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What Makes Creative Partnerships Work

by Angelo Tomaselli, Dirk Deichmann, and Joris J. Ebbers

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Summary. There are many instances in which a symbiotic partnership was the foundation of an extraordinary successful project. In this article, which is based on a study of the Italian movie industry, the authors identified the elements that make such relationships work.

In the most exceptional careers, it is often not all that lonely at the top: For the extraordinarily successful, a partner or small, longstanding team is often an integral part of their success. This is especially true of project-focused endeavors such as creating movies, where the creative person needs a partner to take care of the production side of the endeavor.

Excellence of any kind often involves some mysterious alchemy, but our research suggests that there are distinct patterns to a successful symbiotic relationship during a project, which often is the building block for a more long-term partnership.

In our research, which combined a review and qualitative interviews about symbiotic professional relationships in movies with a quantitative study of 235 movies made by 105 Italian directors and 65 producers, we found that four factors tend to be good predictors of success:

1. A common vision that overrides personal ambitions.

“The fundamental thing is that the director and the producer have the same vision and, above all, the same intent: that is to make the best film possible,” Nicola Giuliano, the Oscar-winning producer of the movie *The Great Beauty*, told us in an interview. Particularly with a young director, this vision may extend beyond the project at hand. “We are working not only on your film, but we are also working on building your career,” he added.

2. Distinct roles.

Giuliano sees the producer, whose job is to handle the business details of making a movie, as playing a distinct and subordinate role to that of the director. “Without the genius, the very good producer cannot realize a beautiful film. It is always good (for the producer) to be down to earth — knowing what your role is, doing it with dedication, consider yourself lucky to do the work you love, which is a total privilege,” he said. Paolo Sorrentino, director of *The Great Beauty*, says Giuliano defends him from the outside world, helping to filter its demands on Sorrentino.

3. Familial closeness.

Another quality shared by the most successful symbiotic careers, perhaps particularly in creative industries, is that the pair often becomes the nucleus of a larger family of employees. For example, *El Deseo (The Desire)*, the production company of Spanish film maker Pedro Almodóvar and his producer brother Agustín Almodóvar is a close-knit group, bound by shared devotion to Pedro’s artistic vision and a deep level of trust among all members of the team. A strong symbiotic relationship between the director and producer sets an example for other team members, creating the trust that’s critical in achieving the collaboration necessary to overcome the challenges that inevitably arise during the long movie-making process.

4. More than one reputation on the line.

Teams where both producer and director are well known enjoy important reputational advantages. Our analysis of the Italian film industry between 2010 and 2014 suggests partnerships where both have strong reputations are more successful in attracting support than partnerships where only one has a strong reputation.

Interestingly, however, each seems to draw different kinds of support. In the context of the Italian film industry, we found that the commercial reputation of the producer was crucial in attracting financial support from investors, while the artistic reputation of

director was crucial in gaining cultural support for the movie idea by means of positive evaluations of the movie script from the Italian Board of Film, an agency of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage. (A positive evaluation is important to obtain government subsidies. In addition, it signals a high quality of the script and that there is a market for the movie, which, in turn, helps in attracting additional private investments.)

The more we reflected on the importance of these symbiotic producer-director relationships, the more we began to think that similar relationships are probably important in other project-based ventures as well. Whether the project involves designing a chair, a car, or a vaccine, a strong partnership can serve to mitigate the risks of failure in similar ways.

For example, clearly separating roles and designating one partner as the public face of the team were key to the success of Charles and Ray Eames, the designers of the iconic Eames Chair and many other masterpieces of mid-century modernism. In their Los Angeles studio, they were equal partners, but Charles' charisma and speaking ability made him the logical public face of the team — particularly in a more sexist era. “He was always the one on the committees and giving the speeches,” one long-time employee of the Eames Office told Sarah Booth Conroy of the *Washington Post*.

Similarly, the iconic project of the Mustang at the Ford Motor Company was born when the executive, Lee Iacocca, and the designer, Carroll Shelby, famous for their business and artistic design reputations, respectively, put aside personal ambitions for a common vision. Shelby later recalled, “Iacocca called me one night and said, ‘You guys tell me you can’t make a sport car out of the Mustang.’ I said I could, but I don’t know if it’d be worth it — if he could make any money with it or not. He said, ‘I don’t care about making any money.’”

The short three-year career of Christopher Paul Bailey as CEO and creative director of Burberry suggests that role separation is a good

rule in fashion as well as movies. Analysts have said that rather than freeing Bailey, his playing both roles confounded both business and design decisions.

In contrast, when the BioNTech-Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine was created, BioTech's founder Özlem Türeci considered her relationship with the husband and co-founder Uğur Şahin as something much more than simple teamwork. "It's a symbiosis, and I think that is the secret why it works so nicely... I pick up where Uğur leaves things and vice versa, and we have the same values and standards to what we want to deliver with our work. And this is a reason why even though we are married we can work very functionally together."

Whether in movies or another field, the essential quality of a successful symbiotic relationship might be summed up in one term Giuliano used a lot in our interview: *sponda dialettica* — a colloquial term that means the individuals serve as strong sounding boards for each other. Giuliano used it to describe a willingness to stay engaged with each other and with the project over time, despite many ups and downs.

"We all work for the same goal: to make the best film possible," Giuliano said. "I am ready to stay even 10 days locked in an editing room to fight with a director to defend a certain choice, but the director who works with me knows very well that in the end, if there is no agreement on a certain choice, I give the last word to the director because I don't believe that the producer should decide on the *final cut* (i.e., the final edited version of the movie)," he said. "I believe in dialogue."



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