

IN BED WITH THE ENEMY:

How to Partner with Your Competition

Follow these “marriage” pointers to consummate the perfect relationship.

BY ED RIGSBEE

Today’s corporations know that strategic alliances lead to powerful synergies. Nonprofit organizations can gain the same advantages if they take a strategic approach to building relationships. Here are tips to successful alliances for your organization:

Find Your Perfect Mate.

To begin, you must seek the right partner. How do you find organizations with whom you’re likely to be successful?

First, talk to your suppliers and funders. They have a great deal of experience with organizations like yours. They also have a handle on each organization’s integrity or lack thereof. Also ask your local chamber of commerce, United Way, college or university, or community foundation for suggestions.

Maybe your alliance will simply be a buying consortium. Perhaps it will be an alliance to serve the same clients or to share a pool of employees. Whatever you decide, the key is to find a partner with the same core values as your organization.

Plan the Courtship.

Next, it’s courting time. Your goal is to help your future partner gain emotional ownership in the partnership. Without such ownership, any commitment will rest on a shaky foundation.

Sensitivity and understanding are crucial. Your potential partner may be experiencing the getting-married jitters, fearing loss of control. Talk about the up and down sides of your intended alliance. Clarify how you might deal with the relationship if things don’t work out. Plan an exit strategy. Getting fears and issues on the table rather than hiding them will serve everyone.

Discuss Your Life Together.

Ask and answer all the big and small questions that come up in any new relationship:

- **Where are you going to live?**

In other words, how will you market yourselves, individually and together?

- **What will you keep separate,** and what will become common property? Might you share warehousing facilities, delivery services, or employees to overcome personnel challenges?

- **Who’s going to do the chores?**

Too often this is where unrealistic expectations rear themselves. Be clear about who will do what, and commit it to writing. The palest ink is better than the most powerful memory. It’s too easy to forget your commitments in six months, a year, or a decade.

- **How will you track** new information to ascertain the value gained in the alliance?

- **How will you communicate** with each other to make sure you’re both happy? Regular value updates on the alliance relationship will be helpful. These updates should consist of expectations (met and missed) and profitability targets. This information will help you decide whether to upgrade, downgrade, or maintain the relationship as is.

Tie the Knot.

Create a partnering agreement, detailing each partner’s responsibilities. This document will be the guiding light for your alliance relationship. When in doubt, you will refer to it.

Learn to Survive under the Sheets.

Once the alliance is in place, you need to become successful cohabitants. While you’re each responsible for your own success, you now must consider how your behavior will affect your partner. Be aware of how your actions may force your partners to change their plans. Confer before you act. After all, you are in bed together. To get space, you must give it first.

Make regular relationship-bank deposits of physical and emotional energy. Always meet your partner more than half way. When you give more than half, a robust synergy follows. So much more is possible by working in concert.

To deal with the challenges of the relationship, you must get past the “denial syndrome.” Don’t fall into the trap of ignoring rather than confronting problems. A confrontation needn’t be a knock-down, drag-out affair, especially if you selected your partner well. Open communication is the key in dealing with missing covers, or anything else. Remember, if you steal your partners’ sheets today, they might take yours when you are cold and in need.

Call the Marriage Counselor.

When relationship roadblocks occur, it may be necessary to seek third-party counsel for mediation. In this situation, authenticity and openness are vital. Since you took the time to choose well, it’s worth the time, energy, and expense to rebuild the partnering bridge.

Mediation is becoming a popular way to resolve conflict, and it will be easier than you might think to find a qualified mediator. In this process of reconciliation, focus on the reasons for selecting your partner and the benefits you hoped to receive rather than the anger or hurt feelings.

Call the Divorce Lawyer.

Oh no, divorce! You truly tried but it didn’t work out. For a myriad of reasons, this sometimes happens. No reason to feel like a failure or declare that you’ll never again be in a relationship. In dealing with separation issues, be the bigger person and again meet your partner more than half way. Otherwise the anger will fester, and you’ll become immobilized.

If there is “community property,” dispose of it fairly, or offer to buy out your partner. Either work it out, or take court-ordered pennies on the dollar. Only outsiders win in this situation.

Relish the Journey.

Enjoying the journey with your partner and looking for additional opportunities are what make all the work worth the energy. If you’ve built your alliance correctly, there will be many rewards along the way. If you must divorce, at least you’ve learned a lot. Use those new insights as you start building your next alliance. ■

Resources

Campbell, David, “High-End Strategic Alliances as Fundraising Opportunities,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 5.

Campbell, David, *Strategic Alliances Videotape*.

Sturm, Paul, “Seven Rules of Successful Collaboration,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 2.

Tietler, Maxine, “Alliances Are Not Mergers: What Problems Should You Expect?,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 2.

These resources are available from the Society’s Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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Nonprofit World • Volume 21, Number 3 May/June 2003
Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations
5820 Canton Center Road, Suite 165, Canton, Michigan 48187
734-451-3582 • www.snpo.org

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