

Create an Atmosphere of Partnership

Sue Dyer

Did you ever work on a team where it seemed that everyone was working against each other? It's no surprise when such a project or initiative fails. Sometimes you just wish that there were a way to get everyone on the same page.

This was the case on one highway-widening project. The team had to calculate how much asphalt it would take to fill the holes left when they dug out the failed areas of the road. The owner and his contractor's superintendent went out and measured the area (a square area at that) to be filled. But time after time they just couldn't agree on the measurement. And that wasn't the only thing they couldn't agree on - how long the project would take, how far the work should proceed in a day, what work had been completed, if the work had been completed correctly, or even on what time of the day to meet - they couldn't agree on anything. Finally, in frustration, the superintendent blew up and was kicked off the job.

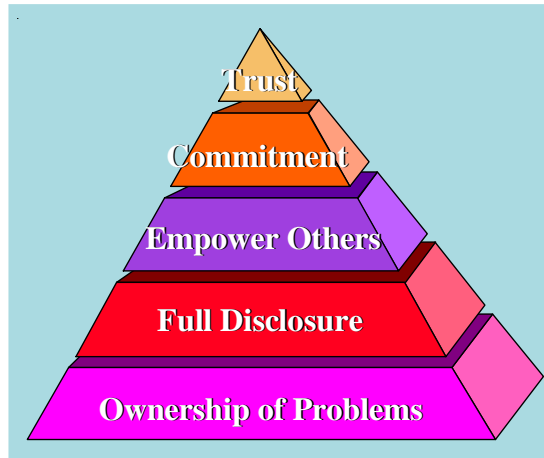
This was also the case for an IT project team. The team included thirteen members from three different departments: Information Technology, Human Resources, and Finance. The team was working to install and run a new enterprise-wide human resources program. The CEO had been told that the new program would improve his ability to make strategic business decisions by allowing him to "slice and dice information" in almost any manner he chose. Each of the team members felt that their department should be able to get what their department wanted. Further, each department was reluctant to change its way of doing business (and the three departments all did business differently). So, each department wanted the new program to serve its needs over the needs of the other departments. Meetings were very heated as team members lobbied to get their own way. Soon people stopped going to the meetings altogether. After a year of fighting, the team, and project, finally crashed and burned when the entire payroll for 30,000 employees could not be printed.

How many times have you been involved with a project that is going south and you just don't know what to do? Here are some concepts that help create a foundation that allows for partnership and teamwork to grow.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PARTNERING

Concept #1: Take Ownership of Problems

What happens when a problem occurs? Is your first reaction, "I thought Bob was supposed to do this" or, "I paid a lot of money to get this right" or, "These numbers are just wrong"? If so, the next logical step is to figure **out who is to blame** for your having this problem. Most of us are very skilled at analyzing who is to blame. Meanwhile, what is happening to the problem that you've uncovered...who is trying to resolve it? No one! When blame seeking starts, all communication between team members stops. And if it takes the team two days, two weeks, or two months to begin to talk about the "real" problem, that time can never be recaptured. It is lost forever. This is a huge risk to the success of your project.



It doesn't matter who created the problem. What does matter is that you understand and resolve the problem quickly so the project (or team) is not damaged. *Ownership of problems means that everyone owns the problems. You seek solution not blame.*

Concept #2: Commit to Full Disclosure

This means that you tell everyone everything that you know. How can the team possibly create plans or know where the inherent problems are if it doesn't have the best information? Many times team members hold their cards close to their vests, not revealing everything that they know. They think that this somehow gives them an advantage. But in fact, when you are working on a project (or on a team) you are interdependent - you need each other in order to succeed. By holding your cards close, causing the other team members to not make the best decisions or plans, you are really hurting yourself as well as the potential success of your project or initiative.

Honestly discussing all problems up front can help you assure success. We know from research that problems occurring after you are underway have a greater impact than problems identified and worked out during the planning phase. So at the very start of your project or initiative take time for the team members to share what each sees as potential problems. Then you will have time to mitigate the impacts. *Full Disclosure means you tell everyone everything that you know - the good, the bad and the ugly.*

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Concept #3: Empower Others

Team members often get frustrated when they aren't allowed to make the decisions that they feel are critical for a successful project. Even worse is when a decision they've made is overturned by someone higher up in the organization. Pushing the power and decision making down to the project/team level is critical for the success of the project or initiative. When issues leave the project level they tend to grow exponentially in both cost and time. You will generally get better quality decisions from those closest to the issues. Empowering your team members is your best bet for success.

In many organizations power resides away from the project and the team members don't feel that they can make decisions. Before you start a project/initiative, it is important to figure out ways to empower the team to do whatever they feel is required in order to succeed. Many teams are doomed before they start. *Empower Others means you push the decision making down to the project level before you start.*

Concept #4: Partnering Requires Commitment

Partnership doesn't just happen by itself, it takes commitment to build and grow. There will be many things along the way working to split up you and your partners. You have to keep together despite them. There will be times when it would be easier to just walk away instead of sitting down face-to-face to work things out – don't! Sometimes the best commitment you can make is to tell each other the truth and then deal with it constructively.

If there are legal agreements between you as partners, don't let them solely define your working relationship. The judicial process is adversarial by design. This can undermine the ability to build the partnering relationships required to succeed. You can't be both "partners" and "adversaries", they are mutually exclusive. *Commitment means doing whatever is necessary to keep your partnership alive and well.*

1: Take Ownership of the Problem

2: Commit to Full Disclosure

3: Empower Others

4: Partnering Requires Commitment

5: Build Trust

Concept #5: Build Trust

Trust is the keystone of partnership. Your partnership will be as good as your ability to create and grow trust between your team members. It allows for open, honest communication. You have more power to create trust than you might think. Your first interaction sets the tone for the relationship. If you go into the relationship trusting and seeking to cooperate and work together, then you are highly likely to get that attitude in return. If you go into the relationship trying to protect your interests and unwilling to be open, that is probably what you will get in return. Game theory shows that cooperative relationships produce larger wins than those where participants are protective and self-serving.

What I've learned about trust is that, for a team, "fairness" is the underpinning of creating trust. It is when someone feels that something is "unfair" that trust begins to erode. So when you have a problem or issue, always put "fairness" on the table and discuss it first. What is a fair way to resolve the issue? Most teams can figure it out. *Measure the level of trust on your project and you will have a good idea of how successful your project will be.*

By using these five concepts you can build the attitude and atmosphere that allows partnership to grow. For most projects/initiatives, working together, not against each other, is the only way they can hope to succeed.

Sue Dyer is the founder and president of the International Partnering Institute, a non-profit educational organization that offers certifications in professional partnering facilitation and partnering competencies. Sue is also president of OrgMetrics, a consulting firm specializing in partnering facilitation and non-adversarial approaches to resolving disputes. To find out more, please contact Sue at suedyer@orgmet.com or 925 449-8300. You can visit us on the web at www.partneringinstitute.org and www.orgmet.com



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