



What Makes a Productive Partnership?

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In 1993, with no investor funding, Kate and Andy Spade took a gamble on Kate’s creative vision. By early 2018, the Kate Spade brand, consisting of exquisite handbags and accessories, was worth \$3.1 billion. The partners’ complementary attributes (Kate’s artistic vision and design sense with Andy’s creative marketing abilities and drive) combined to create something that they hadn’t anticipated: that magical spark of synergy that delights fashionistas around the globe.

Kate credits the partnership with helping her express her vision, something she wouldn’t have had the confidence to do on her own. Andy gained the opportunity to jump from advertising to running what became a multi-million-dollar business. They’re both having a great time and, as Kate says, “I couldn’t imagine doing this with anybody else” ([Fast Company, 2005](#)).

Four Critical Partnership Issues

The magic that allowed Kate and Andy to create an international brand rarely just happens in a partnership. We’ve talked with many partners about their experiences. After hearing their stories, we’ve identified four issues that partners need to manage to create a positive partnership or heal an unhealthy one. They are:

- *Boundaries* – The limits around a partnership that define the space within which the two work together
- *Differences* – The two individuals’ experiences, skills, and perspectives that provide creativity and energy to the partnership
- *Process* – The methods that partners use to transform differences into products, services, and results

- *Connections* – The network of people, organizations, and support systems that sustain the partnership

Each of these four issues is constantly present within any partnership. Managing each issue effectively is the key to success.

The Issue of Boundaries

Boundaries are the limits placed around a partnership. They define what is OK and what is out of bounds, what is in and out of scope, and what partners want to achieve together. Because boundaries define partnerships, they require acute awareness on the part of each individual.

When two people first come together, an initial conversation is required to create a common understanding of what is “in” the partnership and what is “out.” This helps them identify the work they will do together. Two environmental leaders, for example, may decide to partner on a land conservation program, but keep financial matters separate.

As a partnership evolves, conversation continues, and boundaries evolve to allow for adaptation and growth. The environmental leaders may decide to pursue federal grant funding jointly, making it necessary to merge parts of their budgets. Or, they may decide to separate aspects of the program, focusing one manager on a specific aspect of conservation, while the other pursues her specialty.

What we do know is that partnerships never remain the same. The environment changes, individual needs shift, and company goals transform. Partners in the strongest relationships revisit boundaries periodically, making adjustments to ensure they remain viable, relevant, and productive. These conversations help sustain the health and strength of the partnership over time.



Boundary Questions

Purpose – Why are we partnering? What are our common goals? What are our individual goals? Why should we partner with each other and not others?

Guidelines – What are our ground rules for working together? What understandings help us be successful? What behaviors support our individual needs?

Time – When do we meet? For how long do we meet? Is there a limit to the duration of our partnership?

Space – Where do we meet? What physical space best suits our needs (i.e., location, feel, spaciousness, equipment)?

Discussables – What is okay for us to discuss? What topics are out of bounds? What do we want to keep private? What do we need to share?



The Issue of Differences

Differences provide the creative spark and energy in the partnership. If not managed properly, differences can spawn resentment and destructive conflict. Our observations of the thousands of partnerships we have coached lead us to believe that inattention to differences is one of the most common reasons partnerships fail.

When conflict is mismanaged, it can lead to the deterioration or, worse, the complete downfall of the partnership. So many fall into this trap, not realizing that conflict, when managed properly, can be one of the greatest sources of innovation, creativity, and productivity.

Each of us brings to a partnership differences in individual style and preferences; cultural perspectives such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, national origin, religion, and class; as well as life experiences. These differences act as lenses through which we view and interpret every interaction we have. Discussing differences explicitly can transform potentially destructive conflicts into conversations that produce creative energy and peak performance.

Values are the differences found most often at the core of major conflicts in partnerships. Values govern decision making, problem solving, and our deepest beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. They affect every conversation we have and every action we take. We have seen partners crash and burn because of their inability to manage differences in values. We have also helped partners

transform their values into powerful combinations that allow them to achieve more.

For example, we know two partners who continually clashed in times of stress. When faced with a challenge, Bella would begin listing all the opportunities open to the partners. Sasha would become frustrated and overwhelmed by Bella's long task list. She would grow pragmatic and choose the one course of action that she thought was right. Bella, in turn, would become upset by what she saw as the other's rigidity.

They managed to muddle their way through this pattern until, through a values exercise, they discovered the root of their conflict. Bella valued achievement highly. So, during times of stress, her achievement value kicked into gear and led her to become ambitious about how to handle the situation. Sasha valued realism highly. During those same times of stress, her energy would focus on how to handle the situation realistically, in a way that would be successful for all involved. After discovering this difference, the two gained the ability to laugh at themselves in times of stress. They even found ways to combine Bella's achievement drive with Sasha's realistic streak, allowing them to choose actions that were both impressive and attainable.

Each person brings specific **needs and expectations** into the partnership. These differences can thwart the most well-meaning partnerships when they are not expressed. It is amazing how many people truly believe their partner should psychically intuit their expectations. We have found few partners with the ability to read minds, so most are forced to articulate what they want and need out loud.





We see conversations about needs and expectations as invitations. They open possibilities and help define what the partners will do together. Discussing them outright makes it possible for partners to identify how to deal with them within the partnership. These discussions also prevent the situation of people becoming disappointed with unspoken needs and expectations are not addressed.

It is also important to address the different **perspectives** each brings based on their group-level experiences. We identify with many different groups, each of which adds lenses that influence how we view the world. A farm-raised Daughter of the American Revolution and a suburban, second-generation American will see some things differently. It is vitally important to the survival of the partnership that both can talk about their experiences and perspectives, bringing the richness of both to energize their work together.

People often see differences negatively, as barriers to collaboration and cooperation. Rarely do people focus on the **gifts** that different backgrounds and styles contribute to a partnership. Yet these gifts are usually what pull people together. The superbly analytical, logical manager may seek out an intuitive, visionary person to complement his or her gifts.

Identifying gifts overtly helps partners appreciate each other. It also helps encourage a sense of humor when, as the adage says, the trait people fall in love with is the one most likely to drive them crazy. We have seen people become aggravated by the exact quality that they need from the other.

Having the conversation about gifts helps people recognize this pattern and shift from frustration to appreciation. You'll find that, over time, managing differences becomes easier until, eventually, it becomes a source of energy, learning, and delight.



The Issue of Process

Many people, when undertaking a work project, put their undivided attention on the task at hand. They focus on the content of the work and the fact that "it," whatever "it" is, needs to *get done* (and usually *get done NOW!*). Individuals in a partnership are no different. Partners can focus so much on their product or work task that they neglect a very important part of the work: the process, or the *how*, of the partnership.

Processes refer to how people interact: how they talk, listen, and engage each other. They are the ways in which the two solve problems and make decisions. We cannot emphasize enough the power of process. Process is the crucial tool that leads to the growth or deterioration of a partnership. Partners with a negative process may emerge from discussions feeling battered, frustrated, or defeated. We have seen people come out of these conversations and call off the partnership, convinced that they can never make it work. Yet, we've also seen partners find ways to talk about the most difficult issues, ways that allow them to continue the partnership.

We know two partners who, after a particularly difficult meeting with their project sponsor, returned to a meeting room deflated and defeated. They looked at each other and both said, "I really don't want to talk about this." After a period of silence,

they both realized that they had to talk about it. For their partnership to continue, for their third entity to overcome the disappointment it had just faced, they had to address the issue. They began reluctantly. But then, as always, the magic happened: they started to analyze what went wrong, learn from their experience, and plan their next conversation with the sponsor. Their energy shifted, and they emerged from their discussion with renewed passion, enthusiasm, and confidence. These two partners had a process that helped them move through disappointment to renewal.

Process also allows partners to transform the differences we described earlier into sources of innovation and creative energy. In the follow chapters, the exercises will help partners create processes that work. They will help partners attend to these important questions:

- How do we listen so each of us feels heard?
- How do we support each other in ways that suit our needs?
- What do we do when we disagree?
- How can we shift disagreements into opportunities to learn and invent?
- How can we balance our individual needs and the needs of the partnership?
- What processes are in place to ensure our individual and collective growth?
- How do we transform our individual sets of gifts and talents into a greater set of gifts and talents?

The Issue of Connections

The web of relationships is probably the issue neglected most often in partnerships. Each of us has a network of friends, colleagues, and family that support us in various ways. This network becomes even more important when in a partnership since it provides necessary energy, support, and resources to the partners. It is common for people engaged in a partnership to forget about other relationships. This is a huge mistake, since those other connections can fuel and support a partnership, particularly during challenging times.



Identifying the web of relationships helps partners get clear about the support they can access from outside the partnership. It increases the resources and assets that help the partners achieve their goals. Without attention to the web of relationships, partners miss out on a vast source of energy that can take their relationship to a greater level of performance. At worst, ignoring the web can lead to the eventual burnout of the partnership.

We saw two partners emerge from near burnout by calling on their web of relationships. Ron and Kathy, two management consultants, had worked separately for years and found the life to be rather lonely. They met, hit it off, and decided to try partnering together. Once they did, their work skyrocketed. Soon, they found themselves jetting weekly to different countries to consult to a long list of high-profile clients. The stress and constant togetherness began to wear on the partnership. Ron confided that the work was starting to place a strain on the relationship. "It's hard to be with the same person all the time," he said. We agreed and encouraged him to broaden his range, pulling in others to support the partnership. Several months later, when we saw Ron and Kathy again, they were reenergized and recommitted to their partnership. Both had taken some time to work with other colleagues, go to meetings separately, and pursue other interests. They avoided imploding by drawing



on their web of relationships to broaden their range of activities and help them through a challenging time.

The Role of Commitment

Commitment is the essential component that holds all the issues together. It keeps each person at the table, working the issues during times of challenge, boredom, and distraction. Without the mutual commitment of each individual, or with radically different levels of commitment, a partnership cannot get off the ground, let alone succeed. Without commitment, there is no partnership.

Commitment to each of the four issues, throughout the life of the partnership, separates mediocre partnerships from great ones. This dedication sustains individual partners and is exactly what the third entity, the partnership itself, needs to survive.

The Partnering Path

Our observations of thousands of partnerships show a typical pattern of development, that we call

the Partnering Path. The Path can be divided into four phases: Consider, Create, Cultivate, Transform. We'll describe each in turn.

There's a lot that happens before partnerships begin. Individuals need to recognize that they want or need a partner. They then start exploring: possibilities, opportunities, and potential partners. They explore their potential fit with their partner. Sometimes, during this phase, individuals realize that the partnership isn't the right fit. They'll stop the process with and proceed down a new path, considering partnerships with others. This is what we call the **Consider** phase, in which potential partners perform the very important work that must occur before commitments can be made.

Once people commit, they make the jump into partnership. They enter the **Create** phase, in which they negotiate wants and needs, set expectations, and form the foundation for their work together. They work through who will be responsible for what and what they want to achieve through their partnership.

Partners then move to the **Cultivate** stage, in which they grow their partnership and work towards their goals. In this phase, often the longest in the partnership, they perform the work that they have set out for themselves. When challenging issues arise, they tend to them. They manage changes in their environments, evolve their partnership to adapt to those changes, and deepen their effectiveness.

The final stage occurs when partners decide that their partnership needs to change into a different form. This may occur when their work together is finished or when they need to form a different kind of partnership. They **transform** their partnership and look to the future.

The four phases of the Partnering Path usually happen in sequence. However, there are occasions in which a partnership, having been created, must be reconsidered and partners return to the **Create**, or sometimes even the **Consider** phase. This can happen when partners are reassigned to different projects or jobs, organizational goals shift, or individual priorities change. These events cause partners to return to earlier phases and reconsider or recreate their partnerships.

Along the Journey

In each stage of the partnering journey, different issues surface. We envision the partnering journey as having ups and downs, hills and valleys. At different moments in the journey, partners need to address issues relating to boundaries, differences, process, or the web. We imagine the partnering issues rolling by, with different issues surfacing at different times. There is no fixed formula to determine which issue will come up at what time. They simply come, in response to the changing contexts in which partners find themselves. Throughout these issues, commitment remains stable; it is essential for the health and sustenance of the partnership.

Some may think of issues as negative, something to be feared or avoided. For us, however, issues simply exist. They are the currents that flow

underneath the surface of any situation. While we once feared issues, we have learned to enjoy the ongoing learning and energy that they provide to a partnership. We've begun to think of ourselves as explorers, discovering new issues, and alchemists, transforming these issues into assets. We invite you to approach the journey with curiosity, patience, and the willingness to do the work that true partnerships require to become extraordinary.

About the Authors

Maya Townsend, founder and lead consultant of Partnering Resources, helps individuals, teams, and organizations thrive in our networked world. Her projects focus on developing strategic resilience, navigating change, and finding solutions to complex problems. Maya is co-editor of *Handbook for Strategic HR: Best Practices in Organization Development from the OD Network*. She lives in the Boston area. She can be reached at <http://partneringresources.com>.

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