

## THE WHOLE: GREATER THAN THE SUM OF THE PARTS

By Robert J. Tamasy

Have you ever heard someone say, “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts”? This was a reality I learned in profound ways years ago when I was the editor for the magazine CBMC published, *CONTACT Quarterly*. Much of the writing and editing fell on my shoulders, but I was fortunate to have a small team of people who contributed greatly to the content and graphic design.

I remember going into planning meetings armed with my own ideas for how the magazine should come together. But during several hours of “creative conflict,” we always arrived at decisions that were much better than I could have come up with alone. Everyone had made valuable contributions. The finished product always exceeded our expectations. Because the whole was greater than the sum of the parts.

This was where I learned the truth of two Bible passages that I’ve never forgotten:

*“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another”* (Proverbs 27:17).

*“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!... A cord of three strands is not quickly broken”* (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Business and professional leaders are often tempted to work alone – setting goals, devising plans and choosing strategies without encouraging input and feedback from people who will be responsible for implementing them. At best this is exhausting; at worst it is a path to failure.

We find an excellent example of this in the Bible’s Old Testament book of Exodus. God had chosen Moses to lead the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt. During their journey to the land God had promised them, he had taken upon himself the responsibility for resolving conflicts great and small that developed among the many thousands of Israelites.

Moses was serving as judge for the people from morning until evening, leaving both him and the people worn out and irritable. His father-in-law, Jethro, observed this and recognized Moses’ folly in attempting to do this all by himself. *“What is this you are doing for the people?”* he asked. *“Why do you alone sit as judge, while these people stand around you from morning till evening?... What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone”* (Exodus 18:14-18).

Jethro suggested an alternative: To appoint *“capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain”* to serve as judges over all but the most difficult cases. He said, *“That will make your load lighter.... If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied”* (Exodus 18:21-23). Moses accepted his father-in-law’s wisdom and adopted that plan, delegating judicial responsibilities to everyone’s satisfaction.

We would be wise to heed the same advice. Whether CEO, high-level executive, manager, entrepreneur, or lower on the corporate ladder, we all have much to benefit from utilizing the strengths, talents, gifts and experience of others that complement our own. As 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says, *“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.”*

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### Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. When have you worked on a project with others in which the result clearly showed that the same outcome could not have come about by working separately or in isolation? Did you find it gratifying to realize the benefits of collaborating together? Explain your answer.
2. The proverb says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man [one person] sharpens another." Have you ever experienced this? In what ways?
3. Why do some people seem set on working independently rather than encouraging and welcoming the participation of others in the process? Do you think it is a matter of pride or ego, or lack of trust and confidence in the capabilities that others have? Why or why not?
4. How do you think you would react if a 'Jethro' approached you and pointed out some flaws in your approach to work, perhaps ways that delegating responsibility or using the strengths of others could prove to be beneficial?

*NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:*  
1 Corinthians 12:12-26; Ephesians 4:15-16; Hebrews 10:24; 1 Peter 4:10

### Challenge for This Week

Maybe you are someone who enjoys teamwork, collaborating with others in a well-organized team to accomplish specific goals and objectives. If so, this week would be a good opportunity to observe how others around you work. If they are more inclined to work on their own, you might try to find ways for encouraging them to utilize the abilities of others to become even more productive.

If you are one of those who enjoys being a "lone ranger," working independently of others, this could be a time for reassessing that approach. Is it working the best for you? You might discuss this with a trusted friend, advisor, mentor, or your CBMC group if you are part of one. What wisdom do they have to offer you?