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The Habits and Capabilities of Successful Business Partners
Part 2: What do leaders think?

1. Context

In my earlier research paper on Successful Business Partnering
https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/habits-capabilities-successful-business-partners-ian-foster/
I presented a framework of partnering capabilities and behaviors.

This version adds leadership opinion on *the partnering attributes critical for success,* derived from confidential interviews with (27) business leaders from a variety of industries and functions.[1]

The feedback received centered on 4 themes:

- Theme 1: Dealing with ambiguity
- Theme 2: Emotional intelligence
- Theme 3: Innovation, disruption, and agility
- Theme 4: Climate — creating an environment conducive to partnering

Each theme is discussed in turn, emphasizing key points cited by interviewees using the language I heard. Names and roles are withheld to maintain confidentiality.

Theme 1: Dealing with ambiguity

The ability to lead, manage and influence in an ambiguous environment is seen as an essential partnering skill. Partners need to manage multiple expectations and competing objectives, and plan while remaining in the present.

Leader feedback highlighted the importance of:

Assertion
- Asserting yourself to gather information to reduce ambiguity
- Getting comfortable making decisions with more limited information, and with how decisions get made i.e., in a matrix

Big picture thinking
- Striving to know what's happening around you and being open minded – seeking others' perspectives, and reading around the subject
- Spotting patterns and trends and *joining the dots*

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[1] Industries: pharmaceuticals, medical devices, engineering and industrial, instrumentation, retail, software, consulting/professional services.
Functions: IT/digital, data & analytics, HR, product development, supply chain, customer service, R&D, business relationship management

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- Reflecting on the short and longer-term consequences of decisions, balancing risk and reward

Understanding organization dynamics
- Being able to balance the dotted line to the business and sold line to your function. Not being too easy, and not going native. Recognizing priorities and the stack of stuff you need to bring and execute

Mindset
- Having a plan but expecting to adapt
- Developing a way of thinking and acting that is highly collaborative — encouraging and listening to others' views and opinions while valuing and providing your own unique perspective

Understanding and evolving your relationships with stakeholders
- One's entry point into a partnering relationship will vary. Your department's history and relationship with another department may have been fraught, be seen as unimportant, or be new. These are important factors to consider as you embark upon new relationships

Theme 2: Emotional intelligence

Interviewees highlighted the importance of developing the skills to understand and manage your own emotions, and those of others.

The art of human interaction
- People often focus on the process/science, but partnering is much more about the art (of humans interacting)
- Work from the inside out. Understand what's in people's heads first. Reflect on their personality and leadership style
- Be a translator. Take the time to read a room and seek to speak in others' languages. Be a conduit of communication
- The best partners are good at connecting with others. They understand that they first need to build a relationship by listening, understanding, and delivering. They figure out how to get stuff done, by knowing who to call, what to say, injecting urgency, and creating value.

Courtesy and empathy
- Understand what others are experiencing and relate to their perspective
- Make people feel heard and valued. Ensure that you listen and are inclusive

Develop multiple intelligences
- Be *quad deep* in intelligences — business, industry, technology and emotional
- Take the time to understand organizational dynamics e.g., power structure, governance/decision-making, history of the relationship with your function
- Hire people who fit your chemistry and culture

Clear, aligned, and transparent communication
- Have *one team* and one mission, vision and set of objectives
- Transparency is important — clients and colleagues should never have to guess

- Be a storyteller — don't be silent

Theme 3: Innovation, disruption, and agility

I invited leaders to comment on what innovation meant to them and their organizations.

Curiosity
- One leader discussed how intellectual curiosity, visibly demonstrated by their CEO in conversations with staff at all levels, had such a positive spin-off effect in their organization, by encouraging the same of others and making people feel truly valued

Creativity
- Engage, but in a productive way. Disruptors are highly sought after in today's business world, but they need to do it in a way that the organization will respond to
- Look for people who can bring about positive disruption, e.g., who can think like an outsider, and can constructively challenge old assumptions. Introduce your team to business problems and opportunities to engage them, and to plant the seeds for innovation and the possibilities for disruption

Earning the right
- Deliver the basics first. Show you can execute and provide a robust and continuous service. Earn trust then look to help innovate. Establish credibility by searching for the issues that are important to the business and work hard to address them

Agility
- Have the mindset and approach of a product manager (value focus) versus a project manager (delivery focus). Be able to adapt and integrate quickly
- Work like a venture capitalist — start and deliver something of value e.g., minimal viable product, and measure your results before requesting more time and money
- People often need to able to wear multiple hats and demonstrate several competencies
- Partners need to be able to orchestrate to get things delivered i.e., you will often have a mix of staff, vendor partners, and gig-workers, and need to engage all of them to get things done. This brings accountability
- See experimentation, exploration, and hacking as a way of life

Facilitate innovation through your leadership behavior
- Encourage robust debate and cross-pollination of ideas during team meetings

Be accepting of failure
- One leader framed risk-taking to be about the ability to withstand and accept failure, and to seek the learning and growth that comes with it
- Partners need to have this growth mindset, but so do their managers. To build resilience in your team, you need to provide strong support

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Theme 4: Climate — Creating an environment conducive to partnering

Leaders emphasized the importance of a receptive business environment. Successful partnerships benefit from a (governance) structure and understanding that enables partnering. While a company's *best* partners often find a way to succeed, it becomes much more difficult when your counterparts are resistant.

Leaders need to be able to clearly communicate the purpose of the partnering role or function, and ensure planned benefits are delivered to gain credibility.

Each partner will have a different set of stakeholders. Understanding the relationship history with each business unit and providing greater support to partners who have more challenging stakeholders is an important leadership task.

Having a connection: An enabling versus a disabling organization
- One leader, whose organization is heavily involved in partnering, discussed how partnering can be hard to execute with some businesses. If a partner is wanting to get things done but feels like their business is ignoring them, they can feel like an imposter. They stated that their people who do best (with partnering) have the social skills, but also a business who wants to partner i.e., not wish to own or replicate the services they provide. They place those with the strongest partnering skills in the more challenging roles and listen to their feedback, to establish if the operating model or culture is holding them back
- It's also important to assess an individuals' *fit* for partnering. People wanting to please can find aspects of the role challenging. One needs to be bold and sometimes say no. Some partners can get stuck. Ultimately, partners need the confidence and ability to bring others along who may have different agendas

Empowerment
- Leaders need to create the conditions for partners to achieve their potential. Encouraging and supporting them in representing their interests, building a strong and confident voice, taking ownership, and acting on their own authority

Summary

While recognizing the importance of governance in promoting effective partnering, success ultimately depends on the skills and abilities of individual partners. A good partner will be a plate spinner, delicately balancing the demands of the home function they represent and the function they serve. Successful partners develop a clear understanding of the objectives, goals, and strategies of each function they serve, what they can offer, and how they can best influence and deliver value. They will have strong resilience skills, a good network, and a good support system.

Results help relationships, and relationships make it easier to achieve results. Partners need figure out their starting point and work from there.

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