

## **Brian O’Neill’s 21 Partnership Success Factors**

### **10th Conference on National Scenic and Historic Trails**

Editor’s note: During his Keynote Speech opening the 10th Conference on National Scenic and Historic Trails in June, Superintendent Brian O’Neill described the attitudes and some of the practices that have been used to foster resourceful partnerships that manage and sustain the heavily used Golden Gate National Recreation Area. He has distilled the wisdom gained over many years into 21 partnership principles. Here is an abridged version of these ”Partnership Success Factors.” The full version of this document is posted on the Partnership for the National Trails System website: [www.nationaltrailspartnership.org](http://www.nationaltrailspartnership.org)

As the Superintendent of Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Brian O’Neill and his staff [have] earned a reputation as a model partnership park where partnerships are a way of thinking about how best to accomplish the park’s mission and build a community of stewardship. Recently, the park determined that 18.5% of the park services were being delivered by NPS staff and the other 81.5% by a host of park partners. These figures underscore the breadth and value of park partnerships.

One success factor is that Brian and his staff are always honing their edge by being on the lookout for and gathering innovative partnership ideas and best practices from other practitioners around the nation and in other countries. The following 21 partnership success factors reflect two decades at Golden Gate National Recreation Area as a learning laboratory and a synthesis of best practices from many sources.

1. **FOCUS ON IMPORTANT NEEDS** – Partnerships take time to establish and nurture in order to have successful outcomes...
2. **MAKE THE PARTNERSHIPS A WIN-WIN** – Successful partnerships begin and thrive with a clear understanding that mutual benefits will accrue to the partners involved. Each partner may not benefit equally, but each must realize a value-added benefit...
3. **ADOPT A SHARED VISION** – Development and continuing refinement of a shared vision of the work to be accomplished is key to the success of any partnership. The shared vision should evolve from the full engagement of all partners in the relationship. The vision should reflect both the broad body of work and each project or initiative to be undertaken...
4. **NEGOTIATE A FORMAL AGREEMENT** – Good intentions and a handshake are not enough. Partnerships need formal written agreements and work plans that define mutual interests and expectations, the roles and responsibilities of each partner, and clear accountability for the work to be performed. The formal agreement serves as a mutually binding contract to ensure that each partner acknowledges and fulfills their responsibility...

5. ENSURE GOOD COMMUNICATION – The success of every partnership is dependent upon the structure, frequency, and quality of communication between the partners... No partnership can reach its full potential without good communication practices as a core element of the relationship. Partnerships, like any human relationship, are about communication, communication, and communication.

6. ENSURE THE PARTNERSHIP IS OWNED BY YOUR WHOLE ORGANIZATION – To succeed, partnerships need to be truly understood and embraced by the entire staff of the partner organizations... Build a sense of team and a partnership culture so everyone understands the importance and value added by working collaboratively...

7. MAINTAIN AN ENVIRONMENT OF TRUST – Trust is an essential ingredient for successful partnerships and enables collaboration and contribution. Trust must be demonstrated and earned day by day. A single betrayal can be costly and make it hard to regain the same level of trust between the partners. Trust eroding behaviors include: independent action by one partner that has not been shared with the other partner(s); grandstanding at the expense of another partner; not honoring one's word, commitment or confidentiality; creating suspicion in terms of one's motives; or acting in any way contrary to the best interests of the overall partnership. You build trust through the consistency and integrity of your actions over time. And you have to trust your partners in order to be trusted.

8. LEAVE YOUR EGO AND CONTROL AT THE DOOR – The most insidious impediment to good partnerships is the unwillingness or inability of a partner to share power and control. This can be the “Achilles heel” of partnerships. At their very basic definition, partnerships are about shared power, shared vision, and shared responsibility... Good partnerships represent a delicate balance between maintaining one's own identity and adding value to a collective effort.

9. UNDERSTAND EACH PARTNER'S MISSION AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE – Every organization has its own culture that is built over time, based on its mission, its practices, its people, its governing values, its traditions, and its institutional history. In any partnership situation, it is important to acknowledge and understand these different organizational cultures, to respect them, and to find ways that these realities can contribute to strengthen the mutual endeavor. The most successful partnerships recognize and value their differences and find ways to integrate them into a workable overarching partnership culture.

10. USE THE STRENGTHS OF EACH PARTNER – Each entity in a partnership brings special capabilities, unique authorities, and different flexibilities to further the work of the partnership. As specific needs and tasks are addressed, consider the particular strengths of each partner in determining the most cost-effective approach and who best to accomplish a specific task. Successful partnerships are characterized by a flexible approach to how needs and responsibilities are matched given each partner's funding, policies, political connections, and other considerations.

11. FIND WAYS THROUGH THE RED TAPE – Partnerships regularly face “red tape” barriers in trying to work across organization lines, especially with public sector partners, which tend to have more regulations. Getting through these barriers and complications takes creativity and persistence...Convert your stumbling blocks to stepping stones...

12. BUILD STEP BY STEP – ...You have to invest to get results and process is important to achieve successful outcomes... Good partnerships take a steady investment of time and energy to build and develop...”

...“Go Slow to Go Fast.” Partners will grow as far in the partnership as the other partner(s) are willing to help or let them. Challenge yourself and your partners to collectively raise the bar of expectations and advance the partnership step-by-step.

13. STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE – A partnership ultimately gains stature and a reputation based on the quality of the work it accomplishes. The most successful partnerships understand the importance of doing everything well. Build an early reputation for excellence and sustain that reputation...

14. DIVERSIFY YOUR FUNDING SOURCES – The ultimate success of any partnership depends on the human and financial resources it is able to garner. Successful partnerships develop multiple and steady sources of support, particularly for covering basic operational costs and launching new initiatives...

15. CONSTANTLY SEEK OUT AND ADOPT BEST PRACTICES – The best practitioners are those who are a sponge for new ideas and always on the lookout for innovation and creativity that can be adapted to their partnership... Overcoming resistance to change is one of the major challenges to partnership success.

Partner entities need to seek ways to build in greater flexibility and adaptability in their structure and work in order to take advantage of “partnering moments.” Establish a work environment in which reasoned risk taking and creativity are encouraged and rewarded and people are willing to risk possible failures in order to succeed. Leaders should act as “champions” with the courage to support experimentation and risk taking and run interference when necessary...

16. ALWAYS BE COURTEOUS AND DIPLOMATIC – Sustaining successful partnerships involves hard work, practiced effectively and consistently over time... Successful partnerships work constantly on developing effective relationships built on trust and a shared commitment to each other’s interests and success.

17. HONOR YOUR COMMITMENTS – Partnership work entails perseverance and follow through by each participating organization and individual. Partnerships require a shared commitment to each other’s success. Sustaining any partnership requires that exciting ideas of interest to the participants actually get executed...

18. **CELEBRATE SUCCESS** – It is a mistake to not take time to formally and frequently celebrate successes. Successful partnerships look for every opportunity to celebrate individual project successes or key benchmarks in the evolution of the partnership... Celebrating success milestones ensures everybody’s “fun-quotient” stays high...

19. **RESPECT THE RIGHT TO DISAGREE; ACT ON A CONSENSUS BASIS** – ...In successful partnerships, ground rules are established to give each partner a veto power over proposed actions. Partnership work means reaching consensus among the partners...

20. **NETWORK AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS** – A core competency in partnership work is the ability to network and build relationships. People sell ideas to others. People lend support because people ask them to. Partnerships are by definition about people working together and reaching out to others to gain their emotional engagement...

21. **PUT MECHANISMS IN PLACE TO RE-ENFORCE THE PARTNERSHIP** – To realize its full potential, a partnership needs: a clear vision, dedicated and skilled people, a rewards and recognition program, incentives that stimulate desired partnership activity, sustained management support and involvement, operational funds, and a clear understanding among supervisors and staff of the potential benefits that result from the partnership arrangements. These are complex, but essential, elements to put in place. The seriousness with which they are addressed will determine your degree of success. It all boils down to how deliberate and strategic you and your partners are in building a “partnership culture” that incorporates these success factors and the commitments you are willing to make. Understand and adapt success behaviors, develop competencies for these behaviors to be regularly practiced, and align your partnership to succeed.