

Practical ideas...on how to create more collaborative Stakeholder relationships

Factors that need to be present to ensure effective collaboration

Outlined below are the key conditions that need to be present to drive effective collaboration. Depending on the nature of the situation or opportunity, different degrees to which these elements need to be present. Somewhat like a recipe, the elements below are akin to a 'list of ingredients' that are required, however the 'quantity' of each element will be dependent on the situation. In some cases weakness in one element may require building a compensatory strength in other elements. The key elements, in no specified order, are:

1. **Shared understanding of the issue / perspectives.** Taking the time to understand the issues and perspectives of all involved is critical. This involves understanding not just the WHAT (the position) but the WHY (the interests.)
2. **Willingness / commitment to participate.** Where a collaboration opportunity exists and is recognised collaborative effort will be optimised where there is a commitment or willingness to participate. This can be achieved through either voluntary or directed means, although likely to be more effective if voluntary.
3. **Clear and shared goals.** Goals that are shared by all collaboration partners need to be agreed and understood upfront that articulate the outcomes seeking to be achieved. These also provide the frame that supports 'give and take' and working with differences.
4. **Mutual benefits/buy-in.** There needs to be benefits for all the parties in the collaboration effort with the aim of creating a 'win-win' situation. It is important for all parties to understand and believe in the mutual benefits that will flow from their collaboration.
5. **Trusting relationships.** Effective collaboration is more likely in situations where there is (pre-existing) trust, respect, honesty and openness in relationships. Where levels of trust are not strong other elements in this model may need to be further emphasised.
6. **Right skills, knowledge, behaviours and support structures.** The effectiveness of the collaborative effort will be somewhat dependent on having people involved that have the necessary skills, knowledge and behaviours that are required for the task at hand and are supported and encouraged to use them.
7. **Appropriate governance arrangements.** Clear and agreed protocols ideally exist around such things as roles and responsibilities, decision-making processes, timeframes, scope, progress reviews and evaluation. These will likely be more prominent in projects, however some protocols or principles may be desirable in less formal circumstances.
8. **Senior leadership commitment and support.** The willingness to participate will in some cases be enhanced by a strong and visible commitment by senior leaders. This may be especially important when there may not be true reciprocity in the situation providing 'mutual benefit' to all parties.
9. **There is a situation / opportunity that will benefit from a collaborative effort.** It seems like an obvious condition, but collaboration for 'collaborations sake' does not guarantee a better outcome. The choice depends largely on whether individual achievements can deliver the group's performance aspirations, or whether collective work products, activities and skills are needed.

This represents a list of items that can be used as either a planning or diagnostic tool/checklist. It can be used to plan deliberate effort to achieve collaboration by making sure that all the key building blocks are in place or it can be used to diagnose a situation where collaboration is not working well and may benefit from some strategic interventions around some of these elements.

Necessary Conditions for Collaboration

1. **Shared understanding of the issue / perspectives.** Taking the time to understand the issues and perspectives of all involved is critical. This involves understanding not just the WHAT (the position) but the WHY (the interests.)
 - Early on, invest time that enables a thorough exploration of the current situation. All parties need a chance to articulate what is working / not working, and how they envision things could be in the future.
 - take the time to understand each stakeholder's story : what is happening, what is important, their perspectives, activities and pressures
 - explore both the WHAT (the position) and the WHY (the interests) to understand their motivation drivers and WIIF Them
 - understand what they might need to make a decision
 - organise meetings with an open-mindset - one of curiosity not purely to share your agenda
 - make it a two-way street : facilitate an opportunity to share your story - how things are from your perspective
2. **Willingness / commitment to participate.** Where a collaboration opportunity exists and is recognised collaborative effort will be optimised where there is a commitment or willingness to participate. This can be achieved through either voluntary or directed means, although likely to be more effective if voluntary.
 - Be mindful of the insights gained from the 'shared understanding of the issue / perspectives' to help facilitate further buy-in.
 - Take the time to ensure there is adequate resourcing. This may involve re-prioritising other tasks, seconding people and / or communicating changes to appropriate stakeholders.
 - Take the time to understand 'the business' of each stakeholder, finding out when are good times for them to contribute, being mindful of their other priorities.
 - Ensure active participation of all members by giving them task and process roles.
 - Focus on building strong communication structures and patterns. The activities around governance structures will help here.
 - Ensure the right people have an opportunity to contribute at the right time.
3. **Clear and shared goals.** Goals that are shared by all collaboration partners need to be agreed and understood upfront that articulate the outcomes seeking to be achieved. These also provide the frame that supports 'give and take' and working with differences.
 - Collectively discuss and agree the purpose for the collaboration. It helps to discuss the meanings and language used so these are collectively understood.
 - Make time to imagine what success would look like and appropriate timelines and outcomes.
4. **Mutual benefits / buy-in.** There needs to be benefits for all the parties in the collaboration effort with the aim of creating a 'win-win' situation. It is important for all parties to understand and believe in the mutual benefits that will flow from their collaboration.
 - Before anything is formalised, individuals should collectively explore the potential mutual benefits, and ensure all parties agree to the potential value of the collaboration. The activities above will help identify these benefits.
 - Plan to do work in manageable and reasonable timelines.

Necessary Conditions for Collaboration

- 5. Trusting relationships.** Effective collaboration is more likely in situations where there is trust, respect, honesty and openness in relationships. Where levels of trust are not strong other elements in this model may need to be further emphasised.
- People are more willing to do things for people they know and like. So time needs to be allocated for people to get to know each other - as human beings, as well as to become familiar with the skills and capabilities of each other.
 - o organise coffee catch-ups that are purely to get to know the person - as a person
 - o take the time to find things in common
 - Collaboration is about purposeful conversations. Dealings should be honest, respectful and transparent. Individuals involved should work hard to demonstrate collaboration skills (see below).
 - If the collaboration involves the formation of a team, education about 'team stages' and how to work well within these stages should be part of skill development.
 - Where possible, there should be stable membership of collaborative associations for particular pieces of work. 'Heritage relationships' are important to build on in future collaborations.
 - Make sure the right people are involved and informed.
 - It may help to engineer extended links between staff who may not naturally interact, in anticipation of future collaborations.
- 6. Right skills, knowledge, behaviours and support structures.** The effectiveness of the collaborative effort will be somewhat dependent on having people involved that have the necessary skills, knowledge and behaviours that are required for the task at hand and are supported and encouraged to use them.
- Where possible, train people in collaboration skills. Recognise that collaboration takes time and time needs to be allowed for both the 'process of collaboration' as well as the time needed to complete the specific tasks associated with the collaboration. Where appropriate, those involved should talk through the factors that contribute to effective collaboration (on the left) and the tools and methods they think will help fast track collaborations.
 - Those involved should invest effort in collaboration skills such as:
 - o active listening + asking effective questions
 - o clear communication - eg clarifying or summarising points, using a variety of communication channels (not just email - phone, video conference, face to face)
 - o being responsive, organised and meeting deadlines, keeping to task and time, keeping promises
 - o being mindful of assumptions that might be influencing relationships and work practices
 - o seeking feedback - with intent to find better ways for interactions in the future
 - o holding productive meetings
 - o resolving conflicts
 - Technology should be exploited to help facilitate collaboration practices. Consideration needs to be given to infrastructure and resources that enable learning, communication and collaboration.
 - Where possible, people should find ways to integrate collaboration into the workflow - ie it not be seen as a 'nice to have'.
 - Attention needs to be given to the creation of an environment of transparent, honest communication, as well as clear protocols for exchanging information. (Take the time to consider

Necessary Conditions for Collaboration

who needs to know what - and what is the best mechanism to facilitate that happening?)

- People should also be trained in 'managing up' to ensure managers are across the work, and so there is responsive communication up, down and across.
- People in the roles should also have adequate authority to make decisions, and where this is not complete, regular communication with senior leaders so there can be agility with decision making.
- People should also explore the different 'cultures' that may exist in different parts of the business or from others external to the business.
- Time should be taken to capture best practices and understand the mistakes to learn from.

7. Appropriate governance arrangements. Clear and agreed protocols ideally exist around such things as roles and responsibilities, decision-making processes, timeframes, scope, progress reviews and evaluation. These will likely be more prominent in projects, however some protocols or principles may be desirable in less formal circumstances.

- Take the time to:
 - o establish clear terms of reference
 - o get clarity about roles, responsibilities, resourcing + decision making authority
 - o explore technology that can facilitate collaboration activities
- Take time to explore 'values' and preferences in ways of working together (a code of conduct).
- Build time for 'Reflective practice' into meetings. This should review the process as well as the content of the work. For eg, how people are working together, how people are feeling, whether all people are making contributions / feel able to make contributions, frustrations and achievements, communication processes etc. Learnings should be captured.
- Support and process roles are critical (in addition to task roles) and these could be shared and rotated, eg chair of discussions.
- In some cases, especially where external parties are to be involved, 'readiness for collaboration' and possible risks may need to be identified.

8. Senior leadership commitment and support. The willingness to participate will in some cases be enhanced by a strong and visible commitment by senior leaders. This may be especially important when there may not be true reciprocity in the situation providing 'mutual benefit' to all parties.

- Leaders need to publicly endorse individuals who may be representing their interests and pursuing activities on their behalf so their influence can be leveraged.
- Where appropriate, senior leaders should come to some meetings.
- Quick wins should be sought and celebrated.
- Collaborative behaviours needs to be recognised, rewarded and celebrated.
- Where appropriate, suitable measures should be developed and reported on.
- Senior leaders actively promote collaboration practices, should be looking for collaboration opportunities and facilitate new links between staff.

Necessary Conditions for Collaboration

9. There is a situation / opportunity that will benefit from a collaborative effort. It seems like an obvious condition, but collaboration for 'collaborations sake' does not guarantee a better outcome. 'The choice depends largely on whether individual achievements can deliver the group's performance aspirations, or whether collective work products, activities and skills are needed.

- Don't collaborate for the sake of collaborating. Sometimes all you need is cooperation. And sometimes it is a 'tell / ask' relationship. And we must recognise collaboration does not necessarily mean consensus.
- The only reason to collaborate is to add or create value; to achieve things collectively that you cannot achieve individually. It helps to ensure people recognise that collaboration develops through stages and is an outcome of work done together.

Please help us add to the list. Let us know about other effective things you do to help improve collaborative stakeholder relationships.

paul@discoveryinaction.com.au or melanie@discoveryinaction.com.au