

Echoing Green Partnership Guide



Considering a Partnership?

Unlike most fellowship programs, Echoing Green has made it a practice to fund partnerships. We have seen the power of partnerships accelerate the growth and increase the impact of emerging organizations. But we have also seen partnerships create additional challenges for organizations already facing a great deal of adversity. And thus, given these tradeoffs, a partnership should never be entered into lightly. Instead, great care and consideration should be applied to this decision, well in advance of your application to Echoing Green.

To help with this decision, Echoing Green has surveyed a number of the partnerships we've funded over the past two decades – finding out what worked and what didn't. And, with this information, we have created a discussion guide that will help you and your potential partner think through the different issues that all partnerships must inevitably address.

1) Why do you want to be in a partnership?

A partnership can provide a sense of security missing from the experience of a lone entrepreneur. However, make sure that you are choosing the partnership model because it makes sense for your organization, as well as yourself. For instance, will having a second leader allow you to cover more ground or expand more quickly? Or will it just delay the decision-making process in an area where only fast-moving organizations thrive?

2) What are you looking for in a partner? How will your partner be an asset to the organization?

In any long term relationship, it is important that the people in the relationship like and appreciate each other. For partners to truly share joint ownership, they must respect and trust one another. In the most successful partnerships, the partners are drawn together by their shared vision and values. While it can be helpful to accelerate the growth of the organization if you seek out a partner who has the experience and knowledge to fill a perceived gap in your own skills, you should not select a partner based on skill set alone.

3) How do you each plan to contribute to the organization? What skills are each of you planning to develop?

A tremendous benefit of partnerships is that the partners can bring different, complimentary skills, traits and work styles to the organization. However, unspoken assumptions about who will naturally accept responsibilities for certain tasks can lead to difficulties. Oftentimes, just because Partner A has a skill that Partner B lacks, it doesn't mean that Partner A wants the associated tasks to be part of their job. The skill may be one that they feel that they have mastered and they are seeking to develop new skills or it may be something that they simply don't enjoy doing. Conversely, if Partner A has a skill that Partner B lacks, Partner A should not assume that lack of experience indicates lack of interest. Part of the attraction for Partner B may be the opportunity to work closely with Partner A to develop these new skills.

Note: We've seen partners take two very different approaches. Some partnerships take a "divide and conquer" approach where one partner agrees to own the issue, get the appropriate training and be responsible for managing that area of the business. Other partnerships take the approach that a certain set of leadership and management skills are essential for both partners to learn and they seek out opportunities for both of them to get experience and training, often working together on projects and opportunities (e.g., presentations, meetings with key officials or donors, board management).

4) What are your long-term goals? Do they fit with your plan for the organization?

While our fellows are drawn to their work by their commitment to creating social change, they are also driven by their personal ambitions and growth objectives. It is important that partners be honest with each other about what they are seeking in terms of personal and professional growth. In a rapidly evolving organization, there is no scarcity of growth opportunities. Through thoughtful discussion and planning, each partner will be able to easily achieve their desires to stretch and grow and a social change leader.

5) Consider the following questions about your organization's structure:

- Will your partnership be a partnership of equals or is there a power differential with a senior partner and a junior partner?
- What will your titles be?
- Who will do what?
- Do you both acknowledge and agree to all of the above?

Your organizational structure, including job titles and decision making processes, can communicate either intended or unintended messages to your supporters, constituents and staff. It is important to be thoughtful and deliberate in setting up your infrastructure and to think about the impact these decisions will have on your organizational culture as you bring on additional staff, volunteers and supporters.

6) Is the idea that is at the heart of your organization the brainchild of one of the partners or do you share joint ownership?

- If the original concept was initially the idea of just one partner and if that partner has already begun working on it before linking up with the second partner:
 - Will both of you share the "founder" status?
 - How will the original partner be recognized for their initial investment?
 - How does the original partner feel about sharing credit or founder status?

Echoing Green would be remiss if we did not address the really hard topics in these partnership questions. While interviewing one of our very successful partnership fellows for an upcoming Echoing Green publication, the discussion turned to effective decision-making. The fellow is quoted as saying "You have to be able to check you ego and say this is about getting to the best decision. It's not about whether or not I came up with the best answer." It may sound easy to "check your ego" and focus on the big picture, but the reality is that it can be hard. While our fellows don't take on the difficult work they do for

recognition, praise or money, these topics can't merely be swept aside. By creating a culture where it is OK to acknowledge personal desires, emotions and needs and to talk about these things, the hard stuff gets easier.

7) Consider the following questions about financial matters:

- **Are you comfortable talking about money? These discussions could include salary needs, personal debt, etc.**
- **What is your tolerance for financial instability? Have you discussed the amount of risk you're each willing to accept?**

Money is always one of the hardest topics to talk about. Indeed, dozens of studies say that money is the root of most divorces. Similarly, this topic can be especially sticky for leaders of emerging organizations. In certain circumstances, it can feel almost inappropriate to lay out salary demands when you are doing social change work for underprivileged constituents. And when money is tight, it is easier to stop paying yourself than to eliminate a program. For a healthy partnership to survive the test of time, however, both partners need to come into the partnership understanding where they each come from relative to salary expectations and personal financial goals and needs.

8) Consider the following questions about work styles:

- **Where will you be working at first? Together or apart?**
- **Do you prefer to work:**
 - **Collaboratively at all times, talking through ideas and working "out loud?"**
 - **Independently at first, using quiet space to think things through before coming together to discuss issues and make decisions?**

Differences in work styles can lead to misperceptions of who is doing what. What appears to be a communication breakdown may merely be a difference in communication styles. These differences, if not acknowledged and discussed, can easily lead to the perception that there is an inequity in workload or interpersonal tension where none actually exists. Partners who need to be surrounded by buzz and activity may value face time and draw creative energy from spontaneous brainstorming. Partners who are more introspective may find frequent meetings to be distracting and prefer to keep meetings short and very focused. Some partners may be up and in the office before dawn while others may be late risers but famous for sending emails at 2 AM. Partners who are working in separate cities and possibly time zones have to be especially sensitive to differences in communication styles and deliberate in their communication since the majority of their communication will be by phone or email.

Conclusion

Partnerships can bring tremendous energy and talent to an organization, helping it to grow smarter and faster. Partners can also be an enormous source of support. At the same time, partnerships present additional challenges above and beyond those faced by the average entrepreneur, potentially creating serious conflict within relationships and organizations.

Thus, we hope these questions have been helpful in reflecting upon the partnership decision. Remember to treat this decision carefully so that your organization will be well-poised for success.