



Partnership Essential #1: The Value Conversation

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My wife and her friend Kay Strom wrote two books together. Their first book, *Daughters of Hope*, remained on InterVarsity's list of Top 50 Best Sellers for four years running. I'd like you to read a story from their second book, *Forgotten Girls: Stories of Hope and Courage*.

It was in a garbage dump on the outskirts of Bangalore—India's equivalent of our Silicon Valley—that we caught sight of the smudge-faced little girl picking through piles of trash, searching for anything saleable. Just as she stepped barefoot into a ditch running with raw sewage, she caught sight of us looking at her, and she stopped. We did our best to smile. The little girl stared back, her brown eyes wide.

A rusty safety pin held the front of the girl's ripped blue dress closed. Gesturing to the dress, Kay lamely offered, "That's a pretty color." The Indian teenager with us translated her words.

The raggedy child didn't move, and she never took her eyes off us.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Kay blurted with fake cheeriness.

The little girl stared.

Feeling a bit foolish . . . and overwhelmingly sad . . . we bid the little girl good-bye and turned to go. That's when the girl in the pinned-together blue dress spoke . . . but in a voice so soft we almost missed her words.

"I can't be anything," the little girl said.

As you read this story, what happened in your heart? Did the girl in the pinned-together blue dress connect with you, even as she did with me? Perhaps you wanted to join me in somehow shouting across the miles, "No, you are of infinite worth. You are everything to us and to God." We esteem her because God esteems her most highly. We share the belief that she is made in the image of God, made for His glory, made to enjoy His presence, made for a beautiful and vibrant life. The apostle Paul says she is a "masterpiece," a poem, a song God is writing (Ephesians 2:10 nlt).

If you felt as I did, then we held a common interest. Out of our commonly held interest, we longed to "do something," to "make a difference," in the life of the girl in the pinned-together blue dress and hopefully in the lives of those around her.

Successful Partnerships Create Value

In cross-cultural ministry, partnerships form between ministries for exactly those reasons. Two or more groups come together around a common interest and collaborate to create tangible value for someone or some place. For example, imagine collaborating with a local ministry to bring value to the children and families of that Bangalore slum community by working to:

- give basic education to the children
- teach families nutrition and hygiene
- provide women with microloans to start small businesses
- educate community members about the deceitful practices of traffickers

Successful partnerships create value—they achieve something. Christian ministries might collaborate to create the following types of value:

- People take steps toward faith.
- People become Christians.
- Churches are planted.
- People with HIV/AIDS and their families receive home-based care.
- Children in orphan households receive physical and spiritual care.
- Victims of rape are restored to emotional health.
- Families benefit from higher income.
- New Christians participate in local churches.
- Christian leaders become equipped to teach.

Creating value for someone or some place is the result we desire in cross-cultural ministry. But to deem a partnership successful, partners must not only create value in what they achieve for someone, but also they must create value in the process of the relationship, in how they work together. For instance, ministry partnerships generally value the following characteristics in the relationship:

- Mutual trust
- Reciprocal accountability
- Two-way exchange of information
- Clearly articulated goals
- Clear delineation of responsibilities
- A sense of mutuality, give-and-take
- Mutual support and advocacy
- Transparency in financial matters
- Long-term commitment

Why is creating value vital to successful cross-cultural partnerships? Because people cooperate when it is in their interest to do so. At the end of the day, they want to achieve something, they want to have something or become something they otherwise could not have gained or become without the partnership. The more specifically and quantitatively partners can articulate what they want, the greater guidance the collaboration will have.

Successful Partnerships Assess Perceptions of Value

Although you and I may be strangers, this little experiment shows the power of a shared vision to bind and achieve. At the core, we hold with our national partner a strongly shared vision to create value for ourselves and for others. But the opposite is also true. An unshared or fragmented vision has the potential to divide a partnership. The further we move out from our shared vision, the more fragmented our partnership may become. The power of vision to bind or to divide makes it critical for us to hold ongoing discussions with our cross-cultural partners. We must continually assess the value we each hope to create.

Researchers Doz and Hamel (1998) of the Harvard Business School posit that perceptions of value are at the center of collaborative relationships; that is, the success or failure of a partnership hinges on the partners' perception of the value gained from or lost in the partnership. Partners are successful when they assess each other's perception of value throughout the duration of the partnership. On an ongoing basis, each partner must clearly understand their own interests and the interests of the partner.

Because people cooperate when it's in their interest to do so, partners who learn to ask "What's in it for you?" stand a better chance of harnessing the power of partnership. The question works both ways. Each partner-group must say what's in it for that organization. This is the fundamental challenge of partnership: constantly evaluating our partner's interests as well as our own.

So, how do you ask, "What's in it for you?" How do you have the "value conversation" with your partner?

The "Right" Value Conversation...

During a conference on cross-cultural ministry partnerships, I was asked to offer questions that could guide partners in a value conversation. I gave it some thought and realized that, although I had questions, they were not suited to dispense widely at a conference. My questions were not one-size-fits-all. They were not general, but rather crafted for specific situations with specific people.

Partnership is personal and particular. The questions for which we need answers are immediate and practical. We need to know what our partners think, what they want, what they expect of us, and what they understand about our wants from a partnership.

...Matches Your Organizational Claims

Different organizations have the value conversation in different ways.

For instance, in philanthropy, the process by which grants are made involves a certain kind of value-exchange conversation, but it is not a participatory conversation. The grantor asks the candidate a series of questions. If the candidate has all the right answers, then the grant is awarded. If we measure the balance of participation, this process might seem lopsided, but it is a value-exchange conversation nonetheless.

By contrast, appreciative inquiry is another kind of value-exchange conversation. Appreciative inquiry is a highly participatory process whereby the service provider guides members of a community, or other beneficiaries of services, through a process of creating change for themselves. This lengthy process enables people to not only create the change they want, but also to own the change. In the process, the service provider finds out what value they can bring to the community and how. Then they operate at the behest of the community.

A broadly framed covenant, another type of value-exchange conversation, falls in the middle of the balance-of-participation scale.

In our quest to evaluate our partner's interests as well as our own, the value-exchange conversation must be the right type of conversation for what our organization espouses. That is, the type of conversation must match the claims of our organization. For example, the conversation used in making grants is a legitimate value-exchange conversation. But, is it the right type of conversation if our organization espouses authentic partnership? In this case, the method of conversation—non-participatory—would seem to defy the claim of “authentic partnership.”

...Matches the Starting Position of the Partnership

The type of value-exchange conversation we employ must fit each situation and partner. The type of conversation also depends on the position from which we begin the partnership. A partnership may begin in one of these three positions:

- One partner promotes their own vision and program.
- One partner adopts the vision and program of the other.
- Together, partners co-create a vision and program.

Those who promote their own vision and program have a highly defined sense of what they want out of the partnership, with little room for variation or conversation. The value conversation is confined by the existing vision and program. Conversely, those who adopt the other partner's vision and program largely confine themselves to the vision and values of the local ministry. The most malleable value-exchange conversation is, however, by partners who co-create a vision and program.

While I could not offer conversation questions to the conference on cross-cultural partnerships, I have since experimented with a conversation that I can offer. As you consider the range of value conversations, identify which type of conversation your organization tends to have and begin to examine the strengths and weaknesses of your approach. Include in your discovery process one other value-exchange conversation—the Value Assessment Net.

The Value Assessment Net

The Value Assessment Net (VAN) follows the “nominal group technique,” which is a process groups use to generate and prioritize ideas. This highly participatory activity increases the quality of ideas generated and the effectiveness of group discussions.

By applying that technique to partnerships, the Value Assessment Net leads partners step by step in identifying what value they want to achieve and receive from a partnership, or what value they are achieving and receiving from the partnership. Groups may also use the VAN to identify and evaluate value lost over time.

Following the three steps below, each partner-group generates and prioritizes their list of desired ministry results (what value they desire to achieve). In the final step, partner-groups integrate their lists of desired ministry results and form desired-value statements; then, the partners together clarify perceptions, negotiate expectations, identify indicators of value, and set priorities for the partnership.

Step 1: Plan for VAN Conversation

In this step, key stakeholders/members of each partner-group meet to prepare for the VAN process. Your group may be your church or mission organization, and your key stakeholders may be leaders and decision makers from your group. Step 1 does not yet include all members of the group.

Discuss and answer the following questions in order to establish common ground before attempting to do so with the partner-group.

1. What is the overarching strategic reason for us to collaborate with a partner? What ministry results or value could we achieve or create with a partner that we could not achieve or create alone?
2. What ministry results or value does our group want to achieve or create?
3. What value do we expect from the process of collaboration?
4. By what indicators will we know whether we are creating our desired value?
5. What do we believe will be the partner-group’s answers to these questions?

THE VALUE ASSESSMENT NET

VALUE/BENEFIT	DESIRED	ACTUAL
RESULTS: ministry outcomes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
RELATIONSHIP: the character of collaboration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Step 2: Create the Value Assessment Net

In separate meetings, each partner-group creates their own VAN by working through the following process. This is a high-participation process, with key members of each partner-group contributing and voting.

1. GENERATE INDIVIDUAL LISTS OF DESIRED MINISTRY RESULTS/VALUE.

A facilitator instructs each member of the group to generate his or her own list of ideas to answer this question: “What ministry results or value does our group want to achieve or create?” Encourage group members to state each idea in a complete sentence, avoiding single words or phrases to identify value as well as avoiding labels such as “holistic empowerment.” Give everyone time to generate a list on paper, without discussion.

THE FOLLOWING ARE EXAMPLES OF DESIRED MINISTRY RESULTS OR VALUE:

- 100 Christian leaders are equipped to teach.
- 3,000 impoverished women learn how to start microbusinesses with marketable products.
- 200 microenterprise self-help groups are established with at least 2,400 women participating.
- An estimated 6,000 people indirectly benefit from higher income.
- An estimated 60 people are led to Christ.

2. SHARE ALL IDEAS GENERATED.

This exercise gives each member the opportunity to contribute ideas, and it provides a written record of all ideas generated.

The facilitator, going around the room, solicits one idea from each member, recording each idea on a flip-chart. This process continues around the room until members present all ideas. Someone who runs out of ideas says, "I pass." Members may build on one another's ideas.

3. DISCUSS IDEAS GENERATED AS A GROUP.

The facilitator leads the group in a neutral, thorough discussion of the ideas generated. In this exercise, members can ask for more details or seek clarification of an idea. At the end of the discussion, eliminate duplicate ideas and combine ideas into categories.

4. MEMBERS VOTE TO PRIORITIZE THE IDEAS.

The purpose of this exercise is not to exclude important ideas, but to reduce the number of ideas to a workable list by having each member vote for his or her preferred ideas, relative to the original question.

The facilitator counts all the ideas listed and divides that number by 3 (for example, 36 ideas \div 3 = 12 votes per member). Each member has 12 adhesive dots to place alongside the priority ideas they select, one dot or vote per idea. The facilitator then ranks the ideas in order of the group's preferences (the idea with the highest number of dots is ranked first in priority and so on). To further reduce the list of ideas to five or six, repeat the voting process, if necessary.

5. REFINE THE TOP FIVE OR SIX IDEAS PRIORITIZED BY THE GROUP.

State each idea as a ministry result or value to achieve or create. Then identify indicators of how each result or value might be observed and measured. For each of the top ideas, this exercise answers the question, "By what indicators will we know whether we are creating our desired value?"

6. LIST THE TOP FIVE OR SIX REFINED IDEAS ON THE VALUE ASSESSMENT NET.

Step 3: Integrate Each Partner's VAN into One List

In a joint meeting of both partner-groups, discover and validate how the partnership will create value and for whom. The following is a suggested agenda for this process:

- Take a two-day retreat with key leaders of the partnership.
- Using the VAN, have each partner-group list the desired results or value they want to achieve or create from the partnership.
- Compare the lists of desired results or value of the partnership.
- Clarify each partner's perception of value, negotiate expectations and set priorities.
- Identify indicators of results or value and how they will be observed and measured.
- Agree on the date for the next value assessment.

The Ultimate Value Conversation

When it comes to partnering in the gospel, communion with God is the ultimate value conversation. In partnership as in the Christian life, if we miss communion with God, we miss everything.

At its core, partnership is not a set of covenants, policies and procedures. These are merely artifacts. Partnership in the gospel is a way of thinking, a way of being supremely modeled in Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed that His disciples would be one as He and the Father are one so that the world may believe (John 17:21). Jesus believes the most powerful testimony about Him arises from our communion with Him and with one another.

Communion is more than fellowship. It is life together in the sense Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about Christian fellowship. Communion is about being with one another in the affairs of life and of death. Let me illustrate.

In 1993, I sat by my father for three weeks as he lay dying of cancer. My mother and I took turns staying with him until the last week, when we both stayed with him night and day. We spoke few words, but the message was clear. "I am here. I am with you." Few words are more significant. Few actions convey love as clearly. "I am with you." It is reminiscent of Jesus' promise of authority in Matthew 28:18-20. It echoes the promise of covenant and evokes the hope of fellowship. "I am with you" is a promise made certain by the present. Marriage vows are made of it. Friendships are cemented by it. Communities are formed around it. "I am with you" is the embodiment of communion.

This is the acid test of authentic partnership. You know you have real partnership when you have the mutual sense of "I am with you."

Communion with God and one another creates the richest possible ground for meaningful value conversations. And it is value conversations that make cross-cultural partnership both possible and rewarding.

Summary of Key Points

1. To deem a partnership successful, partners must not only create value in what they achieve for someone or some place, but also they must create value in the process of the relationship, in how they work together.
2. Vision has the power to bind or to divide, making it critical for us to hold ongoing discussions with our cross-cultural partners. We must continually assess the value we each hope to create.
3. This is the fundamental challenge of partnership: constantly evaluating our partner's interests as well as our own.
4. The Value Assessment Net leads partners step by step in identifying what value they want to achieve and receive from a partnership, or what value they are achieving and receiving from the partnership. Groups may also use the VAN to identify and evaluate value lost over time.
5. When it comes to partnering in the gospel, communion with God is the ultimate value conversation. In partnership as in the Christian life, if we miss communion with God, we miss everything.

Source

This article first appeared as “What’s in It for You?” by Daniel Rickett in Birmingham, B., Todd, S. (eds). *Shared Strength: Exploring Cross-Cultural Christian Partnerships*. Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International, 2010.

Recommended Reading

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