

Collaboration in Practice

Some Thoughts on Collaboration, Capability and Practice

BACKGROUND PAPER

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Introduction

There has never been more demand for collaboration. Organisations want more of it, strategic plans emphasise it, and job advertisements ask for it. Increasingly, the work that matters most depends on people working effectively across teams, professions, organisations and communities.

Yet collaboration often remains surprisingly difficult. Most of us have spent years learning our profession — how to become accountants, nurses, engineers, teachers, managers, planners, consultants or social workers — but very few of us have ever been taught how to become better collaborators. We are simply expected to learn along the way.

Background

Why Collaboration is difficult

Over the past thirty years I have worked alongside organisations in government, health, education, community services and the private sector. The contexts vary, but one thing has been fairly consistent: many of the most difficult organisational challenges don't belong to one person or one department. They sit between people, between teams and disciplines, and sometimes between organisations.

People also don't necessarily see the same situation in the same way. A meeting finishes with a sense that everyone agrees, only for it to become clear a week later that people left with quite different understandings of what was decided. A project begins with energy and goodwill but gradually loses momentum, or a partnership struggles even though everyone involved genuinely wants it to succeed.

These situations don't always have a single cause. Often there are different assumptions, different pressures and different understandings of what is happening. Working through that requires more than expertise; it requires people to think and act together.

There is more to collaboration than we might think

Collaboration is often thought of largely in terms of communication, trust and relationships. All of these things matter. But good collaboration also requires people to understand complex situations, make sense of different perspectives, think together, coordinate action and learn as circumstances change.

So there's a fair bit involved in collaborating well. How well people collaborate is shaped not only by what individuals bring to the work, but also by the conditions in which they are being asked to collaborate. Structures and boundaries, competing priorities, roles and responsibilities, power and decision-making, available resources, established ways of working, and the way collaboration is supported and modelled by leaders can all make a difference.

Some of these things may be beyond our immediate control. But there is usually plenty we can work on — and, like most things, collaboration is something we can get better at.

The workshop focuses on developing the practical capabilities that support good collaboration: understanding what is happening before rushing towards solutions;



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listening and enquiring well; making better use of different perspectives; developing shared understanding; turning that understanding into coordinated action; and learning from what happens next.

These capabilities are not drawn from one model or methodology. They reflect a range of influences on my own work over many years, including action research, systems thinking, dialogue and organisational learning. Different traditions use different language, but many share a common thread: when the situation is complex, the quality of our thinking, conversations and relationships affects the effectiveness of what we are able to do together.

The group process as leadership

Groups always know more than any one person in them, and much of the knowledge needed to understand or improve a situation is often already there. The people closest to the work usually know a fair bit about what is really going on; the challenge is creating the conditions in which that knowledge can emerge, be shared and brought together.

That means creating opportunities for people to explore different perspectives, question assumptions, develop shared understanding and work out what to do next.

Sometimes this can be as simple as asking a different question, slowing a conversation down, helping people notice an assumption, or making room for a perspective that hasn't been heard.

Bob Dick defines leadership as "anything that moves a group closer to its goals or increases the satisfaction of its members" (Dick, 1991). I like this definition because it reminds us that leadership can come from anyone in the group — and from the group process itself.

How the workshop works

Collaboration in Practice gives participants the opportunity to work with a genuine collaboration challenge from their own workplace. We begin by looking at collaboration differently: not simply as communication or teamwork, but as a set of capabilities that can be developed through practice.

We then turn to the challenge itself. Before deciding what to do, what is actually happening? What assumptions are we making? What might we be missing? How might other people understand the same situation differently?

From there, we explore what helps people think together: listening, inquiry, dialogue and the ability to make

Exploration

Implementation

good use of different perspectives. But shared understanding is not enough. At some point, people need to work together, so we also explore what helps turn understanding into coordinated action: clarity of purpose, roles and relationships, shared responsibility, communication and the practical coordination of work.

Finally, we consider what it means to learn together — not simply at the end of a project, but while the work itself is unfolding.

Learning through practice | The Learning Journey

This emphasis on practice shapes the design of the workshop itself. Before the workshop, participants complete a short **Pre-Workshop Reflection** and identify a real collaboration challenge they want to work with. They then use a **Collaboration Snapshot** to take a closer look at that challenge before bringing it with them to the workshop.

During the day, that challenge provides a thread through the workshop. Participants explore it from different perspectives, practise new approaches and use their Participant Workbook to capture and apply their learning.

Afterwards, the aim is not to return to work with a long action plan. It is to try one or two useful things, notice what happens and learn from it.

Three to four weeks later, I get together with each participant, either online or face to face, for an individual coaching conversation. By then, everyone will likely have something new to work with: what happened, what was noticed, what was learnt and what might be tried next.

The follow-up conversation is important because collaboration is not learnt simply by understanding ideas about collaboration. We learn through practice and review.

What might change?

The answer will be different for everyone:

- Some people may realise they have been moving too quickly towards solutions;
- Others may become better listeners or start asking different questions;
- Others may become more interested in the different perspectives around the table, or more aware of the assumptions shaping their own view of a situation;
- Some may become better at turning good conversations into shared understanding and coordinated action;
- And some may become more confident working when collaboration becomes difficult or uncertain.

These can seem like small changes, but small changes in how people understand, listen, enquire, think and respond can make a significant difference to how a group works together. The aim is not to have all the answers, but to become more capable of working with others when the answers are not obvious.

A practice

One workshop will not solve every collaboration problem, and there is no single model that fits every situation. But people can become better collaborators by becoming more curious about what is happening, listening and enquiring more carefully, making better use of different perspectives, and learning from what happens when they try something different.

These are ordinary things, but they are not always easy. They take practice.

Think together.

Work together.

Learn together.

Conclusion

References

Dick, B. (1991) *Helping Groups to be Effective: Skills, Processes and Concepts for Group Facilitation*. 2nd edn. Chapel Hill, Qld: Interchange.

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