

PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

WHAT STRONG PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS LOOK LIKE

How to build alignment, address concerns early and create greater value from important business relationships.

BUILD A RELATIONSHIP THAT WORKS

A strong business partner does more than deliver a product or perform a service. Over time, the relationship should make the company easier to operate. The partner understands the business well enough to anticipate needs, offer relevant guidance and help leaders evaluate choices more effectively.

That kind of value rarely develops by accident. It grows when both parties understand what they are working toward, communicate openly and take responsibility for their commitments. A good relationship does not require agreement on everything. It requires enough trust and clarity to discuss priorities, limitations and concerns without turning every difficult conversation into conflict.

1 SHARED SUCCESS

Define the result both parties are trying to create - not only the product, service or price being purchased.

2 USEFUL COMMUNICATION

Give the right people timely, specific information while there is still time to influence the outcome.

3 VALUE THAT GROWS

Use accumulated knowledge and context to improve recommendations, decisions and day-to-day execution.

BEGIN WITH A SHARED DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

Companies often assume expectations are understood because the service, price or deliverable has been discussed. But agreement about what is being purchased is not always agreement about what a successful relationship should produce. One party may prioritize the lowest possible cost while the other assumes responsiveness, flexibility or guidance matters more. Both may believe they are performing appropriately while judging the relationship against different standards.

- ☐ What outcomes are most important to the company
- ☐ What the partner should provide beyond the basic deliverable
- ☐ Which responsibilities remain with the company
- ☐ Who may make decisions or approve changes
- ☐ How cost, service, quality and responsiveness will be evaluated
- ☐ Which limitations or tradeoffs both parties should understand

These points are not administrative details. They create a reference point for the moments when conditions change or expectations are tested. When success is clear, both parties can evaluate performance against something more useful than a general sense that the relationship is - or is not - working.

CREATE COMMUNICATION THAT ADDS VALUE

More communication does not automatically produce a stronger relationship. Valuable communication gives the right people the information they need while they can still act. A strong partner communicates before a deadline, cost or service concern becomes a surprise. The company, in turn, supplies the context needed to make useful recommendations - including changing priorities, unusual conditions or customer requirements that were not obvious in the original agreement.

TIMELY	DIRECT	SPECIFIC	CANDID
Early enough to influence the result	Clear enough to prevent misunderstanding	Precise enough to establish responsibility	Open about limitations and tradeoffs

THE BEST RELATIONSHIPS MAKE BOTH PARTIES BETTER AT THE WORK.

PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

PROTECT THE RELATIONSHIP WHEN CONDITIONS CHANGE

A problem does not necessarily mean the relationship is failing. What matters is whether both parties can recognize the change, discuss it honestly and agree on how the relationship should adapt.

RECOGNIZE THE GRAY ZONE

Some relationships do not experience one obvious breakdown. Instead, they gradually become less useful, less predictable or harder to manage. The company may tolerate recurring inconvenience because changing providers feels disruptive. The partner may not realize how much frustration has accumulated because each concern has been handled as an isolated event rather than a pattern.

- ☐ Routine requests require repeated follow-up
- ☐ Temporary workarounds become normal operating practice
- ☐ Each side relies on assumptions that were never discussed
- ☐ Charges, timelines or responsibilities become less predictable
- ☐ Commitments lack a clear owner or completion date
- ☐ Frustration grows while the underlying issue remains unspoken

Individually, these conditions may appear minor. Together, they suggest the relationship is losing clarity and informal accommodation has begun to replace shared accountability. Addressing the pattern early gives both parties a chance to correct course before frustration hardens into distrust.

RESET THE RELATIONSHIP CONSTRUCTIVELY

A productive reset focuses on the gap between what was expected and what is being experienced - not on proving which party is at fault. The conversation should create clearer evidence, ownership and follow-through.

1	DESCRIBE THE GAP	Use specific examples, dates, costs or outcomes so the discussion is about evidence rather than general impressions.
2	CONFIRM THE EXPECTATION	Return to the agreement or shared understanding. If it was never clear, acknowledge that and define it now.
3	UNDERSTAND WHAT CHANGED	Ask whether staffing, capacity, process, incomplete information or an unrealistic assumption is affecting performance.
4	AGREE ON ACTION	Decide what each party will do, who owns the next step and when it should occur.
5	REVIEW THE RESULT	Set a reasonable point to determine whether the action worked and the improvement can be sustained.

KNOW WHEN A LARGER DECISION IS NEEDED

Not every concern requires escalation, and not every relationship should be preserved indefinitely. If expectations are clear, concerns are documented and reasonable corrective action has not produced improvement, leaders may need to reconsider the relationship. Transition costs, contractual obligations, operational dependence, available alternatives and long-term business effects all matter.

WHEN ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVE MAY HELP

For relationships connected to a PIA MidAmerica program or participating partner, issues should be escalated to the association to clarify program expectations, provide context or help reopen communication when appropriate.

START WITH THE RELATIONSHIP YOU WANT TO STRENGTHEN

Choose one partner relationship that matters to the company's performance. Consider what is already working well, where expectations could be clearer and whether an emerging concern deserves attention now. A thoughtful conversation held early can strengthen a good relationship, restore one that has begun to drift or provide the clarity needed for a more consequential decision.

TALK WITH OUR TEAM