

**Briefing Notes:**  
**Productive Pairs**

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As organizations face increasingly complex and fast-changing environments, they typically specialize and differentiate units in order to focus on a particular function (e.g., finance, geography, or market segment). The leadership challenge then becomes integrating all the different perspectives in the service of the overall organizational mission. Over time the highly specialized different functions or units develop quite different cultures. This is particularly true in the class of organizations that are called “loosely coupled,” in which there is a high degree of professional autonomy and unit specialization dominates integration (Orton and Weick, 1990). The challenge in such organizations is to link the knowledge and worldview in the different units in the service of some superordinate product or service. Examples would be the following:

- Universities with the sometimes too separated faculty and staff cultures.
- Newspapers linking the business side with editorial, such as what Mark Willis is attempting at the *L.A. Times* so that there can be better integration of marketing and sales with the editorial content, without compromising editorial integrity.
- Arts organizations linking development and finance with artistry.
- Biotechnology linking a basic scientist’s new ideas with the skills to build it into a viable business.
- Academic medicine with complex business challenges in the hospital operations and lab infrastructure and the medical school faculty.
- Government linking a political leader with the permanent civil service.

In all such situations the mechanism for linking the two groups is key. Renis Likert (1961) wrote about what he termed link-pin or integrator roles. Deborah Dougherty (1992) has written about the importance of multilingual staff, who help translate between the worldviews of one group and another group. With increased specialization, organizations are ever more dependent on the emergence of productive pairs. In a sense, the pair plays the integrator, the translator, and the multilingual role rather than that being resident in a single individual.

## Characteristics of Productive Pairs

Characteristics of a productive pair are as follows:

- Separate bodies of knowledge, networks, etc., even different ways of looking at the world.
- Understanding and valuing each other's area of expertise and perspective. A belief that both areas need to be integrated in the service of the superordinate mission, and often, a shared passion for the purpose.
- Enough time or history together to explore the interdependencies.
- Trust of one another that enables direct talk and push back, even when the topic is centered in the other's world (e.g., not OK to "pull rank" by one's expertise).
- Minimal use of triangling (CFAR, 1998) in another party as a way of exporting difficulties in the pair to an absent third party (for example, feeling close though involving a common enemy or shifting blame to an absent third party when they disappoint each other).
- Strong in resisting being split apart by the manipulations of their respective colleagues who may talk behind the back of one or the other.

Productive pairs often come about accidentally, sometimes forged by the demands of a crisis. A famous example would be Victor Gotbaum, the labor leader, and Felix Rohatyn, the financier, who became enormously influential during the crisis of the mid '70s in New York City. They were able to contain the potential polarization between labor and the business community. In some settings we have natural experiments that illustrate how crucial a well-functioning pair can be to overall performance. Recall how much more effective President Reagan was with James Baker as his chief of staff versus his second term with Donald Regan.

In the art world, George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein collaboratively were able to forever change the institutional landscape in American dance (Jenkins, 1998).

Kirstein laid down his life for classical ballet—hustling, animating, inspiring, bullying, dreaming in the service of his great cause ... Over half a lifetime, Kirstein seemed to subordinate everything to the genius of Balanchine .... 'There was only one director—Balanchine—and everything good and bad that happened to us in fifty years is due only to him .... I am a kind of steward for a mechanism that does control certain things but I never think I am anything more than that.' ... [F]rom that moment, in 1933 when Kirstein arranged for Balanchine to come to the United States their lives and fates were irreducibly blended .... Balanchine's dream, which he couldn't have realized without Kirstein, was to obtain the institutional space necessary to develop his gift to the utmost .... The pairs' subsequent faith in each other was strong enough so that through the course of four separate dance companies there was never a contract between them. 'Confidence was mutual,' Kirstein asserted, 'confirmed by silence on irrelevant legalities.'

Productive pairs, as powerfully illustrated by Kirstein and Balanchine, share a passion for a common goal or vision.

The relationships can either be hierarchical (Krantz, 1989) or horizontal. The dynamic is more the overlay of good interpersonal chemistry with an intellectual understanding of the importance of the two bodies of expertise that have to be connected in the service of the mission. There can be a shared theory of one as close to the mission, the other as support. It does not work when one body of knowledge is treated with contempt or taken for granted, as often happens in academic settings between academic leaders and administrative support.

At one stage of a lifecycle a pair might be productive, yet later on the role might become stifling or anti-developmental for one or the other. The endings of these relationships can often be as painful as a divorce or generate feelings of disloyalty if one side leaves. Generative productive pairs are often able to grow together, amplifying the capacity of the institution to achieve its mission. When a particular pair has been together a long time, it is difficult to replace one half of the relationship. When one leaves, the other often moves on as well or replaces the function of the pair with a more institutionalized arrangement.

In loosely coupled systems groups are often difficult to develop into authentic teams (Katzenbach, 1997). Pairs substitute by linking across many of the potential splits:

|                     |                      |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| Mission/church      | Administration/state |
| Operations          | Innovation           |
| Long term           | Short term           |
| Resource allocation | Fundraising          |
| New                 | Long tenured         |

Pairs function both on the inbound side by listening and making sense of emergent trends and on the outbound side by communicating and helping implement a particular change.

**How Productive Pairs Can Be Fostered**

Many of the most powerful productive pairs have emerged naturally. Yet there are clearly ways to foster their emergence. Below are some approaches that the members themselves can take or that involve a third party.

- Take the time to talk about the shared vision, not abstractly but in detail. Productive pairs often have a shared period in the wilderness, where they are continuously collaborating, dreaming, scheming, and talking about their hopes, their reactions to setbacks, etc. When they come into power, they find the time to renew their shared vision.
- Reflect on the working alliance periodically. Explicitly work on seeing issues from the other’s point of view.
- Early on in the relationship negotiate explicitly for how each wants to be involved in specific decisions, when one can act unilaterally, when

consultation is needed, when both are responsible for developing the decision, etc. Decision charting can be a structured way to explore these issues (Gilmore, 1998, CFAR, 2008). The pair jointly develops a list of key decisions that fall to them, then lists them on a matrix with not only their roles at the top but some of the other key stakeholders (e.g., the board, other executives, etc.). Then each ballots separately on how they see the current and desired relationship to those decisions (using shared codes such as A = approve or veto, R = responsible, C = must be consulted, I = informed). Through this method, the pair sees not only their different perceptions of their roles, but how they see key others being involved. This can be particularly useful because a pair can become too dominant and make it difficult for others to take up significant leadership roles.

The example below is the results of a president and vice president of a national association, exploring both their own roles and those of the board above and the directors below across 29 decisions, ranging from capital allocation and strategic planning, to responding to the press and internal integration across functions.

| <b>Example of Role Clarification Among Key Pairs</b> |             |             |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Role of:</b>                                      | <b>P</b>    | <b>VP</b>   |
| Board  | 5A, 4C, 11I | 6A, 5I      |
| President  | 20A, 4R, 1C | 13A, 4C, 8I |
| Vice President                                       | 1A, 19R, 7C | 7A, 7R, 11C |
| Directors  | 1A, 21R, 7C | 1A, 18R, 5C |

Note in the data that the vice president sees her role as more mixed, some (seven) approvals, some responsible (seven) and some consulted (11). The president sees the vice president as a COO, mostly responsible (19), with only one approval relationship. They have significant differences in their views of the president's role as well. Their perceptions of the board vary, with the VP seeing no decisions in which the board is 'consulted' whereas the president sees four. This illustrates how helpful in a few hours discussing typical and some predictable crisis type decisions, a pair can significantly increase their understanding of how each sees the 'decision rights' and work through to a shared view versus discovering these differences with real stakes and misunderstandings of who is playing what role. Furthermore, it gives the pair an ongoing language for rapid delegation of new, emergent initiatives of both their roles as well as key others.

Beyond techniques, pairs are powerful and resilient because when inevitable misunderstandings or tensions arise, they move closer rather than further apart. As they build up a history of working through important difficult issues, they see themselves and are seen by others as trustworthy leaders who will step up to make decisions rather than leave conflicts unresolved.

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