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Why Partners Need Complementary Strengths

Your strengths are stronger, and your weaknesses weaker, than you realize

by Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller

Adapted from *Power of 2: How to Make the Most of Your Partnerships at Work and in Life* (Gallup Press, November 2009)

Several decades ago, a junior high shop teacher wanted to impress upon his new students the dangers of the oxyacetylene torch. "Pay attention, class," he said, pulling a balloon from his pocket and holding it to the nozzle of the torch. "I am going to fill this balloon with oxygen." When the balloon was full, he lit a match under it, producing a strong pop. "Not bad, eh?" said the teacher, smiling at the rapt students.

He pulled another balloon from his pocket. "Now this time, I am going to fill the balloon with acetylene," he said. Following the same procedure, he made a short flare as the fuel caught fire. "Wow!" said the kids. "Cool!"

The teacher pulled yet another balloon from his pocket. "You've seen what happens to each of these elements separately. Now let me show you what happens when I put them together." He repeated the procedure a third time, opening the valves for the oxygen and the acetylene as the balloon grew larger. "You might want to plug your ears," said the teacher, putting the flame to the latex.

BAM!

The mixture exploded with such force, the students could hear it loudly despite their plugged ears. Their jaws dropped as they looked at one another. Point made.

Was it the oxygen or the acetylene that caused the explosion? Neither. Or rather, both. Separately, they are impressive. Together, they create a mixture so hot it can melt steel. The power is in the combination.

Before you can forge a successful alliance, you must understand what you bring to the combination, and equally important, what you don't.

What you bring (and don't bring) to the collaboration

Your partnerships work on the same principle. The best happen when you and someone who has strengths that complement yours join forces and focus on a single goal. Your strengths cancel out your partner's weaknesses, and vice versa. You accomplish together what could not be done separately.

Before you can forge a successful alliance, you must understand what you bring to the combination, and equally important, what you don't. Collaboration is more than doubling up -- more than just twice the oxygen or twice the acetylene. The key to achieving success is not trying to be someone else or striving to be as good as your collaborator at whatever he does best or seeking to be universally proficient. It's in discovering your own exceptional abilities, recognizing your weaknesses, and understanding how someone else's abilities complement your own.

This combination of reciprocal abilities was at the heart of what we discovered during five years of research into collaboration. Through repeated waves of surveying, we asked thousands of randomly selected adults to identify a successful partnership and a failed one (outside of their family). We then asked them to respond to parallel statements about both of those relationships.

Their responses were analyzed to identify the statements that, when answered positively, best predict collaborative success (and when answered negatively, best foreshadow failure). In the end, 23 statements made the cut to become part of the Gallup Partnership Rating Scales.

Three of these statements emerged as the most important for determining how well your abilities mesh with those of your collaborator:

- We complement each other's strengths.
- We need each other to get the job done.
- He or she does some things much better than I do, and I do some things much better than he or she does.

Survey participants rated their level of agreement with each of the statements on a scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Ratings that averaged less than 3.0 are classified as "poor" or "very poor." These responses were typical of relationships in which the participant felt he or she could just as easily do something alone as rely on the other person. Scores of at least 3.0 but less than 3.6 are considered "borderline," the ho-hum area that, while it may lack acrimony, also lacks intensity. Averages greater than 3.6 are in the "good" range.

We were surprised how strongly a collaborator had to score all three of these statements to demonstrate that he or she was in a resilient alliance. Only by answering 5 to all three statements does a participant indicate a level of complementary strengths that Gallup considers "exceptional." Why no tolerance for less-than-perfect scores? Because the most important reference point on such a scale is not the middle, but the top. Answering 4 to any of the statements, while good in an absolute sense, also indicates a full point of reservation -- something substantial that is keeping you from giving the most positive response. In

practice, this holding back is costly. It reveals that you and your counterpart are not quite a perfect fit or don't absolutely need each other to get the job done. In exceptional two-person teams, there is no such reservation.

These statements reflect not just interdependence, but a mutual recognition of it. One person we interviewed told us how her creativity combined well with a colleague's attention to details. Two producers of programming for a children's medical center discovered that the understanding one had of the hospital's communication needs complemented the other's writing, editing, and video skills. Coeditors of a newsletter found that their work was effective because, as one of them said, "We each contributed something the other lacked, I a sense of style and she a specific political awareness, so that what we wrote wouldn't embarrass anyone."

The characteristics that make a partnership solid could be anything from a physical attribute (the height of a basketball forward) or a credential (a medical license) to experience in a certain field (a decade as an architect) or personal reputation (a relationship with every media buyer in the market). You should be able to name these qualities for yourself and your counterpart without much hesitation: "I bring _____ to the partnership; my partner adds _____."

Anything crucial to accomplishing the goal that one person lacks and the other has increases your rationale for working together. Sometimes what's required is the difference in how the two of you think or act. One consistently sees the potential; the other routinely sees the risks. One generates ideas; the other puts them into production. One is good with technology; the other is good with people.

People often confuse collaboration with friendship, but they are not the same thing.

A successful collaborator must resist the ego-gratifying temptation to take too much credit. If a person honestly recognizes that his counterpart does some things much better than he does and that he needs the other person to get the job done, he is less susceptible to fall into the trap of conceit. In a strong partnership, both participants are always promoting the abilities of the other. They constantly speak in terms of "we" or "us," rather than "I" or "me."

People often confuse collaboration with friendship, but they are not the same thing. While getting along is important to both kinds of relationships, if you team up with a buddy whose strengths do not complement your own, don't be surprised if you find yourselves being more social than successful. Some of your best potential partners are people with whom you have yet to build strong personal rapport but who nonetheless have the oxygen to go with your acetylene.

Strong partnerships prevail despite a persistent cultural bias for focusing on individual achievements. Many observers of a two-person team want to know which of them is the real reason for their success, failing to understand that neither is the complete equation.

The polymath myth

A pernicious idea works its way through classrooms, into corporate training departments, and even around the dinner table in many homes. There's a good chance it hampers your working relationships. It goes by various names: the well-rounded person, the Renaissance man, *homo universalis*, or the polymath (from the Greek word *polymathēs*, meaning "having learned much"). It is the belief that anyone can accomplish anything alone with enough determination and perseverance.

Blame Leonardo da Vinci. His gifts for drawing and painting, his understanding of anatomy, and his penchant for inventing labeled him a universal genius and led millions to wonder why they had not done such remarkable things. Blame Thomas Jefferson, whose interests ranged from politics to science to architecture to agriculture. Or blame the creators of heroes such as Spider-Man, MacGyver, and James Bond -- characters who appeal to us because they are self-sufficient in any crisis. We want to be like that.

This fallacy has tremendous traction in the popular press. Self-help gurus such as Tony Robbins chide their followers for hiding behind "excuses." "Using the power of decision gives you the capacity to get past any excuse to change any and every part of your life *in an instant*," Robbins wrote in his bestseller *Awaken the Giant Within*. "If you truly decide to," he wrote in bold type, "you can do almost anything."

One book purports to help the reader learn "how to think like Leonardo da Vinci." Another book by the same author promises to teach a person how to "innovate like Edison." "Genius is made, not born. And human beings are gifted with an almost unlimited potential," proclaims the back cover of the da Vinci book.

Few ideas so widely accepted are so demonstrably wrong. The polymath is a myth. It contradicts reason, the latest research on genetic inheritance, human nature, and even the Bible (which speaks of "diversities of gifts" among different people). Da Vinci was an incredible artist and thinker, but he often struggled to finish his work. For all his talents, Jefferson was horrible at handling money, dying deeply in debt. He seemed organically incapable of the kinds of constructive confrontations that were welcomed by his sometime collaborator John Adams. And fictional characters such as James Bond are just that -- fiction.

Steve Martin could stake a claim on being a Renaissance man. In addition to being a comedian, he is an actor, bestselling author, playwright, screenwriter -- and an accomplished banjo player who performed several times on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. During one of those appearances, the host asked, "Do you play other instruments besides the banjo?"

"No," he told Letterman. "But, let me ask you a question: If Yo-Yo Ma were sitting here, would you say, 'You play anything else besides the cello?'"

The pressure to be all things to all people is pervasive. But doing just a few things exceptionally well is a better path to success than spreading yourself thinly across dozens of disciplines, becoming, as they say in Spanish, *aprendiz de todo*, *maestro de nada* (apprentice of everything, master of nothing).

The Lake Wobegon effect

When people are asked to rate themselves, researchers often find what they call the "Lake Wobegon effect," nearly everyone believing that they are above average on just about everything. A majority of Swedish drivers think they drive better than average. Most undergraduates believe they have above-average popularity. People scoring in the bottom 25 percent on tests of humor, of grammar, and of logic grossly overestimate their test performance and ability.

The flip side of this phenomenon is that people who excel at a task often think their work is unexceptional. They take for granted what comes naturally to them, assuming that others can perform the task just as well. Their overestimation of others' abilities leads them to suffer what one study called "undue modesty" about their own strengths.

Legendary investor Warren Buffett realized his enthusiasm was well-tempered by Charlie Munger's skepticism.

As a consequence of these misconceptions, most people see themselves as more well-rounded than they really are, above average where they are weak, and close to average where they are incredible. But they're wrong. Instead of complete circles, people are puzzle pieces. Some aspects of their aptitude dramatically exceed those of the general population, while other qualities are well below the mean.

Great partners know where they are strong and where they are weak. Pierre Omidyar, founder of eBay, discovered the "analytic powerhouse" he needed for the business in Stanford MBA Jeff Skoll. "It was the perfect balance," Omidyar said of his work with Skoll. "I tended to think more intuitively, and he could say, 'Okay, let's see how we can actually get that done.'" Skoll was intensely ambitious, which helped with running the business; Omidyar was more laid-back, which helped him work with the growing group of buyers and sellers.

Legendary investor Warren Buffett realized his enthusiasm was well-tempered by Charlie Munger's skepticism. Buffett dubbed his collaborator the "abominable no-man" and claimed that together, they made better investment decisions.

The same pattern emerges in common working relationships. "I was in a retail business with another woman for about 15 years," one woman told Gallup. "She was a born leader, and I didn't mind because I am more reticent. We both made decisions together and did the work together. She had previous retail experience and helped me to grow more confident in that area, buying at market, merchandising, etc. I had always worked in an office previously and had more patience and did the checkbook. We worked well together because we were different."

So admit it: You stink at some things. You have blind spots, weaknesses, areas in which others seem to perform effortlessly while you struggle just to be average. You are also overly modest about your strengths. What seems to be no big deal to you is difficult for others. Your strengths are stronger and your weaknesses weaker than you realize. You need help. You are also precisely the help someone else needs.

Your problem is not your "excuses." It's the fallacy that you can make the basket without an assist, that you can be Edison or da Vinci or anyone else except your talented and incomplete self, or that oxygen or acetylene alone will be anywhere near as powerful as the two combined.

The Eight Elements of a Powerful Partnership

Great partnerships don't just happen. Whether your joint mission is to build a successful company, coach a team, improve the government, do something spectacular for a charity, or any other worthy goal, all successful partnerships share the same crucial ingredients. When all these elements combine, partnerships become not just effective in accomplishing the mission, but also personally rewarding, sometimes intensely so.

Complementary Strengths: Everyone has weaknesses and blind spots that create obstacles to reaching a goal. One of the most powerful reasons for teaming up is working with someone who is strong where you are weak, and vice versa. Individuals are not well-rounded, but pairs can be.

A Common Mission: When a partnership fails, the root cause is often that the two people were pursuing separate agendas. When partners want the same thing badly enough, they will make the personal sacrifices necessary to see it through.

Fairness: Humans have an instinctive need for fairness. Because the need for fairness runs deep, it is an essential quality of a strong partnership.

Trust: Working with someone means taking risks. You are not likely to contribute your best work unless you trust that your partner will do his or her best. Without trust, it's easier to work alone.

Acceptance: We see the world through our own set of lenses. Whenever two disparate personalities come together, there is bound to be a certain friction from their differences. This can be a recipe for conflict unless both learn to accept the idiosyncrasies of the other.

Forgiveness: People are imperfect. They make mistakes. They sometimes do the wrong thing. Without forgiveness, the natural revenge motives that stem from friend-or-foe instincts will overpower all the reasons to continue a partnership, and it will dissolve.

Communicating: In the early stages of a partnership, communicating helps to prevent misunderstandings; later in the relationship, a continuous flow of information makes the work more efficient by keeping the two people synchronized.

Unselfishness: In the best working relationships, the natural concern for your own welfare transforms into gratification in seeing your comrade succeed. Those who have reached this level say such collaborations become among the most fulfilling aspects of their lives.

Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller recently completed five years of research identifying and analyzing the crucial dimensions of a successful partnership. Their book, *Power of 2*, is scheduled for publication in November 2009.

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