Developing the Craft of Collaboration – Part 2

Stretching, weaving, designing, and mapping better collaboration

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Contents

Questions Along a Road to Crafting Better Collaboration

This Part 2 of **Developing the Craft of Better Collaboration** offers a **four-part action framework** *to design and deliver the craft of collaboration*. It builds on the reflection set out in [Part 1](#) 'in search of actions that cultivate and recreate the possibilities of better collaboration'. The framework is aligned with the Caplor House model. It explores each of these nine questions.

1) What at are the **essential key resources** to pack to build better collaboration?
2) What would a **positive scenario** for collaboration look like?
3) Why does much better (intentional, consistent, skilled) collaboration **matter**?
4) What are the **key blocks** to effective collaboration?
5) Where might be **a good place to start on building better collaboration**?
6) What would better collaboration look like **in your context**?
7) What **structures** help collaboration?
8) What would **a negative scenario** for collaboration in this context look like?
9) Is collaboration **just a means**?

I offer you these reflections with their lessons learned together, questions and wondering as pointers towards another road that diverges in the wood. My suggestion is to choose to explore any of the questions that appear to lead towards the next most promising steps. By making time to explore slowly and reflectively some or all of the questions – for most benefit, with others – hopefully you might have some new light on where the road to more effective collaboration calls to you.

As a person of faith, I take great inspiration from St Paul's line – *Glory be to [God] whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.* The pages that follow explore how this power might break out in and from us.

Collaboration through the Caplor House Model

Over the past few years I have found the [Caplor House Model](#) a clear and memorable framework within which to consider many issues and questions to do with organisations, movements and networks and what we do in them. The model offers a framework composed of four different rooms which express something central to how we approach life.

In very simple terms, in the Library there is a focus on evidence and analysis (does it make sense?). In the Observatory there is a focus on vision and possibility (could it be?). In the Family Room there is a focus on relationships and values
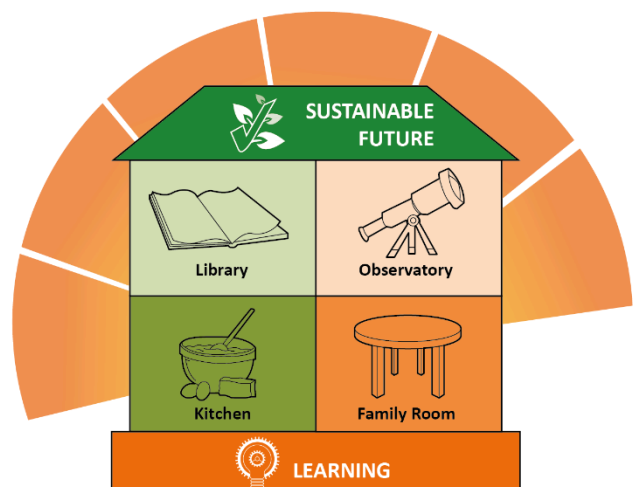
(how will people feel about this?). While in the Kitchen the focus is on delivery and getting things done (how will this happen?). Having worked more from my 'house' over the past couple of years, during Covid 19, I also love that the framework is grounded in the routine space we live and exist in. In a way it points us back to the separate but essentially related dimensions of life that always need attending to. A house can become something – maybe a home – where different dimensions have their space and are valued.

The framework has helped me to understand where the roles I have make me focus, and where my more natural tendencies to focus would be. That all the rooms (spaces) exist in the house has also helped me to understand better the value and giftedness of the contribution that others bring and make. In the system of different but connected spaces, all are needed, and there is real skill – even craft – in being able to be aware of how I and others are approaching what is under consideration at this moment in time.

A key learning for me has been to think of collaboration through an adaptation of this framework. Simply put, *effective collaboration is not one single thing* (no matter how personally or socially we are prone to want it to be singular). Several things need to be attended to. And at its heart the craft is in being able to identify which room I am in, and from which room I may need to operate at a particular point in time.

In the first question I set out an overview of key approaches that seem to me to be critical to effective collaboration and suggest how they can be understood within the Caplor House framework.

- **Mapping** as being in the Library
- **Stretching** as being in the Observatory
- **Weaving** as being in the Family Room
- **Design** as being in the Kitchen

In the eight questions that follow I outline where I think each question ties to the Caplor House framework.

For each I also set out pointers to help go deeper into the questions and offer some quotations and pictures that might help their further exploration.

Collaboration Craft

Library (Mapping)

8. What would a negative scenario for collaboration in the relevant context look like?

9. Is collaboration just a means?

Observatory (Stretching)

2. What would a positive scenario for collaboration look like in the relevant context?

3. Why does much better collaboration matter?

Kitchen (Design)

6. What would better collaboration unlock and look like in your specific context?

7. What structures help collaboration?

Family Room (Weaving)

4. What are some of the key blocks to more effective collaboration?

5. Where might be a good place to start on building better collaboration?

Foundation

1. What are the essential key resources to pack to build better collaboration?

Caplor House – Multidimensional approach to collaboration

1. What are the essential key resources to pack to build better collaboration?

Ask yourselves the following questions...

- *For the journey to better collaboration what do you need to have in your backpack?*
- *What resources and tools can you intentionally be in possession of that will prepare you for the storms that can be anticipated ahead?*
- *What would it look like to go about building a collaboration that could really be transformative?*

Visualisation

In trying to promote the potential of better collaboration it is to be expected that there will be storms to face. People may not deliver, do their own thing, take the credit, avoid the work. The collaboration crafts person will not be shocked by these winds and will carry in their bag a set of resources and options to deal with the different challenges.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about essential key resources to build better collaboration?

How could we explore this a bit more?

1. Could you **stretch**[i] your collaboration, breaking beyond the limits you habitually set for with whom you collaborate?
   What can you do to make this a broader, and deeper and more innovative collaboration so that it is not the same familiar people, each grown comfortable with the perspectives of their own private, public or civil society sector worlds, talking together about the others. How to create space so that people with different views, different analyses, different strategies, solutions and cultures are deliberately brought together in ways that can enrich and enhance overall responses?

2. Could you **weave**[ii] this network of collaboration, linking people to create something new?
   What can you do to connect people, to introduce, spark, fire and support the connections between people? How can we get better at facing and having necessary difficult and important conversations?

3. Could you **design** with a group of people who are purpose driven what would be the look of the best possible collective response you could build and then further develop to the current challenges?
Think about who is in it? And who isn't. How is it resourced? How is it supported? How does learning take place? How does it achieve value for those who are involved? How does it cultivate energy? Is there care to allow for 'emergence' not to kill by over governance, over management?

4. Can you **map** out who you are thinking to collaborate with?
List all the people and organisations that are relevant to transformative action for your area of concern. Identify who they are, how they respond, what resources they bring, how ready they are to collaborate with others. And as part of your map also map out what you think is central to the system that you wish to change. Where is the real power that is holding the system as it is, and blocking it becoming something different?

So, what do you think about this?

When I am working with people to support collaboration, these are four main approaches or tools I select from at different points in the process. I find it useful to relate these to 4 rooms in the Caplor House, as follows.

Stretching helps us to look up and see reality with a radically different sense of possibility. It is about having a bigger and braver vision and daring to consider different possibilities for whom you could (should) collaborate with. This is the step of going beyond working with those who are like you, to find ways of working with those who are different, and maybe reaching into our better selves, with those with whom you might prefer not to work. Because without them the progress needed is not possible. In my opinion, this involves a certain letting go not just of our 'organisational hat', but also our 'sectoral hats', and unspoken assumptions about who are the 'goodies' and 'baddies' in relation to problems being addressed. For NGOs I think this can often involve finding ways to rethink and shift the underlying nature of the relationship with government, with funders, with the private sector, with social movements, and with supporters and volunteers.

Weaving is about intentionally investing in building and deepening relationships in the complex and emotionally charged world of how human beings (even when in offices) need to find ways to connect as people who live 'feeling-full' lives. Collaboration will flourish or die based on the quality of relationships. So really attend to deliberately creating space for personal and meaningful relationships to be established and to deepen. And trust that investment in relationship building deserves way more prioritisation of time and resources than normally given.

Designing is when you commit to make something that works, that makes the possible real now, to the best extent possible. If we are trying to produce a beautiful meal from our kitchen, we know we

really have to also attend to the detail. What specifically and concretely do we think this meal will look like? Where? When? With what ingredients? What preparation time? What music?

Mapping helps us to get real and have evidence about what we are addressing. Collaboration possibilities move from the realm of worthy but ungrounded dreams when you begin to detail (best with and asking others) what others are relevant, what they offer, and what possibility and need they have to collaborate. With the thinking that goes into developing the map, and with the reflection on a visual map – where you can see size, clusters, connections, resources – it becomes much clearer with whom you need to collaborate to have systems level impact.

The brilliance of the model for me lies in hearing what each room says to the other, and developing the sensitivity to imagine or hear what the other might say is fundamental to crafting worthwhile collaboration. If we can grow to hear and welcome the questions from each space as valid, as invitations to co-strengthen our model I believe we are guaranteed much more effective and better collaboration.

Quotations

In working with dozens of networks over the years, we have found that nothing increases awareness of networks and gives people concrete ideas of what they can do to improve their network than developing a network map!

(In relation to weaving, ask yourself) 'Do you help build a network culture?

1) *Love to unearth other people's dreams and visions*
2) *Model an approach to relationships that is positive, appreciative and focussed on strengths and gifts*
3) *Treat everyone as a peer*
4) *Encourage complex reciprocity – sharing information and resources with others without expecting a return from that person because you know others will share with you*
5) *Point out the value of knowing people with different perspectives from different backgrounds*
6) *Encourage people to see conflicts as opportunities to develop breakthroughs*
7) *Encourage people to listen deeply to each other*
8) *Encourage people to identify shared or overlapping interest or values*
9) *Help people make accurate and realistic assessments of others*
10) *Show people how to build trust through small, low- risk collaboration with others'*

– June Holley, The Network Weaver

'The simple act of suspending is the key to collaborative social transformation because it is the necessary first step to working creatively with diverse others.'

– Adam Kahane, Transformative Scenario Planning

2. What would a potential <u>positive scenario</u>[iii] for collaboration look like in the relevant context?

Ask yourselves the following questions…

- *Can you find within you a space to imagine another version and story of human collaboration?*
- *If the collaboration you imagine was effective, what would be going on?*
- *What would <u>you</u> be doing differently?*
- *What are the levers of effective collaboration?*

Visualisation

Example of extraordinary beauty breaking into the world through a flash mob, and all the 'collectivity' that expresses at many levels – different gifts, built from different learning, offered and brought together with a vision of what is possible that can survive the horrible noise if the instruments are played without attention to each other.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about positive scenarios for collaboration?

How could we explore this a bit more?

- Could you construct a positive scenario for collaboration in the relevant context? A vision with a vivid and sufficiently detailed picture of how it would work, comes about, and holds together.
- Identify key actors, factors, the logic and story of how the collaboration could develop. Can you think of an image, a symbol to represent how it works?
- Consider how much easier it is to understand the conditions holding things in place if rather than rely on your resources as a single under pressure organisation you were able to benefit from the contribution of other related organisations to understand and address – policy, practice, resources, relationships, power and mental models.

So, what do you think about this?

Many people are confined, to a greater or lesser degree, to doing what their organisation's job descriptions require them to do. In such a place it is almost impossible to have a developed sense of what their efforts could achieve if linked effectively with others doing related work outside of their organisation. Very often, it seems, the business of connecting with others seems to get pushed down

the list of priorities or left as something to be worried about by the CEO or senior management, or to be determined by the activities of network co-ordinating organisations or structures.

It is worth dedicating time to imagining the full breadth and depth of possible elements of a positive collaborative scenario. This can counteract limiting and restricting collaboration to overly narrow foundations. These elements of a positive scenario could include i) gathering all or reaching out to as wide a number as possible, or manageable – of the relevant stakeholders for the issues you address; ii) creating space to develop real human relationships and connections between the people addressing and affected by those issues; iii) deepening understanding of the relevant context formed by hearing multiple and diverse views; iv) fore fronting of equity concerns to ensure voices of the excluded are heard; v) *joint* discovery of pathways to real transformation of relevant context; vi) freedom for multiplicity of responses, but awareness of potential *high systemic impact opportunities*.

Bad drives out good. It is easy to destroy and knock collective efforts and so to choke attempts to build new collective endeavours. So, we need to build a more robust and resilient appreciation of what it can offer so that our commitment to collaboration can withstand and transcends setbacks and not collapse at the first set back or doubt.

Quotations

'On my first visit to Strasbourg in 1979 as a member of the European Parliament. I went for a walk across the bridge from Strasbourg to Kehl. Strasbourg is in France. Kehl is in Germany. They are very close. I stopped in the middle of the bridge, and I meditated. There is Germany. There is France. If I had stood on this bridge 30 years ago after the end of the second world war when 25 million people lay dead across our continent for the second time in this century and if I had said: "Don't worry. In 30 years' time we will all be together in a new Europe, our conflicts and wars will be ended and we will be working together in our common interests", I would have been sent to a psychiatrist. But it has happened and it is now clear that European Union is the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution and it is the duty of everyone, particularly those who live in areas of conflict to study how it was done and to apply its principles to their own conflict resolution.'

– John Hume, Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, 1998

'At its simplest level, a shared vision is the answer to the question, 'What do we want to create?' … Shared visions derive their power from a common caring. In fact, we have come to believe that one of the reasons people seek to build shared vision is their desire to be connected in an important undertaking.'

– Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

'The first revolution is when you change your mind about how you look at things. The revolution – that change that takes place – will not be televised.'

– Gil Scott-Heron quoted in Adam Kahane, Transformative Scenario Planning

3. Why does much better collaboration <u>matter</u>?

Visualisation

This picture shows Frederik de Klerk and Nelson Mandela shake hands at the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum held in Davos in January 1992. De Klerk, Mandela and their constituencies worked together to end apartheid despite often poor and contested relationships which may seem to have made the possibility of collaboration impossible.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about why collaboration matters?

How could we explore this a bit more?

- Brainstorm reasons, as individual or team for <u>why</u> better more effective collaboration matters.
- Complete – 'with better collaboration we would be…' (explore at different levels; within the organisation; with supporters; with other stakeholders; with other sectors)
- Imagine a 9/10 positive impact evaluation of your organisation's work in 10 years' time. Without other changes, how sufficient is it to system change? Explore the gap between the system change required and your organisation's plans.

So, what do you think about this?

We are caught between an awareness that collaboration – in all sorts of ways – is critical to a better world, and the painful and reluctant realisation that it is not easy, and so we will be easily distracted or tempted to give up on it. Given that there is a cost to building better collaboration – financial, time, emotional – it seems helpful to attend to uncovering and articulating your case for collaboration at an initial stage.

At the heart of this it seems to me we need to come to a new understanding and awareness of the systemic nature of reality. We often come at great social problems with very simple analytical and solutions frameworks. Our efforts to understand are based on our rush to identify specific short term things that can be done (and we can get funded) that promise to make things better. We want to position ourselves as solutions people and to be able to apply quick fixes to problems that are inherently and intrinsically complex. The reality is that problems like climate change and global migration are deeply complex, shaped by many interacting factors, and actors, and not subject to single initiative solutions. The changes that need to happen to stop a catastrophic level of global warming require a wide variety of changes from a wide variety of actors, which involve significant short-term costs. And they need to happen to a depth and degree and at a speed that is beyond anything humankind has ever achieved before. To imagine that kind of change we need a depth and spread of urgent quality high impact collaboration, between organisations, sectors, and countries.

It is foundational to better collaboration to realise that without it there is no hope of the better future we need.

It needs to move from a 'nice to do' to a 'must be done', from the last thing to the first.

Quotations

'The systemic challenges we face call for a systemic approach in which we address issues from many angles, simultaneously as part of a co-ordinated effort. Creating change at the rate we need is going to require a whole new level of planetary collaboration.'

– David Ehrlichmann, Impact Networks

'If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.'

– Nelson Mandela

'.. the scale of these complex problems [has] outgrown the capacity of our existing free- standing organisations to respond.'

– David Renz quoted in Beth Kanter, Allison Fine, The Networked Non-profit

'Individually we are one drop, together we are an ocean.'

– Satoro Ryunosuke

Family Room

4. What are some of the key blocks to more effective collaboration?

Ask yourselves the following questions…

- *At a personal level, what are the key things that block us in building more effective collaboration?*
- *At an organisational level what are the key things that block us in building more effective collaboration?*
- *At the wider social level what are the key things that block us in building more effective collaboration?*

Visualisation

The drive to work with others, to move things forward is the underlying and powerful force of nature. But it gets blocked by huge boulders in different dimensions of our lives which can make it hard to let what is there flow.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about the blockages to more effective collaboration?

How could we explore this a bit more?

- Taking an example of a context where you worked, list the 5 main things that blocked the best collaboration that might have happened. Rank them.
- In what ways does the organisation you are part of impact how you go about collaboration?
- How is your practice of collaboration affected by the sense that the real world out there is shaped by competition and power?

So, what do you think about this?

Whatever hope we have, to weave better human connections and better collaboration, it is important to be aware of and insightful about the kind of things that block collaboration. Listening to many people it seems to me to be helpful to attend to this at three levels – i) personal, ii) organisational and iii) social.

People who do collaboration are real human beings. As such they are a mix of great strengths, much potential, some brilliant ideas and most likely a fair deal of bruising from the reality of life. Human collaboration is about purposeful connection between emotional, vulnerable, under pressure, and nearly always hurt humans who carry the scars of life; and generally, we are much better at being

aware of our hurt than of how we do the hurting or less than fully switched on to how we could reduce it. We come to collaboration with memories of all sorts of interpersonal relations that have gone wrong at least at times. Unless we become more emotionally skilled and can access different ways to attend to, be curious about and move through vulnerable interactions where you are initiating and proposing joint action it is very easy for collaboration to be stillborn.[iv]

It is also important to recall that a great deal of collaboration happens in contexts where the first thing we have put on is our organisational hat. Very often people wearing that hat seem to feel an obligation to put their organisation at the centre of the exchange and dialogue. As with personal blocks, it seems vital that we find a way (deep down also I believe in the interests of our organisations) to deliberately take off our organisational hats – at least for a time – and to really focus on the exploration of the potential shared interest and purpose, to put mission before organisation.

Thinking more broadly at the wider societal level it is important to be aware of underlying mental models that dominant cultures plant in our brains. It is not difficult to see that the costly personal commitment required to stay faithful to the craft of collaboration isn't made easier by cultures which celebrate power, competition and individualism to such a high degree.

Quotations

'Thus, when the need arises to co-ordinate more closely across boundaries with others who are different from ourselves, our identities are disrupted. To make matters worse, the new relationship patterns may disrupt our existing, taken-for-granted, often invisible patters of privilege and power… we can expect a period of painful adjustment for individuals, professions, occupations, organisations, and industries with many defensive reactions and false starts.'

– Jody Hoffler Gitell, Transforming Relationships for Higher Purpose

'… non-profits and the people within them have too much to do because they try to do too much as standalone organisations. Networked non-profits know their organisations are part of a much larger ecosystem of organisations and individuals that are all incredible resources for their efforts.'

– Beth Kanter & Allison Fine, The Networked Non-Profit

'Online social media—increasingly our primary channel for communication and source for entertainment, news, and information, and one of the more accessible avenues of contact we have these days with people who disagree with us—is built primarily for debate, criticism, competition, social comparison and contention. It does not offer much space for promoting reflective listening and mutual understanding. In other words, the underlying algorithms on which the major social media platforms are currently based are actively pitting us against each other.'

– Peter T. Coleman, The Way out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarisation

5. Where might be a good place to start on building better collaboration?

Ask yourselves the following questions…

- *Where in your life do you experience the energy, mystery, value, and power of collaboration?*
- *What are your memories of important and significant achievements made possible by collaboration in your life?*
- *Where do you see collaboration shine brilliantly in the world around you?*
- *Where has collaboration been effective in improving the course of history that you care about?*

Visualisation

Shared living is a great school to learn collaborative practices. For most people clothes don't self-wash and sort, dishes don't' self-clean and stack, and meals don't appear by magic on the table. Learning how to do these things – that must be done – *together* is a great place to learn collaboration.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about a good place to start on building better collaboration?

How could we explore this a bit more?

- What worked well in your life yesterday, or in the past week, because of collaboration?
- In what ways did collaboration make that possible? (Who, what attitudes, actions, skills, strength, vulnerability)
- What new and further possibility has that collaboration left behind?
- What has happened in the people who initiated and shaped that collaboration?

So, what do you think about this?

In face of scepticism about collaboration it can be helpful to build a pack of examples and stories of where collaboration already works in the ordinary circumstances of life, routinely and fairly well. Discovering this can help us build on the strengths and gifts we already have for collaboration. While wanting to make the case that collaboration can be done better, I think it is also important to see it as something quite widely woven into our normal existence. While there can be frustration about what collaboration has delivered it can also be valuable to discover where it has worked, is working and ways in which it can be strengthened and amplified.

At a first level, it can be helpful to turn to the more immediate context and stuff of a person's own life to take notice of and appreciate how collaboration is at work in so much of what makes life liveable. Daily, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the ways we travel, the kind word to nudge us

on, all depend on the timely, collective and untrumpeted efforts of others. Our homes rely on extraordinary degrees of imperfect but just enough for now collaboration, to shop, to cook, to clean, to parent children (and for children to 'children' parents). In specialised worlds we flourish because of what others do so much more easily and better than us.

I think it can also be helpful to dig into cultural practices that manifest a traditional or national approach to collaboration. In our organisations people can bring the wisdom of the different cultures with which they are connected. In my case, for all the pulls of the modern world, as an Irish person I take inspiration from the reality of very different traditions of collaborative practice. We have 'meitheal' which is a work party where people would come together to assist each other such, as for example in the saving of crops. We also have traditional Irish music and dance, again which is only made possible through extraordinary sensitivity to what can be created together. Most striking of all is the tradition of wakes with the powerful community support to hold people in the face of life's most crushing moments.

Similarly, it is helpful to have examples from history that tell the story of amazing social advance and progress achieved through collaboration such as the ending of apartheid in South Africa, the process to peace in Northern Ireland, the civil rights movement in the US. Great movements of progress in history do not happen because of great individuals. Transformation happens because of great collaborations that were woven together which might not have been.

Quotations

'So, we are called to wholeness and simultaneously to recognition of our incompleteness; called to power and to acknowledge our weakness; called to both individuation and interdependence. Thus, the problem – indeed the failure of the 'ethic of rugged individualism' is that it runs with only one side of this paradox, incorporates only one half of our humanity. It recognises that that we are called to individuation, power, and wholeness. But it denies entirely the other part of the human story, that we can never fully get there and that we are of necessity in our uniqueness, weak and imperfect creatures who need each other.'

– M. Scott Peck, The Different Drum

'Team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire…..'

– Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

'So, I think that is why the beginning of any meaningful relationship should start with some kind of exercise in which people are thrown together – out of their familiar surroundings and circumstances. And create some kind of bond.'

– Charles Handy quoted in Dr. K. Shaheen et al. A Conversation with Charles Handy

Kitchen – Design

6. What would better collaboration unlock and look like in your specific context?

Visualisation

Investing in identification and support of people who can have impact together and being ready to mobilise and utilise assets when the time for your impact comes.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about what would better collaboration unlock and look like in your specific context?

How could we explore this a bit more?

- List the organisational assets (vision, value, people, capabilities) you have that you could share with other organisations that together could build a much more impactful road to the creation of a better future.
- Would the policy and campaign work you need to advance, initiate or complete reach a different level with many others?
- In a world with such need for radical collective action what possibilities are you happy to bin simply because they are not easy?

So, what do you think about this?

In the contexts most directly relevant to us (where you will spend your time and energy in coming days) it is vital to be able to imagine and identify valuable and specific attainable benefits only achievable from better collaboration. And to be able to draw a compelling picture of the key steps that could lead towards those benefits being realised.

Consider how contextual analysis and planned actions will be better arising from more dedicated collaboration at the right time. At the heart of most organisational endeavours lies some form of market or contextual analysis and planned responses. All small and medium sized organisations need

to understand their contexts. They carry out SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental) type analyses, and engage in regular cycles of strategic planning to try to understand the past, the present and what the future will bring. The level of resources required to do this well are substantial. It takes major effort and expense to produce all these 4–5-year cycles of 'hidden' strategy development. But does all that isolated work prove itself up to the task of really addressing the root causes of the challenges organisations identify?

So often we build plans and design actions based on behind close door analysis with consultants as our only connection to the external world. What if we committed to design strategic plans grounded in multisector collective and mutually supportive responses? If a handful of similar organisations need to do new plans, could their boards, staff and relevant stakeholders benefit from shared work to develop those plans? The key point is to realise that there is a choice to be made about how these things are done. It is possible to intentionally build in different levels of collaboration into all we do.

To secure resources for collective efforts there is often a need to fight for resources. Would the case for that investment be better heard if we faced the extraordinary waste in lots and lots of relatively small and medium (and large) scale organisations developing their own analyses, plans and policies.

Quotations

'If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'

– African Proverb

'Successful networks are designed – they don't just happen.'

– Peter Plastrik, Madeleine Taylor & John Cleveland, Connecting to Change the World

'Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.'

– Robert Kennedy

7. What structures help collaboration?

Visualisation

In the systems we wish to change it pays to be aware of the whole system and to identify where we can focus our attention and energy to leverage change in the system.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about what structures help collaboration?

How could we explore this a bit more?

- What are the strengths and weakness of the partnerships you are or have been part of?
- Is it enough to limit our collaboration dreams to what can be funded?
- In the move towards larger scale organisations (NGOs), whether through mergers or federal arrangements what is lost?
- Is two or three of the same type of organisation enough?

So, what do you think about this?

We are facing a scale and urgency of changes that is needed in so many areas that is daunting. Often a first response we think of is to step out of our organisations. We seek one or two partners. In doing so I wonder whether we let slip the true potential of multisector and broad cross sector collaboration. A kind of collaboration that takes place in networks rather than partnerships. At the essence of 'partnering thinking' there seems to be a search for someone who *can work with us*. Might this be placing our need first rather than the need presumably expressed or addressed in our mission?

In my experience I have been particularly struck by what seems an unnecessarily restrictive understanding of partnership that underpins some official offers of partnership. There can be merely partnership levels of collaboration. In these, one side sets the policy, and prescribes for others detailed formulations for governance, results, and budget. This seems a very limited and limiting form of collaboration. It is one that can leave official government agencies trapped at levels of micromanagement of multiple and fragmented organisations. Meanwhile the enormous opportunities to be uncovered in building genuine sector and multisector wide collaboration are almost not even noticed.

Similarly, wherever the chance required is systemic, I think a case could be made that any organisation seeking to work with others to affect that kind of change should first begin with as wide a group of actors as possible or needed. The real value of what any individual organisation offers – mostly small compared to the totality of challenges to be faced – often pales into insignificance compared to the scale of response needed. It is possible to just turn a blind eye to this challenge. It might be helpful for all organisations to step up to the call to explore the creation and design of spaces as networks. These provide avenues for wide and cross sectoral and non-sectoral stakeholder dialogues about ways forward. When choosing to just settle for comfortable levels of partnering, one useful question to explore honestly is whether the collective impact at that level will ever be at a scale and seriousness worthy of support.

Networks seem to provide considerable advantages for bringing people and organisations together[v]. At their best networks are convened around shared interests and purposes, rather than power over partners. There is space to value the autonomy and individual contribution of each organisation. There is a degree of safety provided by not being forced to seek funding together, or with having to deal with the more intimate realities of partnering on specific projects. Networks also place an inbuilt value on the contribution of a multiplicity of different organisations and offer a healthy way in which different organisations can achieve together. This can be done without the agenda of take overs and mergers so valued by large organisations and those who prefer to support them.

Collaborating structure	Partnering	Networking
Origin	I/My organisation	Many organisations and people
Initiation	Select with due diligence	Discover potential
Action	The bit more two of us can do	The unimaginable impact we can only have as many
Strengths	Manageable Controllable	Sufficient power with organisations like us, sectors not like us, wider social movements
Risks	More like us	Inertia – lack of emerging clear purpose
Potential	What 2 or a few can do	Impact without dominance – network manners

Quotations

'Creating change at the rate we need is going to require a whole new level of planetary collaboration.'

– David Ehrlichmann, Impact Networks

'This is why networks are so important. They allow us to connect and even occasionally work with people with quite different perspectives without having to agree on everything. This opens us up and enables us to generate new insights and make break throughs that accelerate transformation. … For tackling complex problems that require ongoing innovation, experimentation and processes for scaling successes, organisation and coalitions are too right. Well-structured networks have the diversity and flexibility needed to deal with complex problems of situations.'

– June Holley, The Network Weaver

'The most successful organisational leaders understand they must turn their approach to power upside down and let local activists lead. They recognise seeding and growing vast networks of millions of passionate individuals organised around a common cause is infinitely more powerful than any single organisation or association.'

– Leslie Crutchfield, How Change Happens

Library – Mapping

8. What would a potential <u>negative scenario</u> for collaboration in the relevant context look like?

> **Ask yourselves the following questions…**
>
> - *Is there cynicism about the possibilities of collaboration?*
> - *What is your first reaction when you hear someone say we need to collaborate?*
> - *How does the call to collaboration sound when spoken by the wealthy, political leaders, the powerful, company leaders, men, the developed world?*

Visualisation

How you see depends on where you are standing. The position we are in is relative to others and others are relevant to us as we collaborate.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about negative scenarios for collaboration?

EQUALITY   EQUITY
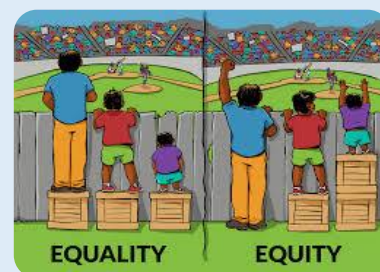
How could we explore this a bit more?

- List your deepest fears of and reservations about collaboration.
- Recall times in your life where you feel an appeal to collaboration may was used against your genuine interests.
- Reflect on how these experiences shape the steps you might take towards collaboration.
- Develop a scenario for how you see collaboration work poorly in the relevant context. Identify key factors, trends and an image, or symbol that represents a disingenuous form of collaboration.

So, what do you think about this?

If we are to introduce the possibilities of collaboration into a range of conversations - given the widespread, at least initial resistance – my sense is that we need to start with where history plants people when they hear a voice for collaboration raised. There must be room given to allowing people to feel and express doubt and even dissent.[vi] Because much good can come from collaboration does not mean we can ignore its shadow side. To be honest, it is quite understandable to be somewhat cynical about collaboration. Like its first cousin 'partnership', the sad truth is that collaboration, or its second cousins 'all in this together', 'national interest' and 'greater good' are often – maybe most often – appealed to or called on in quite disingenuous ways.

Opening the case for the possibilities of collaboration can grate. It can be profoundly counter cultural when we live in a world where so many with power use that power to control and dominate; where leaders choose and impose war; where many political elites blatantly prioritise their interests over those of wider society; where economics that destroys our planet flourish; and where it somehow is taken as 'normal' that so many organisations through all sectors seem to place their interest first.

I think we must start by acknowledging primordial and core cynicism about collaboration when the idea is misused so pervasively. The value we may discover in collaboration cannot be that you do all the work, take all the action, do the work on top of your other work, or that you work in this 'spirit' while others hold back and just do their own stuff. That you do extra while others keep their heads down. That you never hold on to a position. That all the letting go of ideas and commitments and compromising is from you. That you never disagree with an analysis or planned response. That you can be taken as 'a fool' willing to do everything without any acknowledgement or reward. A call to collaborative ways of relating cannot be allowed to be a cover up of inequity, racism, patriarchy, hierarchy, sexism. For very many people at a basic level life's experience will have brought them to a point where they have a negative disposition to collaboration.

In addition to personal experience, it is also important to acknowledge the huge weight of negativity we pick up, largely through news and social media. We often, maybe unconsciously, live with basic theories of how our world and societies work, such as veneer theory and its core belief that 'by their nature humans are selfish, aggressive and quick to panic'[vii]. We do not step into collaboration in social and public spaces where people commonly experience their world or societies being shaped by care, respect or a confidence that there are shared commitments to work together for shared good.

Quotations

'Few ideas have as much power to shape the world as our view of other people. Because ultimately, you get what you expect to get. If we want to tackle the greatest challenges of our time – from the climate crisis to our growing distrust of one another – then I think the place we need to start is our view of human nature.'

– Rutger Bregman, Humankind, A Hopeful History

'…new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. That is why the discipline of managing mental models – surfacing, testing, and improving our internal pictures of how the world works – promises to be a major breakthrough for building learning organisations.'

– Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

9. Is Collaboration (just) a means?

Visualisation

A day at the beach. Public good. Joy, play, fun, food, exercise, sky, sea. Level of collaboration in keeping it available to all as a space where all can have a good relaxing and reviving day together. A shared space.

What images, metaphors or stories come to your mind when thinking about whether collaboration is a means or an end?

How could we explore this a bit more?

- Think of a 'collective' you have been part of. What it was, what did it become, how it became and what was its value? This might be a sports team, a community, a music group, an association, a movement, work group at some point in time.
- Can you map out the values and significance it had beyond its results, or what it outwardly achieved? What were they? Why do they matter?
- Is doing it *on your own*, and *doing it better than others* so important? Maybe better if you can only do it with others, and without being better than others?

So, what do you think about this?

When collectives become, are, and at times achieve their purpose the collective entity forged is not just a means. In some way the team exists to be a team. We reduce and miss the value of the team when we think the result is just the points counted, or their position in the table, or what they achieved. The league table, the obsession with results, where only one can win obscures as much as reveals value. All the effort in each human endeavour to create, become and act for something together has enormous intrinsic value.

The choir does not exist to win the competition. It exists as much to be a collaboration of human beings able to give expression together to beauty. We are called to find the ways to be the best that we can be in the ways we are and can be connected independently of how we compare with others.

The value of community, of team lies in becoming and being team, community. The value may be realised and expressed in different ways, but the value is the hidden journey of what it has become as much as what it achieves or is reputed for.

Wide, broad, growing, and boundary crossing collaborations of many people and organisations have extraordinary value in themselves. If we gather with our differences in respect, if we transcend some of the limits of history, if we connect deeply, if we attempt to learn, if we try to contribute there is huge value to be appreciated. This value is to be discovered, mapped (who brings what? What do we make all together?) cherished *independently* of whether we achieve certain extrinsic results. Cultures corrupted by a false sense of the glory of individualism and competitiveness are too easily blind to this.

There is also an important signing and inspiration value in being pockets of hope where something of what is visioned already lives and there is respect, inclusivity, aliveness.

Above all, in my opinion, it is important not to diminish the value of our collective efforts and what we build even when they cannot overturn systems that have been built and consolidating over centuries.

Quotations

'In and through community lies the salvation of the world.'

– M. Scott Peck, The Different Drum

'So how do you change paradigms? Thomas Kuhn, who wrote the seminal book about the great paradigm shifts of science, has a lot to say about that. You keep pointing at the anomalies and failures iny the old paradigm. You keep speaking and acting, loudly and with assurance, from the new one. You insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. You don't waste time with reactionaries; rather you work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open minded'.

– Donnella Meadows, Thinking in Systems

'The surest thing I took away from my BSW, MSW, and Ph.D. in social work is this: Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering. I wanted to develop research that explained the anatomy of connection'.

– Brene Brown, Daring Greatly

"I hope that you will be lucky enough to go through life saying 'we' more often than 'I.'

– Charles Handy quoted in Caplor Horizons, A Conversation with Charles Handy 'We' beats 'I' all the time

Conclusion

As I see it changing how we collaborate is about systems change. We must attend to all the parts, and to stretch, weave, design, and map differently. Collaboration that makes the difference is so much more than being polite and getting along with other people.

I often imagine that the road to genuine effective collaboration is a bit like the moment a group of sky divers leave the plane. Only when you have let go of what brought you up there (the plane) can you really begin to discover what it is to fly. Without jumping we will never experience the true power in us that collaboration offers.

And once you do you will see everything and every possibility with such new eyes.

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[i] Adam Kahane brilliantly develops the whole idea of 'stretch' versus 'conventional collaboration'. See "Collaborating with the Enemy".

[ii] June Holley is my original inspiration for where 'weaving' fits in all things network collaboration. See, June Holley, "Network Weaving Handbook."

[iii] The role scenarios can play in transformation is most clearly set out in Adam Kahane's book on "Transformative Scenario Planning".

[iv] Brene Brown's work open ways to see vulnerability as key to connections, See "Rising Strong".

[v] Most helpful for seeing what networks are and can distinctively do. D. Ehrlichmann, "Impact Networks".

[vi] The vital importance of creating space for 'dissent' is convincingly set out by Peter Block, "Community: The Structure of Belonging".

[vii] Set out by Rutger Bergman in "Human kin, A Hopeful History".