

# *Partnerships That Perform: It Takes More Than Good Intentions*

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NEW VISTAS

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**T**he ability to build and sustain effective partnerships will be a key competitive advantage for universities in an age of the global educational village. Moreover, even without crossing borders, it is increasingly difficult for an institution to serve the diverse student population and educational imperatives of the twenty-first century on its own. With this in mind, we have set out to codify an approach for building effective partnerships based on our experience and observation of what factors contribute to success or failure. The model is practical and logical, and can be used in part or in total to launch new partnerships or to evaluate existing ones. It can provide an excellent neutral ground from which partners can plan their proposed endeavor or review an existing relationship that may need new life.

Has this ever happened to you? Your president comes back from an overseas trip with an exciting new opportunity, and you and other colleagues spend a year or more working on a partnership plan that never comes to fruition. Everyone thought it was great idea and invested a significant amount of time, but it went nowhere. Or perhaps you have inherited a partnership program that seems to have outlived its useful life, but no one knows what to do about it.

Why does this happen? Most partnerships begin with good will, great

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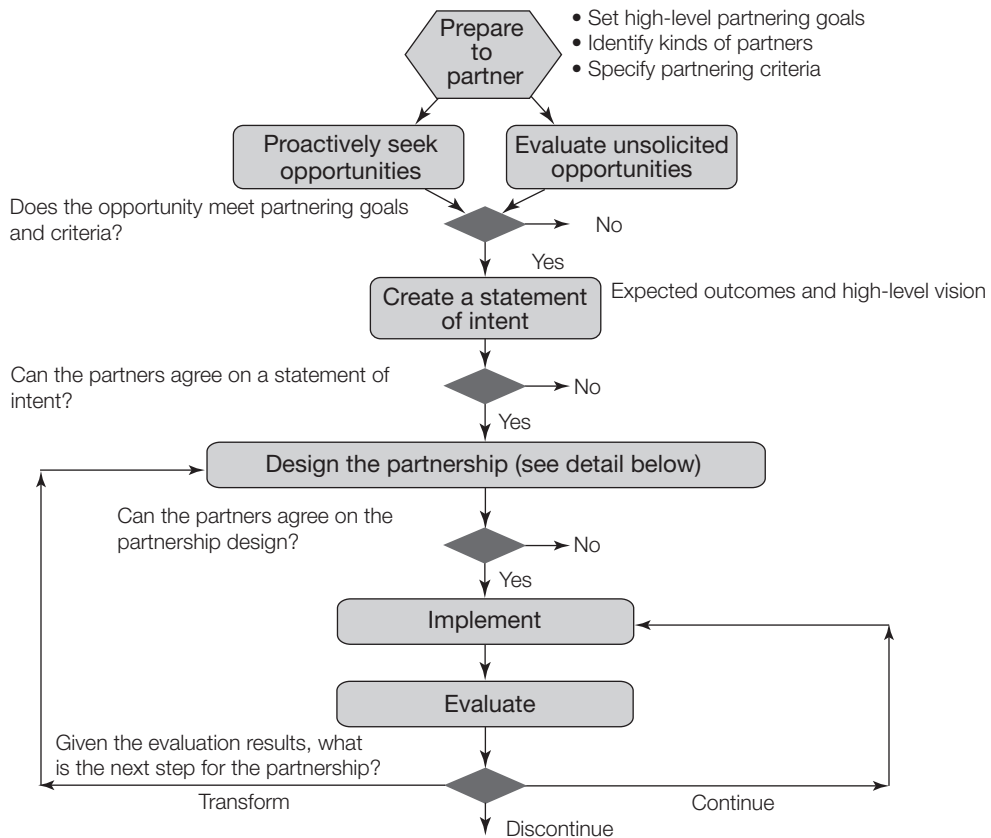
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enthusiasm, and the best intentions. But many end up as entertaining stories of what might have been. In some cases, partnerships limp along with diminishing returns, or, like old soldiers, they just fade away.

*“ The most significant factor in successful partnerships is for the various partners to recognize that each brings different strengths and cultures to the partnership—and that this is a good thing. Failure to respect those differences often leads to a breakdown of the partnership, as each expects the other to conform to their own expectations. Disappointment is the inevitable result. Respect for the different cultures will often bring new insights and opportunities that could not have been possible without the partnership.”*

*Jack M. Wilson  
President, University of Massachusetts*

Still, we all are aware of partnerships that achieved or exceeded their potential and brought benefits to partners that neither could have achieved on its own. What is the mysterious chemistry that makes the difference? We believe there is no real mystery here. Partnerships, like other business endeavors, must be carefully planned, managed, evaluated, and nurtured over time. A partnership has a life of its own that transcends the business objectives it seeks to achieve. It must be mindfully and strategically managed. Good intentions are not enough.



*Figure 1. A model for partnership development.*

## PREPARE TO PARTNER

The most important step in partnership planning is one that most organizations fail to do, and it is the one that should happen before partnerships are launched: develop a clear set of partnering goals for the organization. These goals address the strategic reasons for entering into partnerships in the first place. It sounds logical, and yet in our experience, few organizations clearly articulate their partnering goals. Even if an organization is currently engaged in a partnership, it is useful to step back and set these goals to guide future activity and calibrate existing ventures.

Partnering goals can be thought of as an answer to the question, “In what ways should partnering support our mission and vision?” The goals should be incorporated into the organization’s strategic plan. Once the goals

are set, the initial stage should include a specification of the kinds of entities with whom you wish to partner and some general criteria the partners must meet. The activity in which goals, partner types, and partner criteria are established should engage key stakeholders throughout the organization. Keep in mind that the best kinds of partners are often those who are not like you but whose strengths and attributes complement your own. Partners who are too similar can end up in conflict or competition. Careful thought and investment of time in goal setting at this stage can prevent an organization from pursuing red herrings that waste valuable resources while setting the stage to pursue truly productive alliances.

*"It's been our experience at Stanford that the most productive partnerships are based on a true understanding and appreciation of each other's mission, values, culture, and strengths. And if done right, partnerships will bring benefits that neither party could do on its own while mitigating risk, sharing costs, and establishing best practices."*

*Andy DiPaolo, Executive Director,  
Stanford Center for Professional Development*

### **PROACTIVELY SEEK OPPORTUNITIES/EVALUATE UNSOLICITED OPPORTUNITIES**

There are two ways to become aware of potential partnership opportunities. You can continue to react to unsolicited proposals, as most of us do on a regular basis. The difference is that once partnering goals are in place, you have filters that allow you to objectively ask the questions, "Will this partnership help us achieve our partnering goals?" and "Does this partner meet our partnering criteria?" Consistent application of these filters will enable you to avoid partnerships that sound good but have no real value to your organization. It will also make it less likely that you will miss out on those opportunities with real potential to move your own organization forward.

The second way of identifying potential partnerships is to be proactive by seeking those that directly support your strategic plan. This is the more difficult method and the one that most organizations do not do effectively. The first step is to identify potential partners that pass through your filters. This step should involve key stakeholders whose support would be critical at the implementation stage. The next step is to approach potential partners with a concrete proposal that supports your partnering goals. If you have

done your homework and researched the prospects with an eye to how partnerships could support their strategic objectives, your response rate will be higher than if you approach potential partners blindly. Approaching the identification of partners consciously and deliberately will allow you to spend limited resources wisely and save you from wasting your time.

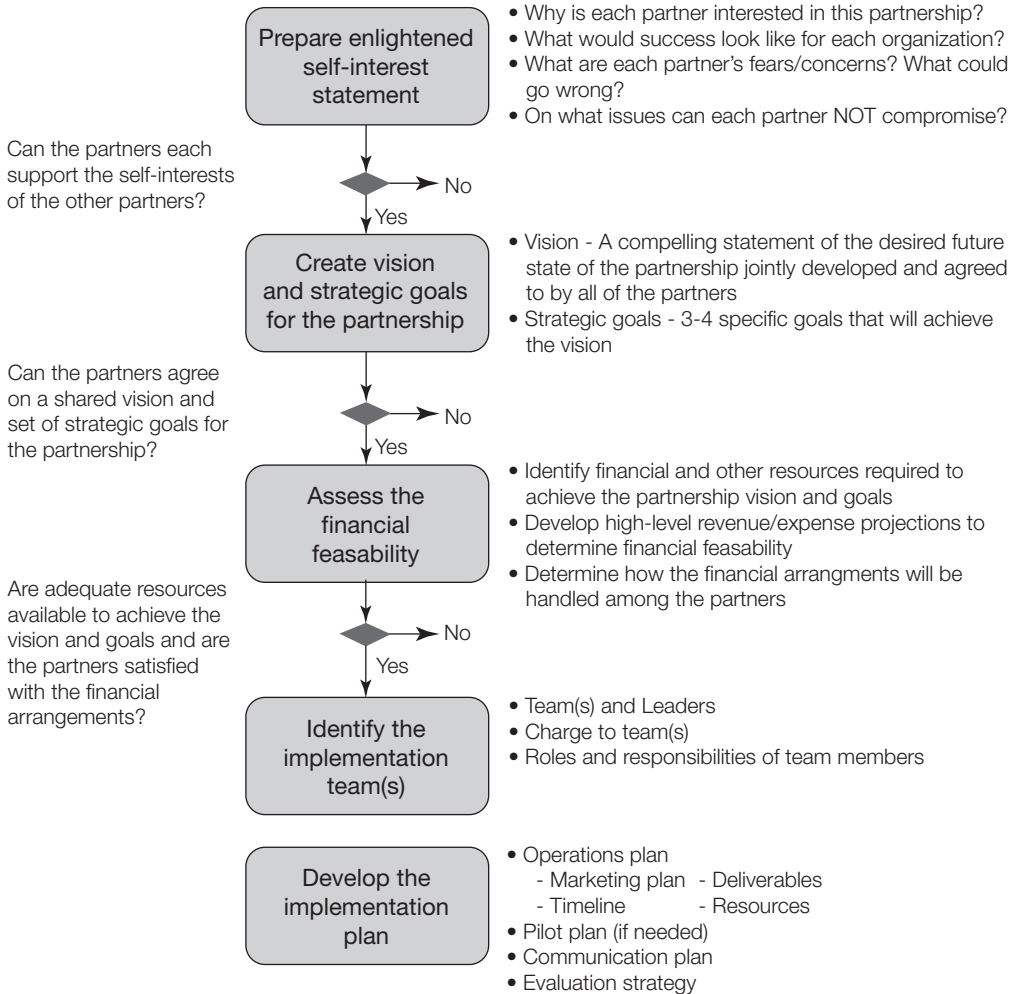
### **CREATE A STATEMENT OF INTENT**

Potential partners typically come together when one organization makes a proposal to another. At this point, the ideas in play are likely more weighted toward the interests of the proposing partner. If there is interest in continuing the discussions, the next critical step is to determine if both sides agree on the purpose of a mutually beneficial partnership. This is done through the statement of intent, which consists of a high-level vision and a statement of the major intended outcomes of the partnership. This should be done jointly to ensure shared ownership. Developing and agreeing on the statement of intent does not and should not involve specifying the details of how the partnership will operate. If the partners can agree on a statement of intent, there is a basis for continued planning. Otherwise, there is a basis for a mutual and amicable suspension of negotiations.

### **DESIGN THE PARTNERSHIP**

If the partners can agree on a statement of intent, it is time for the more detailed work of design. The partnership design stage follows the logical flow of activities depicted in the diagram on page 104 and allows for additional decision points at which to evaluate the feasibility and desirability of the proposed endeavor.

**PARTNERSHIPS THAT PERFORM**



*Figure 2. Design the partnership.*

**PREPARE ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST STATEMENT**

If prospective partners could execute only one element of this model, this is the one we would recommend. The philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell used the phrase “enlightened self-interest” to mean moving forward in fulfilling one’s goals while ensuring that those goals add to the greater good and do not harm others.

In the context of partnering, all partners should be willing to project the benefits of the relationship for their organization. No partnership will sustain itself if it does not serve the self-interest of all of its members. In fact, although self-interest is always operating in partnerships it is rarely made explicit. While people are not accustomed to viewing self-interest as

a positive aspect of partnership development, an honest expression of the benefits sought by each partner creates an opportunity to craft a partnership that truly serves the higher interest of the partners and the groups they seek to reach. This step can dramatically improve the likelihood of long-term success and productivity of the partnership. To bring this out in a constructive way, all partners should complete the enlightened self-interest statement, which addresses the four questions noted in the model, and share responses among the principals.

*"Most academic-corporate partnerships succeed when there's alignment from the beginning on core values and goals, and these are spelled out by the partners. Very little can be taken for granted by the partners in these tricky waters, since there are fundamental differences in their genetic codes."*

*David Porush, Executive Director  
SUNY Learning Environments*

The next stage in partnership design is to create the vision and strategic goals for the partnership. With a clear understanding and acceptance of the enlightened self-interest of all partners, it should be possible to craft a mutually accepted vision and several high-level goals that all parties can support. If not, then much time and anguish will be saved, as a partnership that is not based on a shared vision and goals will likely end in failure and disappointment. In this context a vision can be defined as a vivid representation of the desired future state of the partnership. It answers the question, "If this partnership is successful, what will it look like?" In addition to guiding a partnership through its early stages, a robust vision provides a motivational tool for the partners; it can serve as a very attractive image toward which activities and energies are guided. Additionally, the vision formulated at this stage will serve as a basis for later evaluation of the partnership. The strategic goals are high-level objectives that are mutually determined and actionable. We recommend only three or four goals, as too many can dilute the effort and focus of the partnership. Strategic goals answer the question, "What do we have to do to achieve the vision?" The vision and goals are similar to the statement of intent but are expressed in greater depth and are now informed by mutual self-interest.

**Top ten factors in successful partnerships**

1. The partners have a clear vision/mission. Their organizations know where they are headed and why they are partnering.
  2. The partners are willing to express their enlightened self-interest as a basis for designing the partnership.
  3. The partnership creates something of value that none of the partners could do on their own.
  4. There is a compelling vision for the partnership, supported at the appropriate level in the partner organizations, that describes the desired future state.
  5. There is visionary leadership with input by all partner organizations.
  6. There is a well-articulated design and implementation plan.
  7. There is a viable business plan with clear long-term return on investment or other tangible advantages.
  8. There is an emphasis on relationships. Trust is built, and mutual respect and dependence develops.
  9. There are established mechanisms for ongoing communication among the partners.
  10. There are concrete plans in place to regularly evaluate and improve the partnership.
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Financial arrangements and available resources can often make or break a partnership. It is important to realistically assess the financial feasibility of the partnership to determine whether adequate financial resources are available to achieve the vision and goals and whether the partners can agree on how the financial arrangements of the partnership will work. This stage should include potential revenue projections and a comprehensive assessment of the anticipated expenditures. If profitability is desired or necessary, revenue projections should be conservative, and care should be taken to identify all of the resources that could be needed to increase the likelihood of a positive cash flow. A realistic view of the initial investment required for the start up should also be considered. The partners should engage the appropriate stakeholders in the discussions of the financial arrangements



to obtain their buy-in and support for how the finances will be handled. You should not assume that every partnership has to make money, nor should you assume that every partnership could be a loss leader. Rather, you should try to develop a business model that will ensure the success of the partnership and work within the constraints of each of the partnering organizations.

Partnerships are only as successful as the people who implement them. The next stage is to identify the implementation team(s), including the key people from each organization who will carry out the partnership. There may be one implementation team, or it may make sense to have a core implementation team and then form subimplementation teams with specific charges. A charge defines the purpose and scope of a team and should be created by the partnership leaders. A key aspect of this stage is to specify the roles and responsibilities of each team member.

Leadership of the implementation team is critical and can be done through co-leadership with equal representation from each organization or with a single leader from one organization. The partners should look at the available talents and resources within each organization and decide which model will be most effective. The critical thing is that there be a jointly articulated decision about the leadership plan. It can also be very helpful to bring in an outside facilitator or project manager who is dedicated to keeping the partnership development and implementation on track. Unless there are people within each organization with specific time dedicated to supporting the partnership, an outside facilitator can help the partnership progress more quickly and efficiently.

*“Given our experience with many universities, it is my observation that the most important factor for successful partnership is good communication. People who make communication the highest priority and who openly share honest feedback create and grow the best partnerships. Aside from poor communication, the most significant factor contributing to the failure of a partnership comes down to the people involved in making decisions. Having the right people involved at critical points will always influence the outcome of any partnership.”*

*Diane Landsiedel, Senior Manager  
General Motors Technical Education Program*

Once the team is in place, the partners must develop the implementation plan. A major component is an operational plan consisting of the

specific deliverables, a detailed timeline, resources needed to carry out the partnership, and a marketing plan. The goal is to be very clear about all of the tasks that must be accomplished. Areas that are left ambiguous or undefined can result in conflict later on and are less likely to be carried out. The implementation plan should also include a strategy for communication among members of the implementation team.

Depending on the nature of the partnership, a pilot project may be necessary or beneficial. A pilot would enable the partners to locate and resolve problems while minimizing the negative impact. The partners should determine whether a pilot is appropriate and, if so, build this into the implementation plan. At this stage, the team should determine how the success of the partnership will be evaluated and when and how often that will occur.

### IMPLEMENT

Implementation depends highly on the previous stages and is made easier if the partners have done the upfront planning. The charge is to carry out the implementation plan as specified. Most people tend to spend a lot of time on planning and design, then assume that implementation will somehow take care of itself. Either the leaders of the implementation team or an outside facilitator must take responsibility for ensuring that the deliverables are met and effective communication is maintained. Creating tracking documents that are jointly updated and shared can help increase accountability within the team(s).

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#### **Top ten reasons partnerships fail**

1. The organizations lack partnering goals and clarity on why they wish to partner.
2. Partnerships are often people-dependent and are weakened when key people change if there is no articulated plan.
3. The principals fail to secure approval at the appropriate levels in their respective organizations.
4. An institution that has a history of going it alone finds it difficult to undergo a culture change to engage in true partnerships.
5. The partners fail to uncover or acknowledge differing priorities and cultures.
6. There is no detailed blueprint for the partnership and things break down at the implementation stage.

7. There is not enough complementarity among partners; undue similarity can create conflict and competition.
  8. Some partners fear the loss of full control.
  9. There is a lack of regular, effective communication mechanisms among the partners.
  10. There is a failure to recognize that relationships are critical to the success of partnership.
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## **EVALUATE**

It is probably fair to say that most university-based partnerships are not designed with continuous improvement and exit strategies in mind. They may begin with naïve optimism, and when things go badly, it is often difficult to know what to do to improve them or how to bow out gracefully. Therefore, good partnership planning includes an evaluation strategy that is agreed upon at the outset. The purpose of the evaluation plan is to regularly assess whether the partnership is achieving the vision, accomplishing the goals, and meeting the enlightened self-interest of all partners. These tools, initially designed to launch the partnership, become the ideal litmus test for evaluating it. The purpose of the evaluation plan is to decide whether the partnership should continue as is, be discontinued, or be transformed. If transformation is required, the leadership team should review the steps in the design phase of the model to determine which aspects need to be revisited. In some cases, the vision itself may require reconceptualization; in others, it may be an implementation tactic that needs adjustment. If there is a mutual decision to discontinue, then a fair and balanced exit strategy can be developed, and the spectacle of watching a partnership collapse can be avoided. But with the right planning, yours can be one of those partnerships that succeeds because it is performing at or beyond expectations.

## **APPLY THE MODEL**

To provide some sense of how these approaches have been applied we give examples of work based on the initial stages of the model. The scenario is loosely based on an actual partnership between a US university (XYZ University) and a Latin American university (Universidad Latina.)

The initial step is to set high-level partnering goals that support the strategic directions of the organization, including identifying the kinds of partners with whom to engage and the criteria to use in selecting them. A

sample partnering goal and criteria developed by XYZ University shows what led it to pursue Universidad Latina.

Sample Partnering Goal: Expand the reach of XYZ University's programs to working professionals in Latin America through distance learning.

Sample Kinds of Partners/Partnering Criteria:

- Latin American universities
  - Must be in a country on the cusp of technological advancement in Mexico, Central America, or South America
  - Must be considered a leading university in that country
  - Must have some emphasis on and recognition for technological education
  - Must have some facility with familiarity in developing programs for industry
- Corporations
  - Must be a multinational corporation with whom we already have some relationship in teaching or research activities or
  - Must be a large national corporation with employees in excess of 10,000 that invests in education/training for its employees
  - Must be an organization with whom we have the prospect of also developing a joint research relationship

This example illustrates the value of being clear about why you are partnering and with whom you wish to partner. The goal and criteria provide a solid basis for proactively seeking partners or evaluating unsolicited requests that come your way.

When an appropriate and interested prospect is found, potential partners engage in a mutual sharing of information as a way of getting to know each other and each organization's capabilities and strengths. In our example, XYZ University and Universidad Latina met to share this information and then decided to work together to develop a plan for the partnership before jointly approaching the potential corporate partner.

After getting to know each other, the first concrete step in forming the partnership is to jointly create a statement of intent: a high-level vision for the partnership and a statement of the major intended outcomes. In our example, XYZ University and Universidad Latina might develop the following:

“University XYZ and Universidad Latina will jointly develop and deliver graduate technical programs to the automotive industry in Mexico. The programs will be interdisciplinary in nature, addressing both the manufacturing and business considerations required for success in the global automotive market. The programs developed will represent the particular strengths of each of the contributing universities and will be developed in concert with our initial corporate partner who will represent the perspective and needs of the industry. Our joint offerings will feature a product array that provides several levels of product based on the specific needs of the automotive industry. In keeping with the instructional values of both universities, the courses will be designed to be flexible, interactive, and engaging and will take advantage of the most effective distributed delivery technologies available to both the universities and employees in the automotive industry.”

This statement moves the discussions from general ideas to concrete possibilities. It enables the potential partners to envision the partnership. However, it raises as many questions as it answers: What specific programs will be offered? Who will grant the credit for a joint degree? How will payment work? That is fine; at this stage the point is not to address the operational questions but to see if there is sufficient agreement on the content of the partnership to proceed to solving these challenges. The statement of intent should be shared with key stakeholders at each organization to ascertain if there is support for these initial ideas and to identify serious resistance or necessary modifications.

After both organizations have agreed on the statement of intent and decided to proceed, the next critical step is to complete and share the enlightened self-interest statements. (Refer to the four questions in the design-the-partnership model.) This provides the basis for expanding the statement of intent to a more in-depth vision and lays the groundwork for more detailed planning. It also ensures that the partners will get what they need from this relationship to warrant the hard work required to make this partnership perform.


In the real-world case on which this scenario is based, we uncovered complementary self-interest in several areas. For example, XYZ University wanted to work with a Latin American university that had credibility and entrée to corporations in the target region; Universidad Latina felt that

approaching regional corporations with a strong US university partner increased their credibility and likelihood of success.

Many partnerships have been successful because they have done the kind of planning described above, even if they did not articulate them in this way or make the steps as explicit as we are suggesting. In many regards, the model seeks to codify what outstanding partnerships have done instinctively.

On the other hand, and without going into specifics, the authors are aware of partnerships that failed because critical steps were missed. One university-university partnership failed because the partners lacked a shared vision at the beginning, something that was not identified until the implementation stage. The press releases had gone out, the brochures were printed, but the partnership ended up fracturing because the up-front work was inadequate. Another notable failure between a university and corporate education group happened because the principals at the initiating institution failed to secure the buy-in and approval of those who had to deliver it. This, too, was a high-profile failure that caused frustration and embarrassment. Careful planning and regular checkpoints to assess feasibility can generally avoid such disappointments.

### ENDNOTE

In a recent meeting at which this model was presented to a group of faculty members, one of them said, “I can think of many partnerships I’ve been involved with over the years—including my marriage—that would have benefited enormously from this type of approach.” When we presented the model to a group of engineering educators in 2003, one of them told us afterward that this flow-chart approach appealed to him because it took mystical concepts like partnerships and relationships and put them in a form that his engineering brain could grasp, adding that “if you can reduce it all to just one equation, I’d like it even better.” It has taken us years to distill our knowledge and experience to our current model, and perhaps someday we will streamline it further, especially as we get feedback. But however much we simplify a model, the process of partnering is about the complex arena of human relations, and the likelihood of success is greatly enhanced when approached systematically and with more than good intentions. 

*Authors’ note: If you have any comments or suggestions, please send them to [suebray@mindspring.com](mailto:suebray@mindspring.com) or [scalzk@rpi.edu](mailto:scalzk@rpi.edu).*