

Us & Them:

Decoding the Language of Nonprofit-Business Partnerships

The right words can make all the difference.

BY MERYL MCQUEEN

Charity. Cause-related marketing. Nonprofit enterprise. Venture philanthropy. Whatever you call them, links between businesses and nonprofits are part of the landscape. Some become successful short-term networks. Others develop into stable, long-term partnerships. Still others are spectacular failures. How do you make sure yours is one of the successes?

The First Step

The cornerstone of partnership is communication. Get that right, and the relationship can blossom. Get it wrong, and the entire exercise is energy wasted.

So what does collaboration sound like? And how can decoding the language improve partnership outcomes, enhance staff morale, and put your organization's best foot forward?

Five Keys

To answer those questions, here is a toolbox outlining five elements of language that constrain or facilitate relationships. Analyze your relations with business in this linguistic frame, and you'll be able to isolate problems as they arise, name the underlying conflict, and address it early on. Whether you work through

the issue or abandon a partnership that has little chance of success, using language as a management tool can help you make those decisions with confidence and clarity.

1 **Language matching** occurs when one partner shifts its linguistic patterns to match those of the other. You can use language matching to build rapport, establish connections, and maintain equal footing with a business partner.

Language matching can be conscious or subconscious. It is most effective when it includes changes in words, metaphors, and figures of speech to reflect the business counterpart's language. For example, you might match the corporate language of contracts and commercial viability in order to negotiate with a business partner.

This change in vocabulary can be part of a strategy to counter a perceived power differential. It is equally effective as a way through superficial differences in communication style.

2 **Social identification** is the extent to which people in one organization understand and identify with those in the other. Positive identification indicates high levels of understanding; negative identification shows

low levels. This sense of association can be expressed in many ways in the conversation between nonprofit and business. A few examples will show how useful this concept can be.

The simplest form of positive social identification is the inclusive "we." When you speak of employees in the nonprofit and the business as a collective entity, you convey your belief that you're on the same side and united in purpose.

Listen to those in your organization who are involved in building the relationship with the business. Do they refer to themselves as "bridges," "mediators," or "interpreters" in conveying expectations? Do they see themselves spanning the divide and translating between cultures to get the outcome your organization needs?

If not, you're probably witnessing negative social identification. This occurs when the relationship is characterized by a sense of division, linguistic separation, and sharp distinction between "us" and "them." Phrases like "operating on their terms" and "trying to meet their requirements" may indicate a need to reassess your relationship with your business partner.

Metaphors are equally instructive. Contrast the image of a "bridge" with that of a "battle" in which employees feel like "crusaders" instead of translators.

Contrast the image of a "bridge" with that of a "battle."

3 **Personal contact** is a critical but often overlooked aspect of relationship building. It can clarify how the business views your organization.

For example, does a different person show up at every meeting? Do people sometimes not show at all? Or has the business allocated a specific individual or team to work with you?

In language around the collaboration, do you and your staff use words to show common ground and personal contact with the business? Personal contact influences how much the project is seen as shared and can be a good measure of how the relationship "feels." If your instinct mirrors your personal contact with the business partner, the relationship will be more likely to succeed.

4 Much has been made of the rhetoric of **mutual benefit** between the nonprofit and business worlds, and with good reason. Mutual benefit is an excellent motivator for both sides to join forces. However, language around mutual benefit can be deceptive, and when it appears in dialogue with a potential business partner, caution is advised.

The need for mutual benefit is well established and in itself no cause for concern. Nonetheless, the way a business expresses that desire can give you information about whether the business will make a good partner for you. For example, is mutual benefit broached as the primary topic of conversation at every turn? Does the "what's in it for us?" line overshadow more direct issues about the relationship, such as who will be responsible for what and how outcomes will be achieved? There's no right or wrong level

of mutual benefit in the language of partnership, but the "how" is just as important as the "what."

Mutual benefit can reflect a spirit of compromise, a need to balance organizational imperatives with joint effort. It can also indicate inequity. Analyzing your partner's language can help you decipher which way it falls.

5 **Past alliances** are another way to assess businesses' suitability as partners for your organization. Have they had previous relationships with nonprofits? If they haven't, are they enthusiastic about the possibility? If they have, do they show negative or positive social identification about those experiences? The language of past alliances can tell you a lot about what you can expect, and what the business expects from you.

Language Matters

These five elements are tied to the power relationship between your organization and any business partner with whom you engage. Using social identification as an example, consider the connotations of "working with" someone versus "doing it their way." The latter implies bending the nonprofit to fit the business. The former suggests a mutual set of objectives to achieve together.

Nonprofit employees may be disheartened by a disparate power relationship. Language of positive social identification reinforces the mutual standing of both parties. Language of negative social identification undermines the weaker "partner" by fostering an environment of uneven power.

In combination, these five elements gel into a matrix for deciding whether to pursue a business partnership. Sometimes it will be enough to understand why one business isn't the right

match and another is. At other times, this toolbox of collaborative language will help you isolate issues, confront communication barriers, and move through problem areas to build an equitable relationship. By being aware of how language mirrors, defines, and constrains relationships, you'll be better able to select the most appropriate partner for the task at hand.

Check out your current and prospective partnerships. Do you notice people matching the language of the other partner? Have past alliances been positive? Do you see examples of positive social identification, mutual benefit, and strong personal contact? If so, relations among participants are imbued with collaboration and sharing. And as the whole is more than the sum of its parts, your effort in understanding the linguistic dimension of partnership will be rewarded with partnerships that surpass expectation. ■

Resources

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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