

Unselfishness and Communication—Critical for Collaboration

by Dennis Hooper, August 15, 2011, copyright © 2011

Are you selfish? Aren't we all? And doesn't that fact make any partnership a quid pro quo, an arrangement towards a self-serving end? "If I can keep my partner happy, he or she will do what I need done for me. It's nothing more than a deal really, a mutually beneficial arrangement."

That's a surprising and somewhat negative attention-grabbing quote from *The Power of 2* by Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller. I've highlighted this book in recent articles, and I'll do it again next week.

Though we are all selfish, committed partners sacrifice themselves in ways that on the surface just don't make sense! "A partnership is based on the assumption that by working together, both people will achieve heights neither could have accomplished alone....For a species allegedly controlled by selfish genes, we [humans] have an incredible capacity and reverence for unselfishness, [which] changes everything about collaboration."

"When you value your partner's rewards as much as you do your own, concerns over fairness either melt away or go in the opposite direction. 'What's in it for me?' becomes 'What is my counterpart getting out of this?' The self-focused question of 'Is my partner doing enough?' becomes 'Am I doing enough?' If a person values his comrade getting a reward as much as he does getting one himself, the optimal solution is always collaboration."

Research by the Gallup organization identified three statements that specify the extent to which partners can gauge the health of their relationship:

- We each take as much satisfaction from seeing the other succeed as we do from our own success.
- My partner will risk a lot for me, and I will do the same for him or her.
- My partner is like a brother or sister to me.

Communication is another potent contributor to strong partnerships. "Most collaborators, even many of the best, do not realize the role communication plays in creating a powerful partnership....The ability to 'think out loud' with someone who will not scoff, who will try to improve on the idea, and who will keep your confidence is a major advantage two people have over one person working alone."

"From a practical perspective, staying in contact with your partner allows the two of you to be aware of the other's next move, to make your intentions clear, to brainstorm and perhaps stumble onto an idea you would not have had separately, and to share your candid assessments with each other."

That's not a big surprise to anyone who has experienced successful collaboration. However, the authors introduce the additional concept of "recursion" or "recursive thinking." "Communication in a partnership is complicated by the unique and incredible human capacity for reading into a situation what the other person must be thinking."

"Recursive thinking is a double-edged sword. There is no sympathy without recursion. A great partner who understands that his colleague is struggling will shoulder more of the burden and offer his support."

"Yet too much recursion and too little discussion inevitably lead to wrong assumptions. Rather than explain their rationale, collaborators routinely assume the other person knows the reasons....Assuming without verifying is dangerous. We are not mind readers; we are mind guessers. Sometimes we guess wrong."

The Gallup research identified three statements that characterize successful partner communication:

- We rarely misunderstand each other.
- We are good listeners for each other.
- We show appreciation for what the other does.

Complete and frequent communication is key to successful partnerships. And so is the ability for each collaborator to unselfishly volunteer his or her unique strengths.

In my next article, we'll look at how acceptance and forgiveness are additional critical elements of strong partnerships.