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Is Yours a Partnership 'Team'?

Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

Any fan of basketball, baseball, football, soccer, ice hockey, or softball knows that to win, the players must work as a team. Learning to play together as a team requires that each individual learn and play a particular role with utmost skill. Team members must be unselfish in supporting each other and must devote considerable time and effort in practicing and playing together. If the players don't practice together, if they get into unmanageable disagreements, if they do not support each other, the team will not live up to its potential and it will not win.

Millions of people get married, or enter into some form of intimate relationship, with the dream of living and working happily together. Most want these relationships to be fulfilling and long-lasting. Yet, many don't seem to understand that a long-term, mutually satisfying intimate relationship demands that people work together as a partnership team. Working together as a team can produce a synergistic effect, where the payoff is far greater than two individuals working alone. Becoming a successful partnership team can provide participants with extraordinary resources to meet life's demands and can produce intense satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment as life's challenges are faced together.

Yet, in many intimate relationships, it seems that the people involved are unable or unwilling to develop a successful partnership team. At best, they are different persons sleeping in the same household, eating together at the same table, and sharing some common resources and activities. At worst, they become self-centered individuals, each primarily looking out for himself or herself, and often discounting the other's needs and opinions. As a result, they develop a "win-lose" rather than a "win-win" approach to their relationship. Developing a successful partnership team requires time, patience, commitment and skill. In you are interested in developing a more satisfying, workable team, here are some guidelines for you in assessing your progress.

1. **Consensus.** Can you and your partner easily come to a consensus when making decisions and using resources? Do both of you share the same broad goals and the same sense of commitment to your couple team? Consider these questions:
 - Do you both agree on the vision and purpose of your relationship? Why it exists, where it's going during the next 2 - 5 years, and what its core priorities are? Or do these questions generate uncertainty, confusion or perhaps conflict?

- Are you both committed to similar common values? What does your relationship mean to you? How do you define success and satisfaction? What are the boundaries of your partnership team – who's in and who's out – in terms of influence? What is ethical and fair behavior and how should you behave toward each other? Or, are your vows and other commitments merely a form of "lip service" when you compare what you *want* with what you *do*?"
2. **Trust.** Does each of you truly trust the other? Trust is freely given and built up through behaving in a trustworthy manner.
- Do you talk freely and do you believe each other when communicating? Or, are you a bit anxious that you are hearing only "part of the story." Do hidden agendas exist?
 - Do you believe that you can depend on and count on each other, in bad times as well as good? Or do you feel that relying on the other is naive, and the other person is not physically present or emotionally available when needed?
 - When you communicate with each other, is *honesty* the operative descriptor, or are *manipulation* and *deceit* a more appropriate term?
 - Do you each feel psychologically and emotionally *safe* with each other? Or, is there a tendency to be wary of the other's motives and actions?
 - Does each of you feel confident about each other's efforts and performance about making the relationship "be the best it can be?" Or, do you feel uncomfortable, perhaps suspicious, and concerned about the other's motives or behavior?
3. **Communicate.** Do you communicate openly, honestly and genuinely with each other?
- Can each of you be open and straight with each other about your needs, concerns, anxieties, fear, angers, hopes, joys? Or, do you wind up holding things in, muttering under your breath, throwing verbal darts at each other, and being silently angry?
 - Can you be forthright with each other about the challenges your partnership team faces? Can you openly and rationally discuss each person's points of view without criticizing each other? Can each of you "lose an argument" without "losing face?" Or do you tend to withhold information? Or, are your discussions more like trying to persuade the other to your point of view?
 - Do you share your "wins" and "losses" (successes and setbacks) with each other? Or, when there is a setback, do you engage in finger-pointing and excuse-making regarding undesirable outcomes?
4. **Respect.** To what extent do each of you feel valued, respected and esteemed? Ask yourselves:
- Are both of you aware of each other's skills, experiences and expertise? Or does one person have a tendency to negate or undervalue the other person's talents?
 - Do you genuinely listen to each other's ideas and concerns? Or do you defend and promote your own ideas and conception of reality with only a pretense of paying attention to the

other's ideas and suggestions? Or worse, do you discount those by trying to invalidate them by invalidating the other person?

- Do you openly and publicly honor each other's efforts and contributions? Or, are accomplishments taken for granted, or ignored?
- Do you value each other's time? Or do you act in a way that suggests that your partner's time is not very important?
- Do you hold your vows, agreements and promises among yourselves as sacred? Will you never knowingly violate the integrity of your relationship by what you say or do? Or, do you see these promises and agreements as "maybe – if it's convenient?"

5. **Caring.** Are you genuinely concerned about your partner's personal welfare as a human being? As a partner in the relationship?

- Do you show empathy with each other when a personal or professional problem arises? Do you show sincere caring by writing little notes and cards, giving gifts on birthdays and anniversaries? Do you surprise your partner with a gift because he or she is someone special?
- Do you help each other succeed and grow, and then share in the excitement of each other's accomplishments? Or, do you ignore your partner's achievements?
- Do you have high, but reasonable expectations for each other? Do you provide each other with the resources and compassion to care for each other?
- Do you daily exhibit caring behaviors? Or, do you confuse "caring" for your partner with "indulging," "rescuing" or making excuses when behavior is less than desired or destructive?

6. **Collaboration.** Do you work together, plan together, and set your team, individual and partner goals together? Or, are you noncommittal, grudging participants?

- Do both of you feel a sense of *ownership* for your partnership team? Do you both feel like you are genuine, involved, participating, and equal partners in it? Do you feel that this ownership is an important part of your couple team? Or has one of you assumed primary responsibility for building a team while the other wants to "sit on the sidelines?"
- Is your team's dominant decision-making mode that of "win-win," where you use your resources and meet challenges in a manner that benefits you as persons as well the marital team? Or, are you in a subtle battle for each other's scarce resources and rewards (money, affection, power)?
- When difficulties arise, is your dominant response that of cooperative problem-solving? Or, is it a "cover-my-own-back" response in which each person blames the other for the problem?

7. **Rewards.** These are the payoffs that you experience individually and together as a team.

- Do you recognize each other's smallest accomplishments and compliment each other for small, everyday efforts — like making breakfast or taking out the garbage?
 - Do you celebrate team successes and team pleasures by going out to dinner, going dancing, or taking a three-day vacation together?
 - Do you daily tell your partner how important he or she is in your life? Do you share pain and sorrow together, and see this as a team-strengthening opportunity? Or, do you each of pursue only your own agendas and receive your rewards only from other people and organizations?
8. **Organization.** Your partnership team's organizational effectiveness is in part determined by how effectively you developed each of the previous seven characteristics. Planning, communication, decision-making and negotiating differences are critical skills in making your team effective.
- Are your team's purposes and goals developed in close collaboration with key external (school, church, community) and/or internal constituencies (children, parent)? Or, do team goals and activities occur in a social and strategic vacuum.
 - Does each of you have the authority to make necessary decisions and do you each agree on the rules by which your team functions? Or do you spend a lot of time "playing games" and never get around to dealing with the critical issues?
 - Do you invest the necessary financial, managerial and time resources in your relationship — recognizing it as a high priority item? Or, do you treat it with a "sink or swim" philosophy — giving it little support, yet hoping somehow it will survive?

While these eight dimensions represent ideals and no partnership team would score perfectly on them, it does give you an opportunity to evaluate where you have been and may give you ideas for the future. Is your team moving aggressively in the direction of these dimensions, and are you committed to perpetual improvement on them?

Partnership Team Assessment

Using a 1-7 scale (*1 = very low, negative and undesirable, and 7 = very high, positive and desirable*), each of you honestly evaluate the quality of your partnership team's performance on each of the eight dimensions (consensus, trust, communication, respect, caring, collaboration, rewards and organizational effectiveness). Add up your score.

If both of you scored above 50, you are doing very well and are functioning well as a true, cooperative couple team.

If both of you scored between 32 - 49, talk together about whether or not you wish to do better. Look at the individual items on which you scored five or above. These are your strengths. On which items did you score five or below? Take specific steps to improve in those areas.

If both of you scored below 32, give strong consideration to seeing a marriage counselor to assist you in planing your future together and in working out your differences. The payoff will be in helping you realize your relationship potential and in improving your satisfaction in working together.

If one of you scored considerably higher than the other, talk about how to improve in those areas in which there are the biggest gaps. Do not be discouraged. It's not where you have been, but where you are going together that counts.

Conclusion

Remember that an effective partnership team is one that is cultivated and pursued by each person. Teamwork has to be cultivated and grown by their members – thoughtfully, persistently and sometimes painfully. If you are serious about the importance of your partnership team, you won't shirk from using these eight dimensions as a means to monitor your progress. It's a lifetime challenge, but the results are worth it.

For further information on enhancing your relationship, obtain the Cooperative Extension publication NCR 493 *Realizing Your Marriage Potential*, or *The Twelve Day Marriage Enrichment Plan* from a Nebraska Cooperative Extension office. Or, write to Distribution Center, PO Box 830918, Lincoln, NE 68583-0918.

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