



## Partnerships in Small Firms

By Rena M. Klein, FAIA

Having good partnerships in small firms relies on three aspects of partner compatibility: aspirational, operational, and interpersonal. Challenges to small firm cohesion because firm culture will mirror the relationship between partners as much as it reflects the personal challenges, there are numerous motivations for entrepreneurial architects to form partnerships.

Firm owners who are sole-proprietor often decide to form partnerships in the hope of expanding the firm's offerings or with the hope of adding ambitious new firm owners, or seasoned owners of well-established firms looking to create value beyond their personal experience. New partners seek are likely to be someone with knowledge and market sector connections that the founding partner(s) do not have. The new experience which some small firm owners hope will benefit the organizational structure and work processes of their firm.

Solo firm owners often look for partners who have skills and interests that complement their own. If a founder is naturally personable, they might look for a partner who excels in project execution and delivery. Similarly, if a firm owner is talented in design, they might look for a partner who is skillful in management. An intellectual, artistic firm owner might seek a partner who is action-oriented with a technical bent. There are also challenges. The danger here is the enabling of each partners' weaknesses. "Designers" are granted permission to ignore business details. "Managers" may become exclusively focused on the short-term bottom line. Misaligned purpose, values, and messages to the staff can have negative consequences of this kind of partnership.

## Making Partnerships Work

Whatever the reasons a partnership is formed, certain qualities will foster its success. First and most importantly, partners must have complementary professional goals. Having aspirational compatibility means that partners share a common narrative of what it means to be an architect.

It almost goes without saying that each partner must be competent, reliable and have effective work habits, even if work style differences. Aspects of operational compatibility include clarity of roles and responsibilities and the ability of each partner to tap into different strengths.

However, operational and aspirational compatibility will only go so far. Often, the very differences that make people consider each other as potential partners are challenging for them to actually work together. Social science research has shown that different career paths will attract people with different personality types. Therefore, when you bring two professionals together who have divergent experience and knowledge, it's not surprising that conflict, or at least differing points of view. This is where interpersonal compatibility becomes essential.

Interpersonal compatibility, as defined here, is a similarity in how each partner deals with relationships. Successful partners often have high emotional intelligence about themselves and others. They have the ability to be honest communicators – to say what they mean and listen to what others say. They communicate frequently, in both structured and unstructured forums. Partners who are interpersonally compatible demonstrate a willingness to share their thoughts and feelings with one another, avoiding hidden resentments and the "building of a case" against the other. This kind of openness is essential for successful collaboration over the long-haul.

It is easy to see how a married couple might have an advantage in this aspect of partnering. A married couple is likely to be able to communicate more easily in terms of interpersonal communication and understanding. Expressing mutual respect and appreciation, and seeing the success of a partner's work is likely to come easier to married firm leaders. Yet all partners that work well together must have a measure of these qualities – a willingness to acknowledge differences and operate with a spirit of generosity.

The flip side to this scenario is not hard to imagine. Partners who differ greatly in interpersonal style could be in for a rocky ride. If one partner is withholding of their feelings while the other is easily expressive, understanding between the two may be extremely difficult. Negative emotions that comes from appreciation and respect, unsavory emotions such as jealousy, envy and competitiveness may arise, or worse, lead to a breakdown in the partnership. In this case, the partners may need the help of a skilled organizational psychologist, assuming they want their partnership to succeed.

## What Makes Partnerships Fail

Some partnerships fail quickly because one or more of the partners misunderstand, and thereby misrepresent, their own leaders; they want to collaborate on decision making, and they may believe that differing approaches will strengthen their firm; but in the end they may quickly discover otherwise. Entrepreneurial architects who are used to calling the shots can become impatient with one-on-one discussions and joint-decision making. Lesson learned: make sure you know your leadership style. If you like being in charge, you may want to consider a different partnership structure.

Partnerships are also at risk as firm owners enter mid-life and their firm has matured and stabilized. Partners who have always had different priorities are shifting and differences that were once workable have become untenable. Differing goals and different value systems can lead to conflict. Lesson learned: prepare for change in advance. Partnership agreements must have an “exit strategy” – one that is agreed to long before the partnership ends.

Partnerships that are based on an alliance of two people who have very divergent professional experiences can be very challenging. Partnerships are similar to marriages. Let’s not forget that nearly 50 percent of marriages end in divorce. It may take a great deal of time and energy to build a successful partnership. However, if partners are able to achieve mutual understanding, they can leverage their different personalities and professional approach. Lessons learned: be prepared to work hard at accepting and appreciating differences. Consider seeing a therapist to help you learn to collaborate effectively and efficiently.

**About the Author:** *Rena M. Klein, FAIA is principal of RM Klein Consulting, a firm offering business planning, retreat facilitation, and leadership development for leaders of small and mid-sized design firms. Her innovative work on design practice has appeared in print and web publications, including the Knowledge Resource. Rena is the author of The Architect’s Guide to Small Firm Management: Making Chaos Work for Your Small Firm (2010). More information available at <http://rmklein.com>*

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