

# Cultivate Cooperative Relationships

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We have an idea about nature being competitive – this is a misunderstanding of what “survival of the fittest” actually means. It doesn’t suggest that whoever is the most dominant and can outperform others is at an advantage. Yet this false understanding has influenced our economy, our organizational behaviors, our funding strategies, and our outreach approaches.

“Survival of the fittest” in truth means that those who are most “fit” – most well adapted to their conditions, able to optimize their energy use, and able to partner well with others – are most likely to survive.

There are many types of relationships in nature, and few are in direct competition. It simply takes too much energy. Even relationships we once thought were predatory or competitive are mutually beneficial in some way.

Mutualisms are most powerful when they include unusual allies. The more different the parties are, the more likely the mutualism will be successful. Clownfish and Sea Anemone live in a very special partnership. Though the anemone stun and devour other species of fish with their poisonous tentacles, the clownfish have mucus on their skin that makes them immune and allows them to burrow into protection provided by their host. In return, the clownfish clean the anemone by eating parasites and poop out nutrients to help the anemone thrive. Mutualisms create surplus -- In places where the two live together, colonies of sea anemone are up to three times as large.

In Nature, mutualisms tend to increase in times of stress. In places that are harder to live in, there are more mutualisms. During difficult times (like at the end of the season or in drought), organisms become more cooperative.

**Who might be your unusual allies with whom you can generate new opportunities? What stressful situations are you in that may call for you to recognize or find new strategic partners?**