

How to Move from a Business Relationship to a Strategic Partnership

I attended a team reunion in sunny Sandestin, Florida. It was an excellent time to reminisce and reflect on one of my favorite periods in my career. Why? As a team, we accomplished great things. Personally, I was considered a strategic business partner and was empowered to make a difference. Before I tell you about the reunion, let me give you a little context...

In 2001, I was my company's representative in Montgomery, AL, responsible for gaining alignment, developing relationships, and delivering positive business results with the local bottler. A more massive bottler recently acquired the family-owned operation. The family ownership was well respected, had great community relationships, and delivered outstanding customer service.

The transition didn't go smoothly when the new bottler took over operations. The new operators lost credibility with the customers and the community because of missed deliveries, inferior execution, high turnover, and many broken promises. Most of the original leadership team was released, and new leaders were assigned to clean up the mess.

I was part of the new leadership team assigned to turn things around and knew I was stepping into a challenging situation. The relationship between the company and its bottlers was tenuous. I knew that to become a trusted team member, I'd need to win their hearts by investing time with the bottler's leaders and connecting with them personally. I started by learning about the local market, going on trade rides to get a sense of what the front-line associates needed, asking many

questions, listening, and breaking bread together – the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, right?

I quickly realized that the new Montgomery market leaders were the real deal. To gain a seat at the table and align with them, I provided thought-leading insights and value-creating solutions to help the business grow. I built credibility with the team leader. Over time, I was entrusted with developing and driving the local market strategy and stewarding key marketing asset relationships (e.g., University of Alabama, Auburn University). I’d moved from just aligning with the bottler’s leadership team to become their strategic business partner.

How? Through being trustworthy, sharing a common purpose, promoting transparency, being humble, and always maintaining a sense of humor when things got tough. More on the five steps to developing strategic partnerships at the end of the story.

Our team’s execution improved significantly after a lot of hard work, and our business results exceeded expectations. The team was nationally recognized for its efforts, and a number of us were promoted due to the successful market turnaround.

Back to the reunion...

I was honored to be part of the Sandestin, FL festivities. Only a handful of company representatives were invited to the reunion, but I was the only one to attend. It was great to see all of the people. We hugged and shared fond memories. During dinner, about 15 people stood up and shared funny stories about something that happened during our time together. We all enjoyed laughing at the stories and ourselves.

As we went around the table, I realized that I’d be the last person to speak that evening. I sat thinking to myself, “What am I going to say that hasn’t already been said?”. . . .

Then it hit me. Talk about *partnership*...

You see, my current role has me in a position to influence strategic partnerships around the globe. It's easy for me to do because I experienced being a strategic partner with my former teammates in the room.

After a few opening comments, I started, "Thank you for modeling what a successful partnership looks like. You embraced me and gave me a seat at your table. I can't tell you how much I appreciated it then and now."

"Why?" I continued, "I remember unifying phrases like, 'One team, one goal' or the many days traveling together to different sales centers where we got to know each other. Despite all the obstacles we encountered, we accomplished much. We created shared values and a shared vision. The way you treated me and the partnership we developed modeled what success looks like."

I went on, "I don't say this to impress you but to *impress upon you what* an impact you've had on me. You laid the foundation for the work I'm now doing. I can pass it on. I'm leading a project helping others in North America and around the globe to build strategic partnerships – Peru, Canada, Russia, the Philippines, and beyond. Who would have thought a little kid like me in a small market like Montgomery, AL, would have such an opportunity to make a worldwide impact?"

I paused and passionately said, "Don't ever take for granted what we had. It was special. Through our partnership, we turned around the market, and many of us went on to new opportunities because of what we did here."

"More importantly, let's take this one step further. It's said that people won't remember what you did, but they will remember how you were treated. I'll always look fondly on our time together because I was treated well, and you embraced me as a partner. You treated me well, and for that, I am thankful."

That's the truth. . . I became a strategic business partner and ultimately a friend to all involved in our accomplishments – friendships that lasted a lifetime.

Partnerships are essential to you and your team's success. The Bible says, "It's better to have a partner than go it alone. Share the work, share the wealth. And if one falls down, the other helps, but if there's no one to help, tough!" (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 The Message). Great partnerships enable extraordinary results.

Do you want to become a strategic partner and increase the likelihood of success? I recommend following the below five steps.

1. **Become Trustworthy:** Build credibility through doing what you say you'll do and adding indispensable value. Earn your seat at the table by providing thought leadership, developing solutions, and delivering results.
2. **Unify through a Common Purpose:** Clearly define where you're headed, the collective ways of working together, and what the partnership wants to achieve – ultimately, partners want to improve their business results.
3. **Promote Transparency:** Drive open and honest, two-way communication. Accept feedback as a gift. Be willing to challenge thinking and push the envelope. When faced with problems or conflict, talk things out, always focusing on the issue at hand, not the person.
4. **Be Humble:** Take the position of a servant. Think less about yourself and your goals, and think more about how to help others.
5. **Keep a Sense of Humor:** Remember, laughter is the shortest distance between two people. Know when to interject humor into situations and put others at ease.

If you become trustworthy, unify through a common purpose, promote transparency, be humble and keep a sense of humor, you'll develop strategic partnerships and become a successful

leader.

And, who knows? You may even develop some life-long friendships as I did.

Do you want to learn more about growing your leadership skills? Visit my website, prestonpoore.com, today!

Cheers,

Preston