

Valuing Partnerships

by Sheila Murray Bethel, PhD.

The businesses that are going to thrive in our new century will be those that promote partnerships and alliances over the traditional management pyramid.

We are still recovering from the destructive competitiveness and idealized autocracy of the 1980s, but we've learned our lesson. No one does it alone. In real life, we're tied to others. The ruinous individualism of that decade has yielded to a reality check.

National and global business alliances are replacing lone-wolf empires.

The old theory was that an absolute commander could respond to changes more quickly, like a general on the battlefield. However, we've found that we need strong supportive alliances just because everything is changing so fast. More than ever before, we need quick access to resources - human, informational, financial, and material. Without reliable partnerships and alliances to call on for what we need when we need it, we'll quickly fall behind the competition.

We talk about 'team work' but we're now progressing past teamwork to a partnership mode. Partnerships are different, more potent than traditional teams. For example, members of a sales team used to be rugged individualists who went out and sold things. In our technological age, these salespeople are part of a partnership that can provide a broad range of supports on the spot, things like alternate proposals, financing, or technical expertise.

In the 1980s, when we started our current mode of decreasing the levels of management, everyone thought we'd flatten out the power pyramid and decrease the layers. To people's surprise, the highly successful organizations have become circular instead of flat. Each activity is a link in a chain whose strength depends on the whole.

Businesses used to be divided into isolated fiefdoms where a few individuals had a lot of control. The finance and product development people, the 'number crunchers' and 'computer nerds' were often off in separate corners, doing their own thing and passing on pronouncements.

Now, leaders realize that no one department can be more important than another. Each affects the whole and must function at the same speed. Everyone must become an equal player in an interdependent chain: research and development, information systems, manufacturing, distribution, sales, and marketing. Their partnerships represent equals coming together to fulfill customer needs.

Even within the traditional boss-subordinate structure, the companies that will flourish are those whose employees are empowered to form partnerships. In these alliances, fluid and flexible teams of perhaps four or five people come together to solve a problem or achieve a goal.

Sometimes they then disperse. Sometimes they endure. Being a partner is more powerful than being a team member because each participant makes a contribution equal to that of the highest level executive in the organization. The value to both the company and the individual is incalculable.

And don't overlook your outside resources. Our partnerships go way beyond our businesses in ever-increasing circles. Everyone who helps us get the job done, everyone who supplies us with goods, services, information, and even encouragement, becomes our valued partner, essential for the quick response time we need for the critical edge. Even the smallest company must get into the partnership and alliance arena.