

The Power of Partnerships

Where One Plus One Equals Three...or More

By Butch Maltby

Scripture makes it clear that a “three-strand cord is not easily broken.” Additionally, corporate America has known for many years that strategic alliances can be a critical path toward success in more effectively selling products and services. The nonprofit community of ministries has also begun to thoughtfully explore the power of partnerships.

Soon after the change of the political landscape in the former Soviet Union, the CoMission was launched as an attempt to bring together various organizations driven by a common purpose—the evangelization and discipleship of Eastern and Central Europe. Radio broadcasters collaborated on various strategies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and beyond. And the historic crusade evangelists like Billy Graham, Luis Palau and others have as a presupposition the regional strategy of collaboration.

Notwithstanding these examples (and others), very few ministries actively pursue partnerships mostly due to three “critical killers” of collaboration. These undermining elements include:

■ **The failure to see a broad view of God’s work in the world.** Without being cynical, many organizations believe their ministry is uniquely positioned to execute God’s work in the world—alone. And since collaboration is hard work and organizations feel stressed by the day-to-day realities of their ministry, it’s not unusual to hear some ministry executives say, “It’s too hard!”

■ **A zero sum mentality.** There’s a perception among many ministries that “if one organization sees good fortune financially and otherwise, it may mean our organization is losing ground.” It was interesting to note that during the co-mission, program cooperation came much easier than collaborative efforts in marketing and fund development. The perception of lack of a finite amount of resources has some organizations keeping high walls and more of a defensive posture. Such a mindset makes trusting communication and active collaboration difficult at best.

■ **The failure to identify a working model for a strategic alliance.** Some organizations, flushed with enthusiasm for ministry, will proclaim commitment to a strategic alliance or program partnership, only to have the “wheels come off”

because of a failure to develop a model for cooperative efforts.

Key Questions

In the spirit of forging partner possibilities, a litmus test should be applied allowing for assessment of why a strategic alliance could make sense.

In our experience, strong and vibrant ministry partnerships are driven by evaluation through an eight-point grid. This working model includes the following questions:

- 1. Is there mission compatibility?** In other words, do the organizations have a common purpose, even if they’re executing their mission in different ways?
- 2. Is there a compatible vision?** An organization involved in African evangelism may be a strong partner with a humanitarian organization focusing on physical needs, *if* there’s a common commitment to the collaborative nature of the venture.
- 3. Is there common vision?** Organizations are not static and

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so, by definition, are constantly evolving. Do the two or more organizations have a common sense of where they’re headed, and is there a clear sense that the respective visions are compatible? Simply stated, is there a common destination in mind?

4. Are there compatible values? An organization with a firm hand on efficiency may prove a difficult partner for a more vision-led organization that’s driven by whimsical management and leadership. Some organizations put a premium on “getting it done at all costs,” while other organizations may value their personnel above everything. Exploring the prioritized hierarchy of values is extremely important before press-

ing forward with a partnership.

5. Are the cultures compatible? For example, a missionary focused organization driven by a faith model for fund development may have problems with an organization perceived as more “slick” in its marketing efforts. Experience demonstrates that the smallest of cultural differences can create extreme problems in forging and sustaining alliances.

6. Is there a common commitment to measurement and accountability? In an environment where an increasing number of donors are of the investor type, is there a clear sense of compatibility as it relates to such standard met-

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rics as Return on Investment (ROI) and, perhaps more vitally, Return on Mission (ROM). Organizations lacking a culture of measurement often prove to be poor partners to those organizations with a defined culture for assessment.

7. Is there a clear indication of leverage as a byproduct of the strategic alliance or program partnership? The funding community has made it very clear that partnerships can be a strong motivation. At the same time, superficial collaboration without a clear indication of leverage may be perceived as a marketing ploy.

Prior to any defined alliance, one of the tests must be a series of questions: 1) Are we stronger together than apart? 2) Can we define the value proposition for our collaboration? 3) Is each organization bringing something of value to the relationship unique to its mission, vision, values and mandate?

Cooperation needs to be driven by a strong sense of leveraged possibility.

8. Is there a sense of kinship, relationship and friendship at the leadership level? In our experience, strong alliances are often forged around personal relationships. Long-term friendships among the leadership group of respective organizations can bode well for the viability of a partnership commitment.

Compatibility of values, mission, vision and the standards by which success is measured are all critical building blocks to an effective alliance. When all of the details come together, everyone is a winner.

A Case in Point

An example of this was seen in recent years when a major evangelical prison ministry focusing on a program for meeting the needs of children of prisoners realized it was spending many hundreds of thousands of dollars purchasing Bibles for its annual initiative.

A major Bible translation and distribution group determined that it needed to create more vibrant cause concepts for a broad-based funding constituency which was receiving stale donor communication—typically focused on a region of the world needing Bibles.

So, with a common commitment to express mission and vision in new and creative ways, the Bible distribution group granted all the Scriptures to the prison ministry and then proceeded to communicate the new partnership to its funding constituency.

The end result was that the Bible distribution group generated almost three times the revenue in the month it communicated its partnership, and the prison ministry was able to release significant budget pressures, allowing for more investment in research and development, and redoubling efforts in the scope of its program.

Both organizations were winners in this collaboration and, more importantly, donors had a sense of stewardship as they made gifts to the joint effort.

A second example involved several literacy organizations which came together in a strategic alliance and apportioned targeted areas of activity by core competencies. In the end, these discussions resulted in these ministries bolstering their involvement in certain programs and projects, and eliminating areas where their efforts were not exe-

cuted as well as seemingly competitive organizations.

This analytical approach to determining core competencies and a willingness to “hold loosely” to those programs that were not being executed with marketplace leading effectiveness reflects the heart of stewardship donors long for.

A Growing Concern

Several recent studies have indicated that duplication of effort and the lack of a perceived unique selling proposition are creating confusion and angst in the funding community. Focus groups conducted with major donors have in recent years revealed a growing sentiment expressed in the question, “Why can’t ministries cooperate more?”

It’s our conviction, based on an evaluation of funding trends, that ministries which don’t actively pursue strategic alliances and partnerships will come to discover that selected funding opportunities will evaporate. There’s a growing generation of givers who are driven by a collaborative spirit.

Local churches, parachurch entities and other organizations in ministry in America need to thoughtfully consider how they can begin a strategic alliance initiative. Some forward-thinking ministries actually define a staff position with the terminal responsibility of managing alliances and collaboration.

As ministries deal with powerful changes taking place in the marketing, communication and fund development arenas, it’s absolutely certain that organizations stand to win if they learn how to collaborate with greater effectiveness. Through strategic alliances, program collaboration and even project support, ministries will come to understand that biblical unity can be expressed in dramatic ways—even in a marketplace bent on competition.

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