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A FIELD GUIDE TO COLLABORATION –
ACHIEVING MUTUAL SUCCESS FROM
EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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Introduction

In 2010 the British Standards Institute published a standard for collaborative business relationships. Yet I couldn't help but wonder how much value such a prescriptive outlook could contribute to the complex and dynamic world of human relationships?

There's no escaping collaboration though, it's something we hear a lot about in organisations just now. Yet how many of us understand what it actually means in practice or what it takes to be successful at it? In this paper I set out to address these questions, uncover ways in which organisations might improve their collaboration, and shed light on behaviours that can get in the way.

Executive Summary

Collaboration has many definitions, from the simple exchange of skills to a "way of being" coded into us by evolution. Definitions shouldn't distract us however; humans have been collaborating for thousands of years and most have a felt sense of the mutuality of an endeavour.

There are many reasons why collaborative approaches are used, ranging from the transactional (achieving things organisations can't do alone), to the psychological (humans evolved to collaborate). One of the most powerful arguments however is change. Traditional contracts anticipate situations and create mechanisms to deal with them, but our fast changing world makes effective anticipation, and therefore effective contracts, more difficult, inflexible and expensive. Collaboration allows greater flexibility, but relies on overlapping interests. Since these never coincide exactly there are limitations to collaboration and sometimes there are reasons not to collaborate. Perhaps the complexity involved brings unacceptable risks, or the organisation is in a stable industry where traditional contracts work well.

For those who do collaborate, there can be practical and cultural barriers. Practical barriers are mainly associated with systems and processes. More significant barriers tend to arise from a cultural focus on competition. These can be overcome however, by approaches which allow conflicting interests to be harnessed as a creative force that motivates solutions. Coaching or meetings held solely to discuss the working relationship are examples. Competition isn't a bad thing, but unchallenged it can be a barrier to collaborative success.

Fundamentally, collaboration challenges us to understand that success is not solely in our own hands, it is co-created by our work with others. However skilful we are individually, we can't succeed without others. We are required to re-frame conflict as inevitable, valuing curiosity and creativity to help create solutions that accommodate all. We must also be able to work with partial understanding, and still move forward. These ideas can be challenging for organisations that value certainty, individual expertise and internal alignment - yet those are the very things which can impede collaboration. However, humans are great learners – so we can learn to identify what might be holding us back, and thus improve our collaboration.

What is collaboration?

A dictionary definition is "to work together with another or others on something" (Chambers 2004 p.235) yet in business, more is often implied than that definition allows for, since organisations can work together in many different ways. In talking about collaboration, my experience is that organisations generally mean working together such that:

- Outcomes are possible that couldn't be achieved by working alone
- Each organisation or department brings different skills (though these may overlap)
- Each gets a fair share of the benefits arising from the collaboration
- Difficulties are resolved by agreement, rather than contractual mechanisms

From these ideas – fairness, agreement, skills - one thing becomes very apparent; rather than relying solely on a book of rules (a contract) a whole raft of more nebulous human skills are the primary source of success in collaboration. Issues such as fairness, understanding, and commonality of purpose enter into the decision making process in a way that is unusual in a purely contractual relationship. Collaboration then, adds an element of how something is to be achieved, rather than focussing solely on what is done to achieve the outcome. It involves a re-balancing of the delivery ethos, although formal contracts or agreements are often in place, they are viewed as something of a last resort, with a co-operative approach taken to working out how to move forward together. What though is the difference between a co-operative approach and a collaborative one? The dictionary defines co-operating with another party as "to work together with them" (Chambers 2004 p.263) – little different to the definition of collaboration.

The definitions then are a little untidy, which is perhaps appropriate given that human relationships rarely fit neatly into boxes. Based on my own experience the difference between co-operation and collaboration is often one of intention and timescales. Co-operation tends to be opportunist, and short-term, whereas collaboration is more intentional in terms of choosing partners, and is intended to be a sustained effort over time. Collaboration also crosses boundaries more often, either within the organisation or between organisations. This can be more difficult than it sounds, since humans have evolved to work within social groups, rather than across them (Thomasello et al 2012).

So much for my own definition –what do other authors suggest?

For some collaboration is a technical exercise in "combining the knowledge of diverse specialists" (Adler et al 2011), or;

"a means to seek synergistic gains" via "formalized joint working arrangements between organizations that remain legally autonomous while they engage in coordinated collective action to achieve outcomes that none of them can achieve on their own" (Vangen & Huxam 2011)

For others it is both a "setting and skill set that encourages individuals and teams to make better decisions and earn better buy-in for those decisions" (Canfield 2014)

And others still tend more towards my own definition, that collaboration is "a way of being" rather than something organisations do (Sanchez 2012).

In circumstances of multiple interpretations it is useful for authors to be clear on their own stance – and mine is that relationships are constructed by us, how they are run being a reflection of who we are. As such I view collaboration as a way of working out how to conduct our relationships for mutual benefit, with minimal recourse to formal documentation. This is something of a combination of Sanchez's "way of being" definition and Canfield's reference to the setting or environment in which that way of being takes place.

As a final word on definitions, I suggest we all have a felt sense of what collaboration is – we can sense the mutuality of an endeavour in ways that are difficult to describe in words. Perhaps this shouldn't' come as a surprise. Collaboration is hard-wired into humans by the process of evolution in a way that is significantly different from other primates (Moll & Tomasello 2007), so working in collaborative groups far from being something we define, is in fact a part of what defines us.

Why collaborate?

As Hansen (2009) notes, the goal of collaboration isn't the collaboration itself, but the results it can produce.

For many authors (e.g. Bennis & Biederman 1997; Vangen & Huxam 2011) the key reason for collaboration is that it allows organisations to get things done that they couldn't achieve in other ways. By accessing skills or technology your organisation doesn't have - but others who need something from you do have - the idea is that a whole greater than the sum of its parts can be created.

These are essentially transactional approaches to collaboration, viewing it as a means to an end – but is there more to collaboration than this? Sanchez's (2012) definition of collaboration as "a way of being" suggests that creating win-win outcomes by moving forward together is simply a part of how many people prefer to operate – something research backs-up (Warneken et al 2011). The advantage being that it allows relationships, as well as businesses, to prosper by ensuring that everyone benefits. In that light the benefits of collaboration arise from the process of working together, rather than simply from the outcomes generated.

Collaboration also offers the potential for working together in flexible ways which suit our fast-changing world. Traditional contracts envision the desired outcome and put in place defined mechanisms to deal with foreseeable circumstances - as such they cope well with stable situations. In an increasingly uncertain world however, collaboration can allow more flexible approaches to be taken, accommodating change without the cumbersome bureaucracy of agreeing contract changes. In short, our interconnected, networked world needs flexible ways of working to help people solve problems together – which is where collaboration comes in. Bennis & Biederman (1997) make this case powerfully, and also sound a warning of one of the primary leadership challenges in achieving collaboration when they say:

"Whether the task is building a global business or discovering the mysteries of the human brain, one person can't hope to accomplish it. There are simply too many problems to be identified and solved, too many connections to be made. And yet, even as we make the case for collaboration, we resist the idea of collective creativity. Our mythology refuses to catch-up with our reality. We cling to the myth of the Lone Ranger, the romantic idea that great things are usually accomplished by a larger than life individual working alone."

Bennis & Biederman (1997 p.2)

Finally, in some industries, clients increasingly demand collaborative approaches from their supply chains. For example the UK roads industry has focussed on collaborative relationship skills in its supply chain in recent years, as a means to improve efficiency.

If collaborative approaches are so useful then - and so much part of who are - might there ever be circumstances in which it's better not to collaborate?

Why avoid collaboration?

Hansen suggests that before embarking on a collaborative venture, organisations should ensure that the value of the collaboration is greater than the return minus the costs, using a formula:

Collaboration premium = return on project – opportunity costs – collaboration costs

(Opportunity costs are the return that could be achieved from doing something else with the resources used for collaboration, and collaboration costs are the extra costs incurred from the effort of collaboration)

Hansen (2009 p.41)

My own view however is that deciding when not to collaborate is a lot more complex than this. Consider that for most organisations, collaboration offers an opportunity which could otherwise not be embraced, and this simple equation begins to totter. For one thing, it is very difficult to forecast the returns on such a project with accuracy, making it difficult to do Hansen's maths. For another thing, the concept of "opportunity cost" rests on the idea that people who would be engaged in the collaboration could be profitably used elsewhere. This may be so, but equally people do not have infinitely flexible skill sets, and it may be that other work is not available at the time. This is a common situation in consulting business models for example. Finally, how exactly does one measure "collaboration costs"? One can estimate the costs of management time, or new computer systems, but collaborations are by their very nature even more complex, uncertain, and difficult to control than single organisations – so how likely is it that these costs can be accurately estimated? For these reasons Hansen's formula alone is insufficient as a guide. I'm not suggesting that the numbers are unimportant, just that there are broader questions to consider such as:

Does the organisation's strategy include collaborating with others? In stable industries with mature markets and relatively little pressure for change, traditional hierarchical relationships may be perfectly adequate and fit the organisation's strategy.

Another consideration for the organisation is can we afford the risks of collaboration? Collaboration involves greater complexity and less control than operations inside a single business unit or organisation, so the risks can be higher.

Is the organisation (or at least part of it) capable of shifting from a competitive mind- set to a collaborative one? This is largely a question for the management team who oversee the collaboration from outside of it.

In the end the decision as to whether to collaborate or not must be one of management judgement. Assuming that collaboration is something an organisation wants to do though, what might get in the way of that?

What gets in the way?

Collaboration means acting together in the interests of a common goal. In an age where management incentives are focussed on individual performance however, the underlying cultural belief (Schein 2009) is that competition produces the best results. As Hansen (2009) observes, that style of thinking hampers collaboration by setting managers and business units against each other. It seems then that one of the key things that can get in the way of collaboration is the individualist tendency of Western culture.

Bennis & Biedermann (1997) make a related point regarding individualism, suggesting that contemporary notions of leadership are so entwined with our ideas of hero and celebrity that they are almost synonymous with it. In their words:

"In our society leadership is too often seen as an inherently individual phenomenon…..despite the rhetoric of collaboration, we continue to advocate it in a culture in which people strive to distinguish themselves as individuals"

Bennis & Biedermann (1997 p.1)

Opening ourselves to the need for a different set of underlying values then is a key challenge for successful collaboration. Bushe (2009) makes this very point, suggesting that in command and control organisations although everyone has a different experience of their working life, it is clear who is having the correct experience – the boss. Disagreement is addressed by employee compliance with management directives, and staff are encouraged to edit their reality to serve the narrow purpose of a target-driven business unit.

In collaboration however, the multiplicity of human experience needs to be expressed in order to find common ground and move forward together, which can be challenging and anxiety-producing for some people. In collaboration we are asked to open our minds to other people's realities, and thus take part in co-creating a new one that meets the needs of all parties – which usually involves managing disagreement, because the needs of all parties rarely coincide exactly. This is pretty much the opposite of what is required in many Western competitive hierarchies, but there are other ways of working in use, and from which we can learn.

For example, Morgan (2009) describes the collaborative Japanese practice of "ringi" whereby people at all levels of the organisation review and agree changes to processes and procedures. Although considerable disagreement can occur and time is required to resolve it, the result is that once the way forward is clear there is a good chance that everyone has bought into it – increasing the chances of successful collaboration. As such disagreement is mobilised in the service of consensus and collaboration. As Morgan puts it:

"in surfacing the negatives, we can produce a creative re-definition of the space in which positive patterns of behaviour can unfold"

(Morgan 2009 p.99)

Extending this idea, the African philosophy of "Ubuntu" emphasises that a person becomes a person through their relationships with other people; individuals in society exist not in isolation, but in relation to their relationships with others. This way of thinking characterises difference and conflict as opportunities to increase our understanding of each other and work out ways to move forward together, rather than as barriers to individuals achieving their goals alone (Nafukho 2006).

The crucial point in all of this is that, contrary to much organisational culture in the West, conflict can be the birthplace of consensus. Since an appropriate level of consensus is required for people to move towards a common goal, conflict is an essential element of collaboration. Indeed in one study, greater complexity and conflict were correlated with better results from collaborative projects (Majchrzak et at 2014). It therefore seems likely that changing how people view conflict might be one way forward in collaboration.

Beyond organisational culture, Hansen (2009) describes four barriers to collaboration:

What he calls, "Not invented here" is resistance to reaching out and collaborating beyond the local work group, and "hoarding" refers to people's reluctance to share information. He suggests that both of these are motivational barriers that need to be addressed by clear goals and leadership.

What Hansen calls "search" and "transfer" barriers though – where people can't find information they're looking for, or have trouble transferring information to others – are practical barriers where people who'd like to collaborate can't do it effectively. Overcoming these is more about practical steps to improve information flow.

Finally, the lack of common goals can be a barrier to collaboration. For example, when public sector organisations suggest that collaboration with and among their supply chain is their preferred method of operating, how well can this work? If the goal of public sector employers is to secure the best service at the lowest cost, while suppliers are motivated by profit maximisation, what barriers might this create? One obvious possibility is "lip service" whereby otherwise competitive organisations try to appear collaborative to win business. Another difficulty might be "social loafing" (Karau & Williams 1993) where group members allow others to do most of the work as they don't really share the group's goal.

A number of approaches have been tried to address these issues, mostly by modifying contractual mechanisms to provide greater transparency between client and supplier, specify collaborative behaviour, or share the outcomes of work more evenly. While these have met with some success, it could be argued that the idea that a contractual mechanism can be used to improve collaboration reflects a fundamental tension in public procurement organisations. On the one hand making best use of public funds requires collaboration to achieve innovation and efficiency; however the need for control and accountability places practical limitations on the extent to which achieving public goals can rely on relationship-based approaches. It is tempting to characterise such tensions as deficiencies, another perspective however is that they may actually help - by providing a countervailing force when either relationship or governance become too dominant a focus they keep the differing aspects of a collaborative venture in balance. More broadly, all collaborations have limits because the interests of each party do not completely coincide, and this is just one example. Perhaps being overt in acknowledging these limitations is one way to provide the clarity that successful collaboration requires.

What does it take to be good at it?

Anthropology suggests that successful collaboration requires two things; the ability to co-ordinate actions with others, and mechanisms which allow the resources acquired from collaboration to be distributed in a way which incentivises further collaboration (Melis 2013). In other words, successful collaboration requires us to communicate well, and distribute our gains fairly.

Hansen (2009) suggests that accurate diagnosis of potential barriers to collaboration is the first step to putting in place arrangements to overcome them. This sounds plausible, but seems to be based on a machine metaphor for organisations (Morgan 2009) and assumes a high degree of management control – the very thing that both Hansen and others (e.g. Bennis & Biederman 1997) suggest gets in the way of collaboration!

In contrast to Hansen's "diagnose and fix" paradigm, Bennis & Biederman (1997) suggest characteristics that are common to the most effective collaborations and for which organisations should aim:

- Everyone has a sense of ownership of the outcome
- The leader is highly effective in articulating a vision that unites the group
- The group has an external enemy which serves to define the group and direct competition outwards
- Collaborative projects are often islands, but they are connected to the mainland of each organisation - in other words they create a sub-culture that is uniquely their own.

My own experience generally bears out these ideas. I have led a number of collaborative teams, on projects up to £4bn in value, and they have exhibited many of these characteristics. There is however a question to be asked regarding the requirement for an external enemy in order to forge a sense of social identity. The desire to create division between a group of people and its environment in order to unite that group risks overriding legitimate resistance, and suggests a potentially manipulative approach which uses threat rather than shared goals as an incentive to achieve. Whilst this may at times be effective, it's an approach I question, because it suggests that at its deepest level the thinking in use is individualist rather than collaborative.

A point little mentioned in the literature is the idea that collaboration is co-created. In that respect perhaps it doesn't matter how good your collaboration skills are – their effectiveness depends on the receptiveness and reciprocity of others, rather than being solely under your own control. This suggests that collaborative behaviours can't simply be located in any individual; rather they arise from interaction between people. Effective collaboration therefore depends on the skills of others, as much as on our own. As such, viewing collaboration as a developmental journey for all the parties involved offers the potential for continual improvement in collaborative ventures. In this vein, Bushe (2009) argues that the key to collaborative success is the ability to create and sustain partnership with others. How to achieve this though, when everyone has a different perspective? Perhaps one answer lies in the way we construct understanding.

Gergen (2009) describes how our traditional view of understanding each other is to try and see with ever greater clarity what is in someone else's head. There is something located "in you" which I have to "see" in order to understand "you". This approach locates the creation of understanding as an attempt to penetrate the impenetrable wall between two minds, and since no two minds are alike, it is very difficult to achieve. Instead, Gergen suggests we can redefine understanding as a shared process of meaning-making, which rather than being about seeing into someone else's head is about creating a sufficient level of shared meaning to allow all parties to take a step forward together. In this approach all parties have a stake in the creation of understanding, and the futile attempt to see into someone else's inner world is avoided. Thus our path forward is created together by interaction, rather than individually by passive reception of information.

This idea of learning how to progress together as we work is also addressed by Morgan (2009). In pointing out how our brains work, he describes how our intelligence is distributed.

The brain does not use a central processor linked to its other parts by a communication network. Instead, processing is spread throughout the brain. Consequently, if we want to pick up a glass of water we don't calculate exactly how to do it and then send instructions to our arms, rather we use iterations of increasing accuracy – we begin to move our arm, then work out whether we are getting closer to our target or further away. By constantly refining our movements, we are able to pick up the glass without any need for a central plan. Since this is the natural functioning of our brain, it suggests that cycles of increasing understanding are possible when understanding itself is constructed in the way Gergen (2009) describes. We don't need to have a perfect understanding of each other to collaborate well – instead it's about communicating well enough to allow us to take a step forward together, then our circles of refinement allow us to work out if we're getting closer to understanding or further away, and repeat the process until we get where we want to go. The benefit for collaboration is twofold; first, it invites everyone into the process - understanding is socially created, so it's not just about having a few individuals who are excellent at putting themselves across, it's about everyone having a voice. Second, it overcomes the difficulty that no matter how good your collaborative skills, your collaborative success is limited by the behaviour of others, because as part of actually collaborating you are learning the skills necessary to improve everyone's ability to collaborate.

There is a subtlety to this last point. Since all collaborations take place in a different context with different people, it could be argued that a fixed set of collaborative behaviours is an ineffective approach. This is because the success or otherwise that results from a particular behaviour depends significantly on the context it's deployed in. As such the ability for everyone to learn the behaviour necessary for the context in which a collaboration is taking place could be an invaluable aid, and a view of understanding as co-created and iterative allows this to happen.
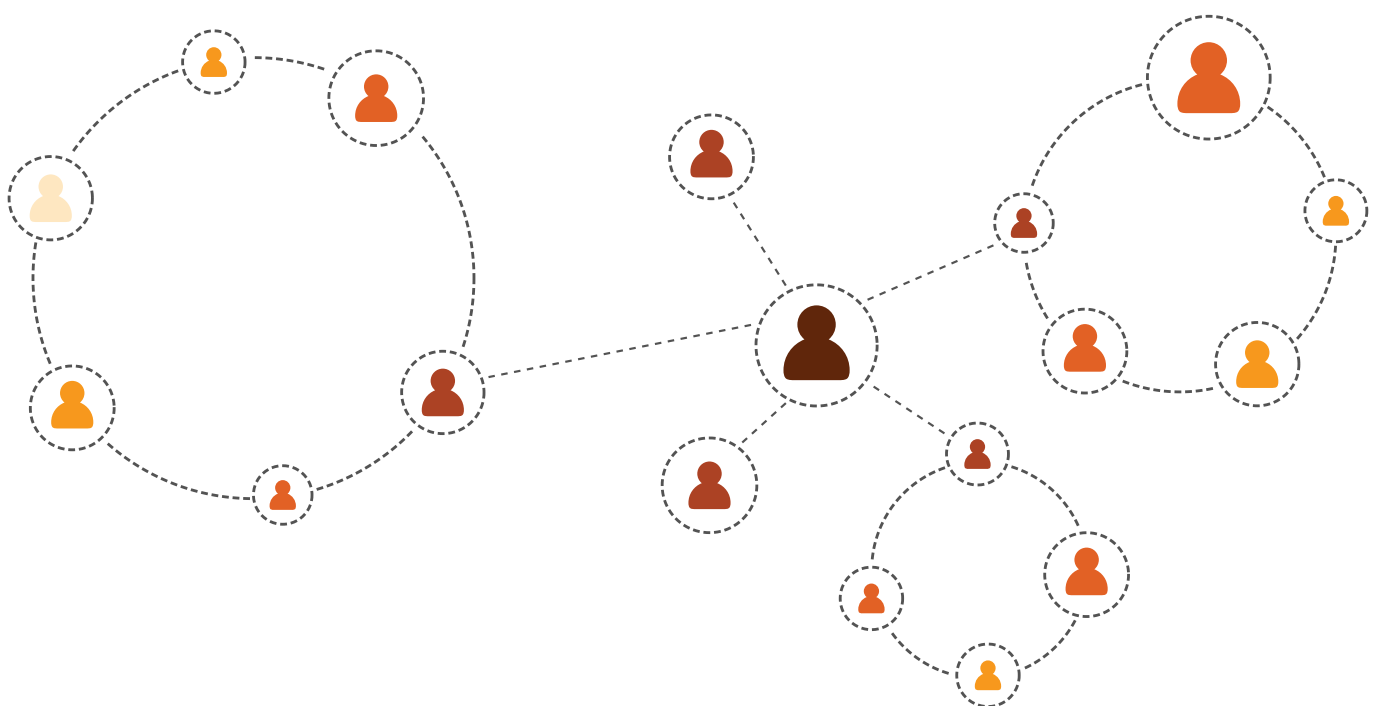
Conclusions

Having looked at what collaboration is, and what it takes to be good at it, I'd like to conclude with actions and behaviours that can improve collaboration.

Explaining our sense-making

Being sensitive to the social rules of the relationship "dance" helps us conform enough to be accepted, which is essential if we are to be effective at knowing when and how to challenge those rules for the good of the organisation (Goffee & Jones 2006). One way to do this is to clarify our interpretation of other's behaviour, and own our experience when we speak. Using the pronoun "I" when we describe our experience helps achieve this, recognising that others might be making very different sense of the same situation. As Bushe (2009) argues, the ability to describe our experience in ways that invite people to be curious about it rather than defensive is a key skill for collaboration.

Functioning well in ambiguity

Better communication = better collaboration, but only to a point. Past this point, the ability to function in ambiguity and complexity is more important. The reasons are twofold; First, some things are difficult to communicate precisely, a degree of ambiguity is therefore inevitable. Second, communication is a two way thing and you can't control another's level of skill at it – but you can control your own ability to work with partial understanding, and your ability to decide how much understanding is enough to allow a step forward.

In fact, although ambiguity is often avoided in organisations, it can have a positive aspect. As Gergen notes, speaking with certainty from a single perspective excludes the creation of other possibilities (Gergen 2009), yet possibilities are exactly what is needed during the inevitable conflicts of collaboration. The need to move from diagnosis to dialogue is paramount in collaboration, because dialogue is what's needed to achieve understanding, so comfort in ambiguity is an important skill.

Providing focus & structure

Ambiguity is one thing, chaos another. Collaboration requires both a suitable setting as well as appropriate human skills – so consideration should also be given to the structure of collaborative projects. As Bushe (2009) suggests, some hierarchy in collaboration is necessary, because it provides focus and direction. This is where the structural aspects of collaborative working addressed in BS11000 show their value. The issue is one of balance however, because the unequal distribution of power in hierarchies can get in the way of people expressing the truth from their point of view, which impedes collaboration by preventing understanding.

People development

Development often occurs in specialisms – leadership, technical or project management training for example. Yet in a world where so much is undertaken collaboratively, people skills matter just as much as specialisms, arguably more. This suggests that developing interpersonal skills is important for collaborative success. Indeed from a collaborative perspective, the "war for talent" is a questionable idea for its assumption that talent lies only in some individuals. Rather, in a world where success depends on collaboration, the behaviours that lead to great outcomes are something co-created by the group - resident in its interaction and culture, as much as its individuals. As such perhaps the "war" is a psychological means of situating our problems outside of our organisation, avoiding looking at how we ourselves, and the culture of our organisation, might actually get in the way of collaborative success.

Leadership

Bennis & Biederman (1997) highlight a crucial aspect of leadership in successful collaborations. All collaboration takes place within a context, usually one where those doing the collaborating are themselves still part of, and reporting to, their respective organisations. A key role of leadership is to help manage this border between the collaborative enterprise and the parent organisations, such that the culture of the parent organisations doesn't negatively impact the collaboration.

Learning as we go

Since the context and the parties change, no two collaborations are quite the same – so skills that worked in one situation might not get you through the next one. Additionally, the idea that collaboration is co-created suggests that as well as paying attention to the goal, we need to pay attention to how we are achieving it as the journey progresses – what are we learning about how our behaviour impacts collaboration in its current context?

One barrier to learning can be that cultural biases for action, success, conformity, and individual recognition impede our ability to reflect, share, co-create and communicate (Gino & Staats 2015). Mechanisms that encourage reflection and learning (coaching for example) can therefore help collaborative ventures sustain and improve over time.

Final thoughts

In setting out to learn about collaboration, I've discovered that learning itself – in the sense of constantly adjusting our behaviours to the collaborative situation we are in – is perhaps the central skill of collaboration. We don't always need to have the answer all worked out before we can make progress – some things are too complex for that. What we need besides technical and organisational skill is the ability to be effective in the complex and dynamic world of human behaviours, allowing us to have enough of an answer to take a step forward together. What "enough of an answer" looks like will be different for every situation – but humans have an endless capacity to learn, which allows us to work out an answer for each situation as we go. Approaches that encourage curiosity and creativity can be valuable here. Curiosity allows us to want to understand other perspectives, and creativity allows us to work out options for moving forward together – learning new ways to collaborate which help us in our specific situation. This field guide has given a taste of the territory that awaits in collaborative ventures, but the detail of the landscape itself can only emerge as collaborative partners move forward together – because in the end it is they who create it.

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The Val Hammond fund cements Roffey Park's commitment to applied management research through expanding the diversity and reach of thinking aimed at improving the world of work. Val, formerly Roffey Park's Chair and Chief Executive, is a keen supporter of Roffey Park's proud tradition as a charitable research institute and is still deeply engaged in Roffey's research work through her participation in Roffey's research advisory group.