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POWER THROUGH PARTNERSHIP



HOW WOMEN LEAD BETTER TOGETHER

BETSY POLK AND MAGGIE ELLIS CHOTAS

FOREWORD BY ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER,
PRESIDENT AND CEO, NEW AMERICA

Praise for *Power through Partnership*

“Having been a part of a founding trio of women for nearly a decade now, I am often amazed when people express surprise that such a partnership exists—and has thrived for so many years. I’m gratified to see Betsy Polk and Maggie Ellis Chotas focus specifically on partnerships between women and explore their unique attributes and strengths. Shining a light on successful partnerships can only encourage more of such partnerships!”

—**Elisa Camahort Page, cofounder and COO, BlogHer, Inc.**

“This is the book for every woman eager for a better way to work and lead. Through partnership, women are capitalizing on strengths and leveraging dynamic networks of sisters, friends, and colleagues to achieve success. *Power through Partnership* shows the way!”

—**Joanna Strober, coauthor of *Getting to 50/50* and CEO, Kurbo Health**

“Need more flexibility in your life? More support? More inspiration? The solution is simple: find a business partner! Polk and Chotas have written a thoughtful and practical guide to forming and sustaining a partnership. As someone with a longtime writing partner (my brother!), I found myself nodding a lot as I read.”

—**Dan Heath, coauthor of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Made to Stick*, *Switch*, and *Decisive***

“Business rhetoric is full of heroic soloists—but the deeper truth is that no business succeeds alone. The great success stories derive speed, spread, and impact from partnerships and alliances. This book is a critical contribution to the business story of the century: the rise of female entrepreneurship.”

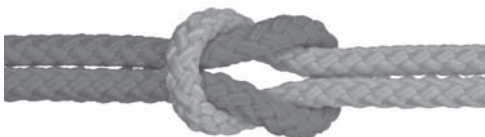
—**Margaret Heffernan, author of *Willful Blindness* and *A Bigger Prize***

“In the midst of the heated debate between the stay-at-homes and the frantic-jugglers, the resentful who had to stop and the resentful who wish they could, *Power through Partnership* shines a light on an exciting option for women everywhere. In this thoughtful and thorough examination of the benefits of partnership, Betsy Polk and Maggie Ellis Chotas provide us with a blueprint for leveraging what women do best: working together.”

—**Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus, coauthors of *The Nanny Diaries* and business partners for thirteen years**

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HOW WOMEN LEAD BETTER TOGETHER

BETSY POLK AND MAGGIE ELLIS CHOTAS



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Power Through Partnership

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*With love and immense gratitude to our families—
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and
Harrell, Georgia, and Nicholas Chotas.
And to all the partners who so generously shared their stories.*

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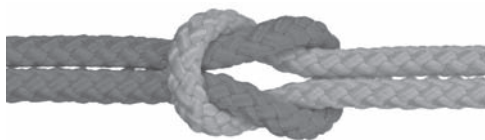
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Foreword



I love this book. Really. And not just because Betsy Polk and Maggie Ellis Chotas say nice things about my article, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.” But because they offer real, practical solutions to the dilemmas that face even the most ambitious and committed women among us. Indeed, our ambition and commitment both to what we do and the people we love are precisely what create so many competing demands on our time. In that context, many of us deflect or defer leadership positions at the top of big organizations, worrying that taking on responsibilities and duties to hundreds and thousands of people will tip the balance of our lives irrevocably and irretrievably.

That is where partnership comes in. Listen to how Betsy and Maggie describe their own work. Looking around a café one morning at both stay-at-home moms and career women heading off to their daily commute, they reflect: “Our lives – filled with spouses, children and activity – were sane. We were leading the way we wanted to, on our own clocks, in cafes, at

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client sites, in our home offices, and even on trails, where we took long “strategy talk” walks together. Thanks to our work together, as two women who each understood where the other was coming from, we were happy.”

That is a vision that women (and men) should relate and aspire to. Why shouldn't we “lead the way we want to,” making time for all the different parts of our lives and ourselves in ways that make us happier, healthier, and more productive? The trick, they say, is to find a partner, not only someone you can share burdens with and create the flexibility you so badly need, but also someone who will motivate you and hold you accountable.

I think the reason this book resonates so powerfully with me is that it taps the secret of much of my own success, certainly as a scholar. Early on, I found that if I took on a project with a co-author, I would not let that person down. I might have let *myself* down, deciding that obligations to committee work, teaching, or family were more important than scholarship. But I would never let down another person to whom I had made a commitment. So finding a partner was actually a way of making sure I did the things I knew I should really do for myself.

Partnership can be an important path to power for women. Read this book and take the plunge. You will be re-inventing the work world and opening up to creating a whole new vista of opportunity for yourself along the way.

Anne-Marie Slaughter
President and CEO, New America
Author of “Why Women Still Can't Have It All,”
The Atlantic, June/July 2012.

Out from Under the Radar



Quick. Who comes to mind when you think of male partnerships? We asked ourselves that question and came up with an impressive list of men who have made a sizable impact on the world: hugely successful ice cream entrepreneurs Ben and Jerry; historically revered explorers Lewis and Clark; cultural icons and famed magicians Penn and Teller; mega-hit film producers Bob and Harvey Weinstein; Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin; DNA discoverers Watson and Crick; *Book of Mormon* and *Southpark* creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker, to name just a few.

Now think of female partners. How many can you name? If you're drawing a blank, you're not alone. Yes, there are plenty of powerful female partners out there—we know that is true after interviewing 125 of them—but none have immediate name recognition like the men on the list above.

Figuring we were overlooking the obvious, we turned to Google. Here's who popped up: Lucy and Ethel, the zany duo of 1950s television fame, two best friends who were always

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scheming (often unsuccessfully, though hilariously) to outwit their husbands; Laverne and Shirley, the Milwaukee beer bottlers, roommates, and sitcom characters who struggled to make it in life and love; Cagney and Lacey, two smart, tough television cops; and Thelma and Louise, movie heroines who, when all roads led to despair, drove their car off a cliff.

When it comes to men working together as partners, there are plenty of accessible, successful, top-of-mind role models. Also, the men on that list are not only well known as individuals, they are recognized as intentional partners as well—that is, men who deliberately decided to work together. What's more, all are or were living, breathing people who have accomplished great things together. And, on the whole, they are recognized more for the successes they've achieved than for their friendships or any interfering personality conflicts.

And that list of women partners? For starters, not one of them is or was a real person—they all lived on television and movie screens—and they are all long gone. Thelma and Louise, the most recent of the batch, had their heyday in 1991. That list of men is loaded with co-leaders who are scientists, technology innovators, entrepreneurs, creative collaborators, and entertainers, but their female counterparts are in an imaginary world. We could not find any professional women partners in visible, intentional collaborations in our online search of cultural icons. And even in the fantasy world, none of the women were known as business partners and certainly not as co-leaders. They were friends, yes, with personality conflicts and mishaps that often took center stage—but partners? Un-

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less you count Cagney and Lacey, far from it. What's wrong with this picture?

The Takeaway

The easy answer is that partnership is a way of working that suits men but not women. However, that's only half the truth. Yes, there's plenty of evidence that partnership works for men. But what we've learned from our research and interviews with female co-leaders in a range of fields is that it definitely works for women as well. From our interviewees—who are collaborating as investment bankers, singer-songwriters, peace mediators, script writers, wholesalers, gallery owners, cupcake bakers, newspaper publishers, and social media whizzes—we heard the same message over and over: partnership is a professional model with the power to make life work more successful and life itself a whole lot saner for women who are ready for a better way.

Maybe that's you. Perhaps you are reading *Power Through Partnership* because you are ready for new solutions to old problems, are tired of working at full tilt, weary from striving for perfection. With partnership the hard work is still there, of course, but it is accompanied by the steady support of a female colleague who is equally committed to pursuing a dream you share, one that's based on values you both hold. Sound like a pipe dream? It's not when partners are ready, willing, and able to do the communicating, load sharing, and relationship building it takes to create and sustain healthy collaborations.

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How Do We Know?

As the co-leaders of the Mulberry Partners, the consulting practice we founded in 2002 that combines our complementary backgrounds in education and organization development, we directly experience the reality that partnership can create. So do the female co-leaders we've interviewed, who are benefitting from the flexibility and support it provides, the confidence it builds, the mutual accountability it encourages, and the equity that is available through it.

The Book We Couldn't Find

With benefits like these, you'd think that female dynamic duos would be an entrepreneurial norm. That's what we thought too when we decided to join forces. We knew we wanted to partner, but we had questions about what it would mean for our decades-long preexisting friendship. We began our partnership aware and wary of the conflict that can brew between women and prevent collaboration. Early in her career, Betsy witnessed the implosions of two sets of female collaborations. In both cases, communication was the first casualty. Partners too busy doing the work to check in with each other made assumptions, trust evaporated quickly, and poorly managed conflict followed. The results were fractured projects, broken businesses, and, what seemed to be most painful of all, damaged relationships. These were scenarios we wanted to avoid, but how? What steps could we take to build a strong, vibrant partnership?

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Eager for guidance about how to develop a successful partnership with a healthy relationship at the center, we looked everywhere for relevant advice. We found many books and resources about how to set up partnership agreements, others on the joys of friendship, and still others on the ups and downs faced by female entrepreneurs. But nowhere did we find a guide that spoke to us as women who wanted to combine our professional skills to create a successful entity while making sure we preserved our personal relationship.

In retrospect it's not surprising that we couldn't find resources about professional women's partnerships. Why would these guides exist when this model is barely recognized in the larger culture? Unlike the celebrated list of male collaborators, who inspire new collaborations by serving as visible role models, real-life successful female collaborations are a well-kept secret—unknown and unaddressed.

With only our own experiences and awareness of potential pitfalls and conflicts to guide us, we set out to form a partnership that could work effectively and be personally fulfilling. And after twelve years of co-leadership, we deem our partnership an unqualified success. The benefits have been enormous. Our partnership has consistently worked for us, providing a platform for professional success through a relationship that offers the flexibility, support, and confidence that energizes us. Because of our partnership, we've been able to give each other steady support as we've faced obstacles. We've felt the rare freedom of being our whole selves at work, knowing that we both fully appreciate our strengths and our quirks. We've

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fueled each other's confidence as we've encouraged each other to take on new challenges. We've had the flexibility of scheduling client meetings and other commitments around our children's school schedules.

We began wondering if we were unusually fortunate or if other women were achieving similar benefits from their collaborations. If so, could partnership be a replicable model more women would benefit from? We decided to find out.

Detective Work: Finding Women Partners

To obtain answers to these questions, we first had to find other women partners. This was no easy task. (You already know what happened when we turned to Google for help with this quest.) We had to hone our detective skills, zeroing in on such clues as “cofounder” and “copresident” in articles about women in leadership. Not once did we discover a female partnership announcing themselves as such.

It took nearly a decade to assemble our list, but eventually we interviewed 125 female co-leaders, who, once found, had plenty to say about the power of their partnerships. Our interviews morphed into long conversations, as women enthusiastically shared their stories. Many confided that they are rarely asked about their collaborations, yet they revealed that these collaborations are often what make their success possible.

These conversations confirmed that partnership is a workable leadership model for women with varying experience in many fields. Whether partners had known each other

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for a lifetime or hadn't laid eyes on each other until someone else matched them up, our interviewees validated our positive experiences. It was more than just our good fortune. It was a broader phenomenon bringing the enormous benefits of success, satisfaction, and even happiness to many women's lives. The results of our interviews led us to believe that partnership is a model that could be replicable for many additional women.

Needed: New Options

Goodness knows women need better professional options. Experts such as Stephanie Coontz have concluded that the "gender revolution has not hit a stall, it's hit a wall,"¹ and numerous statistics and studies confirm that women's rise toward equity in the workplace has halted. In 2012, Anne-Marie Slaughter's groundbreaking Atlantic article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," dispelled the myths that all women really need to do to succeed is to work harder and stay on the career ladder. Arguing that it isn't women who are not succeeding, it's the system that's failing women, Slaughter writes, "I still strongly believe that women can 'have it all' (and that men can too). I believe that we can 'have it all at the same time.' But not today, not with the way America's economy and society are currently structured."²

After impressive gains in education parity and a wider presence in a range of once-male-dominated fields, women seem to have gone as far as they can go as leaders until changes

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are made to this structure, the very fabric of our culture. Entrenched social, cultural, and governmental structural impediments are holding women back. Disparities in health care; gaps in equal pay; limited (and unpaid) family leave; lack of affordable, high-quality options for child and elder care—to name only a few—push back against women at all levels of work. And while there are individual exceptions, such as the twenty-six female CEOs of the top 500 companies³ and the 3.3 percent of corporate board chairs who are female,⁴ too many barriers still work against women in general to prevent them from making it into top leadership in large numbers.

Take the portrait Frank Bruni painted of his hard-working, multitasking sister in his *New York Times* column “Women’s Unequal Lot.” A look at her life compared to his leaves Bruni stunned. He has one job; she has three or four. In addition to her paid work in an executive recruiting firm, she spends “many hours daily as a combined chauffeur, drill sergeant, cheerleader and emotional nursemaid for her two children and two stepchildren.” And she serves on her local board of education. Oh yeah, and she’s hosting Easter dinner for the whole extended family. We couldn’t help but think of our sisters, mothers, and friends, nodding with recognition as Bruni summed up the reality: “Being at the helm would probably push my sister over the edge.”⁵

Frank Bruni’s sister, like countless other women, needs new options and real solutions. That’s where partnership comes in. It is an option and real solution that men have long been leveraging. Look at the successful models listed at the

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beginning of this book. These men have tapped into the power that grows from partnership. They've made the most of the extra strength that results from the transition from one leader to multiple leaders, who can create a more forceful presence. We keep thinking about a picture we saw of the all-male Twitter cofounders who were standing together on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange after Twitter's initial public offering. There they stood amidst the chaos, the epitome of success—confident, assured, and powerful. They took up space. They declared, “We are here, we are important, and we are making an impact.”⁶

The same needs to be true for women. Although female partners are not now as visible (something we're here to change), they do have an impact in their respective fields and greater equity because of their collective force.

Not a One-Size-Fits-All Solution

We know that partnership is not for everyone. Sharing leadership doesn't always work, even with the right partner, the right timing, and all the benefits. And many women are successful and content working alone, preferring to lead on their own. Some women may prefer not to invest the levels of commitment and relationship maintenance required to make partnership work. We know we cannot change that, nor do we want to. But we do see that this model of female partnership applies to intentional, ongoing collaborations as well as to situational, short-term opportunities to lead together. Whatever

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the extent of the collaboration—from co-leading a business to spearheading a short-term project—it will be enhanced when women enter the situation with myths debunked, eyes wide open, and with communication and conflict-resolution skills at the ready.

The Next Step

Once upon a time we took our friendship and started a business without any idea about what we were getting into. When we didn't find the resources we needed, we reached out and found 125 female partner mentors and role models to guide, inspire, and encourage us to keep at it. Through these trail-blazing women, we have been assured that the benefits of partnership are strong, palpable, and well within reach, and that the challenges are conquerable because we have each other. These partners who have shared so generously of their time and wisdom are the ones to replace the outdated, make-believe partners of old.

After all, who needs Lucy and Ethel when Heather White and Lori Joyce are leading bakeries in Canada and starring in their own reality show, *The Cupcake Girls*? Who needs Cagney and Lacey when Marcia Greenberger and Nancy Duff of the National Women's Law Center are setting policies that combat the structural impediments that work against women? And who needs Thelma and Louise when Valerie Batts and Angela Bryant, cofounders of VISIONS, Inc., are teaching

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CEOs across the globe how to dismantle gender biases and racism in order to gain true equity?

We wrote *Power Through Partnership* for women because, quite simply, no other resources available now carry this message for women. Sure, plenty of valuable sources make the case that life is tough—exhorting women to lean in, to stop trying to be Wonder Woman, or to let go of being overwhelmed. But how are women supposed to do that? Concrete ideas and solutions are needed. Partnership is a practical professional model that works well for too many women to be buried. Men have been partnering for a long time, guided by lists of accessible models for help and inspiration. It's time for the same assistance to be available to women.

It's our mission to place the model of women's partnership front and center as a practical, accessible, effective solution. This book is for women who are ready for a better way to lead, to work, to live. Is that you? It has certainly been us. This is the guidebook we never had, here to help you navigate as you experience the benefits, face down the obstacles, debunk the myths, and strengthen the communication and conflict tools you're going to need for the rich and winding partnership road ahead.

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Why Partnership Works for Women



The story behind our trust in the power of partnership begins with two frizzy-haired high school sophomores who met in English class and united over a class project, a *Saturday Night Live* take on Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, set to the music of the B-52s. We received an A. The external validation was nice, but best of all, we had a lot of fun bouncing ideas off each other, writing and rewriting, and spending hours thinking creatively together. After high school, we promised ourselves that someday we'd work together for real.

We held on to the idea of partnering even while our professional lives took different paths—Betsy as a consultant working with a range of institutions to bolster communication and collaboration, and Maggie as a teacher and school administrator. In 2002, when we found ourselves living in the same North Carolina area code, experiencing similar career transitions and with three young children between us, we started getting serious. What would it look like for us to lead together? How could we combine Betsy's background in

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organization-development consulting with Maggie's experience in education? Marathon phone calls and long talks while pushing kids in strollers resulted in the Mulberry Partners, our education-focused practice for organization development, coaching, and consulting.

We were not surprised to realize, early on, that this entrepreneurial partnership suited us. Having a business, an actual entity, made us accountable to each other in ways we would have found difficult to justify otherwise. Back then, as the mothers of young children, we found it difficult to carve out time for ourselves without feeling guilty. But scheduling time together for something that one of us was working on elevated this time from me-time to sanctioned time focused on reaching goals. Through this sense of shared responsibility grew a credibility that fueled our confidence, which enhanced our business, attracting clients and leading to growth.

A few years after we founded Mulberry, in the middle of our weekly meeting, huddled over laptops at one of our favorite coffee shops, it suddenly struck us that we were happy with our work, our leadership, and our lives. We were doing what by then was second nature—building on ideas, communicating in our partnership shorthand, respecting each other's expertise, and trusting that the outcomes of our meeting would reflect a united front.

We surveyed the crowd of mostly women surrounding us in the café, comparing our lot with theirs. A lively group of moms seemed as busy as we were, but their focus was dis-

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tracted as they tried to converse while keeping small children entertained. Lined up at the coffee bar were some business-suited women handling calls while ordering espresso for their morning commutes.

Were these women as satisfied as we were? We hoped so. But as coaches who work with a wide range of people, we were beginning to see that ours was a rare reality. So many of the women we knew—whether they were solo entrepreneurs, corporate employees, or stay-at-home moms—were struggling to opt out, opt back in, or just stay afloat. They were often plagued by doubt and insecurity as they strived for something more.

And there we were marching to our own beat, with someone by our side who had as much skin in the game. We had expanded a twenty-year friendship into a business that helped schools, nonprofit organizations, and corporations to develop collaborative cultures. We were bringing forth the best of ourselves without second-guessing the value of our contribution. We were engaged in work we enjoyed, reaching goals based on our own values that we were equally and fully vested in. We trusted ourselves and each other to fulfill a shared vision. Our work was successful. Our lives—filled with spouses, children, and activity—were sane. We were leading the way we wanted to, on our own clocks, in cafés, at client sites, in our home offices, and even on trails, where we held long “strategy talks” as we walked. Thanks to our work together, we were two women who understood where the other was coming from, and we were happy.

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Overload: A Female Phenomenon

Consider the women you know. How many are struggling to squeeze even more into already packed lives? How many are saying yes too often and no all too rarely? How many are trying to convince themselves that perfection is just beyond the horizon, that all they have to do is work harder, sleep less, push more, smile wider, be tougher, and maybe they will get there, somehow, someday. These women—we've certainly been among them—are striving to be superwomen, summoning all their energy to reach a mirage of perfection, trying to scale mountains of exalted expectations (their own and those of others) as they struggle to lean in deeper and deeper.

When we suggest partnership as a practical solution to these women, their eyes light up as they imagine this professional relationship with someone who is just as focused on achieving similar goals and is equally committed to sharing responsibilities. But then a shadow of doubt crosses their faces as they remind themselves of all the reasons partnership just can't work. Their explanations run the gamut: the fear of trusting someone else; anxiety about conflict; and worry about not having enough time, smarts, skills, money, and/or talent to contribute to a fifty-fifty collaboration. Perhaps they can see the ultimate value of partnership, but the time and energy the investment requires and the penalty if it doesn't work out seem to make the risks too huge to take the chance.

But what if these undecided women could see many high-visibility female role models demonstrating that through

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collaboration they are leading more capably without running themselves ragged? Perhaps then they could see that those advantages of partnering that seemed too good to be true are indeed real and well within reach.

What if women saw the possibility of partnership as a logically radical way of working? It is logical because collaboration makes sense, builds on strengths, and provides a way for women to operate in a world that continues to be gender-inequitable. And it is radical because as much sense as partnership makes for women, especially now, as women struggle to succeed in this inequitable world, the path to partnership has been obscured by myths, misconceptions, and negative messages, turning what should be a logical decision to team up with an ally into an off-the-beaten-path alternative.

Until now, anyway. Instead of partnership remaining a glimmer in the eye of an overworked superwoman that is too easily wiped away as an impossible dream, we want it to be an accessible, equitable choice for women as they make decisions about their work lives.

The Benefits of Partnership

We want to change the world, transforming the ways in which women work by spreading the message about the tremendous benefits that can be realized in healthy female partnerships, such as flexibility, confidence, freedom, support, mutual accountability—and happiness.

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Flexibility

Flexibility is a major partnership asset that provides the space and trust for one partner to step forward as the other leans back. Then, with barely a flutter, there's room for the roles to shift. Whether it's balancing a job share, adjusting dynamics in a client meeting, or filling in for each other when a sick child is at home, women in partnership know how to step up or step back depending on what is needed in the moment.

Kirsten “Kiwi” Smith, half of the screenwriting duo behind such blockbuster movies as *Legally Blonde*, shared a story that demonstrates this partnership balancing act. Kiwi and partner Karen McCullah were pitching their script for a movie for the sixth time to Hollywood executives, and things were not going well. As Kiwi tells it, “I kept pushing Karen to do these meetings and she didn't want to anymore, so this time it was up to me. I pitched my heart out, and the producer said it was the worst thing he'd ever heard. While I was lying on the floor practically crying, Karen picked up the pitch and kept it going. It's a good thing she did. They said yes.” The result of Kiwi and Karen's flexible persistence was the movie *The Ugly Truth*.

But imagine that it was just Kiwi in the story. She might still have been on the floor crying while the executives stepped over her to go for lunch. If it was just Karen, she would have given up the pitch after the third try. Later in our interview, Kiwi remarked, “The male screenwriters I've worked with tend to just focus on getting the job done. For women, the relationship lines tend to zigzag between personal and professional,

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and back again.” It’s those zigzagging lines that make women’s collaborations more than just business arrangements, giving them texture, complexity, and meaning.

Unfortunately, the lines of the traditional work world often don’t allow the same sort of zigzagging. Most workplaces are set up around the idea of the ideal worker: someone who is available to give his heart, soul, and life to the company. As Brigid Schulte describes in her bestseller *Overwhelmed: Love, Work, and Play When No One Has the Time*:

The ideal worker doesn’t take parental leave when a child is born. He doesn’t need a place or time to pump breast milk. He has no need of family-friendly policies like flexible scheduling, part-time work, or telecommuting. The ideal worker doesn’t have to find babysitters, deal with school closures on snow days, or otherwise worry about child-care responsibilities.... The ideal worker never has to think about researching good assisted-care facilities for Mom or Dad as they get older, whether they’re getting the best treatment in ICU, or how to get his sister to her next chemotherapy appointment. It’s simply not his job.”⁷

Schulte concludes that the ideal worker is “so tied to his job that he works endless hours, even if it costs him his health and his family.” Though this is a bit exaggerated, there are plenty of work environments where this stranglehold is the reality. A mere mention of the idea of flexibility in one of these places

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could cause you to be treated as if you were yelling out a bomb threat, and you could be whisked away into a secure location. Sounds far-fetched, right? Sadly, it's not. While in graduate school, Maggie interviewed for a job. She was in the middle of an office tour when the woman who was interviewing her began describing the benefits of the position. "What about the four-day-a-week option we discussed earlier?" Maggie asked. The interviewer glanced furtively at the cubicles surrounding them and whispered, "This isn't something to be talked about out here." Maggie was quickly escorted into a private office to discuss what turned out to be a hush-hush topic.

Often flexibility is brought up in relationship to childrearing, but interviews with partners show that isn't just parents who want or need it. When the father of Summer Bricknell of LocoPops Gourmet Popsicles, a chain of Mexican-style popsicles, was bedridden, Summer was able to be with him and support her mother, thanks to her partnership with Connie Semans. As Summer told us, "Without a partner, it would be much harder for me to take time away from the business. LocoPops would go by the wayside and I would be on to the next big thing." Instead, she was able to take time away, knowing the business would be in good hands with Connie at the helm.

While flexibility is a benefit of any type of partnership, regardless of gender, the reality is that women still do the majority of the caregiving in families, from child to elder care. According to the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, an estimated 66 percent of informal caregivers are fe-

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male.⁸ Without flexible work options, women typically end up spending twelve more years out of the workforce compared with men.⁹ The truth is that women need the kind of flexibility partnership can provide in order to stay engaged in the workforce for the long haul. This doesn't necessarily mean they will work less, but it often means that they will adapt and do what's needed to get it all done, achieving results on multiple fronts.

Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson share a passion for promoting the kinds of results-oriented workplaces that engage today's leaders—both women and men. What started at Best Buy as an innovative human resources project became ROWE, Results Oriented Work Environment, the independent company Cali and Jody founded to focus on helping workplaces such as the White House become focused on results. Who better than two women partners to make the case for how the way flexibility can transform the world of work?

Confidence

We can say from our perspective as coaches that no matter how smart, how together, how polished a woman might seem, chances are that some seeds of self-doubt lurk right below the surface. This theory was reinforced when we started working with a coaching client who struck us as the epitome of competence in her role as head of a successful independent school. When she called for our help, we were delighted by the opportunity to work with such an esteemed, beloved leader. Yet

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when we met with her, the strong exterior was quickly cast aside, revealing a muddle of misgivings about decisions she had made and communications she had delivered.

Most people, women as well as men, face moments when they question and critique the person in the mirror, but what surprised us in this case and in so many others is how little it takes for a woman, compared with a man, to doubt her abilities. Probably most men suffer moments of doubt. But for women, who are operating on inequitable playing fields and often under immense expectations for perfection in all aspects of complex lives, normal human feelings of insecurity can turn into suffocating self-doubts. This way of thinking is so prevalent for women that in 1978 Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes identified the “imposter syndrome”¹⁰ to describe the sense of phoniness successful women can feel when they achieve.

Although the imposter syndrome was first studied in the 1970s, the nagging effect of lack of confidence in high-achieving women continues to be a hot topic today. In *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance: What Women Should Know*, Katty Kay and Claire Shipman explain, “For years, women have kept our heads down and played by the rules. We have made undeniable progress. Yet we still haven’t reached the heights we know we are capable of scaling.”¹¹ This lack of confidence has a profound effect on many women’s sense of self and feelings of efficacy. Without the confidence to ask for what they want and sureness in their ideas, according to Shipman and Kay, it’s rare for women to get into the upper

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echelons of leadership. And the few women who do reach that level often doubt that they deserve to be there.

The partnership dynamic plays a powerful role in developing confidence. The process starts with deciding to partner. When you say yes to combining your skills with those of a respected peer, you need to first acknowledge that you're bringing valuable skills and perspectives to the partnership: after all, your partner is choosing you for good reasons. And, while you may sometimes experience the imposter syndrome yourself, chances are you have faith in the credibility of your partner: a woman may cut herself down, but rarely will she transfer that insecurity to her close colleague. Through the very act of partnering, women learn to assume confidence in themselves because their professional identity is closely tied to that of their partner's.

As we were writing this book, we considered the influence of our own partnership and realized we had both experienced a boost in self-esteem from sharing each other's confidence. Whenever we've faced a task that seemed challenging, all we had to do was remind ourselves that together we were sure to figure it out. Knowing that we could count on drawing from a deeper well of confidence turned what could have been anxiety into we-can-do-it enthusiasm and success.

Freedom

We live in a world where “brusque” is code for another *B*-word used to describe a woman in leadership whose power intimidates

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others, whereas for men such assertive behavior is a perk of leadership and is often expected. Similarly, although showing emotion is often considered a feminine weakness, it can be perceived as a male strength. Jon Stewart deftly handled this gender double standard in a segment of *The Daily Show* entitled “The Broads Must Be Crazy.” Stewart juxtaposed a picture of a misty-eyed Hillary Clinton with photos of male politicians breaking down in tears. Whereas the media’s response to Clinton included comments deriding her for “letting her emotions fall out of her” and “having mood swings,” the teary-eyed males received praise from reporters for being “passionate” and “honest.” The comparisons led Stewart to proclaim, with his typical acerbic wit, “It’s OK to be a pussy, as long as you have a dick.”¹²

In sharp contrast to the entrenched double standards that plague our society, women in partnership have access to the freedom that comes from working with someone who gets it because she has been operating on the same playing field, under the same unspoken rules and societal expectations. This shared understanding can make it easier for a woman to bring her entire self to work, knowing that in the company of a female peer there’s no need to modify, adjust, or apologize for who she really is. Partnership is one of the few professional spheres (perhaps the only one) in which women can comfortably be themselves—brusque, emotional, or otherwise—in contrast to more structured, mixed-gender environments, where women might not feel as comfortable.

Kendall Allen, who, with Elizabeth Bleser, led a business unit for Incognito Digital, an online marketing firm, described

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her appreciation of this freedom: “It’s really, really nice to have a female partner to discuss male–female dynamics that are sometimes power, sometimes sexual. It’s nice to have a partner who gets it—it’s a surprise benefit of working with a woman.”

Through their collaboration, Kendall and Elizabeth also found the freedom to stretch beyond their usual personal and professional comfort zones. According to Kendall, “Through this collaboration, I’ve been able to explore boundaries that I know I could never explore with a male partner—this is both a personal benefit and a professional one.” Elizabeth added, “In my partnership with Kendall, I feel completely comfortable telling her when I don’t feel confident or comfortable. If she were male I wouldn’t feel as comfortable.”

Steady Support

Much of what makes this freedom possible is the support partners give each other, in a fluid give-and-take way. Support, the secret sauce of partnership, is often difficult to ask for. This can be especially true for women, who may feel that by needing to ask for help, they are falling short of the giant expectations they’ve set for themselves. But the beauty of partnership is that reciprocal support must exist for the partnership to work. Partners know that to achieve their goals, they must be there for each other, each of them giving and receiving support. Think back to Kiwi and Karen’s story. If Kiwi hadn’t accepted Karen’s supportive step-in, she would have defeated the outcomes they were trying to achieve together. This balanced

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support isn't just nice to have—it's an essential component of an effective collaboration that enables women working at full tilt to reach goals in ways that invigorate instead of depleting them.

According to Linda Kaplan Thaler, the mutual support she shared with cofounder and coauthor Robin Koval was key to their success. Linda and Robin, the former co-leaders of Kaplan Thaler, one of the fastest-growing advertising agencies in the United States and the creative force behind such iconic advertising campaigns as the AFLAC duck, have also written several books together. Linda shared with us her strategy for ensuring the support required of this fifteen-year collaboration: "To make it work, always put your partner's needs ahead of yours. If you're both looking out for each other, it works out. It's more than just watching each other's backs," she continued. "It's extreme empathy—it is literally seeing it from her point of view." The emphasis on empathy is woven into the values of Kaplan Thaler, where people are as important as any outcomes produced, and it was the key message in Linda and Robin's first book, *The Power of Nice*.

Robin put a different spin on the value of support to leaders: "It can be very lonely and scary to be making these decisions on your own. You always have colleagues, but being at the top puts you in a position where you can be quite lonely. Having a partner provides a great sense of security and counsel, and a way to bounce off your ideas that you just don't have in a single leadership position. It is hard to lead from a position of solitude. As human beings, we don't work that well

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that way, yet the workplace has evolved leadership into solitary silos.”

Women certainly can and do lead and lean in alone with great success, but with the give-and-take support of working with the right partner, they can discover that working together and leading as equals can be a more effective and satisfying way of accomplishing their goals. They can learn that partnership, in which each partner is there for the other, is in the best interests of their product or service. No longer need women strive alone in solitary silos. Women in partnership are making big decisions and taking action together. Rather than lonely, the top is an exciting, energizing, supportive place to be!

Mutual Accountability

When you have the confidence to trust your partner’s intentions, knowing you can count on her as she counts on you, chances are you’re going to do all you can to deliver. Stephanie Allen, cofounder with Tina Kuna of Dream Dinners, a nationally franchised meal-preparation company, likens this benefit to having a workout buddy who keeps you walking around the track. As Stephanie said, “You might not go out for a run when it is rainy and cold because it’s just too much trouble. But if you know your friend is waiting for you on the corner, you’re not going to leave her standing out in the rain alone waiting for you to show up. So you go for your run, and you’re glad you did, but it’s not because of you—even though

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you know it's good for you and you should. You do it because you don't want to let your friend down."

Partnership is the same. Knowing someone else is counting on you gives women the push that can be needed to move past the imposter syndrome so results can be achieved. Partners can't give up on their dreams because these dreams are fueling the outcomes of their partnership, and each partner is accountable to the other for seeing it through. On the flip side, when we asked female partners to describe what motivated their partnerships, they often cited the fear of letting their partner down as the inspiration that kept them going. Mutual accountability is a big expectation, but it can be an energizing one when it comes from partners who are invested in achieving the same results.

Happiness

Of all the enormous, life-altering advantages of partnership, the one that consistently rose to the top in conversations with partners was, quite simply, the happiness that comes when the relationship at the core satisfies all partners. As Gretchen Rubin writes in *The Happiness Project*, women gain joy when they find a close connection and intimacy in relationship, and these are natural outcomes of the rich relationship at the heart of women's healthy collaborations. As Stephanie Wilkinson, cofounder of *Brain, Child: The Magazine for Thinking Mothers*, put it, "For this partnership to work is one of the most gratifying things in life."

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We've found in our interviews that it's the relationship at the center of women's collaborations that makes them tick. When the connection between partners is healthy, the overall entity will be healthy; and when the relationship is suffering, results often suffer as well. Generally speaking, the same is not true for male partners, who tend to measure success by revenue and results.

Women don't have to be best friends or even friends to become partners. But what we've learned from our own experience and from other partners is that female partnerships are more likely to succeed when partners like each other enough to invest trust, manage egos, and share control. That's why the women we interviewed consistently mentioned the relational aspects of partnership when asked to cite benefits. As we'll explore in later chapters, for women, the lure of a give-and-take relationship with a trusted colleague is a major partnership attraction. That has certainly been true for us. Our partnership took root in the tenth grade, where it provided the flexibility and inspiration for us to be creative, the freedom to be our own wacky selves, and the confidence to stand up in front of a bunch of tenth-graders to present our outside-the-box approach to a school project. Since then this partnership has stretched as we've grown, shifting in sync with the stages of our lives. All the while, it has yielded tremendous benefits as we've learned to do what healthy partnerships require: listen, share, manage conflicts, take risks, support each other, and celebrate our successes.

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The Next Step

For a long time, we thought the solution called partnership was the end of the story. It was making work better for us and for many other women. That was that. But as it turns out, we had only skimmed the surface. We had the solution, but we had not yet uncovered the problem. Yes, partnership is a solution that yields tremendous benefits, but why do women need these benefits? What is it about the state of women's lives that make such qualities as flexibility, confidence, freedom, support, mutual accountability, and happiness so essential? What does being a woman have to do with partnership? Stay tuned. That's the question to be explored in Chapter 2.

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