

Working With Your Partners Without Getting Resistance

by Patrick J. McKenna

Remember the last time someone said, “Let me give you a little advice.”

Imagine (if you have never yet had the opportunity) saying this as the practice leader to one of your partners. For some, that might be about all it would take to have them immediately assume a posture of defensiveness. In yet, still other partners might just relish someone taking an interest in what they were doing enough to offer some gentle guidance.

In fact, if we were to question your partners as to what they were looking for in the ideal practice group leader, someone who was available to them to provide a bit of coaching, advice and guidance, we would likely hear a number of very different responses:

Anthony: “Well I guess the most important thing is that the practice leader be honest and open with me. I always feel awkward when other partners have hidden agendas, don’t you? I would be more receptive to a practice leader who could show concern for me and my situation. I want to know we can work together. “

Dorothy: “First off you have to understand that my kind of practice doesn’t run itself. It requires my diligent attention, so my time to spend with anyone who serves as practice leader is at a premium. Secondly, I’m not interested in hearing a lot of half-baked ideas, only tangible and practical suggestions are what interest me.”

Amy: “Be prepared. I expect that a practice leader should know my situation before dispensing advice. Don’t play the know-it-all with me. Ask questions and then listen. A practice leader needs to show me that they can understand everything about my practice, my clients, my issues and then give me some options.”

Elliott: “I’d like someone as our practice leader who is decisive, but that doesn’t mean we can’t toss ideas around. Just don’t wear me out with every little detail. I’d like to see someone who is competent, imaginative – who can catch an image of how to make this practice group really soar.”

As the individual who has responsibility for leading a practice group, you know you have a diverse collection of partner personalities, working styles and individual expectations to contend with. Managing that diversity is not easy.

Each of your partners has his or her special way of doing things – their identifiable and somewhat predictable way of behaving. Your interaction with any partner will succeed to the extent that you are receptive to and heed the little signals that suggest how this individual behaves and would prefer you behave in response. You can only move your

partners forward to the extent that you have earned their trust by building positive relationships with each of them. You can only build positive relationship with people when you are prepared to modify your style to accommodate theirs.

When you seek to coach a particular partner (by praising performance or offering a constructive critique), you may be clear about what you want to say, but the message received is going to be affected by your style of delivery and how the particular individual processes the message. The substantive message to the partner need not change, but how you present the message will impact your effectiveness. Your interactions succeed when you understand your style and how it may differ from your partner's style.

In the previous article, I drew extensively upon the pioneering work of Dr. David Merrill to present you with four different behavioral styles that you are likely to observe present among your partners. You were invited to carefully observe your partner's natural behavior within the group and then see if you could place each of your partners into one of the four different styles.

You yourself, fit into one of those behavioral categories. That means that you will find you share the very same characteristics as one-quarter of your partners and will have little difficulty in relating to those individuals. You are also similar on one of the two basic dimensions of behavior (assertiveness and responsiveness) to two other groups of partners, but it will still require of you some accommodation to your natural "Way of doing things" to make the necessary connection. That leaves fully the last 25% of your partners who you will find to be very different in style from you and often very difficult to deal with.

To create an effective coaching relationship with any of your partners, you will need to *temporarily* adjusting your natural approach using some of the following guidelines. For each specific style and type of behavior that you observe from a particular partner, a number of specifics are mentioned. You should try to do several, but not necessarily all of these specifics.

• WORKING WITH YOUR "DRIVER" PARTNER

"First off you have to understand that my kind of practice doesn't run itself. It requires my diligent attention, so my time to spend with anyone who serves as practice leader is at a premium. Secondly, I'm not interested in hearing a lot of half-baked ideas, only tangible and practical suggestions are what interest me."
Dorothy, our Driver Partner.

These partners are your outspoken, no-nonsense, take control type. They usually are or would like to be, very busy professionals. They can pick up multiple projects, keep them all in the air at the same time and juggle them faster than the eye can see, all the while picking up even more projects. Eventually, the pressure will increase as the demand for quality of results increases until it makes sense to drop some projects to relieve some

pressure. Not wanting to admit that he or she cannot do it all, you will hear this partner call this “rearranging their priorities.” To build your coaching relationship with these partners you need to help them maintain control.

COACHING THIS PARTNER

This partner, more than any other, likes to feel that he or she is on top of the situation. In their view, you as the practice leader are there to help them with their issue or problem. You are not there to present your views on how they should be running their individual practice. This partner expects you to know this and to defer to them when necessary.

These partners are the most time-conscious of any styles. This partner wants to think that their time is being spent efficiently so will seek to keep conversations, meetings and correspondence brief and to the point. In one-on-one meetings with this partner, it is best to take a businesslike approach to your interaction. And, don't digress. As you discuss the matter at hand and are reminded of something tangential to the discussion, you are wise to leave it for another time. The guideline is, “if in doubt, leave it out.”

Despite their strong images, these partners have their own unique limitations. They are selective listeners who tend to tune out small talk. If this isn't your style, don't upset yourself over this partner's seemingly impersonal and unfeeling manner. Accept that this is the way your partner operates and that it is appropriate to behave this way.

When meeting with this partner, give your complete attention. A positive approach would be to ask what the problems or concerns are. Ask direct fact-finding questions – consistent with your original reason for meeting. Stick to the facts. Draw your partner out by talking about the desired results. Describe the gap between actual and desired. Then discuss their concerns. Focus on tasks more than feelings. Ask them how they would solve the problem. Be prepared to listen to their suggestions, the course of action they have in mind, and the general results they are considering. Work with this partner to clarify their priorities. Make sure that both of you know what they are. Having a clear view of your partner's expectations will help you considerably to be of value as a coach.

In the interest of saving time, this partner will usually try to find shortcuts. You need to help them determine the simplest, fastest route to get them to their stated destination.

This partner is one who likes to make up their own mind. They will likely be put off if you simply offer them one alternative. They may feel that you are attempting to make the decision for them. Therefore, present any recommendations with alternatives, together with any documentation or examples that you can offer. Provide solid information that helps the individual assess the probable outcomes of each alternative. These partners are ever alert to what may seem to be vague claims. You need to demonstrate that your recommendations are very workable, no-frills ways of getting the results they want.

What you are doing is respecting your partners need to maintain their self-esteem. You are also allowing them to work in the independent way that they most enjoy.

When suggesting a different idea, opinion, or action, be sure to express your desire to identify solutions that will be mutually acceptable.

These partners are bare-bones planners, but planners nonetheless. These partners want you to come up with a simple, straightforward, results-oriented guide to action. When these partners specify objectives and draw up plans, their direction is set. They take great pride in delivering what they said they would – on standard, on schedule, and on budget. If you agree to do something together, this partner will likely be going full steam on the project before you get back to your office – and will expect you to do the same with whatever your component part may have been. Unless you set up a communications arrangement, you are likely to have trouble keeping track of what is going on. It is prudent to encourage a quick exchange of information at periodic times during the implementation of your action plan.

MOTIVATING THIS PARTNER

Managing this partner is no easy thing because they want to manage you! Work with your partner's strengths by allowing them to take the reins on particular projects. Their preference for change and innovation makes them the natural choice for new "frontier" programs or practice development efforts where they can implement new ideas. Winning, more than anything else, motivates this partner. They are more likely to thrive in pressure cooker situations. Provide them with options and clearly describe the probabilities of success in achieving goals. Also, make sure they understand the need to check in with the practice group or they may demonstrate their renegade syndrome.

RECOGNIZING THIS PARTNER

You need to focus on their achievements and track record. Try to relate some aspect of their personal accomplishments to the group and any group achievement to them personally.

• WORKING WITH YOUR "ANALYTICAL" PARTNER

"Be prepared. I expect that a practice leader should know my situation before dispensing advice. Don't play the know-it-all with me. Ask questions and then listen. A practice leader needs to show me that they can understand everything about my practice, my clients, my issues and then give me some options."

Amy, our Analytical Partner.

These partners thrive on specifics. To build a coaching relationship, you need to be well organized and clear, explain your thoughts systematically, and expect to be asked a lot of questions about the situation or subject at hand. You gain credibility when this partner sees that you have chased down every detail. Be prepared to listen to far more than you may want to know, as your partner explains ideas or project progress in what may seem like overwhelming detail.

COACHING THIS PARTNER

This partner values punctuality. Even if, and especially if, it is not your natural style, be on time for meetings, as you too will be expected to be punctual. In one-on-one meetings it is usually appropriate for you to spend a little time on openers, but keep it brief, don't make it too personal, and then get right into what you are there to talk about.

This partner will expect you to be prepared, don't wing it. Dig up all of the data you might need and anticipate the questions you may be asked. Even for one-on-one meetings, it is often very acceptable to this partner to see you having a written agenda. If you have an agenda, ensure that you get it to this partner in advance so that he or she can think about the topics beforehand.

When communicating with this partner, rely less on body English. The words that you use are important. Saying, "I think . . .," rather than "I feel . . .," can make a difference. Then follow with factual statements. Try to use words and phrases that are music to your partner's ears. This partner appreciates when you use such phrases as "I've analyzed the situation . . .," "My objective in suggesting this is . . .," "A logical conclusion . . .," "Let me get some more information before I give you my opinion on that."

In general, when coaching this partner, point out the most important things to remember first. Then demonstrate the procedure in an efficient, logical manner, stressing the purpose of each step. Show your partner the way to get something done and they will likely master the format, then modify it to suit their needs, so that it works even more efficiently, as they see it.

When proposing some course of action, mention the advantages, but identify the downsides as well. This partner will respect you for doing that and wants to consider all available alternatives. This partner particularly dislikes change because he or she views the future as an unknowable variable, where things can go wrong. Allow your partner to investigate possible repercussions so that they may be more comfortable with possible changes. Elicit this partner's thoughts about processes, procedures or problems ("If it were in your power, how would you change this to make it even better?") You can expect your partner to be conservative when it comes to risk, so where possible show why the approach you are proposing is a fairly safe bet. Avoid emotional appeals or using someone else's opinion. Hard facts will persuade.

When correcting behavior, specify the exact behavior that needs to be changed and establish agreed-upon checkpoints. Allow them to save face, as they fear being wrong. When you don't agree with something, try an approach like: "I'd just like to play devil's advocate with you for a minute."

When the time is up, depart quickly and graciously. Then cater to your partner's preference for written communication. Prepare a well thought out follow-up report

together with any support materials. If a decision was reached, include a step-by-step timetable for implementation. Just be sure to deliver what you say you will. This partner will get turned off sooner than most if you make a promise and don't deliver.

MOTIVATING THIS PARTNER

Appeal to this partner's need for accuracy and logic. This partner does not respond well to fancy verbal antics (avoid exaggeration and vagueness), so keep your approach clear, clean, and documentable. These partners are complex thinkers, they base their decisions on facts and proven information. "I need to think about it," usually means just that. Help your partner substitute quality for perfection. Supply them with any materials or documents they need, and provide deadlines and parameters so they can build those into their time frames.

RECOGNIZING THIS PARTNER

This partner will prefer more privately communicated, specific feedback. These partners are usually very hard on themselves so keep your feedback simple and concise. Mention their efficiency, thought process, organization, persistence, and accuracy.

• WORKING WITH YOUR "AMIABLE" PARTNER

"Well I guess the most important thing is that the practice leader be honest and open with me. I always feel awkward when other partners have hidden agendas, don't you? I would be more receptive to a practice leader who could show concern for me and my situation. I want to know we can work together. "

Anthony, our Amiable Partner

These partners are great team players and contribute harmony and stability to the practice group environment. They are skilled at encouraging others to expand on their ideas, good at seeing value in other's contributions, and genuinely more interested in hearing your concerns than expressing their own. To create an effective coaching relationship, expect to have to project sensitivity for their feelings, exhibit patience, and take time to establish a relationship.

COACHING THIS PARTNER

When coaching these partners, allow plenty of time to explore their thoughts and feelings.

At the outset, touch base personally. This partner will invite you to talk about yourself and you need to let your partner know some things that are going on in your life. Be ready to do more talking than listening. Your partner will not naturally feel comfortable when the limelight is focused on them. These partners are apt to keep their opinions to themselves and if you don't exercise good listening skills these partners will clam up even more.

When you are meeting one-on-one, politely request your partner's input and opinions on the topics you want to cover. Don't come on too strong, be seen to be pushy, or create unnecessarily tight deadlines as it can be very stressful for this partner to do things at the pace of other styles. When explaining your thoughts, you need to be always inviting your partner into the conversation. Always test to ensure that the partner understands and accepts what is being said: "How does this fit with your thinking?" "I'm interested in getting your views on what I've just covered."

Be alert to and address the effects on people of any new policies, procedures, processes or projects that you are proposing – both for this partner personally, or for the practice group. Do not expect your partner to verbalize their disagreement. Look for changes in body language as a tip as to how your partner may be reacting. If you surmise that this partner has any negative feelings about a proposal, invite their reaction: "Some partners seem leery of part of this plan, I'm interested in your thoughts about it."

These partners may become use to using the same old methods again and again, and need to explore new ways to improve their work practices. To the extent that it is possible, help your partner plan difficult projects, design complex work processes, and ensure that their goals are clearly established. Planning is not this partner's forte.

In dealing with problems or decisions, make sure to deal with only one subject or situation at a time, one step at a time. Before moving on to other items, make sure your partner is ready, willing and able to do so. Deal with matters calmly and in a relaxed manner.

When suggesting a different possibility, encourage the partner to share their suggestions as to how the eventual decision might be made in a way that is least likely to disrupt things for everyone involved.

When engaging in corrective discussions, recognize that these partners tend to take things personally, so remove the "something is wrong with you" barrier as quickly as possible. Reassure them that you only want to focus on a specific behavior. Point out in a non-threatening way what they are doing well or contributing while also emphasizing what needs changing.

MOTIVATING THIS PARTNER

This partner likes to feel that their relationships with others will benefit from their completing a project that is within their responsibility. Therefore, appeal to their need to strengthen relationships. These partners are also the most helpful. They often drop what they are doing to aid someone who is in a pinch. They will appreciate it when you spot an opportunity to give them a hand when they are under pressure.

RECOGNIZING THIS PARTNER

Acknowledge their contributions to encouraging others in the practice group, their teamwork and their dependability.

• WORKING WITH YOUR “EXPRESSIVE” PARTNER

“I’d like someone as our practice leader who is decisive, but that doesn’t mean we can’t toss ideas around. Just don’t wear me out with every little detail. I’d like to see someone who is competent, imaginative – who can catch an image of how to make this practice group really soar.”
Elliott, our Expressive Partner

With their energy and enthusiasm, these partners can get involved with so many different activities that they may accomplish goals with a flourish. Or, they may show flurries of activity, but not actually accomplish anything. These partners are concept people who come up with plenty of ideas, but not necessarily the means of carrying them out. To create an effective coaching relationship, you need to cater to their need to conceptualize, while also helping them fill in the missing pieces.

COACHING THIS PARTNER

When meeting one-on-one with this partner, allow enough time for the conversation, recognize that they are inclined to informality, so take a few minutes to build rapport. You need to show these partners that you are interested in them as people. Give them an opening to talk about themselves. Be prepared to listen to your partner’s personal feelings and experiences, since they will likely have a need to share those with you. This partner’s style requires open and responsive interaction with others. Since your partners’ emotions have major impact on what they do, it’s critical that you stay in touch with what they’re feeling. Recognize that with this partner’s tendency to be dramatic, they are likely to exaggerate to make a point.

You may expect that this partner will want to take a macro view of things. This partner, more than any other, will show impatience when your discussion turns to the nitty-gritty. When details are of crucial importance, you need to ensure that they are not glossed over. Meanwhile you may have a lot more topics you want to talk about than this partner wants to listen to. Before meeting, prune your list to a few essentials, concentrate on the high priority items and start by giving the partner an overview of the main points. Make definite statements, avoiding words like try, perhaps, maybe, possibly, etc.

When coaching, don’t give him or her too much at once or they will become overwhelmed. Frequently, this partner will want to jump in and try before they are ready, or before they fully understand everything. Help them channel that enthusiasm with tactful reminders and hands-on assistance to help them prioritize and organize. Ironically, when tasks become more organized, the anxiety level decreases - despite the fact that your partner may bristle at the thought of organization.

These partners are often dreamers – in both the best and worst sense of the word. They will often have a better vision for the practice group. But if their vision is faulty or if you

can't conscientiously support their proposals, help them inject realism into their suggestions, or be respectful and clear in expressing your opposition. One of the techniques that can be helpful is to highlight the recommendations of those partners that you know this partner looks up to and respects. The testimony of those whom they respect will probably carry more weight than tables of statistics or other factual evidence.

When proposing a course of action, do so enthusiastically. These partners like an emotional appeal and like to be pumped about the choices they make and the things they do. A careful weighing of any pros and cons associated with available alternatives rarely gives this partner the excitement expected from making a decision. These partners see mental pictures first, then convert those pictures to words. They base decisions on their impulses, gut feelings, and others' testimonials. You need to support their ideas and dreams while showing them how they can transfer their talk into actions.

Whenever possible, invite your partner's input before a decision is made. If this partner disagrees with you, they usually come right out and say so. They expect the same from you. When problems arise, face them and dispose of them as soon as possible. From your partner's point of view, there is no time like the present to resolve a troubled situation.

If you disagree, try not to argue because they dislike conflict. You might not win an argument with them anyway because their strong suit is feelings and intuition. Try to explore alternate solutions. When you reach an agreement, iron out the specific details concerning what, when, who, and how. Then you must absolutely document the agreement, since they tend to naturally forget such details.

This fast-paced partner expects you to do whatever you are doing as fast as possible, and wants everything done yesterday. You may expect to experience the hurry-up-and-wait phenomena as that project or action that seemed so urgently needed yesterday, gathers dust today. And, when in stress, this partner will want to avoid any discussion of negative-sounding or otherwise messy problem situations. Involve them by asking how they could solve the challenge or difficulty. Sometimes just talking allows your partner to air his or her feelings, relieve tension, and find a solution.

Keep in mind that these partners like to set their own direction. They want to do things their way. Recognize that these partners are prone to stretching the rules in order to achieve results. As far as possible, let them determine how to do projects and achieve objectives.

When the meeting ends take a few minutes for the two of you to catch up on one another's life. The goal is to be appropriately, though not excessively, social. When the issue is important, follow up immediately with a brief, written summary of what was decided.

MOTIVATING THIS PARTNER

Help this partner put their personal stamp on whatever they do. They want their work to be a form of self-expression. They hate doing the same old things the same old ways. Try to find new approaches to the way the two of you work together. For example, since these partners don't like confinement, when in meetings create reasons to get up and move around a bit, and also help them find projects or roles within the practice group that enable them to release some of their physical energy.

This partner will appreciate little special incentives to inspire him or her to achievement. They especially like constant rewards along the way and may favor shorter tasks with smaller payoffs.

RECOGNIZING THIS PARTNER

This partner even more than most, likes recognition. Show appreciation for this partner's contribution. While others may respond to more specific feedback, pay direct personal compliments to this partner, as an individual, when legitimately deserved. And for these partners it is even better if the appreciation is expressed publicly. Try to find ways for them to get the recognition they enjoy, while making sure everyone in the group gets the credit they deserve.

WHERE TO FROM HERE

Do you remember back when you first decided to take up the challenge of playing golf? Before you learned the game, you were what could be called an "unconscious incompetent." That is, you did know how to play golf, and you didn't even know why you didn't know how to play the game.

When you first went out to a golf course to learn, you became a "conscious incompetent." You still could not distinguish one golf club from another or how the game was scored. But because of your new awareness, you were consciously aware of why you couldn't play golf, and what you now had to do to acquire some competency.

With instruction, someone to personally coach your efforts, and a bit of practice on your part, you soon began to learn the essence of the game. You had to be consciously aware of how to stand, how to hold the club, which club might be the better choice in which terrain, and how to properly judge your shots. You became a "consciously competent" player.

Now think of the last time you went out golfing. Were you consciously thinking of how to stand and how to hold the club. Not likely. After having practiced and playing a number of games, you finally gravitate to a level of "unconscious competent." This is the level where you do something well and not even think about it. It comes naturally.

This example is also true for how you progress with understanding and then utilizing this information on behavioral styles in order to develop a proficiency in relating to those around you.

Start applying these techniques immediately. These strategies should help you with those unpleasant, but inevitable conflicts that you encounter from time to time when dealing with one of your partners. You should be able to minimize annoying behaviors in others while recognizing and reducing these same behaviors in yourself.

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DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF STYLES

AMIABLE

ANALYTICAL

DRIVER

EXPRESSIVE

SEEKS:

Acceptance	Accuracy	Control	Recognition
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STRENGTHS:

Listening	Planning	Admin.	Persuading
Teamwork	Systems	Leader	Enthusiastic
Follow-thru	Orchestrate	Pioneer	Entertain

GROWTH AREAS (Weaknesses):

Oversensitive	Perfectionist	Impatient	Inattentive-detail
Slow to action	Critical	Insensitive	Short attention
No big picture	Unresponsive	Poor Listener	Low follow-thru

IRRITATIONS:

Insensitivity	Disorganization	Inefficiency	Routines
Impatience	Impropriety	Indecision	Complexity

UNDER STRESS:

Submissive	Withdrawn	Dictatorial	Sarcastic
Indecisive	Headstrong	Critical	Superficial

DECISION MAKING:

Conferring	Deliberate	Decisive	Spontaneous
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FEARS:

Sudden change	Criticism of	Being taken	Loss of social
Instability	personal efforts.	advantage of.	recognition.

GAINS SECURITY THROUGH:

Friendship	Preparation	Control	Playfulness
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MEASURES PERSONAL WORTH BY

Compatibility	Precision	Results	Acknowledgement
Contribution	Accuracy	Impact	Compliments

INTERNAL MOTIVE:

“Participation”	“The Process”	“The Win”	“The Show”
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