

# Framing the Big Picture

Illustrating the Intersection Between  
Your Strategy and Your Partner's  
Can Help Connect the Dots for  
Stakeholders

By Jon Lavietes and Michael J. Burke



They're called "strategic" alliances for a reason—and the most senior practitioners in this profession have shouted from the rooftops for some time about how good alliance managers must execute their day-to-day tasks with company strategy in mind.

But what does that actually mean?

Contrary to what some in the rest of the organization may think, alliance managers are eternally busy doing more than just building relationships and making sure deliverables are on track—although they have plenty of that to do, too. Yet even with their noses to the grindstone and heads down in the trenches, they need to look up from time to time as well.

"Strategic thinking is a muscle," said **Christina Neary**, vice president and global leader of the Microsoft alliance at Avanade. "I was running a marathon once and I was in mile 23. It was the hardest mind-over-matter place. It was near an air force base in Anchorage, Alaska, and the air force people lined the road. My head was down: *I've gotta finish!* They were [shouting], 'Chin up, soldier! Raise your head, look at where you're going!' It was an instant gut check: We can be so focused on what's right in front of us, and we need to practice looking up. Otherwise you lose your perspective on where you are and how important the role is that you're doing."

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Having that perspective is important—being able to take that panoramic, helicopter view—because when the stewards of partnerships meet with internal stakeholders from sales, marketing, product development, regulatory, and R&D, as well as folks from the partner organizations, to talk about everything codevelopment, coselling, and comarketing, they need to see how every sales engagement, clinical trial, new product feature, or joint email campaign that comes up in the conversation fits within their organization's—and their partner's—bigger picture.

Or, to echo the headline of our Q3 2023 *Strategic Alliance Quarterly* cover story, they must know how to "connect the dots." When the job is done right, alliance managers aren't just completing mundane tasks at the rest of the organization's beck and call, they're actually enhancing and enabling their stakeholders' ability to achieve larger C-suite and board-level goals in ways those colleagues couldn't conceptualize, much less execute, on their own.

### All Points Bulletin: Strategy Is Everything

"Strategy," according to Neary, means "having a simultaneous view of the starting point, the endpoint, and all the steps in between."

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Alliance professionals must understand their company's strategy, as well as each partner's, and harmonize those visions—a tricky task when you consider that tech ecosystem codevelopment initiatives, for example, can involve up to a half dozen entities (and sometimes more).

"I think you need to be cognizant of both [your and your partners' strategies]. The strategic change in the business, it's important to see what your alliance organizational partner is doing, because they may have a change in strategy due to market conditions," said **Philip Sack**, CSAP, principal of consultancy CollaboRare and a tech partnering veteran with stints at Sun Microsystems, Siebel, and Oracle.

In biopharma, too, strategy is the starting point for both old and new collaborations.

"Always start with strategy. Whether we're exploring a new collaboration, or we're looking at how we're moving forward in an existing collaboration, or a new transactional opportunity with an asset or a company, how does it fit the strategy? It's strategy

first, and then science. Is the science solid? Then everything follows from there,” said **Cindy Warren**, vice president of business development, global neuroscience, for Johnson & Johnson.

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### For Goodness’ Sake, Follow the North Star!

Strategy should set the table for execution in part by informing what “good” looks like for each partnership. According to **Jeff Shuman**, CSAP, PhD, cofounder of The Rhythm of Business and emeritus professor of management at Bentley University, “goodness is that which supports the achievement of the strategic intent of the alliance,” and that intention should prioritize what actions to focus on when confronted with several seemingly equally pressing deliverables—a predicament alliance managers find themselves in regularly.

“You’re an alliance manager, you have a decision: you can go A, B, or C,” Shuman illustrated. “How do you really know what [path] you should take? By and large the criterion that makes the most sense is, which of those three courses of action provides sources of value to help you accomplish the strategic intent, the North Star? If you don’t know the North Star, and you don’t know the strategic intent, how do you know what goodness is in a relationship? As an alliance manager, you always want to think about the strategic intent: *What are we trying to do?*”

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That “we” is obviously an important strategic consideration as well, since it’s the intersection of each company’s strategy that forms the sweet spot for alliance value creation.

“In some cases, we compel ourselves to identify something in the Venn diagram of how we can measure joint success together, whether that’s wins together, or case studies,” Neary said, before stressing that these metrics naturally have to be tied back to the bottom line. “We have to ground it in that understanding of, at the end of the day, all of this activity together has to have a material impact, or else why are we doing it? If the partnership is just about the relationship and there’s no material impact, then you’ve got to rethink the partnership.”

### Can’t Wait Till June to Take the Next Big Hill

Of course, as Sack pointed out, strategy is often a moving target, especially in tech, where new, disruptive innovations come frequently and at great speed.

“Most [companies] are evolving because they’re trying to create value for someone along the line, so they’re pivoting or moving to a market opportunity. It’s important that you’re [aware of]: What’s my partner doing? Where are they headed? Why is that relevant for us?” he said.

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Listening to Neary, you get the sense that a big part of an alliance professional’s job is to be hyperaware of impending market trends and their attendant strategy shifts—and to be ready to bob and weave and stop and cut on a dime, like a basketball player trying to shake a defender.

“We are culturally very able to look ahead and see something we may not have anticipated,” she explained. “GenAI is a perfect example. It came along in January, and by June, it [had] changed the landscape of the market. Within 30 days, we were able to come together and say, ‘How do we get in front of clients now,



talk about what we know, what we don't know, understanding that this thing is moving?' And help them—a true partnership. That ability to not be locked into, 'Well, this is the plan, we'd better wait until June, then we can take a new look at the plan and come back up with [a new one] next year,' enabled us to mobilize really quickly and get in front of that opportunity."

And the fun doesn't stop there. Because new products, solutions, and trends are constantly reshaping the market, the onus is on alliance managers to prod their sales and product teams to continually reconceptualize their offerings using the partner ecosystem.

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"Boldness is really critical in strategic thinking, because it can be easy to understand the success formula that you've always had, but sometimes what got you here won't get you there. The long-term relationships require that you're constantly pushing yourself out of this comfort zone into 'What's the next big, bold hill we're going to take?'" said Neary. "You've got to continuously drive that co-innovation engine that is really building new sustained innovation together, because you can't let it just rest on the power of the relationship."



## Present at the Creation of Value

In the beginning was the vision. From that flowed the strategy, ideally, which was then harnessed and connected to tactical execution in order to drive value. Sack has found that it sometimes pays to work backwards, in a manner of speaking, in getting teams to understand the value of a partnership and motivating them to change the way they work in order to capitalize on the opportunities the collaboration presents. Put another way, the internal work of alliance management is often famously harder than the external.

"Once we knew what we were doing, where we were heading, trust had been built, and you had some sort of cadence and reciprocity around sharing, it was easier for me to deal with the partner—unpick things, align things, get things going to the level of trust and capability that was there—than sometimes getting my own organization to head in that direction," he said. "Because the partner may often see you as the value enabler of the company you're representing. You're coming in to align organizations to create value together, to seek alignment in some sort of cadence and build that momentum together, but if you're doing that well and are reasonably strategic and have good commercial acumen, you're seen as a value enabler. So often the rules are dropped pretty quickly once you get over that hurdle."

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On that note, ASAP's small but mighty editorial team follows this rule: Jump all the hurdles, leap tall buildings in a single bound, and boldly go as far and as fast as we can to the next big hill to bring back the best and latest insights and information. The Q3 *Strategic Alliance Quarterly*, for example, streaked across the finish line last month—you can find the PDF in your inbox or access it from the [ASAP Content Hub](#). Alongside our cover story, "Connecting the Dots," you'll learn the prime considerations when exiting an alliance, the fundamentals of tech governance 101, and tips on partner prioritization and segmentation in the ecosystem. In addition, we explore creative new programs designed to give employees from other parts of the organization, and even partner companies, a chance to experience a day in the life—or a few months—of an alliance manager through short-term staffing positions. Check it out! ■

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*As a practitioner of collaboration in a variety of perhaps non-traditional alliance functions myself, I've found so many key elements of partnering and collaboration management for synergistic outcomes were perfectly encapsulated by ASAP's offerings.*

—Kevin Little, CSAP  
Senior Partnership Director  
Novo Nordisk