

Brian O'Neill's 21 Partnership Success Factors

As the Superintendent of Golden Gate National Parks, Brian O'Neill and his staff earned a reputation as a model partnership park where partnerships are a way of thinking about how best to accomplish the park's mission and build a community of stewardship. Recently, the park determined that 18.5% of the park services were being delivered by NPS staff and the other 81.5% by a host of park partners. These figures underscore the breadth and value of park partnerships.

One success factor is that Brian and his staff are always honing their edge by being on the lookout for and gathering innovative partnership ideas and best practices from other practitioners around the nation and in other countries. The following 21 partnership success factors reflect two decades at Golden Gate National Parks as a learning laboratory and a synthesis of best practices from many sources.

1. **FOCUS ON IMPORTANT NEEDS** – Partnerships take time to establish and nurture in order to have successful outcomes. The decision to establish a partnership should begin with the belief that an important need can best be fulfilled through a partnership. Potential partners will always be knocking at your door suggesting partnering arrangements. Often we find ourselves in reactive rather than proactive situations -- responding to an idea from an outside party. It is more productive to be proactive. First determine that a partnership is the best way to accomplish an important body of work. Then seek out the partner or partners who might best be able to help. In some cases you may need to create the right partner.
2. **MAKE THE PARTNERSHIPS A WIN-WIN** – Successful partnerships begin and thrive with a clear understanding that mutual benefits will accrue to the partners involved. Each partner may not benefit equally, but each must realize a value-added benefit. Each partner must constantly assess the needs of their respective partners and ensure that individual and collective actions are responsive to those needs. It is important to tie the partnership and its outcomes to the missions of each partner. Partnership initiatives should not only be a great thing to do but also a benefit to each partner. Sharing resources, benefits and recognition for successes keeps the partnership from becoming lopsided, or dominated by any one player. Each partner needs to see their contribution alongside the benefit gained.
3. **ADOPT A SHARED VISION** – Development and continuing refinement of a shared vision of the work to be accomplished is key to the success of any partnership. The shared vision should evolve from the full engagement of all partners in the relationship. The vision should reflect both the broad body of work and each project or initiative to be undertaken.

Too often, one entity in a partnership independently develops the vision without full engagement of the other partner(s). This violates the underlying premise of a partnership and often results in insufficient ownership or emotional buy-in. Successful partnerships demonstrate a culture of full engagement from the very beginning that leads to collective enthusiasm and achieving results.

4. **NEGOTIATE A FORMAL AGREEMENT** – Good intentions and a handshake are not enough. Partnerships need formal written agreements and work plans that define mutual interests and expectations, the roles and responsibilities of each partner, and clear accountability for the work to be performed. The formal agreement serves as a mutually binding contract to ensure that each partner acknowledges and fulfills their responsibility. Most people are overextended with work, and tasks can fall through the cracks. If a given partnership is important, provide structure for the partnership through a formal agreement and specific work plans that lay out what tasks need to be performed for each initiative, by whom, and when. In a busy world, clearly written intent, roles, process, schedules, and accountability procedures guide performance and follow through. If differences arise or performance lags, the formal written agreement provides a touchstone for accountability, revisiting intent and commitments, reconciliation, and getting back on track. When needed, the agreement should be updated or amended to keep it current.
5. **ENSURE GOOD COMMUNICATION** – The success of every partnership is dependant upon the structure, frequency, and quality of communication between the partners. The most successful partnerships incorporate regularly scheduled meetings or conference calls to review how the relationship is working and progress on individual initiatives or work elements. The work schedule/calendar should reflect the importance of the work. Even the best partnerships do not carry their own momentum for long without a structure for touching base to stay on task and on schedule. The chief executive of each partner entity in a relationship must demonstrate leadership and stay involved to the extent that executive level interest is re-enforced and policy direction is provided on a sustained basis. The executives also are responsible for ensuring that good communication processes are in place within and between each partner entity to maintain the excitement of the collaboration, resolve issues, and advance the work. No partnership can reach its full potential without good communication practices as a core element of the relationship. Partnerships, like any human relationship, are about communication, communication, and communication.
6. **ENSURE THE PARTNERSHIP IS OWNED BY YOUR WHOLE ORGANIZATION** – To succeed, partnerships need to be truly understood and embraced by the entire staff of the partner organizations. Partnerships often originate as a dream or vision of the CEO or an individual(s) within an organization and the compelling reasons and excitement for the potential

outcomes are not shared throughout the organization. This incomplete organizational buy-in inevitably limits or undermines full success when the rationales and commitments are not understood and shared by staff who have responsibilities for implementing the partnership. It is crucial for the leader to invest time and energy to build ownership of the partnership throughout supervisory and staff levels. If the partnership is not understood or accepted as being important, it is difficult to sustain over time, especially when the key individuals responsible for its creation take other jobs or retire. Build a sense of team and a partnership culture so everyone understands the importance and value added by working collaboratively. You need to instill the importance of continually acknowledging the contributions of each party to the overall effort. In essence, individualism needs to be transformed into shared stewardship and responsibility that is re-enforced by actions as well as words.

7. **MAINTAIN AN ENVIRONMENT OF TRUST** – Trust is an essential ingredient for successful partnerships and enables collaboration and contribution. Trust must be demonstrated and earned day by day. A single betrayal can be costly and make it hard to regain the same level of trust between the partners. Trust eroding behaviors include: independent action by one partner that has not been shared with the other partner(s); grandstanding at the expense of another partner; not honoring one’s word, commitment or confidentiality; creating suspicion in terms of one’s motives; or acting in any way contrary to the best interests of the overall partnership. You build trust through the consistency and integrity of your actions over time. And you have to trust your partners in order to be trusted.

8. **LEAVE YOUR EGO AND CONTROL AT THE DOOR** – The most insidious impediment to good partnerships is the unwillingness or inability of a partner to share power and control. This can be the “Achilles heel” of partnerships. At their very basic definition, partnerships are about shared power, shared vision, and shared responsibility. While one entity may possess a superior position, larger budget, more staff, etc. in a relationship, the execution of the work and credit for accomplishments should not reflect this. This is not about a landlord-tenant relationship. This is about two or more entities working in unity to accomplish important work. A “boss - servant” mentality will lead only to frustration and unfulfilled promise. Partnerships are about “we” not “I.” They are about creating an equality of importance - an environment where individual personal egos are subservient to the interests of the whole.

This being said, it is important to help your organization understand that partnering does not mean giving up control or influence, nor does it mean that organizations give up their autonomy. Good partnerships represent a delicate balance between maintaining one’s own identity and adding value to a collective effort.

9. **UNDERSTAND EACH PARTNER'S MISSION AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE** – Every organization has its own culture that is built over time, based on its mission, its practices, its people, its governing values, its traditions, and its institutional history. In any partnership situation, it is important to acknowledge and understand these different organizational cultures, to respect them, and to find ways that these realities can contribute to strengthen the mutual endeavor. The most successful partnerships recognize and value their differences and find ways to integrate them into a workable overarching partnership culture.
10. **UTILIZE STRENGTHS OF EACH PARTNER** – Each entity in a partnership brings special capabilities, unique authorities, and different flexibilities to further the work of the partnership. As specific needs and tasks are addressed, consider the particular strengths of each partner in determining the most cost-effective approach and who best to accomplish a specific task. Successful partnerships are characterized by a flexible approach to how needs and responsibilities are matched given each partner's funding, policies, political connections, and other considerations.
11. **FIND WAYS THROUGH THE RED TAPE** – Partnerships regularly face “red tape” barriers in trying to work across organization lines, especially with public sector partners, which tend to have more regulations. Getting through these barriers and complications takes creativity and persistence. This can lead to heightened frustrations and complications in moving desired work forward in a timely manner. The more entities in a relationship, the more likely that legal, policy, attitudinal, and cultural challenges will be part of doing business. Successful partnerships acknowledge and address these realities up front and take satisfaction in resolving them. Convert your stumbling blocks to stepping stones. Successful partnerships map out the red tape barriers and mobilize whatever it takes to overcome them. It is too easy to point fingers or use these impediments as excuses for derailments and not achieving success. How partners overcome adversity and the institutional complexities of individual partner members will determine, in large measure, the success of the partnership.
12. **BUILD STEP BY STEP** – It is natural for the partners to want early successes. There is a tendency to look at similar partnership arrangements and their results without appreciating all the steps taken that led to the result. You have to invest to get results and process is important to achieve successful outcomes. Every situation presents a different set of opportunities based on the unique social, economic and political realities in which a partnership must operate. Much can and should be learned from the experience of others. Good partnerships take a steady investment of time and energy to build and develop. Successful partnerships are built incrementally by starting at the beginning, and growing gradually and tackling more

complex initiatives based on the competencies gained from the previous efforts.

Successful partners understand the value of due process and earned vs. instant gratification. They recognize that investment in building the infrastructure necessary to achieve future success is important and are willing to forgo premature success in order to achieve larger, more important long-term gains. “Go Slow to Go Fast.” Partners will grow as far in the partnership as the other partner(s) are willing to help or let them. Challenge yourself and your partners to collectively raise the bar of expectations and advance the partnership step-by-step.

13. **STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE** – A partnership ultimately gains stature and a reputation based on the quality of the work it accomplishes. The most successful partnerships understand the importance of doing everything well. Build an early reputation for excellence and sustain that reputation. This will be an important factor in how others view your partnership and what doors will be opened to you. People, and potential funders, want to associate with important work and a reputation for excellence. Step back and analyze what you want people to say about your partnership’s work and organizations. This standard then should underscore your strategy, behaviors, and actions to ensure your desired reputation is achieved.
14. **DIVERSIFY YOUR FUNDING SOURCES** – The ultimate success of any partnership depends on the human and financial resources it is able to garner. Successful partnerships develop multiple and steady sources of support, particularly for covering basic operational costs and launching new initiatives. There are many examples where partnerships become too dependent on one or too few sources of financial support. When these sources are reduced or disappear, sustainability of the partnership is jeopardized. Building a more diverse funding base is the best hedge against the vagaries of over reliance on fund sources that may be problematic or undependable from year to year. Develop and periodically update a comprehensive business plan that addresses both near and longer term public and private funding sources, and earned as well as contributed funds that will give your partnership staying power and adaptability.
15. **CONSTANTLY SEEK OUT AND ADOPT BEST PRACTICES** – The best practitioners are those who are a sponge for new ideas and always on the lookout for innovation and creativity that can be adapted to their partnership. Too often, we hear statements such as “We don’t do things that way. We’ve always done it this way.” “It won’t work.” “This is too risky.” “You have to tell them what they need to know.” “Don’t let them set the agenda.” While such cautionary thoughts need to be considered, successful partnerships are open to new ideas and better ways to accomplish their goals. They can readily

grasp and adapt best practices. Overcoming resistance to change is one of the major challenges to partnership success.

Partner entities need to seek ways to build in greater flexibility and adaptability in their structure and work in order to take advantage of “partnering moments.” Establish a work environment in which reasoned risk taking and creativity are encouraged and rewarded and people are willing to risk possible failures in order to succeed. Leaders should act as “champions” with the courage to support experimentation and risk taking and run interference when necessary.

Resourcefulness also characterizes successful partnerships. Work together to identify and engage the abundant human talent residing in most communities to participate in and assist your partnership.

16. **ALWAYS BE COURTEOUS AND DIPLOMATIC** – Sustaining successful partnerships involves hard work, practiced effectively and consistently over time. It is essential that strong ground rules be established by the partner entities that will govern how the organizations and individuals will interact and treat each other. There is no room for disrespectful behavior. It serves only to tarnish how partners interact and work together. Honesty, respect, courtesy, tact, and diplomacy, should govern partner relationships.

A useful partnering technique is for the partners to define all behaviors that are crucial to sustaining good relationships and then ensure that accountability measures are in place to re-enforce their ongoing practice. Successful partnerships work constantly on developing effective relationships built on trust and a shared commitment to each other’s interests and success.

17. **HONOR YOUR COMMITMENTS** – Partnership work entails perseverance and follow through by each participating organization and individual. Partnerships require a shared commitment to each other’s success. Sustaining any partnership requires that exciting ideas of interest to the participants actually get executed. Progress depends on each person in the partnership honoring their commitment and following up their words with deeds. When work does not get accomplished, it suggests that the work was not really that important to the individual or organization. This, in turn, builds frustration in the other participants and eats at the mutual trust factor so essential to effective partnering. Successful partnerships address these realities by putting in place reliable accountability measures and regular executive base-touching processes to stay on top of commitments and actions.

18. **CELEBRATE SUCCESS** – It is a mistake to not take time to formally and frequently celebrate successes. Successful partnerships look for every opportunity to celebrate individual project successes or key benchmarks in

the evolution of the partnership. Such celebrations allow the partners to recognize good work being done that re-enforces the goals of the partnership; to gain some outside recognition of the partnership; and/or to demonstrate possibilities for the partnership to grow. People often are reluctant to take the time to celebrate but invariably are pleased when it does occur. Recognizing and celebrating accomplishments helps motivate and spur people on to new challenges. It is a lost opportunity when it does not occur. If one's goal is to build greater community awareness of the partnership, then the partners need to take every opportunity to legitimately "toot their horns" and market their work and successes. Besides many people who pitch in on partnership do so because they believe in the cause and because it is enjoyable. Celebrating success milestones ensures everybody's "fun-quotient" stays high. Especially when results are going to take time, it is important to have some early successes and milestones to enjoy and celebrate to build a sense of accomplishment and momentum.

19. **RESPECT THE RIGHT TO DISAGREE ; ACT ON A CONSENSUS BASIS –**
There are times and circumstances in partnerships where honest differences will surface and where reluctance to take action on a proposal is deeply held and where compelling reasons are presented on why an action cannot be supported. It is important that partners respect these positions with adequate dialogue and understand the basis of the concerns. In successful partnerships, ground rules are established to give each partner a veto power over proposed actions. Partnership work means reaching consensus among the partners. Homework well done should eliminate most of these differences before they become contentious. There simply is too much good work where commonality of support can be achieved for these situations to erode the core working relationship.
20. **NETWORK AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS –** A core competency in partnership work is the ability to network and build relationships. People sell ideas to others. People lend support because people ask them to. Partnerships are by definition about people working together and reaching out to others to gain their emotional engagement. Successful partnerships establish formal systems to identify people who can add value and support. They strategically build new relationships and expand networks to accomplish their priorities. Their relationship building work is deliberate and proactive rather than reactive or coincidental. It is based on a clear strategy of engaging the specific organizations and individuals within the broader community who can advance the work of the partnership. Systematically match your needs with potential sources of support and resources to ensure that effective connections occur.
21. **PUT MECHANISMS IN PLACE TO RE-ENFORCE THE PARTNERSHIP –**
To realize its full potential, a partnership needs: a clear vision, dedicated and skilled people, a rewards and recognition program, incentives that stimulate

desired partnership activity, sustained management support and involvement, operational funds, and a clear understanding among supervisors and staff of the potential benefits that result from the partnership arrangements. These are complex, but essential, elements to put in place. The seriousness with which they are addressed will determine your degree of success.

It all boils down to how deliberate and strategic you and your partners are in building a “partnership culture” that incorporates these success factors and the commitments you are willing to make. Understand and adapt success behaviors, develop competencies for these behaviors to be regularly practiced, and align your partnership to succeed.