

Essential Competencies for Collaborative Partnerships: Nine Lessons

How can we collaborate more effectively?

Lesson #1: Know Thyself

Social science research helps us understand that each person brings a set of biases, values, and assumptions to all situations. Each of us has a map or mental model inside our heads that creates meaning for the things we experience. This mental model carries many assumptions, values and thus, expectations. Since it is impossible for one person to absorb all input and still take action, a mental model is developed as a selection process that pulls out specific but limited data. This mental model allows us to make sense of the world by selecting out information based on our knowledge, skills, experiences, and values. We work very hard to match the experiences we have with our mental models. We have mental models, for example, for music, for football, for other people, for ourselves, and for collaboration.

Often there are commonly shared mental models for more simple concepts, such as a chair or a flower. However, the more complex the concept, the more divergent mental models can be. Collaboration is initially based on individual mental models. For collaboration to become a shared mental model, partners and teams must tease out what a collaborative process entails and what outcomes are expected. Fleshying this out along the way is critical to the process, as our individuality mediates our models. Each person in the organization will have a somewhat different mental model of how the collaboration will proceed. This individual process is complex and partially explains why there are many different realities that simultaneously exist (Senge, 1990).

Shared values and goals are a foundational part of the overarching mental structure that drives collaborative efforts. Therefore, it is important to evaluate personal goals and values, and to make them explicitly conscious. This requires the dualistic pursuit of self-knowledge and knowledge of others' mental models. A regular practice step is to be reflective. This requires frequent inquiry to recognize your values and priorities both professionally and personally. For example, do you know what type of interpersonal style you use in relating to colleagues? Do you observe whether your actions align with your values and priorities? Do you know your "hot buttons?" This term, "hot button" is often used to describe a strong emotional or knee-jerk reaction, one that any person can have when perceiving that a key value is being degraded or disrespected. Lack of awareness of these hot buttons, or emotional drivers, limits the ability to proactively respond to difficult situations in constructive ways.

The current context of different mental models of collaboration and status differences between team members, combined with the need to communicate regularly to reach agreements, reflects the complexity of skill and effort needed for effective collaboration. There are no easy answers or shortcuts. Patience and a genuine interest in self-inquiry are requisite. The appreciation that each of us carries a different mental model links to the next lesson on valuing diversity.

Lesson #2: Learn to Value and Manage Diversity

Gender communication becomes a diversity element critical to understand if collaborative efforts are to be strengthened. Generally, men are more task oriented and women more relationship oriented (Tannen, 1990). While it is dangerous to stereotype gender communications in absolute terms, ignoring differences is equally dangerous. Collaboration requires a focus on both task and relationships.

Learning more about gender communication can strengthen any communication repertoire. Gender communication is an example of a social pattern that adds diversity and knowledge to the interaction and thus enhances collaboration.

The invisible strengths of cognitive diversity must be optimized. Researchers have noted for some time that a team's cognitive capability is related to its cognitive diversity. Greater diversity can provide the potential for greater capacity for making complex decisions, where varied interests need to be balanced. Without diverse perspectives, no synthesis can occur and decision quality suffers (Amason, 1996; Murray, 1989). An appreciation of cognitive diversity must be put into action if communication is to be effectively focused on true collaboration. However, it takes a conscious effort to optimize diversity. It is said that people like people like themselves. It is natural to be initially more comfortable with people who have similar work styles and experiences as us. Often in a group situation comfortable connections are made and group norms are established; but the opportunity to optimize collaboration with different team members is often missed. This lack of seeking diversity of perspectives can unintentionally lead to exclusiveness and diminished use of available professional resources. This exclusionary practice has been labelled a negative side of collaboration (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Appreciative inquiry and dialogue are communication methods that can facilitate greater collaboration efforts. Appreciative inquiry is a theory and approach (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) used in organizational development to focus on the positive strengths of an organization and the possibilities rather than the problems. Multiple stakeholders with differing perspectives are asked to work together and develop a shared vision, strategies for implementation, and assessment of gains. This communication approach is one of active listening, positive regard for differences, and the belief in multiple realities. Visioning together what would be possible and how to get to such improved outcomes is different from a problem solving-approach.

Dialogue is another communications process that facilitates thinking and questioning together. In dialogue, conversations focus on surfacing assumptions, goals, and values, and summarizing disparate ideas in search of connections. This type of strategic conversation allows for further exploration and clarification of different vantage points, thus allowing for the development of new knowledge. Information sharing is increased and expertise within the group begins to surface, leading to a new valuation of difference as a context for innovation (Isaacs, 1999). Few team leaders possess the depth of communication skills required to facilitate appreciative inquiry or dialogue. Adding such a facilitator at key junctures in the collaborative process could result in powerful and new outcomes.

Listening to and observing team members to better recognize their values, goals, and ways of communicating are critical actions to engage in, if mutually beneficial partnerships are to develop. This takes time and effort. Formal and informal interactions can be opportunities for learning about the diversity of styles and perceptions within a team.

Lesson #3: Develop Constructive Conflict Resolution Skills

The inevitability of conflict among collaborating parties has been well documented since the time of Florence Nightingale (Jones, 1993; Kalish & Kalish, 1977; O'Neill, 1990).

Despite longstanding concern over ineffective conflict management, it continues to dominate. It may be the most critical obstacle to effective collaboration (Abramson & Rosenthal, 1995). Many professionals have not been socialized to understand the potentially positive aspects of conflict and to recognize that positive affective relationships and conflict are equally important to effective decision making (Amason, 1996).

Conflict resolution is the cornerstone of collaborative success. The nature of conflict, like that of collaboration, is complex. Conflict can both hinder and facilitate collaboration. When using conflict to facilitate collaboration, it is helpful to distinguish between emotional conflict and task conflict. Emotional conflict centers on relationships between individuals and can evolve from a task conflict. Task conflict centers on judgmental differences about how to achieve a common objective. Task conflict is often easier to address than emotional conflict. A cognitive debate over how to approach a

task can facilitate development of a shared understanding and create the necessary perspective for problem solving (Jehn, 1995).

Collaborative leaders must be able to facilitate debate (conflict) over task issues and promote the expression of different perspectives concerned with how problems are defined and approached. If emotional conflict and personal issues surface within the team context, leaders need to be able to redirect concerns away from a personal level to the task issues. It is expected that the persons involved in personal issues will resolve these matters outside of the group discussion. Group intervention should only come if the interpersonal conflict begins to consistently disrupt the teamwork. When emotional conflict is experienced within a partnership context, it needs to be discussed, not avoided. Specific cues or words that are leading to the conflict are most effective when giving this type of feedback. An example might be to reference a tone of voice or lack of eye contact. How non-verbal communications are being interpreted and how those messages are impacting the receiver being presented can provide a base for exploring the conflict.

Follett (1940) described another important consideration for conflict resolution. She explained that conflict is resolved, not by one side dominating the other, or by compromising, but by a creative integration that meets the differing needs of the collaborating parties. Cognitively, rather than thinking of alternatives that lock into either/or situations, a collaborative approach develops a synthesis of perspectives to invent a third alternative. This synthesis of perspectives is the desired outcome of collaboration.

Many books have been written about conflict negotiation. One that has stood this test of time is the Harvard Negotiation Project based on 15 years of research focused on a collaborative approach to constructively resolving conflicts (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999). This project provides a useful model for handling conflict by offering stages for conflict resolution. These stages include: using reflection to prepare one's self, starting a difficult conversation, and keeping it focused no matter how the other person responds. This process is particularly effective in one-on-one situations.

Lesson #4: Use Your Power to Create Win-Win Situations

Unfortunately, conflict resolution is often focused on the single power concept of dominance. Dominance is a victory of one side over another. However, dominance is not successful in the long term for building commitment because the side that is defeated will wait for a chance to dominate. It is an automatic response to use dominant power, such as formal position, when conflict surfaces. Often this behaviour lies outside one's awareness. Dominant power is incompatible with the integration of multiple perspectives, so critical to solving complex problems like those in society today. It creates a win/lose environment and leads to the persistent creation of unacknowledged, uneven discussions where one side dominates and difference is silenced.

The dominant power-oscillation-without-development scenario has been illustrated by Raven and Kruglanski (1970). They studied how two parties try to influence each other during a conflict. These authors observed that when both parties used coercive (dominant) power, there was greater distancing, greater distrust, and greater attribution of negative qualities to the other while holding oneself in higher esteem. In contrast, when both parties effectively used referent (goodwill) power emphasizing their communalities, less distancing, less distrust, greater cooperation, and de-escalation of conflict occurred.

Collaboration operates on a model of shared power (Gray, 1994). However, this does not mean equal formal power. Role status in hierarchical systems is an invisible structure that connotes a formal or dominant level of power, which creates a power imbalance between group members. To achieve collaboration, participants must have some form of mutual exchange. It is the task of one negotiating in a conflict to increase his or her potential for success by actively structuring for a more even power base.

French and Raven (1959) have identified a number of informal power bases, some of which include the power of information, expertise, and goodwill. Goodwill power, described as respecting others and assuming noble intentions of others, enhances interdisciplinary collaboration and mediates or decreases the negative effects of task conflict on collaboration. Asking for opinions from quiet, less verbal participants can demonstrate goodwill and facilitate the sharing of power.

Lesson #5: Master Interpersonal and Process Skills

Both interpersonal and organizational skills are needed for successful collaboration. Important interpersonal attributes include clinical competence, cooperation and flexibility (Trickett & Ryerson Espino, 2004); self-confidence and assertiveness (Keenan, Cooke, & Hillis, 1998); patience to listen to one another's rationale and the ability to take risks (Stoep, Williams, Green, & Trupin, 1999); and the ability to operate in multicultural contexts, tolerate ambiguity, be self-reflective, and convey a value that places the organizational needs above the needs of individual team members (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998).

An organizational skill essential for collaboration is systems thinking, the ability to see the contextual situation from the perspective of the entire system. This perspective involves understanding the connections between the multiple factors (i.e., power structure, political forces, finances, and policies) that influence the development of complex problems, as well as that of a collaborative process. Systems thinking and all of the skills mentioned above take time to master. Their development is similar in rigor and complexity to that of mastering a clinical skill. Therefore, as a layer of understanding the contextual backdrop of collaboration, it is useful to recognize how organizational context and collaboration itself evolve over time.

Lesson #6: Recognize that Collaboration is a Journey

Establishing rapport, clarifying expectations, and requesting feedback are strategies necessary to begin collaborative relationships. Each successive collaborative effort builds on previous collaboration experiences and provides a reference for future efforts. In collaborative relationships, success breeds success. Each subsequent success is a step in the journey of cumulative learning from each other.

Since a collaborative relationship evolves over time, limited time is a key barrier to these relationships. This lack of time to talk limits the opportunities to build rapport with each other. Trust-building opportunities increase in tandem with opportunities to communicate. Thus, making time for responsive face-to-face interaction to work out issues must be fostered if collaboration is to develop. Although not everyone will have as strong a desire to collaborate as you might have, don't allow negative responses to put a stop to your efforts.

Lesson #7: Appreciate that Collaboration Can Occur Spontaneously

Although it is often helpful to structure times for collaboration, it is also important to realize that sometimes the best collaborative experiences occur spontaneously. Consider an illustration in which a spontaneous conversation begins in the hallway. Soon one of the participants suggests the use of a whiteboard, and the conversation moves into a conference room where the idea being created can now be visually communicated to enhance a shared understanding. As synergy develops, an excitement begins as new connections are being made both within each participant as well as between them. Who has more power is not an issue. The exchange is the center of the excitement. Roles fade into the background and mutual discovery is in the foreground. The experience culminates with a shared commitment to take an agreed upon action.

Although such experiences are often fleeting, hard to explain to others, and even harder to re-create, it is important to recognize the benefits that can come from such spontaneous collaboration. Frequently, new knowledge is created as people spontaneously begin to work together on complex

problems within an organization. This occurs because people learn from each other all the time. Often individuals do not realize, at least consciously, what they learn from each other. Sometimes they don't even realize that they learn from each other. It has been observed in product development teams that successful collaboration for innovative outcomes is often not conscious. Sometimes trying to make collaboration happen through structures such as task force meetings, may in fact decrease the capacity to collaborate (Mintzberg et al., 1996).

Lesson #8: Balance Autonomy and Unity in Collaborative Relationships

Collaborative interaction is not automatic. Most interactions tend to be more cooperative or more assertive in nature. Cooperation can be described as working to meet others' needs, whereas assertiveness is used to meet one's own needs. In contrast, collaboration involves mutual attempts to find integrative solutions that meet the needs of both self and others. In collaborative interactions, both parties' concerns are recognized and addressed; different perspectives are merged or bridged (Thomas, 1976).

However, excessive merging can be unproductive. Close relationships may become closed relationships as positions and patterns of interacting become fixed. Collaborative efforts that result in tightly knit groups often view outsiders as the enemy, or can make outsiders feel like the enemy. A team that works together too long often reduces communication with outside people and begins to see only the virtue and superiority of its own ideas.

Hampden-Turner (1970) defined synergy as an optimal balance between individualism and integration. Too much autonomy and individualism can lead to isolation; yet too much integration can lead to diffusion. When this occurs, perspectives merge until parties have nothing new to offer each other. Should this occur, redirect focus on the individual force and adopt reflective practices, be willing to seek feedback, and admit mistakes. Collaboration is indeed a fine balance between autonomy and unity.

Lesson #9: Remember that Collaboration is Not Required for All Decisions

When to use collaboration is a question worth exploring. Collaboration is best used to solve "wicked" problems. These are problems with imperfect, changing, or divergent solutions. However, collaborative relationships can be intense, unbalanced, and tiring.

Collaboration is not consistently good, nor pervasively beneficial; nor is it always needed. Not all problems are complex (Mintzberg et. al, 1996). Autonomous decision making still plays a vital role. Taking the time to provide group input into simple decisions may not be cost-effective. No one process, no matter how encompassing, fits all situations. Judgment is needed.