

Acceptance and Forgiveness—Critical for Collaboration

by Dennis Hooper, September 6, 2011, copyright © 2011

We all have idiosyncrasies. Your collaborative partner certainly does! I'll bet you can describe three or four of them instantly.

It's a bit harder to think of anything particularly unusual about your own behaviors, isn't it? Okay, so maybe you can admit to a few abnormally good characteristics that contribute to your being a helpful, productive colleague, right?

"There is a natural propensity to believe you are normal and that the other person, to the degree he or she differs from you, is a bit off." That's a quote from *The Power of 2* by Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller. This book has been the focus of my four most recent articles on collaborative relationships. Acceptance and forgiveness are two of the eight elements required for successful collaborations.

We typically form partnerships fastest and easiest with people most like us. Whether it's having attended the same school, having grown up in the same town, or sharing similar values, we tend to associate ourselves with people who are like us.

"Humans are tribal creatures, constantly drawing boundaries--sometimes prejudicial boundaries--between friends and foes." Once we commit ourselves to a relationship, however, we start noticing those quirky little habits that sometimes deter collaboration. The longer the relationship has existed, the more opportunity to notice those idiosyncrasies that start to grate on you.

The research conducted by the Gallup organization, however, found that the strongest partnerships were able to agree with the following statements:

- We focus on each other's strengths, not weaknesses.
- We accept each other as we are and don't try to change each other.
- We are understanding of each other when one of us makes a mistake.

Part of the reason that acceptance of your partner's habits becomes difficult is that "every one of his or her strengths can be upended and seen as a weakness." The complementary strengths that are crucial to the success of a partnership (and that you admired so much at the start of your relationship) can become frustrating to endure as time progresses!

When collaboration is going well, partners overlook each other's foibles. "But when things turn negative, a parallel set of emotions kicks in. The counterpart's personal ticks become full-fledged character flaws."

If one partner begins to doubt the competence or motive of the other, or if there is a failure to follow through on commitments, trust may disintegrate. When a violation of trust occurs, the future of the collaborative relationship is at risk.

If you are the perpetrator and you know such a violation has occurred, the obvious corrective action is to apologize. "Make your good intentions clear. Make a peace offering. Be demonstrably more reliable to rebuild trust."

But what do you do if you were the one betrayed? "It takes a rare level of maturity and self-awareness to let the trespass pass. You need a tremendous amount of discernment, self-control, ability to give your counterpart the benefit of the doubt, and desire for a better outcome. How you manage your own thinking is as important as the offense itself."

Holding a grudge--seeking retribution of any sort--can destroy the partnership. Forgiveness, which is the only hope for reconciliation, is difficult for many of us.

Two statements in Gallup's research differentiate good and bad partnerships relative to keeping the collaboration from going negative:

- There have been times when either my collaborator or I have violated the other's trust.
- When either of us has violated the other's trust, we have been able to forgive the other.

Typically, you forgive and move on. The betrayal was minor and the act of forgiveness is equally insignificant. However, either partner may experience a season of feeling that he or she is shouldering the burden of excessive acceptance and forgiveness of the other. How do you handle those feelings?

You may have a growing feeling of resentment. You don't like your good nature being taken for granted. First, as foreign as it may be to your thinking, recognize that your partner may have had similar feelings recently. When one individual feels the partnership is suffering damage from rough seas, it's time to seek a safe harbor and do some repair work.

Communication about fairness and trust is necessary before either is likely to improve. Hard as it may be, it's time to examine the health of the relationship. Revealing some of the perspectives you've been keeping to yourself is probably appropriate.

Partners have these kinds of evaluative conversations all the time. If you think this one might be particularly intense, consider engaging a skilled third party who can help ensure that each individual is listening and seeking to understand the other.

We all see the world through our own experiences and perceptions. It's hard to set our biases and beliefs aside and truly listen to the experiences and needs of another person. Boundaries and expectations may need to be examined and reestablished. "One of the most difficult collaborative decisions you will face is whether to patch up a partnership if your counterpart violates your trust."

There's not enough room in this article to adequately address the complex concept of forgiveness. If forgiveness is an area of concern or interest for you, I suggest you conduct your own study of the topic. The authors of *The Power of 2* don't explain how to forgive, only that healthy partnerships require it!

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