

STRATEGIC PARTNERING: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR LASTING SUCCESS

What is Strategic Partnering?

Strategic Partnering is one of the most effective and proven ways for an organization to scale its work into something transformative and achieve results that are sustainable over time. ACTN Strategies' clients have utilized partnerships to bring in added expertise, seize market opportunities, mitigate risk, and implement public policy initiatives.

Why is Strategic Partnering valuable?

Partnering is not *just* a business arrangement—it also cultivates important relationships. Through partnering, key leaders can work together to manage tasks and resolve problems in a mutually agreeable manner well before the partnership begins to fray and/or cause financial and reputational damage to the involved parties.

Building and maintaining strong partnerships is an art and a science. [McKinsey research](#) shows that business executives rate “alignment on partnership objectives” and “effective internal communication and trust” as the two keys for thriving partnerships and a lack thereof as the primary reasons for failed partnerships. Still, leaders most often focus on end results and ignore the importance of truly aligning on goals and/or identifying relationship management tools. Why? Because it's hard. Communication and trust require a great deal of transparency, honesty, and active participation. But it's worth it. Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter of Harvard Business School found [that partnerships built on genuine bonds](#) between leaders have a better chance of success and a greater ability to last over time than those driven by a transactional mindset

How does ACTN Strategies approach Strategic Partnering?

The ACTN Strategies team uses decades of experience to build partnerships that intentionally focus on the human element that underpins collaboration. In doing so, ACTN Strategies provides tools for partners to effectively communicate, share all relevant information, and maintain trust the most critical element of partnering—ensuring the initial alignment of a partnership is sustained over the engagement.

Given the high premium placed on the human dynamics of partnerships, ACTN Strategies has developed a comprehensive process to ensure partnerships endure over time and achieve the desired objectives. ACTN Strategies' process to maintaining partnerships is built around four elements:

1. **Strengthening Relationships.** ACTN Strategies excels as mediator when communications and trust erode in partnerships. ACTN Strategies creates a “safe space” where partners can have honest conversations to solve the challenges at hand to avoid costly delays and litigation.

2. **Trusted Advisor.** With nearly 50 years of combined of experience, ACTN Strategies' leadership team serves as a trusted advisor to senior executives. The team's methods improve team effectiveness by building the "soft skills" that keep the work on track, ensure open lines of communication, and preserve a sense of purpose and mission.
3. **Project Management.** ACTN Strategies custom creates project management processes that ensure all parties involved are aware of key milestones, deliverables, and work completed to date. Having an open and transparent project management framework in place proves critical to collaboration and meeting deadlines within budget.
4. **Technology Strategy.** In complex and fast-moving work environments, a best-in-class technology strategy is essential. ACTN Strategies' team has an extensive background in deploying a suite of customized technology products to ensure a partnership is managed in a way that promotes collaboration, builds trust, and maximizes resources.

ACTN Strategies' approach to building partnerships delivers:

- Collaboration to establish win-win relationships based on trust, teamwork, and shared risks and rewards
- Engagements that are built around open lines of communication, with clear metrics to guide the work and ensure progress
- A shared vision of success, with measurable outcomes and impact woven therein

ACTN Strategies' Impact

Illustration #1: Partner Facilitation to Achieve a Successful Course Correction

In 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) contracted ACTN Strategies to facilitate a series of executive planning sessions for a project worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Several DOJ projects were at risk of going "off the rails" and headed towards default and arbitration with project partners. The projects were plagued by similar issues: a lack of communications and trust between DOJ and key partners; no discernible way to de-escalate the situation; no project management; and a crushing amount of paperwork from a lack of technology-based solutions.

As a first step, the ACTN Strategies team performed a comprehensive assessment to identify the pain points, the challenges that required the most immediate attention, and where the most serious communication breakdowns had occurred between the partners.

The most consequential outcome of that assessment was the dialogue it started with the entire partnership team. Lines of communication widened as people started talking about their work, their frustrations, and the progress achieved to date, which ultimately allowed them to begin

rebuilding trust. As a result, the ACTN Strategies team quickly became the “Trusted Advisor” across the entire partnership and had created a “safe space” for people to express ideas, frustrations, and concerns.

Once communications and trust were restored, ACTN Strategies began implementing a comprehensive approach to managing the project, enhancing the transparency of the workflow and allowing for more accountability around timelines, deliverables, and budgets. Furthermore, the ACTN Strategies team drew upon their background in the tech industry to develop and implement a series of technology-based solutions that increased the partnership’s workflow efficiency.

Within six months ACTN Strategies had transformed the partnership from being behind schedule, mired in contractual disputes, and facing legal action to a relationship that was meeting its original timeline and operating within budget. More importantly, communication and collaboration were deemed better than at any other time of the partnership, leading one senior leader from the sessions to say that ACTN Strategies’ partnering facilitation should be a requirement for all contracts.

Illustration #2: Rebuilding Collaboration Among Multiple National Security Partners

In early 2018, ACTN Strategies was retained by the Department of Defense with an urgent request – travel to Alaska in the dead of winter to resuscitate a fraying group of partners engaged on a project critical to the national defense of the United States. The lead contractor was close to terminating and defaulting on the project – one valued at roughly \$300 million.

On short notice, Sherry Robinson of ACTN Strategies was on the ground with the team of partners to assess the situation at hand. Her first task was to conduct an assessment to better understand the issues at hand and where the breakdowns in collaboration and trust were occurring. With that information in hand, Sherry then worked with the partners to develop an action plan that would guide the work going forward. To ensure progress and rebuild trust among the parties, Sherry established a project management system so all participants understood the roles, responsibilities, action items, and timelines for the project.

In a matter of weeks, the ACTN Strategies’ approach restored a partnership at risk of dissolving, quickly created a “safe space” to improve communications and rebuild relationships, became a trusted advisor, and deployed a technology-based project management system to keep work moving efficiently and in an open and transparent manner.

Even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, ACTN Strategies implemented regular check-ins, including virtual meetings, to ensure the project remained on track.