

## Let's Dance



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During an episode of a dance-focused reality show airing last night one of the judges praised two dancers for their matched steps and beautifully coordinated routine. Despite the random pairing of competing amateur dancers for the on-air performance, the two young women were able to work together in a way that suggested they had been dancing together for a long-time. Their ability to perform “in sync” was impressive. It reminded me of the way that partnerships and collaborations involving nonprofits *should* be.

The risks of an ineffective pairing include:

- Wasted financial and other resources spent on the cultivation, implementation and eventual disbanding of the business relationship;
- Disillusionment with the idea of partnering, leading to missed opportunities to partner in the future;
- Unanticipated costs or other losses resulting from the failure to gauge the true costs of partnering;
- Disengagement by stakeholders who are offended or otherwise unhappy with the nonprofit’s decision to partner or the identity of its partner.

Managing the risks associated with partnerships and collaboration requires equal measures of artistic ability and technique. It requires:

- **The willingness to engage in candid dialog about the underlying motivation for partnering.** There are innumerable reasons to partner. For example, your organization may want to: save money, make existing services available to a wider client base, generate a new income stream, or bolster its “standing” in the community at large. The willingness to acknowledge and discuss the truthful motivations for seeking a partner is essential to success. It is not essential that your goals and your partner’s goals line-up perfectly. But unspoken goals and motivations are a precursor to an out-of-sync performance.
- **Thoughtful examination of “what could go wrong” before the deal is done.** A beautifully choreographed pairs’ routine requires practice as well as risk management. Each member of the team imagines how missteps and miscues could occur to disrupt the flow. Movements are chosen and rehearsed with potentially disastrous stumbles in mind. Nonprofit leaders can and should do the same before moving forward with a partnership. Consider a wide range of “what could go wrong,” long before it does, including: waning interest or commitment over time, changes in leadership at either partner organization, unforeseen resource constraints, attempts to change the “rules of engagement” mid-stream, and missteps that occur despite efforts to avoid them.
- **Committing expectations, responsibilities, options, and terms to writing.** Some of the most

successful business partnerships began with casual conversations over lunch or a glass of wine. Yet leaders who are devoted to the nonprofits they serve recognize that memorializing the details of any partnership is an essential step on the road to synchronicity and a winning partnership. Like rehearsing a new dance routine, the process of negotiating the details of a partnership may not be performance ready. But addressing the critical details *before* the curtain goes up is essential. Some of the most important issues to sort out and sort through include: the terms under which either partner may back out; the roles and responsibilities of each partner, including areas of overlap or shared responsibility; and agreed upon benchmarks for success.

Watching a well-choreographed dance routine is fun. Watching a nonprofit partner with another nonprofit, a public agency or a private business in a way that advances a community-serving mission is reaffirming of the power of partnerships. Partnerships are common in the nonprofit sector and unsuccessful partnerships are inexcusably common. With advance preparation and a commitment to candor you can increase the odds that your next partnership will be a mission-advancing performance that begs an encore.

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