All about cooperation, collaboration and partnerships

Cooperation is fundamental to addressing all kinds of business, social and global challenges.

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Whether between individuals, local communities, companies, governments or even competitors, cooperation and collaboration are key to meeting the challenges of our time. So say numerous studies by IESE professors, business professionals and managers.

Sustainable strategies

The last of the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Partnerships for the Goals, is to "strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development." In other words, SDG 17 promotes partnerships in order to tackle the inherent complexity of all the previous SDGs. If there is to be any hope for achieving the 2030 Agenda commitments on time, professors Pascual Berrone and Joan Enric Ricart urge companies to collaborate with each other and with multiple stakeholders, including the public sector, multilateral organizations and civil society actors. One of their [four steps to integrate the SDGs into business strategies](#) is to prioritize collaboration over confrontational stances.

Complex challenges require "collective and coordinated efforts," highlight Joan Fontrodona and Bruno Martínez in their [strategies to decarbonize the economy](#). In their opinion, governments, businesses and citizens must be "proactive and committed."

In the fight against climate change, we also need global consensus and a multilateral approach, add [Joseph Stiglitz and José Manuel Durão Barroso](#), in a conversation between the Nobel Prize-winning economist and the former president of the European Commission, respectively.

The growth of green mobility presents an opportunity to boost cooperation. We will need "more collaboration and coordination between the private and public sectors to move toward making Europe the first green continent," says Marc Sachon. This is one of the keys to the [future of the automotive industry](#).

Fewer lone heroes, more participation

Great challenges must be met with "[robust action](#)." This concept originated in a study of chess players that found that the best players persevere in their strategy while adapting flexibly to their opponents' moves. Fabrizio Ferraro argues that robust action can foster cooperation among multiple parties with differing interests and points of view.

Meanwhile, Sebastian Hafenbrädl urges us to identify factors that promote or hinder cooperation. In order to test whether humans will cooperate even at the expense of their personal interests, Hafenbrädl's team devised a water-rationing game to be played by children in Germany and India. They found that a majority of the children chose to cooperate,

suggesting that [cooperating for the common good](#) is sustainable, even among competitors.

Cooperating and competing are not mutually exclusive

Even competing companies can unlock innovation benefits by partnering with each other. Such is the task of [corporate venturing squads](#): partnerships between agile startups and established companies seeking innovation. According to M. Julia Prats, the advantages of this type of counterintuitive collaboration include better access to startup deal flow and the sharing of knowledge and best practices. She details the keys to these squads' success in [this practical guide](#).

When partnering creates value

Benefit corporations also rely on partnerships by prioritizing social and environmental goals without sacrificing profit. As Joan Fontrodona and Bruno Martínez note in their report on [benefit corporations](#), these are becoming increasingly attractive due to younger generations' commitment to sustainability concerns.

Desiree Pacheco also highlights how [social movements help drive the growth](#) of renewable energy startups and can even [give lagging industries a boost](#), such as the solar energy industry in the United States. Her research shows that collaboration between entrepreneurs and social movements accelerates innovation toward a more sustainable future.

Creating collaborative environments in cities

[Public-private partnerships](#) (PPP) have become a driving force in addressing the challenges of urban growth. The [Public-Private Sector Research Center](#) and [IESE PPP for Cities](#) regularly produce reports to help companies and public administrations jointly design, organize and manage sustainable solutions for smart cities. Check out some of their takeaways, [here](#). In the words of Joan Enric Ricart, co-director of the [Cities in Motion Index](#), creating sustainable and inclusive cities goes hand in hand with their digital transformation and collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

Farm Cultural Park (FKP) in Sicily is a prime example of [fruitful collaboration between public and private stakeholders](#). Initially a rundown urban space, FKP was revitalized, thanks to an

initiative financed by private funds, public subsidies and admission fees. In their study of FKP, Antonino Vaccaro and Pascual Berrone conclude that cooperating with diverse players — community groups, the media, local authorities and grassroots organizations — can maximize a project's reach and impact.

Collaborating for positive social impact

Faced with a panorama of complex global problems, companies are turning to a more strategic, collaborative and collective model of philanthropy. Companies have begun to understand they can achieve a much more positive social impact by joining forces with other companies, NGOs, governments, and foundations, than they would be able to achieve individually, says Joan Fontrodona of the [CaixaBank Chair of Sustainability and Social Impact](#).

Generating a positive social impact was exactly what Chetna Sinha aimed to do when she founded the [first cooperative bank for rural women in India](#), the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank.

Cooperating for responsible digital transformation

In a context of rapid digital transformation, [emerging technologies such as AI](#) or [blockchain](#) may contribute to solving global challenges — or exacerbate them. In order to achieve the former, companies must collaborate and cooperate. Llewellyn D.W. Thomas addresses how [responsible collaboration can help minimize the carbon footprint](#) of companies' digital technologies.

Building bridges for international cooperation

International cooperation is important for companies operating at a global level. Jordi Canals advises boards of directors to [understand and anticipate geopolitical shifts](#) in order to minimize risks and take advantage of opportunities. This implies working closely with governments and international bodies, as is detailed in his recommendations for boards of directors seeking to integrate geopolitics into their strategic discussions.

Fostering cooperative behavior

Given the benefits, what conditions favor cooperation?

- Maria Puig, director of the [Dignity, Diversity and Belonging Office](#) at IESE, encourages organizations to create environments where "every person contributes in a collaborative and positive way, where everyone can thrive and see their talents flourish." Learn more in our report, [Beyond Diversity.](#)

- In our current high-uncertainty context, Christoph Zott believes that it is crucial to think like an entrepreneur. In other words, business strategists must reduce social distances, dialogue with many different stakeholders, and even collaborate with AI. "Innovation is more powerful when everyone works together," he states in our report, [Elevate & Innovate](#).

- Sampsa Samila provides tips for [amplifying cooperation on shared projects](#). When colleagues provide intellectual or material support without expecting anything in return, their collaborations tend to last longer.

- Sebastian Hafenbrädl finds that offering group performance feedback, rather than assessments relative to the performance of others, fosters a more [cooperative, rather than competitive](#), environment.

- Research by Isabel Villamor suggests that [virtual or hybrid teams](#) work together more effectively when they share values from which clear norms of conduct are derived.

- To strengthen a sense of connection, or shared reality, among remote or hybrid teams, Maya Rossignac-Milon stresses the importance of [re-creating office bonding](#) moments, such as water-cooler talk, even in virtual environments. To better connect with others, she recommends simply [being yourself](#) when networking with other professionals, instead of always trying to manage impressions. This facilitates more authentic connections.

- To better manage multicultural teams, Alvaro San Martin urges us to [understand the cultural commonalities](#) that underlie many of our seemingly different behaviors.

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