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Alliances: Holding Hands and Sticking Together

By Kathleen Begley

Sears and Land's End. Amazon.com and Target. Microsoft and NBC Television. These are just a handful of mega-organizations that have teamed up in recent years to form what the business world calls "alliances." Reluctant to fall into gobbledegooky jargon, I prefer to refer to these arrangements as "holding-hands-and-sticking-together." In this horrific economy, I think there's never been a better time to start creating new support systems for yourself. While you're at it, make some for me, too. OK?

Whether you're a corporate executive, an hourly employee, or a fledgling entrepreneur, you're probably going to survive more easily in the next year or so by remembering that no income-earner is an island. In my view, you and I are going to need one another more than ever before as the United States slides into what appears to be a looming recession of unparalleled proportion.

According to economists, the coming downturn may make the gum erosion that forced you to get periodontal work look mild in comparison. Get it? Recession – the dental condition that decades ago resulted in older people being described as "long in tooth." OK, it was a stupid joke.

"Modern alliances are increasingly the golden means to the end of building, not simply a bigger business, but a greater and better one," according to business gurus Robert Heller and Edward deBono. "Alliances come in all shapes and sizes, but share the same essential foundation: the belief that as active and sharing partners, both sides will achieve high ambitions that otherwise might be beyond reach."

Here are some ways to make the concept relevant to your job situation:

- **Rethink old rules.** Back in your school days, your teachers probably actively discouraged you from working with your peers to come up with answers to questions on your exams. In my communications training classes, I often tell participants that such rules are partially responsible for the tendency of professionals to hoard valuable information. What kind of alliance making is that? My suggestion: redefine what you call "cheating." Rename it "collaborating."
- **Look for opportunity.** This past week, I taught a two-day writing class to executives at a large health organization on the West Coast. The location was a nearby campus of the University of Phoenix, which holds most classes in the evening. Several years ago, the parties realized that one wanted to rent low-cost meeting space and the other desired to make money on empty daytime classrooms. And so an alliance burst forth.
- **Talk to strangers.** As I sitting Friday in the lobby of a hotel waiting for a taxi to take me to Los Angeles Airport to return home to suburban Philadelphia, a woman named Rhonda Sher struck up a conversation. The owner of a coaching company called The Two-Minute Networker, Sher told me about a half dozen organizations that might be helpful to grow the keynote speaking portion of my business. Alliances here I come!
- **Get off your high horse.** You may be under the illusion that you alone have the expertise and experience to manage your career. Why take suggestions from lesser mortals? My advice: get over yourself.
- **Think win-win.** To feel comfortable forging alliances, you have to create deals in which both parties come out ahead. Otherwise, you're doomed. A case in point occurred about 10 years ago when Time-Warner merged with AOL. In making the deal, the publishing giant failed to notice that the other side was getting most of the benefits. As a result, the alliance blew up in everyone's face in a few short years.



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- **Apply the idea microcosmically.** The most beneficial alliances come not from formal contracts hammered out by huge conglomerates, but from informal arrangements created by individual employees. Say, for example, that you frequently have to produce audit reports or computer documentation for high-level executives. To relieve the stress or writing, get an editing and proofreading buddy to review your pearls of wisdom with a fresh set of eyes – oops, I mean eyes.
- **Manage your fears.** If 2009 turns out as challenging as many economists predict, you'll hold up much better by having alliance partners to talk to. Another relevant old saying: A problem shared is a problem halved.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has owned and operated Write Company Plus in West Chester, Pennsylvania, for almost 20 years. She provides communications training to Fortune 500 companies around the world. The author of seven books, Dr. Begley writes a business column each week for a Philadelphia area newspaper, where this article appeared Sunday.