Partnership in Practice

– extended trust in each other's complementary competences

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The word partnership is used about almost everything – from supplier agreements to logos on a website. But a genuine partnership is something other than a contract.

Fundamentally, it is about extended trust in each other's complementary competences, where you fight together to achieve a common goal. Not because the agreement says so, but because the goal is bigger than each party.

This article is about what characterises strong partnerships – and what I have learned from them over more than 30 years.

What is a good partnership?

A good partnership expresses that everyone involved has extended trust that each of them will proactively contribute the distinctive competences that can complement one another in a stronger value chain.

At the same time, the partners must unequivocally demonstrate the will to work towards a common, ambitious goal without hidden agendas or prioritised "nursing" of the home office.

If it is a full-scale partnership project, you also move in together physically and have full transparency in the finances; a shared bottom line in the shared household.

Where I learned it – Danish Mobile Hospital

At the age of 23, in early summer 1995, I arrived in Banja Luka during the war in Bosnia as a young emergency services officer and became head of Danish Mobile Hospital, a partnership project between Greater Copenhagen Emergency Services (Beredskab Storkøbenhavn) and Caritas Denmark, financed primarily by the EU.

When I arrived, it quickly became clear that the local staff did not work very well together. The leadership task was therefore not just project management under very demanding circumstances, but also a dose of genuine team building in practice.

The team consisted of surgeons, nurses, interpreters and logisticians of different nationalities, ethnicities and religions. We got to know each individual, worked side by side 16–17 hours a day, ate the same food and drove the same truck. Trust was not created with words, but through action – when we crossed front lines with medicine, or when someone broke down and had to be brought to safety.

The result was several thousand flawless operations under extreme pressure, help for almost a million civilians and the EU's medal of merit for extraordinary humanitarian effort. But even more important was that the local staff themselves gave us the name "DMH Dream Team". In 2014, together with my old colleague and good friend Zeljko Bozic, I founded Outdoor Leadership Training Center in Bosnia – a partnership that today trains leaders to build real Dream Teams. Because partnerships are not only external, but also internal.

The first partnership in business

After Bosnia, I joined ISS as a management trainee in 1998. My first job was as operations manager in Property Services, where I was responsible for "green & white". Here we established a partnership with AMU Nordsjælland (a Danish adult vocational training centre), which could train and upskill 32 semi-skilled gardeners (who cleared snow in winter in collaboration with a lot of farmers and their tractors) – a huge puzzle with almost 1,200 man-days of training in just five months.

AMU had the training expertise and facilities, we had the tasks and the customers. Neither of us could have done it alone. It raised both quality and customer service markedly – and it taught me that the best partnerships arise when both parties need each other.

The same happened with the machinery. We were not experts in repairing the machines, so the workshop function was outsourced to Svogerslev Maskincenter – but at the same time insourced into our own building. It was slightly more expensive per operating hour, but production stoppages almost disappeared. Efficiency rose markedly, and so did customer satisfaction (and employee satisfaction). After two years, a deficit had been turned into a +17% operating margin.

Herlev and ISS – share the risks and rewards equally

One day, after a long operations managers' meeting, my boss, Ole Mortensen, suddenly stood up and exclaimed: "Mads, I've figured it out! We'll take operations, and you … you take all the soft crap!" It was because I insisted on proper induction and training. That command became the start of my HR career – and of one of the strongest partnerships I have been part of.

The visionary and practically minded job centre manager in Herlev Municipality, Niels Tolstrup, faced a challenge in activating unemployed people and a rising cost base. ISS had a recruitment need and wanted a flexible workforce that could quickly gear up and down. Complementary needs and complementary competences.

The projects started by getting unemployed people with many problems other than unemployment into work, and developed into, among other things, Immediate Activation (Straksaktivering), which became a huge success and was rolled out across the country.

We built such a good concept for the benefit of all parties that trust grew and grew – until the day we moved in together under one roof in the "MultiService" project. One of the secrets here was that we

shared the risks and rewards equally – with open calculations and a shared bottom line. Herlev took care of legislation, timeliness and benefits, while ISS took care of welcome, workwear, induction and training plans as well as services at all kinds of municipal institutions.

Together we also developed "Dansk på arbejdspladsen" (Danish in the Workplace) with the seed of the brilliant video CV, and several Danish and foreign ministers came to visit to see how we did it in practice – and my unit delivered the group's second-highest margin.

The masterpiece was the DKK 6 million multi-partnership project "Knowledge Centre for Competence Assessment of Refugees and Immigrants" in Aarhus, which I got the Minister of Employment to come and open – to the great revelation of ISS Denmark's managing director, to whom I simply whispered: "Now ISS is the leading consulting engineer in the integration field." It was later rewarded with both the Integration Prize (Integrationsprisen) and the CSR People Prize.

Outsource what you are not best at – but move in together

Dynamic job placement was – like the machinery – not ISS's core competence either, and head office's traditional and sluggish job centre could not keep up at all. So we simply did it ourselves.

I outsourced the temp function to a temp agency – but at the same time insourced it physically, so we sat in offices side by side with my project managers. Within a year, the shared "Incubator", as we called the temp unit, turned over a double-digit million amount. And once again we shared the risks and rewards equally.

The point is that a partnership is not about being able to do everything yourself. It is about finding those who are better at what you have not mastered – and then working so closely together that the boundary between the organisations almost disappears.

A team that defied the doubt

Partnerships also exist within an organisation. At ISS, as project director, I built a team of 12 project managers and consultants around the country who shared knowledge, frustrations and ideas across the board at regular meetings and some really fun workshops that we orchestrated ourselves.

When one colleague was overloaded, another stepped in. Head office not only doubted the initiative, but actually tried several times, out of sheer envy, to put a spoke in the wheel – for example when a senior manager called me and said: "If you and Ole want to mess around with that activation circus, fine, but don't count on any help from here!"

I asked the team whether they would stand together on it anyway. They would – and with Ole Mortensen's backing it succeeded beyond all expectations. Extended trust in each other and a common goal were stronger than the scepticism from outside. The projects generated positive coverage, strengthened the brand markedly and won several awards.

> *When there is darkness around you, be your own light.*

From boss to client – and partner

At Christiansen & Essenbæk, Jon Buch was my boss when together we created the award-winning project "Trivsel – 360 grader" (Well-being – 360 Degrees). Later he became my client, and we have worked together on leadership development for many years. When my parents celebrated their golden wedding anniversary and I was the chef for the whole party, Jon turned up and toiled for eight hours on a Saturday. "You've helped me so much, so of course I'll help you!", he said.

Since then we have trained his leaders in Bosnia and in the Swedish wilderness in winter, among other places, and they have cycled up Mont Ventoux together. It is a partnership that has survived changing roles – because it rests on mutual respect and a shared desire to create something bigger than ourselves.

One of the young guys, Anders, who was on some of the first leadership teams, I saw a light in, even though he was teased a little by the experienced old hands. I believed in him and took him along to a couple of private, friendly gatherings. Recently it was announced that he will soon succeed Jon.

Partnership across sectors – more welfare for less money

Partnerships can also solve societal tasks. In our project "Fremtidens lederberedskab" (Future Leadership Preparedness), the school, parents, volunteer instructors, local businesses, the municipality and a number of sponsors came together to train 32 young people from 6th grade on five character-building OLTC training expeditions around Europe over two school years. I myself contributed around 1,600 volunteer hours and DKK 300,000. It was the realisation of a dream and a vision I had created one dark night in a forest in Canada with the wolves around me.

An absolute requirement for taking part in the project was that each young person had to find, complete and document at least 20 hours of voluntary work in the local community themselves – for example helping out at the nursery, at the care home or for the neighbour. More welfare for zero kroner.

It is a partnership where all parties contribute – and that is something you must learn much earlier in life than many people think. At the same time, it removes the need for expensive rehabilitation projects for teenagers, which cost the municipal coffers dearly.

Partnerships today

The principle has not changed. Today, Cronquist Consult works with an IT partner that uses AI for process optimisation at our shared clients. We contribute leadership, business development, strategic advice and culture change – the partner contributes the technology. On our own, we would only solve half the task – or perhaps not get started or reach the goal at all.

It is the same logic as in Banja Luka and in Herlev: Complementary competences, a common goal and trust that the other party will deliver its part.

A good example is PSN Service A/S, where for some years we have worked together on, among other things, executive business coaching at C-level and training of middle managers – and now AI-supported process optimisation. In the period 2023–25, the company improved its pre-tax profit by more than DKK 15 million and has now been acquired by InstallatørGruppen, with whom we are also in dialogue.

Take your own medicine – also when the partnership becomes unhealthy

Not all partnerships last forever. At the temp agency, I met one of the most skilled salespeople I have ever met. She outperformed her colleagues by a factor of four to five – and later became my partner in life. But the foundation of a partnership can change if there is foul play, and a few years ago I had to make the decision to say goodbye to what was once an important relationship.

It can be costly and take a long time before you are free of what suddenly starts to weigh you down. In my own case, it has taken more than four years to clean up someone else's self-inflicted financial chaos – and the party is not over yet, despite unequivocal contracts and court rulings.

So it applies both in life and in business: When trust and the common goal disappear, the partnership is no longer a partnership. Then you must take your own medicine and break out – even if it costs. It takes courage to acknowledge, but it frees energy for new, healthy partnerships.

Strong partnerships reach further

Today, my old friends from the ISS days and I still meet. We founded the "Rokokoklubben" (the Rococo Club) and meet now and then in Nyhavn to tell old stories. We all have other jobs today, but we respect each other for a commitment that reached beyond our own noses.

That may be the best sign of a strong partnership: It reaches further than projects, job titles and separate organisations.

Characteristics of a strong partnership

Five characteristics:

- **Extended trust:** You trust each other's competences – also when it is difficult.
- **Complementary competences:** Each party contributes what it is best at.
- **A common, ambitious goal:** The goal is bigger than each party – and worth fighting for.
- **Openness:** Share the risks and rewards equally with open calculations and a shared bottom line.
- **Proximity:** Work side by side – preferably under one roof.

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- Which of our “partnerships” are really just supplier agreements?
- Where could a partner with complementary competences lift us – and what should we give in return?
- Which partnerships have become unhealthy – and do we have the courage to break out?

Conclusion – trust is the currency

A genuine partnership is built on extended trust in each other’s complementary competences and the will to fight together for a common, ambitious goal. That applies in a war zone, between a municipality and a private company, between boss and employee – and in life.

The prerequisite is that you first know yourself and know what you can contribute. Only then can you embrace other people’s perspectives – and build partnerships that reach further than the contract.

The article builds on, among others, my LinkedIn articles “Partnerskab i praksis” (Partnership in Practice, 2015), “Real Dream Team Building” (2015) and “Ny velfærdsmodel baseret på frivillige” (A New Welfare Model Based on Volunteers, 2021) as well as “Building real Dream Teams” on cronquist.dk.

Want to build stronger partnerships and Dream Teams?

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