

Abstract

Creating Partnerships

*Unleashing collaborative power in the
workplace*

By Cynthia King, Wisdom Way Press, 2005



CourageousHR works with HR leaders and Communities to identify their distinctive contribution and then make it, both culturally and operationally, an organisational reality.

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Creating Partnerships: Unleashing collaborative power in the workplace.

Most relationships within organisations reflect the dynamics of the power structure, which for varying reasons, are based on competition, domination and control. The emphasis is on individuals and individualism rather than partnership and the power of the relationship.

So, when building relationships the key is to understand that the relationship dynamic needs to shift from 'control of' to 'service to' in seeking co-operation with others, rather than seeking compliance.

A lot of the culture around competition and control is fuelled by the need for predictability, which is linked to survivability and the fear of failure. So, whilst most people believe they could and want to do better, they have a tendency to 'pin the blame and hope on someone else'. ***However, it is important to recognise that everyone shares responsibility for any system we participate in.***

Therefore, a fundamental challenge in transforming organisations includes the will and commitment to nourish personal leadership capacity in everyone, and to change consciously and collectively organisational systems and cultures in order to support truly collaborative approaches.

To imagine how things might be, we first have to get past the idea that things will always be the way they are. We have to be willing to travel without knowing where we're going.

Allan Johnson, Gender Knot

What is needed is a cultural transformation around a fundamental shift in how we relate as human beings to one another resulting in developing a model of co-creation that involves building mutual trust and respect at the core of our relationships.

Characteristics of partner organisations

Organisations that are functioning within the partnership paradigm generally tend to share a common set of characteristics: (*The Partnership Organisation: a systems approach* by Riane Eisler & Alfonso Montuori)

- Flatter, less rigidly hierarchical structures
- Where hierarchies do exist they are *hierarchies of actualization* that encourages innovation, flexibility and individual innovation
- The role of the manager is dramatically changed from the 'cop' to a 'facilitator' who provides transformational and empowering leadership
- The concept of power is changed from power-over manipulations that operate at the expense of others to generative power-with relationships that seek to identify and implement the most effective ways of working together
- View workers as people to be nurtured, mentored and valued rather than as cogs in a machine to be used, disposed of and replaced.

- Research indicates that many people leave to find other work because they do not feel valued

There is a shadow side to partnership in that without careful and clear definition, strongly supported meeting agreements and consciously amplified communication, facilitation and conflict management skills, the illusion of partnership can cause confusion, distrust and blockages to progress.

Partnership does not work by merely changing organisational structures, titles and policies. In addition, a partnership-oriented culture doesn't mean a laissez-faire, everyone-do-what-they-want style in a totally horizontal workplace. On the contrary, it involves clear expectations standards and guidelines. In other words, partnership, if it is to work, has to be an inside job not externally imposed.

What it means is that all individuals in an organisation are there by choice, and take part in decisions as to what role they play, how they work together, and how the work and organisation are structured (Power of Partnership)

So to involve people there must be complementary, co-ordinated effort to examine and change the attitudes, beliefs, actions and norms within the organisation. This requires going into the *underground* of the organisational culture, clearing out old conflicts and misunderstandings and re-working the usually implicit operational agreements – the norms – by making them consensually derived and explicit.

Strategies for organisational culture change

Create structures that support 'webs of inclusion' rather than 'hierarchies of exclusion'.

- All voices can be heard – be they involvement in meetings or opportunities to have input to agenda-setting
- “No one position dominates over the rest”

Give high priority to maintaining open and mutually respectful communication

- Everyone is provided training to develop skills in communication, understanding of intercultural dynamics, conflict management and transformation, facilitation and mediation, and collaborative decision-making
- Everyone consciously works at modelling active listening and open communication that supports building mutually respectful and trusting relationships, even when they disagree

Restructure reward systems to reflect congruent support for team efforts

- Rather than solely rewarding individual 'stars' or limiting rewards to those who take personal credit for the work of those 'below them'.
- All team members receive recognition for exemplary service and team achievements

Accept and encourage expression of other 'ways of knowing'

- Recognise there are multiple ways of 'knowing' and seek to balance the rational/intelligence with emotions and intuition and build these into their development, decision-making and planning so operating within a continuum rather than between polarized dualities. Within this paradigm there is a “connected knowing, that arises out of the experience of relationships ... its primary goal is understanding not proof”

- Reframing interactions so that rather than lecturing to an audience there is a conversation with colleagues, working on questions that matter to all the participants leading to a realisation that they are working on a process that is a living, dynamic progression.

Respect and honour diverse perspectives and opinions

- There are many different realities each of which merits consideration (cultural, ethnic, gender, socio-economic, political, religious, age, ability or functional differences)

Being in partnership certainly does not involve taking the easier path. It does require discipline, commitment and willingness to admit mistakes and be able to re-group. It is about inclusive integrity, accountability and stewardship.

The common ground model

Many models for creating participative organisational culture are based on individualistic psychologies, particularly behavioural psychology. The common ground model is not a psychological perspective it is a communication one. Communication is fundamentally about balancing our need for creativity and relational expression with our needs for co-ordination.

The partnership organisation holds that clarity and ambiguity are always present in equal measure and it is through a co-ordination among people that we find dynamic balance between creativity and structure. So progress is a shared journey and common ground is forever in a state of transformation and flux. Progress becomes something more subjective and is much more than technical mastery and invention. For example, when work is not going well, people describe the organisation as “not progressing”. On the other hand, when people at work feel truly included in the system, engaged in sharing power, and proud of their contribution, they will describe the organisation as ‘progressive.’

Common ground model

Good conflict vs. Bad conflict - If some conflict is good, is too little conflict bad?

Most conflict resolution models focus on ‘bad conflict’ being only the highly intense battles between two parties yet few consider how disruptive and destructive when two parties become increasingly non-communicative in the effort to avoid conflict. Thus in the *underground*, people stop talking to each other about what really matters, what’s bugging them, and then act in ways that denies the existence of conflict. Groupthink is one result of nominal conflict; parties refuse to criticise decisions and avoid conflict to such an extent that individual perspectives and even critical information may be withheld, and riskier decisions are ultimately made.

The *battleground* refers to the zone where intense value conflict resides or erupts with high levels of intensity, so high it exceeds either or both parties’ ability to cope because they are consumed with winning at any cost, fearful that loss means their own demise. This is a place where people and positions feel threatened, leading to defensiveness. If the conflict isn’t resolved this is when it sinks into the *underground*. People and issues hide in the underground and is the result of individuals avoiding honest discourse.

The *common ground* emerges between the *battleground* and the *underground*. It is where civility, respect, acceptance of ambiguity, tolerance for conflict and therefore where true partnership finds

its greatest expression. It is not a static zone but rather it is fluid and permeable and its shape and reach is dictated by the people in an organisation developing their collective ability to work from a place of civility and respect, to appreciate that ambiguity is a part of life and essential to creativity and freedom, and to tolerate a greater range of conflict without allowing it to explode into value attacks or sink into passive-aggressive avoidance or guerrilla-inspired sabotage.

The *common ground* grows not by eliminating intensity of conflicts, nor by seeking ways to move as quickly as possible into the *common ground* in order to achieve a sense of stability and comfort, but rather by acknowledging that mature human relationships involve broadening our ability to manage that intensity while honestly seeking a sense of mutual understanding – whether or not all parties agree on all points.

Central to the common ground model is the premise that civility expands to the degree that people find ways to increase their tolerance for conflict and ambiguity.

When people feel that the *power-over* structure, with its emphasis on domination and control, is too overwhelming to challenge, they hide their feelings and allow animosities to fester in the *underground*. They realise it is dangerous to make a direct attack on the hierarchy from a subordinate position.

Leadership in a partnership organisation

Managers focus on doing things ‘right’, like meticulously implementing prescribed policies and procedures, and obsessively pursuing an action plan to its completion even when new information would indicate a change of course is needed. Leaders on the other hand focus on the ‘right things’, which may involve mid-course corrections. (Warren Bennis & Burt Nanus, Leaders strategies for taking charge.)

Partnering leaders, co-create (rather than impose) the organisation’s vision; helping others make the interconnections between vision, goals and actions; collaboratively crafting and sustaining the organisation’s core values; linking those shared values to fluid and practical organisational norms; facilitating conversations across the organisation to help clarify, refine and apply the organisation’s mission.

Within a partnership organisation there is a shift away from command and control to one based on a supportive and inclusive web of relationships that encourages dialogue and collaborative problem-solving (akin to KM systems). Through a continuous process of shared discovery new connections are made and new patterns for the practical and innovative application of that knowledge are designed.

Traditionally, management skills which have been valued and developed are around the ability to work systematically to a pre-determined, carefully controlled outcome. Whereas in partnership organisations, the most valued skill is the ability to conceptually, flexibly, and yet systematically work through a process – perhaps without a specific and predetermined outcome – following the threads wherever they may lead, and knowing when ‘good enough’ is sufficient for recommending action.

The partnering leader moves beyond the preoccupation with specialisation because in today's globally interdependent and rapidly changing marketplace, it is self-evident that no specialist can stand alone.

Leader as partner

Partnering leaders ensure that as the process of innovation unfolds (as new information feeds new knowledge, understanding and advances):

- *The value of people and their unique contributions is enhanced.* So individuals have the opportunity to engage in dialogues that seek out and examine key questions, ask for constructive criticism and develop innovative proposals that although not guaranteed acceptance, are guaranteed consideration
- *A culture of genuine civility and respect is established,* which supports collaboration. An organisation's potential for creating viable and genuine partnership is directly related to the health of the relationships among its employees. There must be safety to 'speak the unspeakable', to question standard operating procedures and to disagree with those 'in charge.'
- *Innovation itself is both encouraged and understood to be an on-going process* that requires constant new information and the introduction of processes that may represent breaking the mould of revered organisational traditions.

The seeds of emerging partnership organisations will not take root until those willing to serve as partner-members and partner-leaders dedicate time and take actions to redefine how they will work together to achieve progress together

Sometimes both employees and managers surrender their power and abdicate their responsibility to change things because being involved in directing change requires a crucial level of commitment that they feel unwilling or unable to make.

"If we deny our power to affect people, then we don't have to worry about taking responsibility for how we use it or, more significantly, how we don't." Allan Johnson, Power and Difference

'Servant Leadership' (coined by Robert k. Greenleaf) is someone who chooses to serve first. So service is the primary value. Stewardship (peter Block) is accountability without control or compliance. This path of service and stewardship requires a shift in a leader's behaviour, role and self-attitude. It requires moving from a 'driver of change' to a 'gardener of people' who sees the potential in others and helps create the conditions for them to grow and reveal themselves. They are an active participant in creating learning that thrives on open discovery and innovation and doesn't hesitate to admit "I don't know".

Regardless of one's position in an organisation we all have the possibility to practice partnering leadership, by:

- Acting as agents of conflict transformation, by being the one who takes the initiative to break disruptive, competitive and destructive cycles, rather than waiting for someone else to go first. Mistakes and conflicts are seen as learning opportunities
- Exercise courage by walking through the fear in difficult situation and choosing to move forward with deep integrity in spite of one's apprehension

- Consciously seek to reduce one's own negativity and habitual patterns that might contribute to the organisational 'rumour mill.' Practice open and conscious self-monitoring.
- Practice open and appreciative inquiry in order to learn from many points of view, open the dialogue, listen with empathy and speak our truth. Cultivate 'beginners mind' wherein the goal is understanding.
- Generate trust by listening to each other's stories without judgement, blame or demand. Then tell our own stories, without seeking competition or self-aggrandisement
- There is no abdicating responsibility to someone 'in charge' who can then be crucified if we dislike the outcomes

Go to the people. Live among them.

Learn from them. Love them.

Start with what they know. Build from what they have.

But of the best leaders, when the task is accomplished and their work is done, the people remark,

"We have done it ourselves."

Old Chinese Proverb

Leadership power and organisational forms

Inspired from the 'Participative Design' Model (Merrelyn Emery)

	Command & Control	Partnership
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Closed Structure ■ Hierarchical / Dominant ■ Bureaucratic / representative ■ Rigid / difficult to change ■ Top down decisions made by a few at the top ■ Controlling / limited learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Open structure ■ Flat/non-dominant ■ Participative / partnership ■ Flexible / adaptable ■ Consultative / group decisions ■ Self-managing / continuous learning
Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Considered to be generally unreliable, irresponsible, dumb, and basically lazy ■ The need for some type of competition and motivational reward system to increase their productivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Considered to be generally purposeful, responsible and conscious learners
Management / Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A strong management presence is required to ensure the work gets done ■ The bottom line equals the lowest cost and the maximum profits to investors ■ Managers use rewards and sanctions to try and mould the behaviour of employees ■ A few people at the top make top-down decisions ■ The responsibility for control and coordination rests at the level above where the work is actually being done 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Effective leadership involves coordinating efforts between individuals and teams ■ Promotes active participation and continuous learning ■ Provides a role model for open communication, innovative problem solving and transformative conflict management ■ Facilitate group decision-making yet are capable of calling the decision when necessary ■ Leave coordination and control of work processes at the level where the work is actually done ■ Help team members to build mutual respect, trust and support
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Low commitment, involvement, productivity and quality ■ 'Deskilled' people who are limited to specific areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ High levels of employee commitment, involvement, productivity and quality ■ Develops multi-skilled people who can work in a variety of areas and who have a vested more personally in the overall outcome

Key actions for organisational and cultural transitions

One of the most common situations to encounter is an organisation stuck in old, binding traditions, while fully engaged in massive change and transition. In that instance, individual, organisational and cultural transitions are often mirroring each other and individuals are juggling changes and transitions at all levels simultaneously.

All systems are in flux and many people are responding either by retreating from the edge of change and clinging fiercely to tried and trusted traditions or by looking to fix blame for the state of crisis and calling for a 'better patriarch'.

In this regard, there are 10 key actions that are important in ensuring a successful transition:

- Allow for 'speaking the unspeakable'
- Acknowledge endings and provide assistance for moving through the grief cycle
- Recognise and support the process of working through the wilderness
- Consciously involve people in managing transitions
- Identify 'early adopters', the 'mainstream' and transition holdouts; then map a strategy for managing the transition with each group
- Find ways to embrace those who do not fit 'the mould,' and teach people how to collaborate and build community
- Preserve group memory and weave in new threads
- Create rituals around transitional stages
- Provide 'time out' retreats
- Celebrate success and prepare for the long haul.

About CourageousHR

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