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Thinking About the “Business” of Collaboration

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Introduction

We have probably all been involved in collaborations over the years, some fruitful, some not. I have participated in many, but have not had the opportunity to look at collaboration as a structured, definable process. Recently I sat down and organized my thoughts regarding collaboration prior to looking into the subject formally. What I would like to do here is to share those thoughts and some references with you in the hope that this might stimulate your interest in looking at collaboration on a more “business like” basis.

Levels of Collaboration

Firstly, from my perspective there are various types or **Levels** of collaboration. I use the term “levels” because of the varying intensity of the interactive processes involved.

For example, there is what we might call **Twinned Work**. In this case participants work hand-in-hand addressing the same aspects of the work, and doing so jointly. This can include a think-tank process wherein all assembled work on the same issue. This is probably the most intense level.

Another possibility is what I’ll call **Joint Work**: participants in this case work on a project separately but complementarily. Each takes an aspect of the work, but the whole depends on each performing his/her contribution, i.e., there is little or no overlap. Joint work itself has a spectrum of levels, with more of the content of the work shifting to one or other party. Examples might include **Joint Dominant Partner** where most of the work is undertaken or falls on one partner, or **Joint Equal Partner** where the work is distributed roughly evenly.

The least intense level of collaboration I’ve called **Co-ordinated Work**. In this case, participants work separately, but periodically update each other on progress (“throw stuff over the fence”). There may or may not be an agreement regarding separation of areas of work.

I suppose there is at least one other possibility that I will call **Parallel Work**, where each goes off and does his or her own thing, but then come back together from time to time to share insights. This is about as close to non-collaboration as collaboration can get!

Kinds of Collaboration

At any of these intensity levels, it seems to me that there are a number of possible **Types** of collaboration. I have organized these in descending order of the earliness or completeness of the involvement in the project.

One type I would call **Concept Framing**, where participants work

together to develop a concept, framework, method, or the like. They establish the very nature of the project and/or its methods. The next type I would call **Concept Expansion**. In this type of collaboration, the participants work together to expand, clarify, or more fully articulate a concept, framework, method already initiated by one of them or by each of them separately. Participants can collaborate in **Development**, where they work together to create a new object or capability. One of them or someone else could have framed and expanded the concept, and they work to make it real. In a project, the latest type of collaboration I’d call **Critiquing**. In this case one or other of the participants examines, criticizes, evaluates, suggests improvements to, tests, or otherwise interacts with the product(s) of the other. The person(s) critiquing may have had no other involvement whatever in the project prior to that.

These are not meant to be exhaustive and probably are not. However, they make it clear that there are a number of types and levels of collaboration - it is not a single formless thing.

Timing of Beginning Collaboration

In thinking about this, it also came to mind that the level and type of collaboration has a starting point. In the case of **Co-Work**, the partners begin the project together, although each might have worked on somewhat related work prior to the collaboration. **Merged Work** is a bit different. Here each partner has previously been working on aspects of a common issue, the subject of the collaboration, and the parties elect to bring the two parts together, again with a spectrum of possible distribution of the work between the parties.

The Value of Collaboration

It seems to me we elect to collaborate because we see greater value in collaborating than proceeding independently.

The following are the benefits we might get out of collaborating:

- We become able to carry out projects beyond the ability of an individual researcher.
- We are able to assemble a team with the full set of capabilities required to address a problem, issue, or topic.
- We enable a team to achieve desired outcomes in finite time, e.g., through parallelism.
- We reduce our dependence on single individuals.
- We foster increased cross-fertilization, intellectual stimulation, debate, and critique.

- We raise our credibility to funding agencies.
- We are able to rationalize resources and effort and achieve efficiency with one team effort instead of many individual efforts.
- We reduce redundancy in research.
- We are able to realize the enjoyment of working together.

The Challenges of Collaboration:

So, we have many levels and types of collaboration, and there are definite benefits from collaboration. What is hard about collaboration? What are the “costs”?

One of the earliest challenges in collaboration is **Team Building and Maintenance**: the challenge of putting together and keeping together a group with the required capability cross-section of participants who are also able to function in a collaborative environment. Once we have a team, **Responsibility Determination** rears its head: who is responsible for doing what and when? How should we address any defaults? If we get past these, then, much like in marriage, **Funds Administration** becomes the focus. How will the funds of the project be distributed and who is responsible for this? What is the appeal process? This factor rocks many boats.

Next are the **Interactivity Requirements/Limits**. This involves the definition of the terms of working together: what is the required attendance at meetings? Which reports and other communications are required? What is expected in terms of joint discussion versus independent decisions? And on and on. There need to be pre-defined rules or at least guidelines regarding expectations on interactivity. **Research/Development Responsibilities** are another bugbear: who is required to do what? To what level of quality? By when?

Then decisions need to be made in the area of **Publication Rules**. This entails defining who may publish what and when, and permissions, reviews, etc. that are required. Within the area of publication, there is also the issue of **Authorship Precedence** the rubric for determining the order of authorship. Beyond authorship there is the challenge of defining **Intellectual Property Ownership**, who owns what and how will any derived wealth be distributed.

In my consulting career, a number of my mentors beat into my head the need to document, in the business plan for new ventures, the cost of exiting a business. This subject is the **Escape Clause**. How can a collaborator graciously exit the process, and what are the ex-collaborator's rights (e.g., to authorship, publication, publicity)? Then there is the matter of **Team Expansion**. What are the rules for bringing new members into the team and what are their rights and responsibilities.

Anyone who has been there knows that these are real challenges, and will aver that ignoring them is a sure pathway to trouble and failure. I maintain that collaboration is a kind of “business” and there needs to be a degree of business formality and informed management...things not often in the skill set of the average researcher. In particular there needs to be a **“Collaboratorship” Agreement** that explicitly addresses the above issues and does so in a form that is acceptable to the collaborators. This should be a document, and the classic partnership agreement might be a basic model for it. My concern, though, is not the form, it is its existence.

The Devils of Collaboration

Maybe knowing how things can go wrong will help in formalizing an agreement. The following are types of problems that bedevil projects that I have encountered, but maybe you have some of your

own that you can suggest.

1. **Inactive/Less-Active-Than-Agreed Partners**: collaborators who elect or circumstances cause them to become inactive or not carry out their responsibilities completely or at all.
2. **Control Takers**: collaborators who inappropriately subsume a controlling position in the collaboration, taking the work in directions not agreed to or not desired by others.
3. **Over-Managers**: sometimes project managers are chose to manage research projects, and attempt to exercise a level of control that is more appropriate to product development.
4. **Greedy Partners**: collaborators who militate for increases in their share of the funds or who appropriate intellectual property, without regard to agreements.
5. **Information Starvation**: this is where one or more of the collaborators fail to produce key information, slowing or halting the work of others.
6. **Credit Takers**: collaborators who position themselves to take or get an inappropriate level or kind of credit for the work.
7. **Disrupters**: collaborators who engender or cause conflict among team members leading to reduced morale or effectiveness of the team.
8. **Rogue Publishers/Communicators**: individuals who publish or communicate information without approval/agreement.
9. **Prisoners of the Project**: collaborators who wish to leave the project, but are unable to find an appropriate means of exit.
10. **Prisoners of the Concept**: the inability to change the direction of or terminate the work if it becomes counter-productive to continue in a given direction.

These are sometimes not easy to avoid. In fact, the lack of a collaboratorship agreement virtually guarantees that one or more of these devils will “possess” the project.

Some General Reflections

After thinking about it for a while, it seems to me that collaborations are much akin to business partnerships. Like business partnerships, some formality must be employed if a degree of order is to be had and success is to be reasonably assured. We need to be reminded of a fact, preached to me by my accountant, that the average business partnership lasts only about 2 years. Clearly partnership is a meta-stable state.

In addition to reading books and articles on collaboration, it would appear that it might be useful to review the literature on business partnerships and to use wisdom garnered from this area to guide the formalization of collaboratorships.

As I mentioned earlier, I am only beginning to think about this area in a structured way, and I have only begun to review the literature on collaboration. I know I have a lot of learning to do. But I have already realized through painful experience that there are many psychological and sociological/social aspects of collaboration. These need to be recognized, understood, and taken into account if

we are to be good collaborators and good collaboration leaders. Sometimes, for example, people may come to just not like each other or to react negatively to each other's styles. Others may feel concerned that their work is being usurped or ignored. Still others might feel they are being directed and that they're losing their freedom and independence. Greed may come into the picture, someone wanting special credit or a greater "take" from the project. It is also easy for insecurity to lead to dysfunction within the group.

Interestingly, collaboration within an organization might be more challenging than between organizations. Sometimes the silo-istic nature of organizations blocks collaboration by denying credit or recognition for anything undertaken beyond the person's home faculty.

It seems to me that introducing some of the principles of chaordic management (see Dee Hoc) may be essential in academic collaborations. This theory of management forswears the classic command and control approach to management and substitutes the idea of purpose-united, but highly autonomous teams having a high degree of tactical freedom.

Many collaborations depend on one individual who is the anointed or de facto leader (often called the Principal Investigator or PI). The facilitation and management skills of this individual are critical to maintaining the team and project, especially if this individual does not hold the purse strings.

Competencies for Collaboration

Finally, I'd just like to end with the thought that there are discrete competencies required to develop and maintain collaborations and to be a collaborator. These are beyond the expertise required for the research itself. Some of the competencies that seem particularly important are: Interpersonal Skills, Stakeholder Analysis, Team-building Skills, Facilitation Skills, Negotiation Principles and Techniques, Principles of Partnership Formation and Management, Knowledge of and Experience with Group Management Techniques, Management Knowledge, especially Chaordic Management, Principles of Group Dynamics, Knowledge of Potential Collaborators and their Capabilities, Knowledge of and Experience with Collaboration-Support Technologies, Leadership Skills, Project Management Skills, and Conflict Management Skills.

I would be interested in your thoughts on this topic. Meanwhile, best of luck with your collaborations...but don't leave them to luck!

Acknowledgements

A number of these ideas in this article were stimulated by discussions with Dr. Alex Jadad and Shirley Fenton; I thank them for this. This work has been supported by Agfa Inc., NSERC and the University of Waterloo



SELECTED BOOKS ON COLLABORATION

Thomas E. Ogden, Israel A. Goldberg
RESEARCH Proposals A Guide to Success 3rd edition
Academic Press, 2002
ISBN: 0125247338

Robert Axelrod
The Complexity of Cooperation-Agent-Based Models of
Competition and Collaboration
Princeton University Press, 1997
ISBN: 0691015686

Guy Oakes and Arthur J. Vidich
Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life:
University of Illinois Press, 1999
ISBN: 0525024842

Jim Bryant
The Six Dilemmas of Collaboration-Inter-organisational
Relationships as Drama
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2003
ISBN: 0470843926

Lisa Gundry/Laurie LaMantia
BREAKTHROUGH TEAMS FOR BREAKNECK TIMES-Unlocking the
Genius of Creative Collaboration
Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2001
ISBN: 0793142733

David Straus
HOW TO MAKE COLLABORATION WORK-Powerful Ways to Build
Consensus, Solve Problems, and Make Decisions
BK Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2002
ISBN: 1576751287

Helen Sullivan and Shris Skelcher
WORKING ACROSS BOUNDARIES-COLLABORATION IN PUBLIC
SERVICES
Palgrave Macmillan, 2002
ISBN: 0333961501

Seymour B. Sarason & Elizabeth M. Lorentz
Crossing Boundaries-Collaboration, Coordination, and the
Redefinition of Resources
Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998
ISBN: 0787910694

James E. Austin
The Collaboration Challenge How Nonprofits and Businesses
Succeed Through Strategic Alliances
Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000
ISBN: 0787952206