

Best Friends Forever? Don't Be a Naive or Disappointed Partner



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

At some point in our childhood, many of us share a 'best friends' gift with another person. For me, it was a set of necklaces that fit together like puzzle pieces. One necklace belonged to me, and the other belonged to my best friend. They were cheap and shiny, and I imagined us wearing them well into old age. Ironically, just a few months passed and my 'best friend' lost her necklace. It was probably the first time in my life that I felt like a chump. I had made an agreement with that girl to be best friends forever, and she dumped me for a new friend with prettier necklaces. Entering any kind of partnership is risky; it's simply impossible to predict how things will turn out. Here are some partnering tips that should help you hang on to your nonprofit's shiny reputation and assets.

- **Conflict happens:** Many partnerships begin with mutual admiration and a sense of being "in sync." But when two independent organizations join forces for a common cause, their leaders may not see eye to eye... all of the time. As you begin the vetting process and proceed with a courtship, take the time to discuss how conflicts or conflicting points of view will be addressed. Are you committed to airing your concerns directly with your partner?
- **Come out and say it!** Ever had that feeling in the pit of your stomach when you know someone is taking advantage of you? It's a pretty bad feeling. The best way to address that feeling is to stand up and speak up. If a partner tries to manipulate you, candidly tell them that you are not happy with the arrangement. Don't stay silent to keep from offending your partner. A good partner will consider your needs and invite open communication.
- **Choose wisely:** Rather than rushing into a relationship believing that your partner is perfect, take the time required to conduct some due diligence. Learn all you can about the organization you will be calling "partner." Remember that your nonprofit's shiny reputation could be impacted positively... or negatively, as a result of the partnership. Check references! Ask for contact information from organizations that can attest to your potential partner's work style, culture and partnership philosophy.
- **Put it in writing:** The most common partnership-related mistake that nonprofit leaders make is to enter into a partnership without first putting expectations and requirements in writing. Always define the terms of your partnership in writing to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and increase the odds of success.

Managing the risks that arise from partnerships begins with reflecting on how conflicts will be handled before they arise, and continues with having the courage to raise difficult issues with your partners, conducting due diligence before you say "I do," and putting partnership expectations in writing. Following these tips will enable your nonprofit to reduce the risk that your shiny reputation and valuable assets will be tarnished or lost in your

next partnership.