



Making a Partnership Work: It's Not a Marriage, or Is It?

By Libby Wagner, Founder and President

A friend of mine is currently watching one of his long-time clients partnership implode. Okay, implode is a strong word, but it's not far from what a business partnership break-up feels like: to collapse inward violently; to demolish.

In fact many who have either experienced this first-hand or who have watched from the sidelines know this is almost (if not exactly) as terrible as the divorce of a married couple: the loss of a dream, a sense of wasted time, sadness, anger, the divvying up of resources and property. No one sets out with this in mind—no one wants to go through a terrible break-up, even if, in the end, it's for the best.

Generally, in the work I do, I try to prevent this sort of break-up by improving leadership, communication, clarity and culture so that the partners can either behave proactively getting started off on the right track, or if not, we work with an intervention model to try to set things

straight before they get irreparable. To be sure, not all partnerships are salvageable and not all are worth fighting for. Sometimes, it's time to call it quits. Sometimes, it's okay to move on. How do you know? And how can you prevent this from happening to you?

You've Always Got Three Choices!

Using the Influencing Options® Three Choices Model—Influence, Acceptance, Removal—is one of the most empowering things you can remind yourself of when you are examining a partnership that's not exactly in the place where you want it to be:

Influence means you come up with a plan to bring about some changes. This is where you might work with a trusted advisor or a consultant.

Acceptance means that whatever it is that's not working is something you're willing to let go of—to no longer let it affect you negatively.

Removal is, well, removal. This is the break-up or at least the radical reorganization of things.

Don't Pick Toxic: The most important thing to remember is that if you are not experiencing the kind of partnership you want, and you do not select one of these three options, what you're really choosing is to be in what can turn into "the Toxic Zone," a place where you are unhappy, frustrated, stressed, negative and even miserable. Even just a malaise of mediocrity is toxic. That's your signal that something needs to be done.

At the Outset, or At a Renewal Point

Ideally, I'd love to work with brand new teams, partnerships and organizations. How exciting to create the building blocks for success—especially leadership, communication, and cultural success—from the start? This is not the bulk of my work—people who are getting started in a business or a business partnership often do not seek the outside help of a consultant to gain clarity and behave proactively. They are focused on getting the money in the door, the people on the street, and getting the word out. They often believe, with their great ideas and passionate commitment, it will just work out. And, if they start making money right away, it's almost worse—they succeed in spite of themselves until they reach the point of the next level of growth (like hiring more employees, taking on bigger clients or customers, instigating new technology, etc.) and they realize painfully that they can't keep doing it the way they have been because the terrain has changed. Either way, "outset" or "renewal" is a good place to get really clear on your partnership.

Keys to Creating Your Successful Partnership

1. Clearly articulate your company vision & mission.

Don't underestimate the power of this. If you're not on the same page literally, you never will be.

2. Clearly articulate your roles and responsibilities and scope of work.

Who does what? Who's responsible for sales? For marketing? For being the front-person for the company? Work all of this out, and document it.

3. Define how you will make decisions, especially around new initiatives and money.

Where do you have collaborative decision-making? Where do you have autonomy? What will you delegate?

4. Define how you will resolve conflict or disagreements and have a plan for confronting and creating accountabilities.

This is really important because it allows you to get back on track when you get off. If you don't have the skills to do this, invest in them. It's critical.

5. Identify how each of you will be able to grow and develop within the business.

Do a little dreaming! What is the ratio between work time and discretionary time? What are the values you share with your partner and the ones you don't? What will the business support in terms of professional growth, and what's on your own?

6. Examine and define your exit strategy if it's time to end, dissolve the business, or retire.

Again, a trusted advisor or consultant can help here. Look at all your options and revisit regularly (annually) to evaluate what has changed and what remains.

How Do You Know When It's Time to Go?

Take a look at the following list. The more you can put a “check” by, the greater the need to reevaluate the partnership relationship and the more urgent it is for you to select either “Influence” or “Removal.” Don't be afraid to get outside help.

1. You do not look forward to coming to work; your heart's not in it.
2. You seem overly exhausted, tired and burned out.
3. You are not addressing issues directly or resolving issues in a timely way.
4. You are speaking through others—employees, colleagues, lawyers, and consultants—for long periods of time. (or you're not speaking at all!)
5. Your organization itself is suffering, i.e. low employee morale or high turnover, decreased profits and revenues, decline in market share, diminished reputation in industry.
6. You feel like you've exhausted your personal and emotional resources to try to make it work, and it's just not.

Finally, What About Relationships?

An entirely different article could be devoted to relationships and the impact on business partnerships. The simple idea is this: relationship trumps everything. Whether it's a family business, a marriage/business partnership, best friends or college buddies—each of these dynamics plays into whether or not a business partnership is going to be set up for success, whether it will be complex and high-maintenance, and in the end, the decisions made need to take these relationships into account. Many people will let the business suffer because the cost to the personal relationship isn't worth it. Or, as

sometimes happens, the opposite occurs—personal relationships suffer because the business is interfering. Choosing to balance your many marriages¹ is both challenging and gratifying, and it requires self-reflection, honesty, and the willingness to ask for help when you need it!

¹ See David Whyte's book **The Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self and Relationship.**

Libby Wagner

www.libbywagner.com | www.influencingoptions.com
office 216 First Avenue South | Suite #331 | Seattle, WA 98104
mail 6523 California Avenue SW #139 | Seattle, Washington 98136
p 206.906.9203 | toll free 877.454.2299 | f 866.451.5618
e libby@libbywagner.com