



Book Dance Lessons

Six Steps to Great Partnerships in Business and Life

Heather Shea and Chip R. Bell
Berrett-Koehler, 1998

Recommendation

Chip R. Bell and Heather Shea take a crack at a much overlooked business skill: partnering. While many management gurus espouse the growing importance of partnerships and alliances to modern business, advice on how to actually implement and manage these relationships is much harder to find. *Dance Lessons* uses simple, emotional language in mapping out guidelines for successful partnering. These guidelines tend more toward general, interpersonal relationships than specific business cases. In fact, much of the book's content could be re-titled "How to Have a Successful Marriage" without changing so much as one word. Despite this lack of hard business focus, *BooksInShort* recommends this book on the strength of the intelligent exercises that the authors suggest for use in each stage of the partnering process. While *Dance Lessons* might be light on the numbers and factual examples that business readers have come to expect, the passion that the authors bring to the subject will leave you highly conscious of the critical, but often neglected, personal aspects of business partnerships.

Take-Aways

- Partnering is the essential skill for success in business.
- Partnerships succeed or fail because of interpersonal skills, not business skills.
- Great partnerships require commitment, honesty and generosity.
- Learning to be a partner in business and life mirrors the process of learning to dance with a partner.
- Determine at the outset exactly what kind of partnership you want and how involved with your partner you want to be.
- Make sure that you and your partner share attitudes, values and goals.
- To prepare for inevitable challenges you will face, rehearse partnership skills early in the partnership.
- Exchange feedback and evaluate your partnership often, to keep it growing even while it is well under way.
- When there is pain in a partnership, take the opportunity to learn and grow.
- Ending partnerships is as important as beginning them.

Summary

The Partnership Dance

Success in today's world depends on the ability to develop and maintain partnerships. Yet partnering is an art, not a science. Learning how to form an effective partnership resembles learning a great dance. In both, the learning and mastery occur in stages.

Partnership is a deliberate blending of capacities for the continuous mutual benefit of involved parties. That can mean a business partnership or a personal relationship. The principles are the same. A partnership is a process, not a single event. Great partners also spend a surprising amount of time preparing before they actually join together.

Like dance partners, great personal or business partners and partnerships go through six stages: focusing, auditioning, rehearsing, dancing, hurting and bowing out.

Step One: Preparing for Partnership

Different kinds of partnerships exist. The type of partnership that is appropriate depends on how involved the partners want to become. Choose your kind of partnership according to your purpose, and find someone who wants the same kind of partnership.

“Partnerships generally do not end in conflict. They go from vanilla to death. They end far more often because of neglect than strife, so the most important lesson is to keep partnerships healthy along the way.”

The highest level of partnership is The Tango. Tango partners symbolically complete each other. They move almost as one. Tango partnerships are deeply personal. They require great emotional investment and a high level of trust and loyalty. This partnership requires intense preparation and works best when each partner wants a great deal of interdependence and when the partners cannot afford the costs of failure.

“Great partners know that they are not perfect, nor do they expect anyone else to be perfect. But they have faith that they can become better and that their partners and others they deal with share their desire.”

The Waltz is a partnership in which the participants work closely together, but have far less emotional investment. Waltzers are easily distracted by outside issues, and they often look outside the partnership for solutions to problems. Waltzes are good for partners who need the security of an alliance but who also want some freedom.

Square Dances are moderate partnerships. Square dancers carry out some moves with their partners, but they also dance with others. Square dances are high-risk alliances, because the partners are ambivalent. They must work hard to focus themselves on the partnership.

The Twist consists of two people dancing separately in front of each other. This is the right relationship for partners who will work separately from one another most of the time, but who must come together for one key task. Supplier-vendor relationships are typically "twist" partnerships.

“Keep in mind that if your partner says there is imbalance, there is imbalance. In relationships, perception is more important than reality.”

Finally, partners can join in a Line Dance, which is more like an emotional support group than an interdependent coupling. The dancers are together only because it is more fun to dance in a group. These partnerships provide assistance and support without emotional entanglement. This is the right partnership when partners gain value from the alliance, but neither one is dependent on its success.

Finding Your Partnership's Focus

When you are thinking about a partnership, focus on two main factors: the purpose of the partnership, and the personal or commercial compatibility of the partners.

“Congruent values make a partnership last. Differences make it rich.”

Six questions can help you focus: Can this partnership bring out the best in all involved? Can the partners engage totally when the partnership demands it? Can the partnership withstand total honesty? Can it bring respect and honor to the partners? Will it have reliability and loyalty? Have the partners made the commitment to stay in the partnership when there's trouble?

The partners in great partnerships show a giving attitude, far beyond the basic requirements. Partners must trust each other, be honest and keep their word. Their mutual vision must support the partnership. They must balance their rewards fairly over the long term.

Step Two: Selecting Great Partners

To dance your best, you need a partner who fits you. In great partnerships, each partner has capacities and capabilities the other lacks. They fill each other's gaps. Great partners are ready for passion. They are committed to seeking the best. They bounce back from trouble and are pragmatic. They love the energy of their encounters. They make sure their dance makes sense.

“The continual cycle of failing, learning and succeeding teaches great partners to be flexible, to be hardy and to persevere.”

Be certain that you and your partner have complementary strategies. Your values should, at least, be compatible. You need similar views on communication, on how long the partnership will last and on monitoring and control practices. From a business point of view, you should make sure your organizations are structured to support the partnership.

“Partnerships are greatness in the making. They are hopeful pursuits of magic, not efforts valued only at the finale.”

Partners need common goals. Begin with compatible current intellectual capital and make provisions for acquiring more as you need it later. Agree on how to divide rewards, profits and benefits. Partners must respect each other's privacy and agree upon internal leadership and control.

To make sure you and your partner match each other well, ask yourselves the following questions: How important is being the best to you? How would your previous partners describe your attitude? Do you believe partners should be totally honest about every aspect of their dealings? What would help you stay in the partnership when things get tough?

Step Three: Getting the Partnership in Shape

You may be tempted to rush through rehearsal, but this is the key to great partnerships. In great partnerships, five things happen:

1. All partners have the skills, competence and wisdom to perform their roles.
2. They challenge themselves with a clearly defined, shared goal.
3. They rely on cues or pacts that keep them on track.
4. They provide effective feedback that nurtures the partnership.
5. They honor a set of protocols, standards of behavior, that they can rely on in difficult situations.

Rehearsing is a conscious act. Work on specific skills with your partner. Set up a hypothetical situation and work through it. This will allow you to discover traps or likely errors and to build confidence for real challenges. Exaggerate problems in rehearsal so real problems will seem easy.

Practice listening. In effective listening, always give the other person your full attention. Practice having productive dialogue. This means starting with a shared agenda for the conversation, asking productive questions and working toward an achievable outcome.

“Partnerships diminish the protection of anonymity. They are poor associations in which to hide.”

Practice giving advice. State a clear issue or problem - make sure you and your partner both want to address the problem - and ask permission to give advice. Always give advice in the first person singular. Say "I find that" or "What's worked for me," not "You ought to."

Step Four: Keeping the Motion

Great partnerships feel "on" in a very special way. Skill and attitude must work in harmony to reach the level. Bring these gifts to your partnership:

- Generosity - Adopt a giver mentality. Remember important dates, like your partner's birthday, and show your generosity by surprising your partner with personal gifts.
- Faith - People with faith are happier and more optimistic. They worry less. Adopt a deep-rooted confidence and belief in what you cannot prove.
- Passion - Partnerships need passion, because business relationships come filled with rationality, order and sanity. Sane partners must bring some "insane" passion.
- Inclusion - Involve your partner. Ask your partner for help when you need it. Help your partner see the partnership as a collective effort.

“Before asking for feedback, volunteer a brief, honest summary of areas in which you know you need to improve. This tells your partner you are seriously interested in input and not just fishing for compliments.”

A great partnership needs rational discipline. Use your head. Initiate phone or e-mail contact. See your partner in person. Offer ideas and recommendations. Use direct language. Keep differences and conflict in the open. Never "bad-mouth" your partner. Use problems as opportunities to learn. Praise without criticizing. Get support from people outside the partnership. Don't focus so much on each other that you miss information that could improve your performance.

Step Five: Managing Pain

Pain is a normal part of any relationship. It helps signal areas where improvement is needed. First, you must see the signal. Then, you must choose the right action. When you are uncomfortable or hurt, look inward. Reflect on the state of the partnership. Assess the partnership's communications.

You may choose among three options for pain management: stop, seize or scrutinize. Stopping the hurt is best when the pain threatens to injure you or the partnership. If the pain appears to lead toward growth, seize the opportunity. If the origin of the pain is uncertain, scrutinize it.

When you make a mistake in the partnership, be humble. Express sincere empathy with your partner. Show your loyalty. Stop the pain. If you make a mistake out of fear of success, or out of guilt, seize the chance to overcome these obstacles. If you violate a core protocol, you can threaten the future of the partnership. Scrutinize your actions and motives.

“Part of the partnership challenge is being very clear on what is expected of each partner. Should expectations change, partners need instant clarity to make the appropriate adjustments.”

When your partner makes a mistake, look for the motives underneath the mistake. If your partner is angry, look for the frustrated need under the anger. If your partner is arrogant or overconfident, look for the reason. If your partner breaches a core protocol, it will take great effort to recover. Be patient.

Step Five: Calling It Curtains

Great partnerships are ended as deliberately as they are begun. Partnerships sometimes end in animosity because the partners try to keep dancing after the music is over.

“Lace your final meeting or two with opportunities to remember, reflect and refocus.”

Sometimes, a partnership simply fails. If one partner wants to end it and the other does not, the situation is awkward. If you want the partnership to continue, re-state your commitment to the partnership and focus on the rational benefits of continuing. In business, any show of sentiment or hint of blame probably will end the partnership on the spot.

If you want to exit, show the same sensitivity you displayed at the outset of the relationship. If the partnership ends in animosity, review your agreements carefully. You may need the help of a professional mediator.

If you both want to end your partnership, or if outside forces demand an end, do not let the experience sour you about future partnerships. Instead, view it as a chance to understand what went wrong and what could have gone better.

Sometimes, even successful partnerships must end. Take the ending as a chance to educate, evaluate, anticipate and celebrate. Learn what was missing in the relationship. Look for lessons. Use "what ifs?" to imagine what you could have done differently. Evaluate the partnership to see what actually happened. Do a thorough critique. Anticipate your next partnership by imagining how this one could have been more successful. Do more "what ifs?" At the end, take time to celebrate what you accomplished. This can be as simple as a special dinner or a drink after work. Acknowledge your partner’s contribution. Show your gratitude.

About the Authors

Chip Bell is a senior partner at Performance Research Associates in Dallas. He has been a trainer or consultant to companies including IBM, Microsoft, Cadillac, Motorola, Sprint and Harley-Davidson. He is author of 11 books, including three bestsellers. **Heather Shea** is CEO of Inspiratrix, Inc., a training and consulting firm in Orlando, Florida. She has been a speaker, trainer or consultant for many firms, including 3M, Ford, Hewlett Packard and Walt Disney World.
