A guide to forming effective partnerships

Developing sustainable partnerships is an important strategy for companies trying to meet their corporate citizenship goals. It allows them to leverage their partners' resources – including expertise and human capital – while engaging stakeholders and building awareness on important issues.

Partnerships are a means of achieving objectives that cannot be accomplished as efficiently alone. Billy Brittingham, director of Executive Education at the Center for Corporate Citizenship, identifies five questions that companies should ask when considering whether a partnership is the most productive tactic to achieve a desired goal.

- Does my team have the capabilities and resources to achieve our goals or do we need additional resources or capabilities?
- Is there a logical partner who shares the same or related goals?
- Do they have complementary assets and capabilities?
- Are our cultures compatible?
- Can you envision how you would work with a partner to amplify your existing resources and capabilities and maximize your ability to achieve your goals?

Once you have sketched out answers to these questions, you are ready to approach a potential partner. Brittingham emphasizes, "It is important to be sure that connecting to a partner will enhance your ability
to meet your goals.” The scoping phase can be used to create further conversations and engagement on your initial ideas and then to build the case for partnering, if necessary.”

Scoping and building
This process involves figuring out what issues you want to address through your program, whether you need a partner to achieve those goals, and what partners present the best likelihood for success based on complementary capabilities, culture, and connection.

- The corporation and nonprofit exercise due diligence and formulate criteria for selection.
- Both parties develop mutually acceptable procedures for collaboration.
- Both parties define problems clearly and explore measurable solutions.
- The joint team focuses on a manageable set of tasks that can be implemented quickly.
- Formal collaborations should be highly focused, appropriately resourced, and backed with strong commitments.

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Billy Brittingham
Director of Executive Education
Center for Corporate Citizenship

Partnerships are developed because companies want to address stakeholder concerns and address a specific issue(s) – education, climate change, etc. – in order to improve the competitive context in which they operate. As a starting point, it is imperative that companies identify which issues they want to affect and how.

Once the issues have been identified, the company can explore initial ideas with potential partners in order to gauge each other’s compatibility for the commitment.

Corporations and nonprofits can connect along a variety of engagement levels and types, but should aim to meet the following six criteria if engaging in formal alliances:
- Both parties identify specific projects for collaboration and the required internal resources.

Before entering into a partnership, it is important to understand the culture and operations of the other party, determine reliability, and decide whether the six criteria can be met. A gradual approach may be advisable, beginning with an “arm’s-length” relationship and increasing the intensity of collaborative projects over time.

Managing and maintaining
The work has only just begun once a formal partnership has been established. “For any partnership to be effective and to deal successfully with challenges, it needs to be built on a strong foundation of individual commitment to partnering and on the conviction that
a partnership approach is necessary to achieve the desired goal," Brittingham comments. This process begins by populating key positions and agreeing on the respective roles/responsibilities of each within partnering organizations. Select individuals must act as guardians of the mission, both internally and externally, while ensuring that the partnership is meeting its pre-established milestones and commitments. Effective partners confirm in writing what resources have been pledged and set up a system for recording contributions.

"As with all aspects of partnership planning, changes should be mutually agreed in advance of implementation," Brittingham adds. This ensures that the good that can be derived from a partnership is not eroded.

**Sustaining outcomes**

If the partnership is successful, partnering entities may find a way to sustain and/or scale up the project(s). Unforeseen opportunities emerge during the review process that may prompt partners to expand to other sectors or markets. If this happens, entities should possibly begin re-scoping the extended partnership en route to planning and implementation of an expanded or improved program. In the same vein, organizations must also know when to exit partnerships. Partners move on for several reasons:

- Reduction in or withdrawal of resources
- Project(s) completed
- Project(s) failed or not sufficiently meeting objectives
- Changing partner priorities
- Changing context – political, social and economic

Throughout the process, organizations should have a commitment to transparency and mutual benefit. "Effective partnerships can create social change and have a significant positive impact," Brittingham remarks. "It is not an easy task to develop strategic partnerships, but it is an important one that companies should leverage to drive their corporate citizenship goals."