

Strategic Road Kill

■ Relationship road kill.

If you're a business owner, you've seen it. The pain of broken relationships with partners, clients, vendors and key leaders is a prime reason why business owners come to know how lonely it is at the top.

One of the top reasons those relationships break is that we don't always build good relationship terms. Not how- to-like-each-other terms, but how to lock down the terms that can lead to long-range gain for each party. We're both right. Arriving at a healthy partnership is a process that requires both building relationship and agreeing to specific terms. It's hard work, and I don't know anybody who gets it 100% right. But following a good process creates the greatest likelihood for success.

Let's break down the process.

1. Uncover true motives. What does each party really want at the end of the game? A true partnership is successful only when the needs and desires of all parties are understood and responded to. Don't rush it. Give it time and listen.

2. Learn to trust, part one. Trust is possible only when you've become as transparent as possible about your motives. My motives may be very different from yours, but you may be willing to accept that if, along the way, your own requirements are met. Unless you can reach some level of trust, the rest is wasted effort on a doomed relationship.

3. Think and talk. Now that your cards are on the table, take an appropriate amount of time to hammer out an agreement that makes everyone comfortable. When the stakes get high, this stage of the process may mean getting away in a retreat setting. It may mean bringing in an objective party to facilitate. It may mean working at it for as long as it

takes. There's no place in this process for "hurry-up."

4. Hold it loosely. Reach terms that everyone can live with during a transition period. Put them in writing. But recognize that those mechanisms must be fluid and flexible. This is a time to test your assumptions before you're linked so closely that disentangling would be painful and messy. This stage is hard for the concrete mind of a capitalist. But if you firm up terms too early, expectations may be built on false assumptions. And false assumptions increase the likelihood of broken relationships later.

5. Learn to trust, part two. In the course of doing business, your trust will either deepen or it will break. If it breaks, the good-faith terms you hammered out will provide a safe exit for everyone.

6. Lock it down. Over time, you'll learn what works. After you've learned, commit to those terms. Some partnerships can be locked down with a handshake or an open-ended relationship that comes under review every 90 days. Others need legal language, contracts and notarized signatures. Whichever is appropriate, the terms must be clear and locked down.

Good contractual agreements provide a safe-haven for great relationships. And good agreements can grow only out of good process. So, think it through, give it time and lock it down.

Do your partnerships make your business more valuable or more vulnerable?