

## The Best Partner Ever

by James Cramer, 2002

The professional partnership can be rewarding but it's also a tough proposition. Surviving and prospering in a partnership is a subject that we get into discussions about often. I recently moderated a workshop where we looked more closely at the question: "What motivates partnership?" The reasons given varied, but pretty much fell into seven areas:

1. To expand skill base of the firm
2. To make more money
3. To increase the size of the practice
4. To have more fun and lower the risk of failure
5. To fill in for each other and get more time off
6. To find the power of synergy (1+1=5)
7. Because it just feels right

Hundreds of partnerships are formed every year in the design professions. It can be a pleasant and profitable experience but it can also become a nightmare. A partnership is really a professional marriage and therefore none is truly perfect. Still, they can fulfill each of the above-mentioned seven areas that motivated the partnership to begin with.

As I recall it was Mark Twain in *Puddin' Head Wilson's Calendar* where I encountered the statement: "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." The power of synergy requires an open and self-critical attitude and this can feel threatening—even invasive. But it can also lead to powerful growth that is worth more than all the annual association continuing education units combined. There are a lot of positives in partnerships but these rarely develop without maturity, enthusiasm, and optimism.

I have a working list of five principles I have found make for the most successful partnerships. Some are unconventional, others classic.

1. A partner is committed to improve the other partner's condition.
2. A partner trusts the other partner to make the decisions that ultimately build more trust.
3. A partner is motivated to establish breakthrough relationships that are durable and are often more about giving than getting.
4. A partner should strive to achieve multidimensional growth in repute, expertise and income as an ongoing expectation.
5. A partner must be an exemplar in collaboration to build relationships that are long-term, mutually reinforcing and mutually rewarding.

Too often the stresses of imperfect partnerships cause a cooling in the relationship and the reasons for forming the partnership are soon forgotten. For instance, spouses of the partners may discover that they do not get along or are not as enthusiastic about the professional venture. Sometimes partners are dishonest with themselves and often we see the symptom of this trait as taking credit for others ideas and actions. Sometimes the problems revolve around "grabbing" which is shorthand for greed.

Take a close look at your own style. Can you share? Can you learn? You must, to become or remain "the best partner ever."

