials create obstacles to partnership. Since society confers power upon the helper, it is the helper’s responsibility to create a partnership with a client. Clients do not owe us their cooperation. We must earn it.

Partnership is a process.

It takes time to achieve a functional partnership. A partner may be slower than expected to accomplish an agreed task. Instead of expressing frustration or reprimanding (partly due to differential power), it would be better to step back and ask what exactly is making the partner fail to comply? And together the solution may be found. In a partnership capacity strengthening project with one institution (where I was representing a donor), one senior member who was failing to keep the delivery deadlines came to me and said, “Although I am thankful for all the help that this project is providing to our institution, I should tell you that by the time you came up with this project, my plate was already full. Thus, what I have to do in this project as assigned by my superiors is over and above my allocated time. And after all there is no real incentive to work extra hours on the project. So please do not be surprised if your proposed deliverables come late.” A lesson learned here is that some of the partners we work with may not have been really ready to work with us. Or maybe those that are expected to work with us are not the signatories in the partnership. We should therefore be keen in nurturing the partnership all the way through the project and especially at the beginning.

Trust.

Adopting transparency measures is perhaps one of the best tools for cultivating trust in a partnership.

Communicating expectations and assumptions in an open meeting or forum can set the scene for behavior protocols and how we want to work in a partnership.

How and who we choose to communicate with will determine whether the partners can trust in each other. Successful partnerships are often those that design behavior protocols (laying out expectations of how issues will be dealt with) which could include things such as dealing with finances, publication authorship, monitoring and evaluation, reporting requirements, etc.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MINDSETS IN NURTURING PARTNERSHIPS?

Mindset is an important factor that potentially influences relationships in partnerships. Mindset has been variously defined as established attitudes held by someone, beliefs about oneself and ones most basic qualities. It involves things like intelligence, talents, personality, etc. How we respond to challenges and setbacks is often determined by our mindset. According to Argyris (2004), there are two dominant mindsets in organizations: the productive mindset and the defensive mindset. The productive mindset seeks out valid knowledge that is testable. The productive reasoning mindset creates informed choices and makes reasoning transparent.

The defensive mindset, on the other hand, is self-protective and self-deceptive. When this mindset is active, people or organizations only seek out information that will protect them. Truth can be shut out when it is seen as threatening. While elements of our personality—such as sensitivity to mistakes and

setbacks—can make us predisposed towards holding a certain mindset, we are able to develop and reshape our mindset through our interactions. Individuals can be placed on a continuum according to their implicit views of “where ability comes from.”

Dweck (2006) provides another category which we believe is important in understanding and nurturing partnerships. According to her, there are two categories—growth mindset versus fixed mindset—that can group individuals based on their behavior, specifically their reaction to failure. Those with a “fixed mindset” believe that abilities are mostly innate and interpret failure as the lack of necessary basic abilities, while those with a “growth mindset” believe that they can acquire any given ability provided they invest effort or study.

Based on the above classifications it is clear that promoting true partnerships would favor productive and growth mindsets as opposed to defensive and fixed mindsets.

When we encounter a problem in partnerships, we should not immediately begin blaming the other side. Patterson et al. (2013) caution that we must work on ourselves first because the problem may well be on our side.

Some takeaways from this brief are that we need to be determined to stand for the purpose of the partnership we have built; we need to demonstrate commitment and dedication; we need to be open-minded at all times and have a positive mental attitude of understanding others. And when things go wrong, let's deeply examine ourselves first because we may be the ones in the wrong!