Cutting Through the Complexity: A Roadmap for Effective Collaboration

Collaborations and networks rarely achieve their ambitious goals. Here's what it takes to make them actually work. — Building on the work of many others, we have developed a roadmap that cuts through the complexity. We have tested and refined this framework over years and across domains, and we tend to apply it in the spirit of statistician George Box, who famously said, "All models are wrong. Some models are useful." We have found it to be useful and hope others will too.

The Five Cs: a roadmap for effective collaboration — While the why (the focus) and the what (the activities) of collaborations differ widely, the how (the process) is remarkably consistent. Launching and sustaining effective collaborations and networks requires that we pay constant attention to five activities:

- Clarifying purpose
- Convening the right people
- Cultivating trust
- Coordinating existing activities
- Collaborating for systems impact

These activities help us navigate the personal, political, cultural, and organizational dynamics inherent in collaborative efforts. They are never fully complete, and they are not strictly linear. They inevitably loop back and forth on each other, and require revisiting throughout any collaborative effort. While it's impossible to know exactly what's going to happen until people actually get in a room together, the purpose of the roadmap is to outline the "deliberate" aspect of the collaborative process—the aspect that, to a meaningful degree, can be planned and facilitated. Here, we outline why each of these activities is important, what tactics can be applied to address each one, and how to put the framework into practice.

Contents

Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR)

Stakeholder(s):

Converge :
David Ehrlichman, David Sawyer, and Matthew Spence are partners of Converge, a team of strategists and designers committed to social and environmental impact through collaboration and networks. In their work with Converge, they have helped build cross-sector collaborations and networks taking action on issues as diverse as economic mobility, environmental conservation, human rights, and health care reform.

David Ehrlichman :
Ehrlichman was previously a network coordinator for the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network and the James Irvine Foundation New Leadership Network, as well as a consultant with Monitor Institute. He is co-author with Sawyer and Jane Wei-Skillern of previous articles in Stanford Social Innovation Review, including "The Most Impactful Leaders You've Never Heard Of" and "The Tactics of Trust."

David Sawyer :
Sawyer is also president of Context, a consulting firm with practice areas in strategy, leadership, and culture. He previously directed leadership and service-learning programs at Berea College, receiving The Servant Leader Award from the National Youth Leadership Council, helped launch the nation's Americorps program, and served as the first Executive Director of Social Venture Partners Portland.

Matthew Spence :
Spence is also president of Spence & Company, where he conducts training for professionals in a broad range of industries on how to organize complex information for more effective communication. He previously served for five years as a director of research at Amana-Key, one of Brazil's leading executive development firms, and recently led a collaborative effort by Fortune 100 tech companies and their suppliers to improve practices in sustainable supply chain management.

Tom Atlee :
A decisive moment — Social philosopher Tom Atlee has written something that struck us as a good summary of what's happening on the planet right now: "Things are getting better and better, and worse and worse, faster and faster, simultaneously." If he is right—and we think he is—then we urgently need to consider two questions: How can we amplify the things that are getting better and better? And how can we minimize the damage from things that are getting worse and worse? We believe the answer to both questions lies in cultivating effective collaboration—that is, meaningful attempts to work together on behalf of a shared purpose—across and between silos, organizations, sectors, and networks. From our perspective, it's not an overstatement to say that our ability to work together effectively across all kinds of differences is the last great hope for humankind.

Vision

Collaborations and networks actually work.

Mission

To cut through complexity.

Values

Collaboration: Collaboration is appealing in concept but challenging in practice. While extensive resources—including ones from the Community Tool Box, The Intersector Project, and NewNetworkLeader.org—exist online to support collaborative efforts, the fact remains that we human beings are simply not very good at making "we" work. And yet, most change-makers today acknowledge that to address the complex social and environmental challenges we face we must learn how to collaborate—across organizations, sectors, networks, and differences. Effective collaboration must become a reality, not just an aspiration.

Conversation: Most of us are familiar with the challenges of collaboration. Personality conflicts get in the way. Participants avoid difficult conversations.

Informality: People are too formal and polite.

Candor

Trust: We don't take time to deliberately build trust.

Leadership: We don't understand leadership in a collaborative context.

Resources: And we fail to devote resources to essential coordination functions so that collaborations can truly flourish.

1. Purpose

Clarify purpose

Stakeholder(s)

Simon Sinek :
Though a collaboration's purpose—its reason for being—can evolve over time, an initial high-level purpose statement is essential to get people in the room. As leadership expert Simon Sinek said in his well-known TED talk, "Start with why."

RE-AMP :
For example, the RE-AMP network's high-level purpose is to "reduce global warming pollution 80 percent by 2050 across eight Midwestern states."

California Summer Matters Network :
The high-level purpose of the California Summer Matters Network is to "increase and improve the summer learning opportunities for all children and youth across the state."

Albert Einstein :
Clarifying purpose also entails making meaningful sense of the issue at hand. Albert Einstein famously said that if he had an hour to save the world, he would spend the first 55 minutes understanding the problem, and the last 5 minutes solving it. This process is what the design community calls "sensemaking."

Donella Meadows :
"The scarcest resource is not oil, metals, clean air, capital, labor, or technology," systems theorist Donella Meadows once said. "It is our willingness to listen to each other and learn from each other and to seek the truth rather than seek to be right."

Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network :
The Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network (SCMSN) is a region-wide, cross-sector collaboration of 19 organizations that are working together to improve land stewardship in the 500,000-acre region of California between San Francisco to the Monterey Bay. Participating organizations include federal agencies, state and county parks departments, land trusts, nonprofit organizations, the region's largest timber company, research institutes, special districts, and the area's largest Native American tribal band.

The network initially formed in late 2014 when a number of large public and private land owners and managers realized that although their organizations were all committed to caring for the region's natural resources, they weren't working together on a scale that would be necessary for both the natural and human systems to thrive in the area. They knew they needed a collaborative approach, but they also knew that social fragmentation (the area had a history of tensions and mistrust) would limit progress. Before the collaboration's first meeting, we held in-person conversations with more 20 potential participants. Because these conversations were confidential, participants shared their honest thoughts, fears, concerns, and hopes for the collaboration. As expected, we heard concerns about hidden agendas and learned that participants had very different priorities in their day-to-day work. However, despite significant differences of opinion, there was also a meaningful amount of common ground. Participants generally agreed that effective stewardship required a "mosaic approach" that would accommodate a variety of land uses. They recognized the value of sustainable timber harvesting, and were aware of threats from real estate development and climate change. Importantly, everyone agreed that the region, as well as the work of each organization, would benefit from stronger connections and more collaborative relationships. At the first convening, we anonymously reflected back what we learned to the whole group, acknowledging differences while highlighting areas of agreement. As a result, participants were able to begin crafting a high-level purpose statement just a few hours into their first gathering, thereby clarifying the collaboration's reason for existing and charting a collaborative path forward. Over the course of their first two convenings, participants also completed a historical analysis of the region, examined external trends and forces, considered future scenarios, and identified shared values. This sense-making process helped the network evolve its high-level purpose statement into a memorandum of understanding, which all 19 members ratified at the end of their third convening...

The purpose should be ambitious enough to inspire, clear enough to identify the right participants, and specific enough to focus the work of the collaboration. Collaborations can be bounded around an issue, geography, population, outcome, or combination ... Sensemaking involves surfacing diverse perspectives, developing a shared understanding of the actors and organizations involved, and making sense of external trends and forces. It also involves understanding the local context, decoding the history of the place or system, identifying political and power dynamics, and unveiling hardwired assumptions. Through this exploration of the system, participants begin to acknowledge their differences, while also recognizing the perspectives they share and the values they hold in common. This becomes a foundation on which participants can begin to act and eventually tackle the more-difficult conversations about issues they don't agree on.

1.1. Perspectives

Surface diverse perspectives.

1.2. Actors & Organizations

Develop a shared understanding of the actors and organizations involved.

1.3. Trends & Forces

Make sense of external trends and forces.

1.4. Context

Understand the local context.

1.4.1. History

Decode the history of the place or system.

1.4.2. Politics & Power

Identify political and power dynamics.

1.4.3. Assumptions

Unveil hardwired assumptions.

2. People

Convene the right people

Stakeholder(s)

Marvin Weisbord :
Although there is no single correct answer to who to include, we agree with Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, creators of the "Future Search" planning process, who write: "The more far-reaching your objective, the greater your need for a broad selection of diverse players." According to Weisbord and Janoff, this includes people with:

- *Authority to act, such as decision-making responsibility in an organization or community*
- *Resources, such as contacts, time, or money*
- *Expertise in the issues under consideration*
- *Information about the topic that no others have*
- *A stake in the outcome and an ability to speak to the consequences*

Sandra Janoff

Margaret Wheatley :
We would add two more. First, the "right people" include those who can listen deeply and consider diverse perspectives. As author Margaret Wheatley wrote, "Real listening always brings people closer together." Second, the "right people" are simply those who stay engaged. Over the course of any collaborative effort, it is normal—even expected— that some people will leave the initiative, and others will join as the collaboration evolves. In effective collaborations, the right people show up, stick around, and follow through.

Center on Network Science :
Researchers at the University of Colorado Denver's Center on Network Science have found that collaborations that begin and grow through "thoughtful inclusion" tend to exhibit greater long-term sustainability and effectiveness. Rather than engaging with all possible participants, thoughtful inclusion begins by recruiting a core group of committed individuals and organizations, even one by one, to clarify an initial purpose and plan of approach. As the initial group develops deep trust and cohesion, it invites additional participants to add necessary capacities and resources, and to increase the collaboration's reach.

Convening the "right" people means bringing together whoever is needed to tackle the challenge at hand... Getting the right people in the room doesn't necessarily mean issuing an open call to everyone who may have a stake in the effort. Open invitations are often motivated as much by the fear of appearing exclusive as they are by convening a broad selection of participants who need to be involved.

2.1. Authority

Include people with authority to act, such as decision-making responsibility in an organization or community

2.2. Resources

Include people with resources, such as contacts, time, or money

2.3. Expertise

Include people with expertise in the issues under consideration

2.4. Information

Include people with information about the topic that no others have

2.5. Stakeholders

Include people with a stake in the outcome and an ability to speak to the consequences

3. Trust

Cultivate trust

Stakeholder(s)

Google :
Google recently spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours to figure out why some teams stumble while others soar—an initiative called Project Aristotle. It reviewed a half-century of academic studies and studied hundreds of teams, struggling to find evidence for the common assumption that the composition of a team makes a difference.

Abeer Dubey :
''We looked at 180 teams from all over the company,'' said Abeer Dubey, a project leader, in a New York Times Magazine article about the initiative. ''We had lots of data, but there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference. The 'who' part of the equation didn't seem to matter.'' Google ultimately found that high-performing teams have high levels of "psychological safety," as measured by an equality of turn-taking in team discussions, as well as high degrees of social sensitivity, or group members' ability to read each other's social signals.

Amy Edmondson :
Psychological safety, as defined by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, is a ''shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking,'' and ''a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up ... It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.'' In other words, people work together most effectively when relationships are strong and auth-

entic. When they listen deeply to others and feel free to speak their minds. When they value diversity of thought and experience, and can tap into the unique gifts that each person brings. When there is a high degree of mutual respect and, in a word, trust.

Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network :
For the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network, we conducted a social network analysis just before the network's first convening in March 2015, and every six months thereafter, to track and support the growth of these relationships. This data helped us to strategically "weave" connections across the network to maximize its potential for collaboration. The network maps below illustrate this work. Each circle, or "node," is a leader in the network. The colors indicate the organization type they represent, and each of the lines connecting the nodes signifies a personal or professional relationship between them. The network was initially fragmented, as seen in the first map, particularly in terms of the connections between different types of organizations. In the second map, you can see that after only two convenings—during which we deliberately took time to establish a foundational level of trust between previously disconnected participants—the system became much more interconnected. Even if the network had never met again after September 2015, the region was now much more resilient than it was before the network formed. There were new and deeper relationships, stronger flows of information, and greater recognition of the opportunities for collaboration between organizations.

In our view, trust is the single most important ingredient of effective collaboration. Enduring relationships are not a "nice to have"; they are a "need to have." The web of relationships that develops between participants is the invisible structure that makes collaborations work. Trust, however, has become something of a buzzword. Everyone says it's important, but failing to cultivate trusting relationships is where most collaborative efforts fall short... Trust is not the same thing as "liking" or "agreement." To work together, people don't need to like each other. And they shouldn't agree with each other on every issue. When we talk about trust, we mean trust for action—what we call "trust for impact." The type of trusting relationships that can hold the tension through difficult conversations, engage in generative conflict, find a slice of common ground, and make collaboration a reality, not just an aspiration. We've also found it's possible to build trust more quickly than most people think, as long as you go about it deliberately.

3.1. Turn-Taking

Ensure equality of turn-taking in team discussions.

3.2. Sensitivity

Foster social sensitivity.

Stakeholder(s):
Group Members

3.3. Social Signals

Train group members' to read each other's social signals.

3.4. Confidence

Instill confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up.

Stakeholder(s):
Teams

3.5. Authenticity & Respect

Empower participants with interpersonal trust based upon mutual respect and comfort in being themselves.

4. Coordination

Coordinate existing activities

Stakeholder(s)
Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network :
*Analysis of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Net-
work, a collaboration of 60 communities throughout the
United States working to create more resilience to wildfires,*
*shows a strong statistical correlation between the depth of
relationship between two participants and their perception
of collaborative opportunities between them.*

When people have identified a shared purpose and built trust, they are far more likely to seek out and follow through on opportunities to support each other's work. This requires that participants share the work they already doing that relates to the collaboration's purpose. In the process, participants find opportunities to partner together, find quick wins, and avoid duplication of efforts. Working together, even in small ways, allows participants to strengthen their relationships with one another, creating a virtuous cycle of trust and action... In other words, as relationships develop, participants notice more opportunities to collaborate, which in turn strengthens their relationships.

4.1. Opportunities

Find opportunities to partner together.

4.2. Wins

Find quick wins.

4.3. Duplication

Avoid duplication of efforts.

4.4. Intersection

Serve the personal and organizational objectives of individual participants.

However, the altruistic commitment of participants isn't enough to sustain collaboration. On the contrary, collaboration must also serve the personal and organizational objectives of individual participants. Otherwise, they won't be able to justify the time it requires to participate fully. This overlap between individual priorities and the collaboration's shared priorities is what we refer to as the intersection of self-interest and shared interest, and finding a proper balance between the two is essential.

4.4.1. Gives & Gets

Give participants the opportunity to identify their gives and gets.

To this end, participants should have an opportunity early on in a collaboration's formation to publicly identify their gives and gets—what they can give to the collaboration to support other participants and what they need to

get out of the collaboration to make their participation worthwhile. The more specific the gives and gets, the better participants will understand one another's conditions of engagement. Examples of gives include connections to funding sources or influencers, access to a volunteer base or a fleet of trucks, or time and energy to contribute to the work of other partners. Examples of gets include a professional grant writer, capacity or expertise to support a project, a conference room to host a meeting, or tangible outcomes from the effort.

Stakeholder(s):

Participants :

Participants should also express legitimate constraints on their ability to contribute. Left unstated, others may perceive these limitations as a lack of commitment or a failure to follow through. Constraints may include issues such as the time participants can commit to the collaboration, the expectations of their board or senior leadership, and legal restrictions on their ability to participate in advocacy and policy change.

5. Collaboration

Collaborate for systems impact

Stakeholder(s)

Junious Williams :
Getting at root causes necessarily requires acknowledging and addressing systemic and structural issues, such as racism, sexism, and income inequality. As Junious Williams and Sarah Marxer write in their article "Bringing an Equity Lens to Collective Impact": "Without rigorous attention to persistent inequities, our initiatives risk ineffectiveness, irrelevance, and improvements that cannot be sustained."

Sarah Marxer

For true systems change to occur, collaborative efforts must seek to address the root causes of problems, rather than just mitigating the symptoms. Actions to reduce immediate suffering, such as filling a cavity, are essential. But we will never produce lasting change without also addressing the root causes of the issue at hand, such as providing young children with quality oral care from the outset.

5.1. Equity & Justice

Embrace the principles of equity and justice.

And according to the authors of "Collaborating for Equity and Justice," this requires that collaborations "embrace the principles of equity and justice and reexamine their membership, distribution of power and resources, social change agendas, and current commitments to an equity and justice work plan."

5.1.1. Membership

Reexamine membership.

5.1.2. Power & Resources

Reexamine distribution of power and resources.

5.1.3. Social Change

Reexamine social change agendas.

5.1.4. Commitments

Reexamine current commitments.

5.2. Leverage

Identify and act on leverage points that address the collaboration's central purpose.

One way to address root causes is by identifying and taking action on a set of "leverage points" that address the collaboration's central purpose. Leverage points are places in a system where "a small shift in one thing can

produce big changes in everything," as Meadows has said. In a collaboration, leverage points also represent opportunities where participants can have greater impact by working together than they can by working alone.

Stakeholder(s):

100Kin10 :
100Kin10, a collaboration of more than 200 partners working to support STEM educators and train 100,000 excellent new STEM teachers by 2021, engaged hundreds of teachers to identify 100-plus challenges standing in the way of quality STEM learning for all students and to assess the relationships between these challenges. Through this process, 100Kin10 identified six primary leverage points to achieve its goal: 1) Raise state standards, 2) improve the quality of the curriculum, 3) expand financial support for STEM college majors, 4) develop accountability systems that promote teacher creativity, 5) increase the time available for professional development, and 6) increase the time available for teacher collaboration.

5.2.1. Prototyping

Move from ideation to prototyping.

In addition to the comprehensive systems-mapping approach that 100Kin10 took, collaborations can identify leverage points through an in-the-room systems mapping exercise or through a design thinking approach that can help them move quickly from ideation to prototyping.

5.2.2. Structures

Provide participants with structures to act.

Collaborations must then provide participants with structures to act, such as project teams focused on specific objectives.

Stakeholder(s):

Participants :
Participants typically engage when they feel they can have an effect, and where their organizational priorities align with the work of the team.

6. Implementation

Put it all together

In addition to the Five C's roadmap, effective collaborations also require a degree of governance, structure, coordination, and funding to accomplish their goals.

6.1. Governance

Enable collaborators to do what they want to do

As collaborations and networks move towards shared action, formal governance procedures can help participants make timely decisions, invite new members, design and facilitate convenings, and integrate a suite of online collaborative tools.

Stakeholder(s):

Madeleine Taylor :
The purpose of good governance "is not to tell members what to do, but to enable them to do what they want to do," write Madeleine Taylor, Peter Plastrik, and John Cleveland in their article "Connecting to Change the World."

Peter Plastrik

John Cleveland

6.2. Structures

Enable collaborators to effectively channel their creative impulses.

From our perspective, a network is the structure that operationalizes collaboration. The right network structure enables a collaboration to effectively channel the creative impulses of its participants. But too much structure risks stifling individual initiative, and engaging with too many rules and procedures.

Stakeholder(s):

Frances Butterfoss :
According to Frances Butterfoss, author of Coalitions and Partnerships in Community Health, "One should adopt the simplest structure that will accomplish the collaboration's goals."

Networks :
Some examples of basic network structures that can support collaborations include:

Learning Networks :
including the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network

Action Networks :
including the RE-AMP Network

Action/Learning Networks :
including the California Summer Matters Network

Networks of Networks :
including the Network for Landscape Conservation

6.3. Coordination

Mobilize people and resources to address challenges.

Collaborations can't achieve ambitious goals through self-organization alone. Some form of coordination is needed to mobilize a constellation of people and resources to address complex challenges... We have found it useful to think of coordination as a set of responsibilities that can be organized in three major areas:

Stakeholder(s):

Coordinators :

Those who perform these roles have been called systems leaders, systems entrepreneurs, network leaders, network entrepreneurs, strategic conveners, and accompagnateurs. Whatever they are called, their primary role is to coordinate. The role of a coordinator, or team of coordinators, is to constantly sense and respond to the emerging needs of the collaboration as it evolves. They work to help participants clarify the purpose and the values they hold in common, identify who else needs to be involved, cultivate trust, find opportunities for mutual benefit, and catalyze collaborative action toward shared goals. Coordinators do not seek the spotlight. Instead, they are typically motivated by the collabor-ation's purpose and their ability to help others achieve their potential for impact.

Systems Leaders

Systems Entrepreneurs

Network Leaders

Network Entrepreneurs

Strategic Conveners

Accompagnateurs

6.3.1. Communication & Sourcing

Front of the house: external communications, public relations and outreach, and resourcing

6.3.1.1. Communications

Communicate externally.

6.3.1.2. Public Relations

Engage in public relations and outreach activities.

6.3.1.3. Resourcing

Provide resources.

6.3.2. Processes

Middle of the house: weaving, process design, meeting facilitation, conflict management, and member on-boarding

6.3.2.1. Connections

Weave connections across the network to maximize its potential for collaboration.

6.3.2.2. Processes

Design processes.

6.3.2.3. Meetings

Facilitate meetings.

6.3.2.4. Conflict

Manage conflict.

6.3.2.5. On-Boarding

On-board members.

6.3.3. Logistics

Back of the house: logistical preparation for convenings, project tracking, evaluation, financial planning, and tech support

6.3.3.1. Convenings

Prepare for convenings.

6.3.3.2. Projects

Track projects.

6.3.3.3. Evaluation

Evaluate activities and results.

6.3.3.4. Financing

Engage in financial planning.

6.3.3.5. Technology

Provide tech support.

6.4. Funding

Collaboration is under-resourced.

Stakeholder(s):

Harvard Business Review :
As the authors of the recent Harvard Business Review article "Audacious Philanthropy" write: "Collaboration of any type can be difficult and costly, so few philanthropists meaningfully support or engage in it, even though most are frustrated with the inefficient proliferation of siloed change efforts."

Foundations :
Yet foundations and philanthropists have a critical, unique role to play in supporting collaborations and networks.

Philanthropists

Networks

Funders :
The primary challenge for funders is to support collaboration without restricting or controlling its path. Funders must be willing to let the participants define a collaboration's purpose and direction, or they run the risk of stifling the very energy that gives collaboration its potential for impact.

S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation :
The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation has found that it can effectively support collaborations and networks to pursue emergent solutions by [pursuing the following objectives]

6.4.1. Objectives & Deliverables

Allow for flexibility in the collaboration's objectives and deliverables.

Stakeholder(s):

Funders

6.4.2. Trust

View the development of trust as a valid collaborative outcome.

6.4.3. Operational Capacity

"Make room" for other funders to support collaborative projects by investing in a network's operational capacity.

6.4.4. Functions

Support specific collaborative functions, such as convenings, facilitation, and coordination.

6.4.5. Learning

Approach collaborations and networks as a learning opportunity.

6.5.6. Adaptation

Be prepared to adapt their support as collaborations evolve over time.

Administrative Information
Start Date: 2018-03-15
End Date:

Publication Date: 2020-01-19
Source: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/cutting_through_the_complexity_a_roadmap_for_effective_collaboration

Submitter:
Given Name: **Surname:**
       Email: **Phone:**