Achieving Collaborative Advantage: Understanding the challenge and how to act

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Why Collaboration?

we found an IT solution to sharing information when everyone told us we couldn’t do it

community representative
community development partnership
Why Collaboration?

We’ve delivered ahead of time with reduced cost and better quality.
Why Collaboration?

There is this great burst of enthusiasm and excitement – it’s been absolutely fascinating, bizarre and amazing.

OU Partnership Manager
Why Collaboration?

...when it works well you feel inspired ... you can feel the collaborative energy
collaborative advantage

... something is achieved that could not have been achieved without the collaboration

...when it works well you feel inspired ... you can feel the collaborative energy
common rational for collaborative advantage

- access to resource; financial, technological, expertise
- shared risk
- efficiency
- co-ordination and seamlessness
- learning
- moral imperative; there is no other way
However...
we had great expectations ... after two years the partnership committee said we’ll stop that ... no business case could be made

Why not collaboration?
we have been cuddling each other for 10 year but we’ve made little actual progress

Why not collaboration?
... the (collaborative) project has worked out but, oh boy, it has caused pain

... the rate of output is slow ... even successful outcomes involve pain and hard grind

collaborative inertia
... something is achieved that could not have been achieved without the collaboration

... the rate of output is slow ... even successful outcomes involve pain and hard grind

... collaborative advantage

... collaborative inertia
understanding collaboration

... oh boy, it has caused pain

why inertia rather than advantage?

... you can feel the collaborative energy
understanding collaboration

focus on issues recognised by those involved as causing anxiety and reward in collaboration

- learning
- membership structures
- working processes
- resources
- common goals
- identity
- communication and language
- culture
- accountability
- social capital
- trust
- power
- leadership
- democracy and equality
- compromise
- commitment and determination
- risk
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- risk
understanding collaboration

focus on issues recognised by those involved as causing anxiety and reward in collaboration
managing goals

common wisdom

the success of collaborations depends on the extent to which partners’ goals are congruent, shared and agreed

common practice

organisational and individual agendas frequently make it difficult to agree goals
Goals paradox: goal congruence and goal diversity influence success in collaborations

**Managing Goals**

**Congruence**
- Partners and collaboration goals aligned
- Competitive conflicts of interest (reluctance to share information)

**Diversity**
- Synergy from diversity of resources
- Incompatibility conflicts of interest (seeking different outcomes)

Congruence and diversity in tension
managing goals

the success of collaborations depends on the extent to which partners’ goals are congruent, shared and agreed

common wisdom

I wanted a clear vision, a set of aims and a clear set of outcomes. And without that I wasn’t prepared to play ball.

Director of Environmental Services
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of goals</th>
<th>Issue manifestation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration’s, organisations’ and individuals’ goals</td>
<td>e.g. individuals seek to incorporate own goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Stakeholders, members</td>
<td>e.g. external parties influence the agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuine and pseudo</td>
<td>e.g. expressed goals may be purely nominal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration dependent / independent</td>
<td>e.g. irrelevant goals creep into the agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process and substance</td>
<td>e.g. process goals may be more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit, unstated and hidden</td>
<td>e.g. real goals may not have been expressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
collaborative advantage

... the bringing together of different resources and expertise provide the basis for getting advantage from collaborating

collaborative inertia

... joint actions must satisfy many different agendas
the practical conclusion ....

sometimes it’s best to get started on some action without fully agreeing on goals

we have to write a statement of aims to justify our existence ... my job is to find a way of writing it so that none of the parties involved can disagree
If you are going to work collaboratively with another organisation there must be shared values and culture.

Common wisdom: Partners will bring to the collaboration different ways of being, interacting and working.

Managing Culture
The organisation has a difficult culture and they’re very politically motivated, they get messages from on high that send them all into a bit of a spin.

Encountering otherness

Cultural awareness is necessary to understand the issues affecting a collaboration.
For a year I sat on the SIP board as a nodding Dove... I hadn't a Scooby what they were talking about...

Incompatible professional cultures

Terminology may not readily translate across organisational and cultural boundaries
Work in spite of our systems, even with the best partnership we’ve got, we’re struggling and clunky.

**Incompatible organisational cultures**

Things that are easy to do in your organisation may not be straightforward to do in another.
I do it sneakily - I arrange things sneakily rather than put it in the budget.

Incompatible national cultures

Things that are expected in one culture may not be acceptable in another.

Partnership Manager, Russia, Rumania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria
collaborative advantage
... the bringing together of difference (resources and expertise) provide the basis for getting advantage from collaborating

... joint actions requires a resolution of the points at which different cultures intersect

collaborative inertia
Harnessing cultural diversity

**Flexibility**
accommodate the intersection of different cultures.

**Rigidity**
preserve distinct organisational cultural resources

**Autonomy**
Individuals need to act on behalf of their organisations

**Accountability**
Organisations’ interests must be protected

**Complexity**
Embracing complexity is necessary to harness resources

**Control**
Control is necessary to steer the joint agenda forward.
Common wisdom:

- Trust is a precondition for successful collaboration.

Common practice:

- Suspicion is the starting point - partners are often needed where trust is weak.
Research says

The trust building loop:

- **Reinforce trusting attitudes**
- **Gain underpinnings for more ambitious collaboration**
- **Aim for realistic (initially modest) but successful outcomes**
- **Form expectations about the future of the collaboration based on reputation or past behaviour or contracts and agreements**
- **Have enough trust and take a risk to initiate the collaboration**

The trust building loop.
Regeneration Partnership

Community Organisations

Charity

Collaboration

Community Partnership

Local Employer

Bank

Voluntary Organisations

Umbrella Group

Community Group

Charity

Community Organisations

Local Authority

Planning

Education

Housing

Social Work

Regeneration Partnership

complexity
managing complexity
collaborations tend to be *dynamic*, “movable feasts”

- organisational restructuring and mergers
- new strategies
- new government policies and incentives

*will* change the structure and purpose of existing joint initiatives

and individuals *will* make career moves
it's hard to agree goals, accommodate cultural diversity, communicate and build mutual understanding, manage power relationships, build trust and maintain continuity in complex, dynamic structures.

reinforce trusting attitudes

aim for realistic (initially modest) but successful outcomes

in underpinnings for more ambitious collaboration

dynamics make the trust building loop fragile
our conclusions ...

contradictions, tensions and dilemmas

complexity

multiple views

dynamics

frustration of intention
our conclusions ...

collaborations are by nature inefficient

use them sparingly

reserve your energy for situations when real collaborative advantage can be envisaged
our conclusions ...

achieving collaborative advantage requires compromise, energy, commitment and care

nurture, nurture, nurture
our conclusions ...

serendipity and success ...

“the right people from different organisations came together at the right time”

“we also tried and abandoned many other collaborative initiatives; this is the one that worked”

enhancing serendipity
managing to collaborate involves using the available tools as conceptual handles to aid thinking knowing what to nurture

understanding the complexity

accepting the pain it is a relief and a reassurance to see that the pain and grind of partnership work exists in other partnerships, not just my situation

I am beginning to understand what is going on

... everything I thought I knew about how to achieve change doesn’t feel good enough

our conclusions ...
Managing to Collaborate: the theory and practice of collaborative advantage.

12th January 2012

Make it Happen

Why much of what we do ensures that our strategies won’t be implemented

Professor Brian D Smith
Visiting Research Fellow

www8.open.ac.uk/business-school/corporate/business-network/breakfast-briefings