

# The Art of **Building Consensus**

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*How to manage a  
successful career in  
**development  
partnerships***

# Find Your Footing

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It's no secret that cross-sectoral partnerships are a hot topic in development right now. The increasing emphasis on the idea that no one can do it alone has informed the actions of bilateral and multilateral donors, foundations and nonprofits around the world, forcing them to better engage with the private sector and with one another.

**A**nd, as a result, the need for professionals to work full-time on cultivating successful development partnerships is growing.

While this growth has potential to lead to an entirely new era in development, the idea of a career in partnerships is still relatively new, and the path to “success” remains largely undefined.

What is starting to take shape is a framework around the basic skill set required to fill these new roles. This guide will help you determine if you're a good fit for a career in development partnerships and what you should focus on to effectively grow into one.



# What does a partnerships professional do?

A career in partnerships will require you to wear many hats. You will constantly be at the center of all the different stakeholders and need have an understanding of what's happening at both the macro- and micro-level of the partnership.

**W**hether major decisions are being made to scale up the project, minor details are missing from an email awareness campaign or progress is being impeded for any reason, you'll be the one to piece together how every component impacts every stakeholder, not to mention the one everyone is looking to for answers.

To successfully navigate what many would see as competing priorities, you'll need to be part advocate, part negotiator, part listener and part decision maker. Each of these soft skills is essential to keeping your teammates on the same page and aligned to the same goal.



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The career choice of partnership development is the glue to it all.

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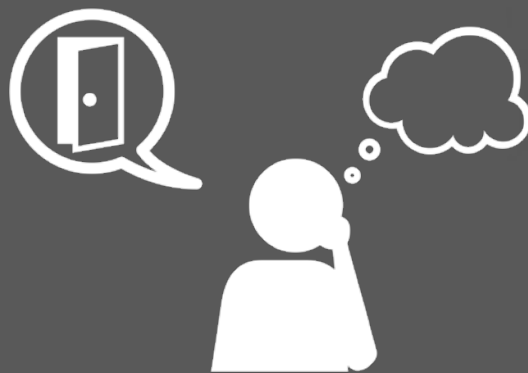
— Nazanine Scheuer  
Director of global corporate partnerships  
Save the Children

# Do you have what it takes?

The right combination of soft skills is important to advance in most careers, but it's especially critical in a partnerships role that's going to require you to manage (and appease) a variety of personalities.

**M**ost of your soft skills are already an inherent part of your personality; however, they can be practiced and honed if they don't come naturally. All it takes is a little bit of self-discipline to begin applying these desired traits to your interactions and the help of the right mentors.

So, what skills should you focus on developing for a partnerships career? These are the top 4 our experts recommend:



## 1. Open-mindedness

Really listening and enthusiastically seeking to understand each party's perspective are huge components of keeping an open mind. In the case of private sector partners, the ability to embed yourself in their business model to understand the issues and challenges they're facing is crucial.

Working on this skill will bolster your negotiating abilities too. An open mind makes it easier to think on your feet and offer mutually serving solutions, demonstrating that at the end of the day, you have everyone's best interest in mind, not just your own agenda.

One way to work on keeping an open mind is to day dream a little. Trust us, you can do this productively. Start brainstorming regularly both on your own and with a group of peers or co-workers. While you're doing this, consciously approach all ideas with a "yes we can" attitude rather than focusing on practical reasons something wouldn't be possible to implement. When you have a list of potential solutions you're happy with, then figure out how you can scale them up or down to implement them efficiently.



## 2. Congeniality

It's a rare situation to like all of your co-workers, but to successfully manage a partnership try your hardest to make sure everyone likes to work with you. Every stakeholder should be confident in and comfortable with you to want you as their go-to when there is a problem to solve or even a success to celebrate. Likability will also improve your chances of getting internal buy-in around the great new ideas you have before sharing them with the larger group.

A good way to build up this skill is to practice communicating face-to-face as often as possible. Conference calls and emails can go a

long way, but one-on-one interactions are key to building long-lasting relationships.

Another big part of congeniality is honesty. Don't make promises without first thinking through their implications on the other stakeholders and communicate truthfully about timelines. If you know something is going to take two months to achieve, don't promise results in two weeks to appease the people in the room. It's okay to take a step back before giving a final answer as long as you do follow through in a timely manner.



## 3. Problem Solving

Most partnerships are entered to solve a problem, and the first step is to form a concept. The more clarity you can bring to your concept, the better. That means being able to think through lots of different scenarios to keep things moving "according to plan" even when facing roadblocks. Coming to a conceptual agreement also provides a reference point to return to if priorities start to shift unexpectedly so that you can successfully find paths to realign the vision with the goal.

A good partnerships professional will also be able to immediately think of opportunities to bring an initiative to scale. Today, partnerships are operating in a much more honest development climate where partners are willing to speak to things like for-profit intent in addition to doing good. This means there is often greater incentive to do more. As a problem solver, you'll need to figure out what the top motivators are for each of your partners and speak to those needs accordingly.



## 4. Diplomatic Discipline

Clear project management experience and the ability to set expectations are important, but do this in a way that facilitates conversation among all group members even if you are primarily representing only one of the partners.

A high degree of diplomacy is also required. If partners are giving equal amounts of money, then who is first among equals? Who's driving the agenda? It's important to have that discussion upfront to clarify the role of each stakeholder so that you can prioritize accordingly.

To work on your diplomacy and discipline skills, we recommend trying your hand as a project manager on something a little bit outside your comfort zone. This way you will not only be able to react to real scenarios and stakeholder relationships, but you'll also get direct feedback from a team working under your direction and from superiors who may not have had a chance to see you work in that capacity before.

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You're trying to show: 'I'm not coming in with just my view and just my expectation, I'm trying to set expectations and clarity of purpose for whole partnership.

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— Mark Fitzgerald  
Principal  
KPMG's International Development  
Assistance Services



## Bonus Skill: Be Undeterrable (at least on the surface)

Most people are good at their job, or at least good enough to get by. What most people are not good at is stepping outside of their role and pushing forward to find innovative solutions for bigger picture problems – especially after they’ve heard the word “no” from a superior.

For most managers, “no” doesn’t have to be the end of a conversation. In fact, good managers will be receptive if you’ve found

solutions to the reasons they cited for not green-lighting your idea in the first place – that is if the foundation of your plan is good.

Demonstrating a willingness to go the extra mile for something you’re passionate about is a skill that can be applied to any career, but it will be especially valuable to positioning yourself as an integral player in a partnership since you’re showing you’ll do whatever it takes to make sure the goals are reached.

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“We want people who say, “You may have told me no, but if I tweak it this way, will you say yes?” That’s the type of profile we need more of.”

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— Mark Fitzgerald  
Principal  
KPMG’s International Development  
Assistance Services

# Where can partnerships take development?

The future of development partnerships appears to be a bright one.

In a recent survey conducted by Devex in partnership with Abt Associates, we found that 73% of development professionals polled believe that collaboration on development partnerships will grow dramatically over the next ten years. The same held true for 79% of sustainability executives surveyed.

But with dramatic growth comes increasing complexity, a challenge that makes it all the more essential for professionals entering the field to have the right combination of project management ability, soft-skills and the drive to create a long-term vision to guide the partnership to expectation and beyond.



“Partnerships is more than just a buzz word. Development partnerships have the potential to deliver outcomes far greater than any one entity alone. What a great idea to build your career around.”

— Jenni Cardamone  
Manager, Partnerships & Communications  
Devex



Devex has the  
tools you need  
to manage your  
development career.

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