



Transform work relationships into powerful partnerships.

White Paper posted in February 2015 at neilbakerconsulting.com.



Partnership is a way people communicate and relate in ALL work relationships—within an organization and between organizations—which enables optimal results.

How well people communicate and relate is a major determinant for results.

- In my survey of 420 leaders at workshops last year, 88% identified communication and relational issues as the predominant barrier to change as opposed to technical issues.
- An estimated 70% of change efforts fail to achieve targeted impact, driven by resistance and unproductive behavior—not barriers like resources, poor planning, or bad ideas.¹
- In a study with 25 million employees from more than 2.8 million work groups, employee engagement was strongly linked with profitability, productivity, customer satisfaction, and employee retention. Engagement requires relationships that lead to experiences such as “my opinions seem to count” and “someone cares about me as a person.”²
- The same study revealed that 70% of American workers are not engaged or are disengaged with substantial negative impact on the bottom line.
- In a study with 115,000 individuals in more than 200 organizations, a key factor for profitability and organizational resilience was an environment of open, honest, trusting communication which supported helpful feedback and enabled difficult conversations.³

What makes quality of communication and relationships so important?

More than 30 years of research has shown that intrinsic motivation as opposed to compliance leads to better outcomes.^{4,5} This means that work *has meaning and importance* for a person as opposed to doing work just because you have to do it.

Developing and sustaining connection of personal meaning and importance to the mission and tasks at work requires ongoing, excellent communication.

Also, in complex systems, no one person or group has sufficient information and perspective to accurately define problems or to design creative, effective solutions. One right answer rarely exists. Different perspectives must be brought together through high quality communication.

Why are gaps in quality of communication and relationships so common?



The most important cause is not lack of skills but lack of sufficient structures and processes to counter *inherent* forces in organizations which create a high risk for problems.

Even in the most successful organizations with the best intentions and skills, the forces of complexity, uncertainty, volatility, and pressure *inherent* in organizational life make it challenging to sustain the quality of communication needed for collaborative relationships.

Such forces pull everyone, at times, out of their best communication and relational skills.⁶ Once this happens, the demands of daily work easily get in the way of addressing problems. Unresolved difficulties can then become unproductive patterns of behavior. Results will suffer.

The first step: self-awareness and self-reflection

Not only does stress pull everyone, at times, out of their best communication and relational skills but this can occur outside of full awareness. We all have blind spots for our own behaviors which can be counterproductive. At the heart of building powerful partnerships is the ability of each person involved to observe their own ways of thinking and behaving and correct course.

Powerful partnerships are able to accept such occurrences with compassion and offer helpful feedback. This is a cornerstone of dialogue which will be discussed on page 3.

Elaborating on self-awareness and self-reflection is not the focus of this white paper but links to helpful resources can be found on page 8.

Partnerships: the framework for high quality communication and relationships



Definition

Based on the above issues and evidence, I define partnership as a way people communicate and relate in ALL work relationships—within an organization and between organizations—which enables optimal results. In a partnership, the parties involved are committed: (1) to the success of a mutual endeavor; and (2) to the success of each individual party.

“Success” must involve *what is meaningful and important* to each participant. The latter is crucial. No matter what a person’s rank, from the CEO to the frontlines, finding the way to intrinsic motivation and engagement is a key driver for the best outcomes.

To find synergies and address inevitable tensions between different perspectives, interests, and needs, partnerships depend on (1) dialogue; (2) decision making; and (3) additional structures and processes (vision, values, meetings).

Do partnerships require a lot of time?

Partnerships require time and hard work. But, think of all the time wasted right now by relational problems which degrade performance and morale.

- Up to 80% of conflict in the work place is due to people not checking out their experience, judgments, and assumptions with each other—not intractable issues.⁷
- Such unresolved differences commonly lead to unproductive second and third hand hallway conversations which consume time and emotional energy.
- As high as 50% of meetings are unproductive⁸—time that could be used for dialogue.
- A study of over 300 companies found that those which engaged people rather than focusing primarily on pace and efficiency had faster execution and 52% higher profits.⁹

Partnerships take time but taking time saves time in the long run and leads to better outcomes.

Structures, processes, and practices for partnerships

(1) Dialogue

At the heart of high quality partnerships is **dialogue**--open, honest conversations which *elicit* commonalities and differences and manage them skillfully to:

- discover what is important to each participant;
- find mutual definitions of problems, mutual goals, creative solutions, and shared commitment for action;
- maintain feedback about what is working and not working in order to sustain progress and to continually develop the partnership.

Key practices for dialogue:¹⁰

- Explicitly keep separate the times for dialogue and for decision making.
- Make explicit the intentions of dialogue (see above).
- Elicit different viewpoints and explore them. Avoid debates.
- Suspend certainty that there is one right perspective or solution.
- Explore the underlying data and observations on which views are based.
- Assure wide, balanced participation.
- Avoid judgments and blame. Assume mutual contributions to problems.

- Use cycles of active listening, active telling, and checking understanding.¹⁰
- Openly manage power differentials (see page 4 for more discussion).

The complexity, pressures, and high stakes of work make it difficult to hold back the drive to action in order instead to consider and skillfully manage different perspectives. Dialogue depends on sustaining strong intentions to pause, reflect, and put its practices into action. This is more likely with the support of a team which prioritizes a vision of high quality partnerships.

You can apply practices for dialogue right now.
Every conversation is an opportunity to build partnerships.

Example 1: *In complex systems, slowing down simply to ask questions is likely to progressively lead to more accurate definitions of problems and stronger motivation. One dialogue can stretch out over multiple shorter conversations. Use questions to collect information in every conversation.*

In a hallway conversation or a meeting with an individual or team, consider these questions:

How are things going?

What is working and not working?

What do you care most about at work? What makes you most enthusiastic?

How does this [e.g. change, project, problem] impact what you care most about?

What are your biggest concerns about work right now?

Do you have ideas about how we can mitigate those concerns?

Example 2: *If you are in the middle of a conflict, ask if others could set aside the attempt to resolve it just to explore what each person is observing and experiencing. As noted previously, an estimated 80% of the time the issues leading to workplace conflict turn out to be different than expected or even go away.⁷*

See “Additional resources” on page 8 for more guidance and links to case stories.

A key practice for dialogue: openly manage power differentials.

There are quite human, universal tendencies toward problematic ways of expressing and responding to power which cause relational problems.



Open communication is easily shut down by top-down expressions of power—e.g. “Do it because I say so.” or “I am in charge here.” For those with less power, it is quite human and common to withdraw from communication or criticize and attack.

Managing power differentials well is more likely if time is protected for dialogue and explicitly kept separate from decision-making. The aim is to stay aware of the power in the room and work to counter tendencies to avoid, withdraw from, dominate, or shut down communication.

This requires two-way feedback among participants about what is working or not working relative to assuring high quality dialogue. Feedback *includes* those with more power or formal authority. No one can be immune. Dialogue is a context in which people participate as equals.

(2) Decision making



The paradox is that dialogue is about equality while decision making may involve power. But, handled with care, power actually strengthens partnerships.

One of the risks of staying connected through dialogue is inadvertently falling into the feeling that decisions can only be made if everyone is happy.

Decision making usually involves trade-offs. There are almost always constraints to what is ideal for intrinsic motivation for each person. There are no perfect decisions and no decisions without risks and downsides.

For the most part, people realize this. They want to get things done and prefer to move forward rather than get stuck searching for perfect, risk-free decisions or making everyone happy. People prefer decision-makers who *care* about them even if all their interests cannot be met.

In my experience, the most serious relationship problems are caused not by imperfect decisions or even failed decisions but by poor and inconsistent decision-making processes.

Common decision-making errors are bouncing back and forth between decision types in response to pressure, not using sufficient dialogue to engage people at each step, not acknowledging risks and downsides, or not including people in designing implementation.

It takes courage, vision, and a good deal of emotional balance to take the risk of making a difficult decision when also carefully seeking and considering all input and reactions.

Types of decisions:

The two predominant types of decision making I recommend for partnerships are *consultative* and *consensus*.

- In *consultative* decisions, a leader with the authority to do so makes the call after obtaining input through dialogue from those who will be impacted and those who have key knowledge and expertise.
- In *consensus*, a group of people make the call together. Consensus does not mean that the decision is everyone's first choice but that everyone can *live with* the decision and *commit fully* to its success.

A third type of decision making, *authoritative*, is used infrequently in partnerships. It means that a leader with authority makes the decision without input.

Key practices for decision making:

- Assure that the type of decision and the process for making it are explicitly identified and made known to everyone involved.
- If you have the authority to make a decision, always consider consulting with others before doing so (i.e. maximize participation).
- Use dialogue to generate multiple options and clarify the benefits and risks of each.
- Acknowledge risks and downsides to decisions.
- Use dialogue during input and after any decision to assure reactions are heard.
- Explain how and why certain input influenced the decision or was not incorporated.
- Explore ways to mitigate concerns about decisions.
- Involve people in the design of implementation of the decision. Maximize choices.
- Use dialogue over time for mutual feedback to improve decision-making processes.

Staying in dialogue while also staying the course through decision making and action is one of the most important and nuanced balancing acts of partnership. It takes art, skill, and ongoing, deliberate practice by individual leaders and by teams.

You can apply practices for decision making right now.

Every conversation is an opportunity to build partnerships.

Example: *Problems such as conflict, confusion, or poor motivation can be caused by flaws in decision-making. Before intervening in such problems, reflect on the following questions:*

*Does this situation involve a decision that needs to be made?
Is it absolutely clear who has the authority to make a particular decision?*

*Has that individual or group identified the type of decision making method?
Is there a clear timeline for the decision and opportunities for input?
Have all the right people been involved, especially those impacted?
Have multiple options with their benefits and risks been discussed?
Do we know how the implementation will be planned?*

If you discover gaps, a next step may be to use dialogue to ask others to give them consideration.

See “Additional resources” on page 8 for more guidance.

(3) Additional structures and processes: vision, values, meetings

- Collaboratively create a vision for partnerships and define the values and guidelines for dialogue and decision making.
- Maintain regular individual and group meetings up, down, and across an organization and in multi-organizational alliances.
- Define meeting structures, roles, and processes for both dialogue and decision making.
- Continuously improve these structures and processes through regular feedback.

While meetings are much maligned, they are core to partnerships. Lack of sufficient regular meetings between key individuals and groups with time protected for dialogue is a common cause of problems. At the extreme, I have seen two executives caught up in a prolonged conflict who had not met outside of team meetings (i.e. just the two of them) in 8 years.

How do you develop and spread partnerships throughout an organization?



Thinking in terms of large projects, widespread trainings, or restructuring creates risks for wasting time and money.

The journey to partnerships is about changing habits and patterns and that takes courage, dedication, and persistence.

In this context, create the foundation for larger success by an initial emphasis on *immediate application* of the structures, processes, and practices of partnership focused on an important problem. Narrow the scope wherever possible.

Do not be surprised if you feel you need outside assistance. As noted earlier, changing habits and patterns often requires seeing through our own blind spots. For assistance, I recommend

that you find consultation and coaching which offers an action-oriented approach. Also, feel free to contact me to explore your next steps and if my services could be a fit for you.

References

1. Keller, Scott, Price, Colin **Beyond Performance: How Great Organizations Build Ultimate Competitive Advantage** McKinsey&Company 2011
2. Gallup Inc. **State of the American Workplace** 2013 <http://www.gallup.com/services/178514/state-american-workplace.aspx>
3. De Smet, Aaron et al **The Missing Link: Connecting Organizational and Financial Performance** McKinsey&Company, 2007 at Mckinsey.com
4. Deci, Edward L., Flaste, Richard **Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation** Penguin Books 1995
5. Stone, Dan N. et al **Beyond Talk: Creating Autonomous Self-Motivation through Self-Determination Theory** November 24, 2008: downloaded at www.selfdeterminationtheory.org
6. See a review of selected research and a reference list at [Invisible barriers to communication.](#)
7. Bushe, Gervase **Clear Leadership: Sustaining Real Collaboration and Partnership at Work** Nicholas Brealey Publishing 2010
8. <http://ideas.ted.com/2014/11/17/the-economic-impact-of-bad-meetings/>
9. Davis, Jocelyn R. et al **Strategic Speed: Mobilize People, Accelerate Execution** Harvard Business Press 2010.
10. Obtain the tool and reference list **Ultra-Brief Reminders for Dialogue** by subscribing for free monthly articles and blogs at [Subscribe.](#)

Additional resources

- **Case stories**
 - See the client stories [Reinventing a partnership](#) and [Breaking out of a six month stall.](#)
- **Self-reflection and Self-awareness**
 - See the articles [Are you leading from reactivity or creativity?](#) and [Invisible barriers to communication.](#)
 - See the blog posts [A tool to help counter the mind's hard-wired reactivity](#) and [Hard-wired to react. Hard-wired to connect.](#)
 - Obtain the collection of articles **First, manage your brain.** by subscribing for free monthly resources at [Subscribe.](#)
- **Dialogue**
 - Obtain the tool and reference list **Ultra-Brief Reminders for Dialogue** by subscribing for free monthly resources at [Subscribe.](#)
- **Power**
 - See the blog posts [Hard-wired for troubles with power](#) and [Vulnerability, results, and leadership.](#)
- **Intrinsic motivation**
 - See the blog post [Having trouble motivating others?--a quick diagnostic.](#)
- **Two-way feedback**

- See the blog posts [Teamwork as perpetual feedback](#) and [Creating shared values by learning from imperfection.](#)
- **Decision-making**
 - See the blog posts [Are flaws in decision-making processes causing conflict and poor alignment?--a quick diagnostic](#), [We have a consensus!?](#), and [Always consider consultation before deciding.](#)

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. helps leaders and teams build high quality internal and external partnerships in the service of achieving their vision and goals. To this work he brings insights from 24 years of experience as an organizational leader with responsibilities ranging from overseeing a 70 staff unit to guiding quality improvement for a state-wide \$1 billion healthcare delivery system. He has extensive experience with quality improvement, behavioral science, and adult learning. Neil has worked with organizations widely known for innovation including the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado. He received his B.S. from Stanford University and M.D. from Stanford University School of Medicine. See neilbakerconsulting.com for more information.

[Subscribe for free monthly blogs and articles](#)