

The Role of the Champion: Practical Guidance for Venture Managers

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Strategic alliances, joint ventures, and licensing agreements are essential tools for growth, innovation, and expansion of ventures. However, the success of these collaborations does not rest solely on contractual terms or alignment of business goals. One of the most crucial but often under-appreciated factors is the presence of an effective champion within each participating organization. For venture managers, understanding the champion's role and how to cultivate and support it can be the difference between success and failure.

At its core, a champion is the individual within the organization who takes personal responsibility for making the alliance succeed. This person is not merely a project manager or a liaison. Instead, the champion is someone who understands the strategic importance of the deal, possesses the influence to make things happen, and is willing to advocate for the alliance internally and externally.

Every successful alliance needs a champion on both sides, one in each partner firm. It's not enough to have only one committed individual; mutual investment in success requires mirrored commitment and advocacy within both organizations. When this mutual championing exists; problems are resolved faster; trust is built more quickly; and the alliance is more resilient to external shocks.

Venture managers should not only identify champions but also invest in building strong relationships between them. A critical insight from practical experience is that personal relationships between champions are vital. This means that beyond formal communications and structured updates, venture managers must facilitate informal, trust-building interactions between these key individuals.

Trust and Empowerment Are Critical

Why is this so important? Because alliances are dynamic and often require fast, flexible responses to challenges. When champions trust each other, they can bypass unnecessary bureaucracy, escalate issues appropriately, and make timely decisions. Personal relationships help align intentions and reduce misunderstandings—two common pitfalls in cross-organizational collaboration.

In practical terms, venture managers should set the stage early. This may involve arranging face-to-face meetings, shared off-sites, or informal dinners during the initial phases of the alliance. These are not "soft" extras, they are investments in the operational strength of the relationship. The goal is to foster candid conversations, mutual respect, and a shared sense of ownership over the alliance's success.

Another essential dimension is that champions must be empowered. A champion without decision-making authority is a figurehead at best. To be effective, champions need the freedom and support to solve problems, allocate resources, and make strategic adjustments. This doesn't mean they need unchecked power, but they should be high enough in the organization, and trusted enough by leadership to act without getting bogged down in layers of approval.

For venture managers, this has a clear implication: when negotiating the alliance structure or governance,



advocate for your champion to be someone with real decision-making latitude. If you're managing the alliance from a more operational level, ensure that the champion above you has the backing they need and make leadership aware when gaps in authority are stalling progress.

Moreover, when assessing a partner's readiness to collaborate, don't just review their technical capability or market access. Ask: Who will be the champion on their side? What is their level of authority? Do they have access to budget? Can they make things happen quickly? These questions often reveal more about the future trajectory of the alliance than any contract clause.

Champions Should be Senior Management

One of the most powerful insights for venture managers is this: The higher the level of the champion in the organization, the greater the chance of success. Senior champions bring credibility, vision, and organizational alignment. They can clear roadblocks with a phone call, reallocate resources during critical phases, and signal to both internal and external stakeholders that the alliance is strategically important.

From a practical standpoint, this means that venture managers should strive to engage a senior champion. This doesn't mean bypassing middle managers or ignoring operational voices. Instead, it means ensuring that the alliance has visible sponsorship from the top even if day-to-day operations are managed lower down.

Senior champions also help manage internal politics. Alliances often require internal change new systems, shared customer data, joint product development and these changes can meet resistance. A senior champion can override opposition, reframe the narrative, and ensure internal alignment with the external goals of the partnership.

If your champion is mid-level, it's your responsibility as an venture manager to build a coalition that includes higher-level support. Regular briefings with executives, shared KPIs, and updates tied to broader strategic goals can keep the alliance on the executive radar and secure ongoing support.

Venture managers themselves often function as operational champions. While they may not be the ultimate decision-makers, their ability to influence

outcomes, coordinate cross-functional teams, and build partner trust makes them critical champions in their own right.

What it Takes to Succeed

To thrive in this role, alliance managers should: deeply understand the business case behind the alliance; build cross-functional credibility inside their own organization; create feedback loops that keep champions and stakeholders informed; be proactive in identifying problems and offering solutions; and translate the goals of the alliance into meaningful internal objectives for teams.

This is not a passive role; it's one of continuous influence, problem-solving, and communication.

Even strong champions need reinforcement. Over time, organizational priorities shift, leadership changes, and resources get reassigned. Venture managers must be proactive in reaffirming the alliance's strategic value and re-engaging champions as needed.

This involves reporting on key wins, sharing partner feedback, highlighting risks, and tying alliance success to internal KPIs. A champion who sees the alliance delivering measurable value will continue to advocate for it.

In some cases, champions may leave or change roles. Venture managers must be ready with a succession plan. This means grooming backup champions, documenting institutional knowledge, and ensuring the alliance doesn't depend on a single individual.

Key Takeaways for Alliance Managers:

1. Identify a champion on both sides of the alliance as early as possible.
2. Build strong personal relationships between the champions: Trust accelerates everything.
3. Ensure champions have authority to solve problems, allocate resources, and make key decisions.
4. The more senior the champion, the more leverage they bring, so aim high.
5. Support and sustain champions with data, wins, and strategic alignment.
6. Prepare for leadership transitions with a plan to maintain momentum.

Ultimately, the champion is the lifeblood of any successful alliance. For venture managers, cultivating the right champions, and supporting them throughout the life of the partnership, is not just a task. It is a strategic responsibility. Those who understand and embrace the role of the champion are far more likely to lead alliances that thrive, deliver mutual value, and stand the test of time.