



When organizations come together, one of the key steps in moving from an informal collaboration to a formalized entity, is the creation of an operating agreement that balances power and responsibility in the structure. This helps provide a backbone to how key decisions will be made and important processes carried out. There are, however, a myriad of other decisions that will take place as implementation occurs and the operations proceed. It is these day to day operations that I want to address. As the relationships unfold, I suggest that the mentality of “partner” should operate in all aspects of decision making, without regard to where each organization sits in the hierarchy and without regard to size or finances.

When one accepts a partner in any endeavor, it means, I think, that you have taken on the responsibility for mutual welfare, that you have given up the right to make decisions independently without regard to the impact on one another in exchange for the mutual benefit that working together will accrue. Both are agreeing to make decisions in this wider context, standing in one another’s places to some degree as choices are made.

These relationships can be easily spoiled when that sense of partnership disappears and the affect shifts to “power over” rather than “power with,” to competition rather than collaboration. At some points along the way as these discussions proceed, questions inevitably arise about “permission.” Do “we” need “their” permission to do...? I think this is typical of the wrong frame for this relationship, not the right one. The right one, is, I believe, “If this is going to potentially affect our partner, positively or negatively, we want them to participate in the decision process. We want their input before we choose. We want to make sure they understand what is going on and to hear about it from us.” Similarly, when one asks something of the other, it shouldn’t be framed as “Do we have to do that? Can they make us?” but rather, “Why would we not comply with this request if at all possible?” Unless there is strong evidence otherwise, you must assume good intent on one another’s parts.

Some might say this is deceptively simple and that we need to think through all the contingencies and parse out the decision making power in a more detailed way. I have not, in my experience, found that to be a useful exercise. First, it is almost impossible to anticipate what circumstances will arise. Second, the very process of attempting to do this sets up a potentially destructive set of dynamics that focuses on dividing power rather than sharing it. What I have found to be most successful is the adoption of a set of mutually respectful norms based on the ethic of partnership and a strong sense of reciprocity.