

Finding the right partner

September 1947: Two couples sit down for a friendly game of bridge . . . and 40 years later they rise from the table after 790 sessions.

Playing cards came naturally to my parents, as it did to me years later (I "majored" in bridge during my first year in college -- and hid my grades from my parents). Mom and Dad courted by playing three-handed pinochle with Mom's father in a tiny North Dakota town during the mid-1930s. Dad helped manage the local bank and when my grandfather spotted him walking up Main Street every day after closing he immediately called for his cards and his daughter.

Mom and Dad's courtship continued when they moved to Minneapolis in the late '30s and they married in 1942. Dad joined the Army and later that year met Minneapolis native Ed Eisenmenger during Officers Training School. They became fast friends and stayed in touch throughout the war, then returned to Minneapolis to re-join their wives.

When the two couples decided to play bridge together for the first time in 1947, they made an important decision. They may have done it casually or actually discussed it. I never knew. But they thought it was probably best for the couples to split up . . . so Dad and Ed's wife Margaret played against Mom and Ed.

Dad and Margaret won handily that first evening and again in October and November, but Mom and Ed came back to win four of the next five. That's the way it went, year after year. Dad kept a running score -- and the two couples made the Minneapolis newspapers in 1959 when they totted things up after their 219th session and found themselves dead even, with 858,570 points each.

During the next 28 years, Dad and Margaret held the lead most of the time, but every once in a while Mom and Ed would surge ahead -- and the final tally in October 1987 was razor thin: 3,963,030 for Dad and Margaret (50.8%), 3,835,800 for Mom and Ed (49.2%).

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There's a cliché about bridge partnerships that says a husband and wife should never attempt to play as a team -- the possibilities for disagreement and *ad hominem* remarks are just too great, with potential damage to the marriage.

On the other hand, there are at least a half-dozen husband/wife teams at my local bridge club and they seem to get along just fine.

I guess the point of all this is that when you choose a strategic partner to help you launch or grow your social enterprise, you'd better be careful -- especially if you're considering an alliance with a private sector company.

When it works, a partnership with a corporation can provide significant leverage:

- You have deep knowledge of a specific sector and the corporation has marketplace savvy (it knows how to build and grow an organization to scale, how to compete, how to adapt to changing conditions)
- You're close to the customer and the corporation has a network of high-capacity contacts
- You can build a team internally and the corporation can build a support base externally
- And -- if you've chosen the right partner -- both of you have a passion for your mission

So here are some things to think about as you contemplate creating a strategic partnership with a corporation (or, for that matter, with a commercial enterprise of *any* size):

- ***Why are you doing this?*** To make money? To enhance your image? To further your mission? To increase employee morale? Any or all of the above? Having clarity of purpose will make your subsequent decisions simpler.
- ***Is this something you really want to do?*** Do you have the necessary passion, the full commitment you'll need to make it work -- or are you seeking a partnership because somebody told you it was the right thing to do?
- ***How will you measure success?*** What are your specific goals for the partnership in terms of social impact, financial gains, organizational capacity-building or other factors? You need to set realistic expectations -- and that means recognizing all your direct *and* indirect costs, financial and otherwise.
- ***How far are you willing to go?*** How much time are you willing to devote to a partnership? What resources are you willing to provide? What responsibilities are you willing to assume? Are you looking for a short-term or long-term relationship?
- ***Is the timing right, for both you and your partner?*** For example, trying to create a major strategic partnership at the same time you're mounting a capital campaign is probably not a good idea.
- ***Is there a genuine fit?*** Finding the *right* partner is critical. Do you and your partner share the same core values? What are your mutual needs and capabilities? Does the corporation have a logical relationship to your product or cause? Does it share your target market and geographic focus? Is it credible in its own field? Is it financially and operationally sound? Are there any potential controversies that could scuttle or damage the partnership? Of course, the corporation will be asking the same types of questions about you.

- ***Will partnering with this particular company jeopardize your other relationships?*** Will staff members, funders or the people you serve object? Will other stakeholders become restless?

Two final notes:

- If you're wary about partnerships with commercial enterprises, start small, and remember the concept of market pull: Listen first, then decide whether you have something to offer that would be of benefit to the prospective partner -- don't go in trying to sell something the partner may not even need.
- And once the partnership is underway, *manage* it. The best way to build trust among partners is to concentrate on personal relationships, so work hard to cement them, up and down the line, from the senior executives to the lowest level employees in both organizations. Always respond to your partner's needs before your own (that's how you create value), keep the lines of communication open -- and always respond quickly (a good rule of thumb is to make sure you call back the same day).

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*This entry in "Jerr's Journal" is adapted in part from an essay in **Boschee on Marketing**. The entire book can be downloaded free of charge at http://socialent.org/Publications_Podcasts.htm.*