
Marriage versus strategic alliance: soft and hard dissatisfaction and failure factors

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Abstract: Marriage can be defined as a social-institutional agreement or an institution or organisation in which interpersonal relationships are acknowledged. Divorce is an epidemic, and so is strategic alliance. Both are based on the actions and reactions between people in the context of interpersonal relationships. The number of marriages is going down and correspondingly divorces seem to occur at a more rapid rate, and this phenomenon is found in strategic alliance partnership too. Hence, just like marriages in the recent times, a majority of institutional partnerships fail. What makes a marriage, or a strategic alliance, tick initially? Many, which include romance and mutual desires, goals, and expectations as well as name and fame in the eyes of the public and in general life filled with happiness. However, just like most marriages, strategic alliance partnerships fail too at some point in time, marred by failure, dissatisfaction, bitterness, and yes, eventually, end in divorce. This article discusses findings derived from an empirical survey to identify critical soft and hard factors that negatively influence partnership or relationship dynamics. The article suggests remedial measures that may be used to avoid factors that lead to dissatisfaction and failure in the context of inter-organisational relationships.

Keywords: behavioural factors; divorce; marriage; soft and hard factors; strategic alliance.

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Pre-start

Nadia Manzoor (nadiapmanzoor.com/the-institution-of-marriage/) published online the following statements:

“In the institution of capitalism, I am the perfect consumer. In the institution of marriage, will I become the perfect wife?”

...Recently a friend of mine got married. She was deeply in love with her partner, had a beautiful epic wedding in Hawaii, and within six months was seriously contemplating divorce. During the wedding, she was so proud to change her last name to his, and to walk beside him as his wife. Now, she has officially changed her name back, and she says she can't do it anymore. 'Everything changed', she said. "After we got married, I just sort of became a wife, and that's not what I wanted".

The same happens in strategic alliances too. The question is how to improve and protect it from the divorce or when is it most appropriate to break it up or divorce?

1 Introduction

We are all created for relational purposes - relationship with God, colleagues, companies and institutions, friends, and employees as well as with co-workers and community and our spouses/partners and children.

Given that marriage is viewed as social contract, some scientists have used that notion as a basis to study relationships between organisations as well (Zineldin, 2002). One main difference between marriages and institutional relationships is that marriages occur with only one partner at a time, but organisational marriages can occur between multiple partners at the same time. The earning and the organisation of money and income, financial strategies, and division of labour are salient issues in both marriage relationship between two individuals and relationship/partnership between organisations (Vogler, 1998; Heimdal and Houseknech, 2003; Gray and Evans, 2005). Thus, the dynamics of a

regular marriage relationship between two individuals in the organisation and utilisation of money, revenue, financial strategies, as well as other resources and the division or labour and responsibilities, if anything, closely resemble and are even identical to the dynamics of strategic alliance partnerships, as factors critical to the survival of success in relationship remain the same in both types of relationships.

Alonza (2012) argued as follows:

“The custom of marriage represents the glue that bonds two people into an integral whole. The organizational marriage metaphor (OMM) is symbolic-interpretive, post-modernist, and contains organizational culture and change theories and the general systems theory to ground the metaphoric theory to explain the systemic relationships between two organizations. Each person in a marriage has similar or different cultural qualities associated with personality, perceptions, values, ideologies, assumptions, and behaviours. The couple subjectively and objectively strives to fulfil individual needs, increase benefits, and better quality of life through adaptation, learning, and striving for win-win outcomes.”

A sustainable strategic alliance between organisations can be considered as a perfectly planned marriage that aims to create a happy family. Both marriage and happy family in this context depend on the people in the new family or organisation. A successful marriage and alliance requires, according to Alonza (2012) and Zineldin *et al.* (2015), positive - good balance between personalities; empathy - shared empathy and concern; commitment - investment in the marriage or the alliance; acceptance of differences that can be a reason for creating synergies; mutual love and respect; and continuous nurturing of the relationship.

One more common factor of failure in both marriage and strategic alliances is that both suffer from high rate of divorce/failures. Although both hard and soft factors which were discussed at the beginning are essential to the survival of both marriages and alliance partnerships, the impact of soft factors on the dissatisfaction and failure in relationships has not received much theoretical and or empirical attention.

This findings discussed in this article are derived from an empirical survey conducted using a questionnaire to identify critical soft and hard factors negatively influencing the partnership relationship. It provides prescriptions for avoiding dissatisfaction and failure in inter-organisational relationships.

2 Literature Review

When two organisations (couple) desire to get into a working relationship together (live together), they face a huge challenge, that is, to bring the best outcomes (better future and life) for both parties in the relationship. They are likely to be conscious of avoiding taking counterproductive strategies/initiatives based on emotions and spontaneous and sometimes opportunistic behaviours. Some strategies might not be followed because of internal and external and controllable and uncontrollable reasons (competitions, environment, competences, resources, attitudes, feelings, etc.) that might lead to conflicts, instabilities, unfulfilled commitments, and even divorces, separation, or exit. A

peaceful and civilised exit needs effective strategies to reduce as much as possible the level of damage or loss that both parties may suffer on account of the break-up/divorce. Pre- and post-marriage (firm partnership) activities play a vital role in the context of the broad spectrum of human or corporate cultures, including values, attitudes, and norms (Zineldin, 2004).

A marriage or a strategic alliance does not merely occur at the whims and fancies of two individuals or a group of individuals representing two different organisations. For example, two individuals are not likely to consider getting married just because one of them (or both) finds the other pretty, attractive, wealthy, and smart. They weigh a lot of other options too, including what they consider to be an ideal partner's personality, social skills, empathy, attitude, and sense of ethics, trustworthiness, morality, and honesty, before deciding to get hitched. Therefore, as would be the case in a regular marriage, there are several characteristics and traits that must be seriously taken into consideration to make the organisational marriage successful. If the couples, human or organisational, wish to develop and enhance their respective hard/economic (e.g., financial performance) factors and or soft/noneconomic factors (behaviour), its essential that they have some common goals and visions going into the marriage/partnership to ensure harmony and unity and success of the partnership. The partners should also consider the following soft and hard strategies:

- 1 ***Be realistic.*** The failure rate of marriage and strategic alliances is more than 50%. One important reason for such a disaster is unrealistic wishes, dreams, hopes, and so on.
- 2 ***Communication skills.*** Dealing with different people or organisations having different cultures, values, goals, and attitudes needs high level of communication and coordination skills.
- 3 ***Trust and commitment.*** Trust- and commitment-building process is a social exchange and slow process and starts with minor actions and transactions in which little trust is required because little risk is involved and in which both partners can prove their trustworthiness, enabling them to expand their relationship and engage in major transactions going forward (Zineldin et al., 2015).
- 4 ***Fair distribution of roles, responsibilities, and outcomes.*** Many strategic alliances just fail because of the same reason, that is, unequal distribution of power and responsibilities and the cost of the alliance exceeds the benefits expected of the partnership.
- 5 ***Establishing a detailed strategic plan*** that can be adjusted or whose key components can be changed when needed. Thus, in order to succeed, a strategic plan requires flexibility. It should include information about the core reasons for the relationship and the integration and has a clear understanding of the expected outcomes. It encompasses a thorough consideration of the tactics to be used to achieve specific goals and outcomes such as turnover, profits, financial stability, increasing shareholders values, return on capital and investment in order to succeed.

- 6 ***Atmosphere***. Relationship between parties is influenced specifically by the atmosphere or working environment. Absence or presence of frank, cooperative, or, unfriendly atmosphere explains good or poor relationship. Shared ***values and*** visions are factors indicative of a positive atmosphere. Opportunism is a negative variable (Zineldin *et al.*, 2015).

Both strategic alliance and marriage partners consider money, income, revenue, costs, capital, and investment as hard factors. Trust, commitment, balance of power, frankness between partners, and so on are considered as soft factors. Although both hard and soft factors are essential for the survival of both marriage and strategic alliance, the impact of soft factors on dissatisfaction and failure in relationships has not received much theoretical and or empirical attention in research works focusing on both family and business relationships.

However, similar to organisational economic and financial management, institutional marriage and household financial opportunities can yield benefits in terms of household economic security and management of wealth and assets and liabilities. Moreover, it is worth mentioning here that the financial crisis during the mid-1990s was a main (and common) reason for the increase in the debt of both households and business organisations. This crisis led to the eventual destabilisation of many companies and households and ultimately the economy as a whole (Dyanan and Kerr, 2009).

In his work, 'To Marry or Not to Marry', Baxter (2005) argues that some working women do feel that marriage would be a sign that they are adults enough to take responsibilities. Others consider such responsibilities as soft negative factors because the rules that they as adult women are expected to follow are quite gendered (i.e., wives are expected to do much more of the domestic labour than are girlfriends or cohabiting women; Baxter, 2005). Thus, many working-class women believe marriage may not bring as many benefits as it does losses (Hartmann, English and Hayes, 2010). Many strategic alliances just fail just for the same reason, that is, unfair balance of power, unequal distribution of responsibilities, costs exceeding benefits expected of the relationship/partnership.

As in marriages between people, strategic business alliance partners (Quinn and Odell, 1998) demonstrate mutual commitment in order to enable the alliance to develop based on the principle of fair exchange, which means partners involved are expecting to receive benefits proportionate to their contributions to the relationship (Cullen, Johnson and Sakano, 2000; Lane and Beamish, 1990). Strong norms of reciprocity develop in the relationship where there is a sense of give-and-take between the alliance partners.

The success of strategic alliance requires attention not only to the hard side of the alliance management (e.g., financial and operational issues) but also to the soft side. The soft side of the alliance relationship refers to the management and nurturing of mutual trust and commitment as the most critical socio-psychological aspects to the sustenance of the alliance (Cullen *et al.*, 2000).

If the marriage or the alliance partners do not trust each other, they hold back information or take unfair advantage and indulge in unethical behaviour towards each other. When this happens, the marriage or alliance fails and fails to produce all the mutual benefits possible from the relationship (Cullen, Johnson and Sakano, 2000, Zineldin *et al.*, 2015). Unreliability, unfairness, and opportunistic behaviour by partners set the alliance on the path of not only sub-optimisation but also dissolution (Zand, 1972).

3 Methodology and data

We identified and analysed the influence of soft and hard variables on the failure of strategic alliance in the following two ways:

- 1 We asked 159 senior executives or managers of enterprises of different sizes and sectors how important they perceived the influence of the stated negative variables to be in the failure of alliance including in terms of perceived failure or factors that cause dissatisfaction.
- 2 To clarify which dissatisfaction or failure items that most disturbed the respondents in a relationship, we asked them to rank each failure/dissatisfaction item on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The highest ranked dissatisfaction factors were referred to as critical failure factors.

An electronic web-based questionnaire was designed to collect the needed data. A 5-point Likert-type scale, with anchors ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, was used to rank 20 soft and 20 hard variables.

The IBM SPSS Statistics 22 software was used to determine the sum, means, and standard deviations for each item. Most of the items and scales were already established and validated by different authors, which also strengthens the reliability of findings (Zineldin *et al.*, 2015).

4 Results

The internal consistency of the 20 soft and 20 hard items instrument was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The coefficient value of 0.841 obtained indicated that the instrument used in our survey had good reliability. Thus, the continuation of the study was justified. Table 1a and 1b show descriptive statistics, that is, the mean and standard deviation (SD) of the most influencing soft and hard dissatisfaction factors.

Table 1a Descriptive statistics for the soft items ranked by the highest mean

<i>N</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	Not fulfilling promises	4.22	0.726
2.	Unethical behaviour	4.19	0.716
3.	Less ability/willingness of flexibility	3.96	0.774
4.	Non-trusting behaviour	3.90	0.667
5.	Lack of confidence	3.87	0.780
6.	Low intention to maintain relation	3.87	0.644
7.	Difficulties between partners concerning future trends values etc	3.84	0.611
8.	Less energy/time in relationship	3.82	0.802
9.	Less knowledge/confidence	3.81	0.716
10.	Suspecting the intentions of the other partner	3.72	0.711

Table 1b Descriptive statistics for the hard items ranked by the highest mean

<i>N</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	High coordination cost	4,10	0.704
2	Unwillingness to sacrifice some control	4,00	0.746
3	Difficult access to resources and competence	3.97	0.882
4	Disagreement over how to share profits	3.94	0.836
5	Lack of perceived benefits by one or more partners	3,92	0.787
6	Tied-up capital	3.86	0.913
7	Different competition rules, regulations, and conditions	3.85	0.658
8	Difficulties in coordinating the sharing of common resources and activities	3.82	0.920
9	Difficulties in access to critical resources	3.81	0.600
10	No longer needs other partner's technological experience and competences	3.80	0.877

As shown in Table 2, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was used to verify the suitability and validity of the scale of dissatisfaction or failure factors.

Table 2 KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		0.781
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. chi-square	671,680
	Degree of freedom	10
	Significance	0.000

The Overall KMO value is 0.6 or above and the Bartlett's test of significant (sig) sphericity value was less than 0.05, which shows the factor analysis is appropriate. The test of this study shows that the KMO is 0.781 and statistically significant (significance is 0.000).

Similar to marriage relationships there are some well-known factors that subject strategic alliance partnership to higher risks for divorce. The most common reasons of divorce cited by married couples include lack of interest in demonstrating commitment towards fulfilling the promises made at the time of entering into marriage relationship, unethical behaviour, hiding facts or being secretive, lack of flexibility, unrealistic expectations, lack of willingness to treat the other as equal partner in the relationship - some of the critical soft factors that cause dissatisfaction and failure in marriages.

Some of the dissatisfaction problems shown in Table 1 can be fixed and divorce or termination of relationship can be prevented. Commitment is having a long-term view of the marriage as well as any healthy strategic alliance that helps people not get overwhelmed by daily problems and challenges. When there is high commitment, trust, flexibility, confidence in a relationship, people feel safer and are willing to give more for the relationship to succeed. The most common hard dissatisfaction factors are coordination costs, financial outcomes, and fair distribution of profits as well as high fixed capital.

However, respondents of this study ranked the following as the five most influencing soft factors that have an impact on relationship failure:

1 **Failure to fulfil promises or broken promises**

For partners, promises are not just conditions of satisfaction or success that they must fulfil in the future; they are assurances conveyed through a partner's behaviour vouching for the integrity and sense of honour of partners in the present moment. Satisfaction can come later, but integrity is a must *here and now and in the present moment* in every act. While satisfaction is a conditional for integrity and depends on factors partners cannot control, integrity is unconditional. Integrity or reliability depends on choices over which partners do have control. Failure to fulfil promises adversely affects the willingness to adhere to moral and ethical principles, soundness of moral character, and honesty. Integrity and loyal are essential pre-conditions for the success of individual relationships as well as organisational relationships in the long term. If one partner does not feel the other can be relied upon to fulfil his or her part of the obligations and promises required to keep a relationship going, it means there is no integrity, trust, or ethics in that relationship according to the partner suspecting the other to be untrustworthy. Therefore, integrity in the context of marriage or business alliance is much more than a sincere intention to fulfil promises. It takes work and not mere lip service when confronted with questions seeking to confirm their intent to fulfil their end of the bargain in the relationship. It requires that partners keep their words even when any of them cannot deliver what she/he promised. Failing to fulfil promises and lack of communication may lead to disillusionment of partners, which can be considered as a sign of lack of care. Thus, communication is essential to iron out differences or misunderstandings between the partners, and proper communication ensures there is no ambiguity in the understanding of partners about the promises they made to each other while getting into the marriage relationship (Beck, 1989)

2 **Unethical behaviour**

Ethics is not about just working on the basis of what is considered legal, where attention is paid only to working to merely conform to what is a mere technicality in the legal context of the partnership. It is about paying due attention to other dynamics, including the softer, emotional, empathy-based, or abstract, value-oriented aspects of the partnership where the onus is put on giving proper consideration to constraints of partners which cannot be viewed in the background of legality alone. It is about doing the right thing in every situation, even when no one is looking or following your actions. Unethical actions are those that don't conform to acceptable standards or work practices. It should be noted that what is unethical may not always be illegal. There are many issues and actions one or both partners may do or be involved with within the law, but such actions hurt one of the partners. There may be situations where even if such actions are not hurting the partners but adversely affect the larger society, they are still considered unethical.

3 Lack of flexibility

Physiologically, dishonest people are less cognitive and less flexible than are trustworthy and honest people who always speak the truth. According to Leins, Fisher, and Vrij (2012), dishonest people or liars are less consistent in their explanation than those who speak the truth when asked to describe a specific event (e.g., verbally and pictorially). Deep coordination-related knowledge between partners is critical to ensure that both demonstrate flexibility in their behaviour, which in turn nurtures their trust in each other and strengthens the partnership. Lack of sharing of information between partners is also detrimental to keeping the partnership healthy and work atmosphere flexible because flexibility is a mechanism vital in conflict management. Lack of flexibility means lack of adaptation ability. Flexibility in response to specific issues or tasks is an essential component in managing the tension or conflict that arise where partners have competing goals and as a result in such a conflict-ridden atmosphere that comes about on account of competing goals or conflicts of interest partners begin doubt the motives of each other or trust erodes between the partners.

4 Non-trusting behaviour

Human relation research and studies argue that interpersonal trust is an integrated feature of such a relationship. Trust is the belief one partner has about the integrity of the other partner. It increases the sense of security in the relationship. Distrust destroys the relationship (Larzelere and Huston, 1980). Cullen, Johnson, and Sakano (2000) showed that the dynamics of trust and commitment affect the performance of international strategic alliance relationships.

5 Lack of confidence

Lack of confidence refers to the gap between the expectations and the actual outcomes in the partnership, which may result in disappointments on the part of one or both partners. Partners are supposed to be confident that their expectations will be met and there will be no scope of disappointment in the partnership. Partners do not feel involved if they lack confidence. In complex social system organisations people involved in operations require more confidence, which is a prerequisite for their involvement and effective participation in functional systems like family, economy, or politics, and such effective participation and increased trust provide better chances at success and brings in more benefit to all concerned in the system or organisation (Niklas, 2000).

This study reveals also the following hard factors that cause the most dissatisfaction:

1 High coordination cost

Zineldin and Brednlöw (2003) and Luvison and Marks (2013) argue that strategic alliance may incur high coordinating and controlling costs. Coordination is a web of relationships, work episodes, resources, activities, and processes and is a strategic response to problems that arise from inter-organisational dependencies.

A coordination mechanism should be identified in form of a set of methods to be used to manage interdependence between partners or organisations. The main challenge is to determine and select the appropriate coordination mechanism to manage interdependencies.

2 Unwillingness of partners to give up control when required

Long-term and close relationships require sacrifice of resources, freedom, and even control over specific working styles and ways of acting and reacting. Not many couples and organisations consider giving up control as an essential factor in the success of the partnership. Many think that each one is entitled to keep his/her own personality and understanding of values and cultures. However, many researches have shown that couples are happier and more likely to remain in their relationships if they are willing to sacrifice for each other, including sacrificing of control and willingness to compromise (Gordon, 2012). Organisations should do the same.

3 Difficult access to resources due to lack of confidence

This hard barrier is closely related to the soft factors described above such as breaking promises; lack of dignity, trust, and confidence; and unethical behaviour. The theory of 'core competences' (CC) could be at the root of the unwillingness of partners to give access to one another's core competences and unique skills. CC are resources and activities that are unique to a person or an organisation in a partnership, where they are deemed as experts or specialists in relation to carrying out works that critically require a special set of skills and are expected to do better than others given such skill-sets. Some partners are careful and believe that the today's partner can be tomorrow's competitor or enemy. Some believe that core competence must be kept intact and it should be leveraged to exert a strong control or domination over the other partner in order for them to be always dependent on them and putting the onus on them to do all that is necessary exclusively to prove their loyalty in the relationship (Zineldin, 2006).

4 Disagreement over sharing of profits

Each partner brings a different set of values, ideas, skills, priorities, resources, and competencies to the marriage or organisational partnership. The challenge of any partnership is to bring these diverse competencies and contributions together, linking them with common goals and vision to gain optimum economic outcomes and profits for the survival and sustainable development of partnership. A partner may choose to increase his/her profits at the expense of the other partner. This is exploitation and opportunistic behaviour. Thus, disagreements over how to share the outcomes and profits are a main reason for failures and dissatisfaction in relationships.

5 Lack of perceived benefits to one or some partners

Any relationship starts with identification of some levels of self-interest, desires, and needs. Thus, each partner needs to see and get benefits in a collaboration, which are often measured in terms of financial (hard) and behavioural (soft) values, in order to be able to be loyal and keep themselves involved in the relationship over time. If any of the partners is trying to increase his/her benefits at the expense of the other partner, such exploitation and opportunistic behaviour can damage the relationship. Hence, lack of perceived benefits from the partnership relationship is one of most important dissatisfaction factor that leads to failure in relationships.

Divorce as well as termination of strategic alliance relationships are too common. Individuals and organisations at the crossroads of divorce and relationship termination may benefit by knowing the main factors associated with dissatisfaction and failure.

Conclusion

The results of this research show and confirm that soft attributes such as trust, confidence, dignity, and commitment are clearly factors that determine why some couples or strategic partners stay together and others divorce or terminate the alliance. Such soft factors account for most of the failures and dissatisfaction in romance and marriage relationships as well as in strategic alliances. 'Hard' or structural factors such as strategy-goal fit, financial aspects, and difficulties in accessing each other's competences and resources as well as exploitation and opportunistic behaviours are also important factors that lead to dissatisfaction and failure.

Partners should learn how to avoid destructive arguments and solve their differences amicably. They can create more realistic expectations for their relationships and create more equal partnerships and fair distribution of benefits. They must create a mechanism for enhancing the dignity and confidence as well as resource-sharing and relationship coordination and put in place methods to manage interdependence between the partners efficiently and effectively.

Some of the dissatisfaction problems discussed in this study could be fixed and divorce or relationship termination prevented. Dignity, trust, and commitment are vital to keeping the relationship going in the long term, be it marriage or any healthy strategic alliance, which helps people not get overwhelmed by daily problems and challenges. When there is high commitment, trust, flexibility, and confidence in a relationship, people feel safer and are willing to give more for the relationship to succeed. This study reveals also that the most common hard dissatisfaction factors are coordination costs, financial outcomes, and unfair distribution of profits and benefits.

Finally, the sustainability of organisational marriage and alliances depends on how well the partners work together and their success and satisfaction in responding and adapting to changing internal and external conditions.

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