

10 Ways to Foster a Strong Co-Founder Partnership

You can't make something from nothing all by yourself. Somewhere along the line, you might decide that you're more powerful as part of a team. But when you're hit with a flurry of inevitable, unpredictable events (your funding kicks in, you grow like wildfire and you must scale immediately), will your team structure stretch and flex enough to support these impending pressures?

I co-founded AirPR with [Rajagopal Sathyamurthi](#) in 2011. As co-founder and CTO, Raj creates infrastructure, scales products and applications, and makes sure the site is sailing smoothly in general. I focus more on marketing, sales and investor and customer relations.

So what are the keys to keeping this yin-yang dynamic healthy and balanced? Raj and I pulled together a hearty list of tips geared toward founding partners, but it can be applied to any workplace pairing you're looking to spruce, polish, and improve.

Stay focused on your own projects. Since co-founding a business comes with a multitude of responsibilities, it's easy to get distracted. There are a million problems you could solve at any given moment; you're constantly fighting to stay focused. When it comes down to it, there's only one "most important task" at any time. Funnel your energy and don't worry about what your partner's doing — they've got it.

Go ahead and disagree. You both should know it's okay to disagree. At our company, we make it known that anyone can voice their opinions even if it opposes that of a founder's; it's a positive thing. The best sources of ingenuity come from differing opinions.

Don't take things personally. When you do disagree on an issue, take it for what it is: an instance of opposing opinions. A big definer of our culture is that we don't take things personally. Disagreement is natural and debate is good. We hash it out, make decisions and move on.

Stay solutions-focused. If you do catch yourself taking something personally, let the other person know what's bothering you and discuss an action-oriented solution. It seems simple enough, but reacting emotionally versus objectively can be an easy trap to fall into. Collaborate on concrete solutions and be done with it.

Value constant communication. Touch base frequently in order to keep your co-founder informed. Nothing you keep to yourself will help and every issue is of importance, so share away. Keep that standing weekly meeting. Keep the door revolving. Creating a plan that doesn't feel over-structured is an art form. We don't sit down and say, "Let's communicate." We build the space to foster open communication on a continual basis.

Get personal and build trust. It used to be taboo to talk too much about your personal life at work, but we live in a day and age when personal and work lives are fused together. Form a real friendship.

Meet each others' families. Healthy co-founder relationships begin with empathy, and sharing things about meaningful areas of your life forge a path for trust and respect.

Actually work together. Often, co-founders split a list of responsibilities, spending little time in each others' worlds. The two of us own different areas of the business, but we also actively overlap. This balance of hands-on and hands-off parallel management helps us build respect for one another's skills. Working together allows us to work apart.

Know when to budge. Flexibility is a necessary trait, especially for colleagues like co-founders who have equal weigh-ins. If you've been debating a particular issue for some time and find continuous opposition from your partner or multiple colleagues, humble up. When the business demands it, give a little.

Make time for each other outside of the office. A co-founder relationship is a relationship like any other, and dedicating focused time paves the way for great collaboration. Get dinner, carpool together, or attend a non-work-related event. When you look at your colleagues as valuable people in your life, you open the door to the best types of working relationships you can have.

Let up and laugh. At a fast-growing company or startup, there's inevitably a lot of pressure, and the sheer magnitude of the tasks at hand need to be complemented with some light-heartedness. Smile, laugh and joke about silly things that come about. Believe it or not, that's what will make these years most memorable.

Lastly, remember you're lucky not to be in this alone. There's nothing more rewarding than sharing early successes with someone who's been working just as hard as you've been. Plus, having a co-founder is just more fun.

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