

THE MEANING OF PARTNERSHIP

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Summary: “Partnership” can mean much more than simply working together. It can be a completely different way of structuring human relations. The authors outline the difference between what they call real partnership and the old understanding of partnership that is driven by a belief in zero-sum “dominator” relations. They present some of the processes they use in doing partnership education in corporations and communities.

The term “partnership” has many different meanings. It refers to relationships with vendors, limited partnerships, business alliances, the emphasis on team work, and a new spirit of seeking out opportunities for collaboration and networking. But, partnership is much more than a fashionable new buzzword. It literally calls for a complete shift in the way we view and, above all, create human relationships.

In this article we want to 1) clarify the term partnership; 2) suggest that partnership can mean far more than simply “working together” or “collaborating;” 3) illustrate how an expanded understanding of partnership can apply to all our relationships; and 4) briefly outline a process we have used to introduce to organizations this expanded concept of partnership.

Once a decision is made to work together, the way in which that decision is implemented and the style of the interactions are key to the success of the enterprise. The desire to partner is not enough. We have repeatedly found that many efforts collapse because the participants have a mindset which actively sabotages partnership.

In our book *From Power to Partnership* (Harper Collins, 1993) and in our workshops and corporate consulting, we stress that *having* a relationship is not enough. It’s the *quality* that counts, whether in relationships with vendors, subordinates, bosses, neighbors, family members or spouses.

In this article we want to show why it is important to differentiate between a real partnership, a mutually beneficial relationship in which both parties win, and a dominator relationship that is just a convenient opportunity to work together, where the quality of the relationship still focuses on zero-sum, win-lose, or what we call dominator relations. Unless this distinction is clarified and ground rules are established around the quality of relationship, the term partnership will just mean “working together” dominator-style. We believe it can mean much more than that -- it is a worldview that embraces mindsets, values, behaviors, and interactions.

From Domination to Partnership

We have drawn on the writings of systems scientist and historian Riane Eisler* who has outlined two different models for the organization of human interactions: the dominator model and the partnership model. The dominator model creates a great disparity between genders, a high degree of institutionalized violence --in larger social systems this takes the form of political imprisonment, torture, police brutality, or family violence, sadly still perpetrated every day all over the globe -- and a high degree of institutionalized fear -- from explicit or implied threats against one's life, health or well-being to the intimidation some bosses use to keep subordinates in line.

The dominator model emphasizes power hierarchies and polarization, an "either/or" approach to life: you're either my friend or my enemy, I'm right and you're wrong. The primary organizational characteristic is ranking -- entire organizations set up in such a way as to clearly differentiate levels. A great deal of energy is expended in climbing the ladder, struggling with peers to reach the top of the pyramid, and maintaining and securing the power position one has achieved.

If so-called partnerships are entered with this dominator mindset, then clearly the word partnership means nothing more than working together in the same old way. Unfortunately, it has been our experience that most “partnerships” are just that -- more of the same.

The partnership model emphasizes gender equality, little or no institutionalized violence or fear, and a flatter, more egalitarian organization. Since the primary organizational concern is not ranking, relationships do not revolve around figuring out who is boss or who is in control. Rather, the primary

organizational principle is linking, bringing people together in mutually beneficial relationships and figuring out how individual responsibilities and contributions blend to produce extraordinary creative results.

Challenging assumptions

People in our workshops and lectures respond with excitement to this alternative way of relating. Many people are justly tired of the old, dominator way of relating, and are relieved to imagine a different world, a different society, and different institutions inspired by the idea of partnership as a foundation for interaction.

But then we take the process a step farther and start to sketch what this world of partnership would look like. When we question the underlying assumptions of people's ideas of partnership, what partnership would mean in their workplace, it becomes clear why it's so hard to get beyond the dominator system. Most people believe that partnership means no competition, no conflicts, no disagreement, and no real leadership. In the focus groups set up to explore the idea of partnership, we commonly hear comments such as "I saw my group was having a problem [during the discussion], but I didn't say anything because I didn't want to be a dominator."

The assumption behind this comment is that partnership means some kind of homogeneous, wishy-washy, milquetoast world where nobody expresses differences or disagreements, nobody takes leadership roles, and everybody is always "nice." This is profoundly misleading. Partnership is too easily dismissed as unrealistic and the dominator belief system is one more time reaffirmed as "unfortunately" the only workable option.

It's useful to explore how the two models actually translate in everyday life situations. We have found that focus groups exploring realistic what-if scenarios of partnership relationships can often come up with very important insights. After we challenge the notion that partnership is some unattainable utopia, we ask groups to be realistic and a) try to come up with role-models and examples that illustrate partnership for them (from all walks of life and historical periods); b) explain why and how these examples are relevant; c) discuss what is stopping them as individuals and as a group from creating

partnership in the same way as their role models; and, d) contrast these behaviors with dominator behaviors. At the same time, we ask the group members to model what they think partnership is like in their own group process. Here are some of the results of the discussions.

The importance of conflict

Conflict situations, for example, are handled very differently in the two systems. In a dominator world, conflicts tend to be avoided, repressed, unexpressed, or expressed to a third party. When manifested, conflicts take on threatening, destructive and even explosive expressions, from confrontations to warfare -- whether on the battleground or in the office. At the verbal level, communication typically takes the form of debate, accusations, and constant repetition of one's own point of view in order to "win" the arguments. This kind of mis-communication is all too common in organizations.

In the real partnership oriented systems that we have observed and worked with, conflict is much more open; but, conflict-resolution is practiced so as to avoid ugly escalations. Co-workers dialogue frequently and confront openly the minor irritations of their daily work life. Together they devise solutions. They spend time clarifying their purpose and destination, and figure out ways of helping one another to achieve. They streamline processes and make them easy, flexible, and enabling. If a fundamental disagreement arises about the strategic mission of their company, they work together to manage a separation that, at the very least, allows all parties to maintain mutual respect.

In contrast, the dominator model increases the probability of conflict with its dichotomous, "either-or" view of the world which polarizes people at the opposite side of issues. By rewarding dominance, it fosters unproductive internal struggles.

The role of competition

Another fundamental difference in partnership versus domination is the perspective on competition. In a partnership system, competition is a challenge to give the best of yourself, to test your skills against standards of excellence, and to strive to become a benchmark. In a dominator system,

competition is often practiced unfairly. It is focused on crippling or obliterating the other; it is lived like a war where the end justifies the means; and, it becomes ugly.

Dominator systems are based on a fundamental assumption also known as "the myth of scarcity," namely that there isn't enough to go around. This assumption fuels the majority of competitive behaviors in dominator oriented organizations. The partnership philosophy instead encourages a belief in abundance, an attitude of hope that human beings who link efforts and resources can create enough to go around, and a belief that bread and fish can be multiplied. The key is shared imagination, enthusiasm, hard work, and lots of creative juices. A fundamental pillar of partnership is the freeing of an organization's creative talent. In contrast, the dominator oriented organization suffocates creativity with burdensome restrictions and a fear of making mistakes.

The function of leadership

The role of leader is fundamentally different in the two worldviews we are exploring. Whereas in dominator oriented organizations the leader holds most of the power for as long as he (mostly) can and fosters a mix of trepidation and fear, in partnership organizations leaders emerge in relation to tasks. Decisions belong to those who have the most expertise or skill in a given area. Leaders coordinate, facilitate, remove obstacles, encourage, mediate, and advise. The metaphors used for leadership shift from images of captains and generals to those of teachers, mentors, and orchestra directors. Each person on the team will be a leader and a follower at different times, depending on the situation and on the mutually agreed upon commitments and obligations.

Understanding cause and effect

Another fundamental difference between partnership and dominator views of the world is the relation between cause and effect. In a dominator worldview steeped in reductionistic thinking, it takes a big cause to produce a big effect. As a single individual I have no hope to make an impact on a huge organization. I am helpless. The sum of these individual thoughts produces a deadly apathy, the well known organizational inertia.

Shaped by systems thinking, the partnership worldview teaches that in complex systems small causes can produce extraordinary effects. Where islands of partnership are created, hope blossoms and the creative cycle spins larger and larger ripples, like the proverbial pebble in a pond.

These examples illustrate a) how the idea of partnership can be developed in small groups, with a minimum of theoretical background, through an ongoing process of modeling and creative exploration -- “What would leadership/conflict be like in a partnership system?” “What would I have to do, here and now, to begin to model partnership in my relationship with my group members?”; b) that developing partnership is an ongoing process of both relationship-maintaining and relationship-creating; c) that it is possible to shift to a level of relationship that can create partnership as opposed to domination.

A short case study

It is fascinating to watch the unpredictable consequences of one action. In 1994 we were honored to be the keynote speakers at the prestigious Starr Symposium at the University of Kansas City-Missouri (UMKC). The goal of that year's conference was to promote partnership in the Kansas City community through the partnership of women and men in business and academia. A pretty ambitious plan, to be sure, but a very important one in the partnership worldview. Once it is recognized that human beings fundamentally come in two kinds -- female and male -- it is easy to understand that partnership begins in this most basic of human relationships.

We designed a workshop to help the group generate a series of initiatives to spread the partnership spirit into the larger community. At first the two "polarities" met separately to identify a) what they most appreciated about the other gender in the domains of education, business, and the arts; and b) what they would most like to change. Then small groups, each composed of both men and women, generated initiatives that would leverage the strengths and overcome the negatives of typical gender interactions in those specific domains. Task forces formed around the initiatives that stimulated the most enthusiasm.

Six months later, the outcomes were unexpected and varied: a theater piece on partnership and gender relations performed by some of the workshop participants in a Kansas City theater; a national

survey of attitudes of high school students on sex and gender published in a major newspaper; and a course on partnership introduced for the first time in the university curriculum. A year later, the UMKC Women's Center, which had been the driving force behind the Starr Symposium, sent a delegation to the Women Conference in Beijing. There, they hosted a very successful workshop on partnership using the process we had presented in Kansas City.

This same process is applicable to other organizational settings. For instance, two groups that need to interact across functional lines or business unit boundaries can set up a voluntary process to envision what a partnership system might actually look like between them. Once they critically examine underlying assumptions and establish a partnership approach to interaction, cooperation, conflict resolution, and leadership, they will see creative cycles multiply and generate abundance for all.

Conclusion

In this article we have suggested that the word partnership can mean far more than just working together. It can mean a new way of working together, one that goes beyond the all too common dominator mindset of “I win/you lose.” Once we have outlined the basic dimensions of partnership -- linking rather than ranking, gender equality, flatter organizational structure, and a win-win, mutually beneficial approach to relationships -- we can begin to explore what this would actually mean for us. The way we have found this to work best is through a combination of creative exploration in a “what-if” mode and ongoing modeling.

Partnership can indeed mean many things, but it is up to us to choose whether it means business as usual, or a true attempt at changing the fundamental structure of human interactions in the workplace. The alternative to the old model of control and domination/submission is there: it's up to us to enact it and create real partnerships.

* Riane Eisler (1987). *The Chalice and the Blade*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Pull Quotes:

Partnership can be much more than a fashionable buzzword. It can point the way to a fundamental shift

in human relations.

Partnership is not a utopia. It is simply applying our creativity to human interaction.