

COLLABORATION IN ACTION: TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

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Collaboration in Action: Transforming Communities: A Summary

The rapidly evolving human services climate creates opportunities for innovation and creativity in service delivery. There is an increasing emphasis on collaboration as a means to create greater impact and effectiveness. Drawing on their extensive experience, the authors assert that collaboration generates transformation throughout the system, the dynamics of which need to be acknowledged and worked with.

The emergence of a living thriving system is a chaotic, organic process, which evolves through a complex process of growth and development. In exploring the interlocking systems involved, the greater the depth and penetration of the collaboration, the greater the impact, intended and unintended on individual organizations. The authors provide some concepts for exploring these elements of collaboration, and invite further inquiry.

A. The Context

Introduction

In North America, major changes in human service funding mechanisms, in the evolving role of public and private organizations, compounded by funding cutbacks and a growing demand for human service supports, have created the backdrop for innovations in service delivery. This inquiry arises from recent experience and thinking about inter-organizational collaboration in community-wide efforts to deliver comprehensive and more fully integrated services. The paper accompanies a workshop: “*Collaboration in Action: Transforming Communities*” which explores specific experiences with multi-organizational community collaborations. What are the processes that build engagement? What elements must be present to move a “collaboration” from a good idea to a living entity? Is there more to success than good planning and good leadership? The workshop/paper is part of an ongoing inquiry in to the elements that make up a truly transformative new organizational dynamic. How and does this build community? Specific case examples are explored in more detail in the workshop, but are pointed out below.

As organizational development consultants working in the public sector, we have grounded our practice and inquiry in recent thinking about complex adaptive systems - the patterns of relationships within them, how they are sustained, how they self-organize and how outcomes emerge. [1-3].

“A system, in this context, is anything that takes its integrity and form from the ongoing interactions of its parts. Companies, nations, families, biological niches, bodies, television sets, personalities and atoms are all systems. Systems are defined by the fact that their elements have a common purpose and behave in common ways, precisely because they are interrelated toward that purpose.”(page 137) “[4]

Complex adaptive systems are shaped and influenced by where they have been. Thus the study of the whole and its relationship to the parts becomes very important. Often we have tried to implement change by looking at the resisters and factors that will impede our progress. In the context of complexity science we are exploring and advocating a focus on those elements that will attract people, instead of implementing large-scale change that excites resistance. We work with the attractors.

Winer and Ray define collaboration as, “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve results they are more likely to achieve together than alone.”[5]. Further, it is a relationship that, “includes a commitment to: a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards.”[6]. We have been inspired by the growing writing and research on inter-organizational collaboration and have incorporated in to our work many of the lessons learned elsewhere [5-18].

B. The Interlocking Systems of an Inter-Organizational Collaboration

Inter-organizational collaborations create change dynamics at the macro or system level, and at the organizational or meso level. Collaborative ventures, operating as an open system, feel the impact of the collaboration at all levels of the system. Figure One, below, illustrates some of the key components of an inter-organizational collaborative initiative. These components are discussed in more detail in the workshop, in relation to specific case examples.

- o **Supporting Individuals:** including leaders who are in a position to generate energy and attract support, enablers who can open doors or block progress, and supporters who can till the earth on which the collaboration grows.
- o **Participating Organizations:** each of which brings varying degrees of enthusiasm and determination based on capacity, core mandate, internal culture, and its previous experience with collaborations. These variables are important bell weathers for future success.
- o **The Collaboration Initiative itself:** can generate vitality or lose steam depending on several factors. Mattesich and Monsey’s [6] review of 133 studies of collaboration identified the following inherent dimensions as important to success. Our own work has found the same:
 - o *membership characteristics* (representation, ability to trust and compromise and aware of self-interest),
 - o *process/structure* (decision-making including conflict resolution, flexible and adaptable structures, clear roles and policy guidelines)
 - o *communication* (open and frequent, formal and informal links,
 - o *purpose* (concrete, attainable goals and objectives, shared vision, unique purpose; to this we would add clear business case)
 - o *resources* (sufficient funds, skilled convenor).
- **Environment - socio/economic sectors:** the particular nature of the sector(s) within which the participating organizations operate will influence the collaboration. Particular professional and practice cultures and their related power dynamics affect the experience of participating individuals and organizations. The legislative and policy environment within sectors affect the mandates and degrees of flexibility of participants. The boundaries of the sector and their degree of flexibility affect the ease of inter-sectoral action. The predominant understanding of best practices of the day can help or hinder collaborative propositions.

- **The Funders:** During the 1990's funders, particularly granting bodies and those allocating public sector grants, have viewed collaborations favourably. Some have made it a requirement for eligibility. Many partnerships have been conceived on paper within the last few days before a funder's proposal delivery deadline. As discussed below, without other driving forces, or a foundation in a larger collaboration, these partnerships tend to be superficial or short-lived. One of the collaborations we have supported as OD consultants encountered difficulties arising from funder-driven pressures. Some funders have recognized the challenges in creating fruitful collaborations and have supports in place to foster collaborative efforts, such as funds available to finance the invaluable "rooting" activities.

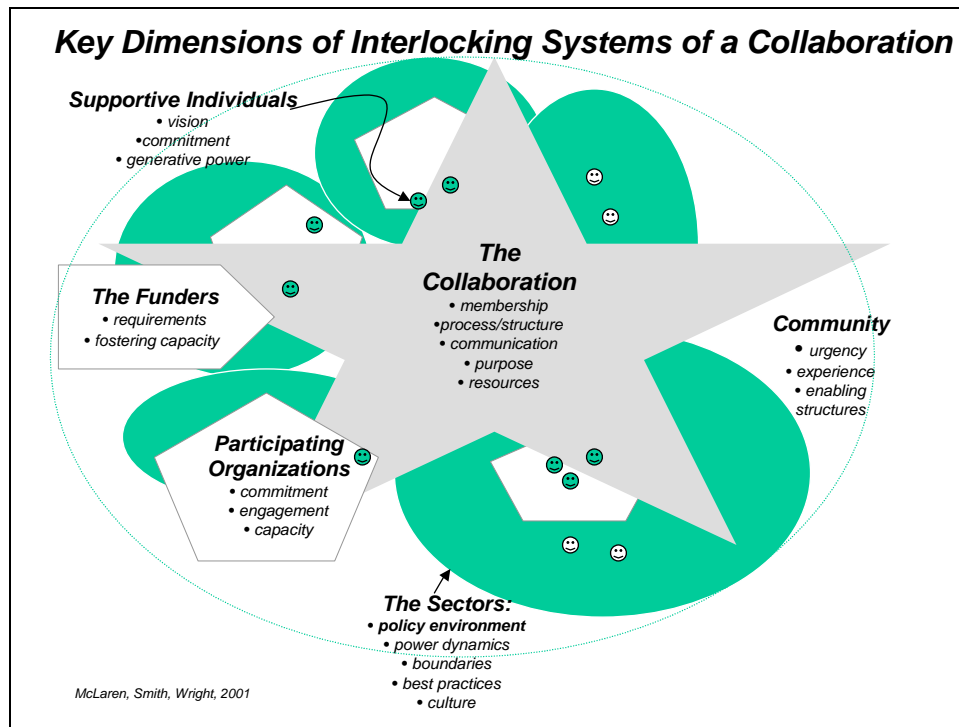


Figure 1

- o **The Community:** Community action and recognition of a need can spur a collaboration to address the issue. Experience with successful collaboration helps seed others in a community. Our Canadian city has growing experience with community-wide collaboration, based on early successes. The presence of enabling structures, such as inter-sectoral planning bodies in the community, can foster a culture of successful collaboration.

C. The Evolution and Emergence of a Collaboration

The collaborations we have worked with can feel chaotic and non-linear, despite the literature describing a life course - a beginning, middle, and end [9, 19, 20]. They evolve in an organic way that simply cannot be fully planned. A shift in one or two aspects of the collaboration – a key individual leaves or another comes on board, an external condition shifts in some unintended way, a crisis – each can spark a flurry of activity that can move a collaboration to a deeper level of commitment. In a child and family services collaboration involving 23 separate agencies in a Canadian city, the original process of the largely funder-driven initiative,

was altered over the first several years by numerous other initiatives and internal developments that shifted the locus of control within the group, and spawned innovation and mini-collaborations within the larger collaboration.

Collaboration takes work; the motivation must be serious, multi-factoral, and integral to the purpose and mandate of each organization. “Pseudo-collaborations” -- created for the sole purpose of gaining funding or those responding solely to external forces -- are not sustainable in the long term. The most successful collaborations are those with strong driving forces at multiple levels in the early stages of formation. Collaborations that sustain energy over time continue to seed these driving forces, thus reinforcing the momentum of the venture.

Inter-organizational collaborations exponentially multiply the number of “cross-boundary¹” connections that each organization must navigate. The number of external relationships increases the potential for conflict and tension. The deeper the collaboration reaches into the core of an organization, the greater the number of connections. Conflicts most frequently occur at these connection points [21]. This was an obvious problem with a smaller collaborative effort one of us was involved with involving five quite small agencies working with high-risk youth. Rather than negotiate and communicate the conflicts -- things like differences in workplace values, staff roles, decision-making systems -- the agency Directors left important tensions unspoken for several years partly out of concerns about greater transparency and partly out of discomfort in dealing with differences. Organizational processes need to be in place to ensure ways of dealing with and resolving differences and using conflicts as an impetus for adaptation. This means adopting organizational learning practices within the collaboration and in each participating organization. [4, 22, 23].

Figure Two, below, illustrates the evolutionary process of collaborations as a cycle of growth and development, requiring periodic renewal and revisioning. In our experience, bolstered by that of other authors [7, 9, 13, 15, 24] the collaborations that moved successfully from vision to implementation invested significantly in the “rooting” stage – taking time to build consensus on the focus, capacity within the collaboration with community outreach and organizing in order to build a strong base of support. A good example is a recent initiative among education, health and social service agencies in one city, working with pre-school children and families at risk. A powerful funders group along with a number of other key community voices brought together 300 stakeholders to develop objectives and build momentum in the wider community. Such early successes have not eliminated future obstacles and conflict, and have required several re-visitations to the action plan to refine expectations. But that is life in the hurly burly of collaborative initiatives

¹ Boundaries are defined internally within an organization by teams, divisions, departments, etc. Externally they “edge” each organization. The more the collaboration penetrates an organization, the more its internal groups “rub up against” internal groups in other organizations. This is what we mean by cross-boundary connections.

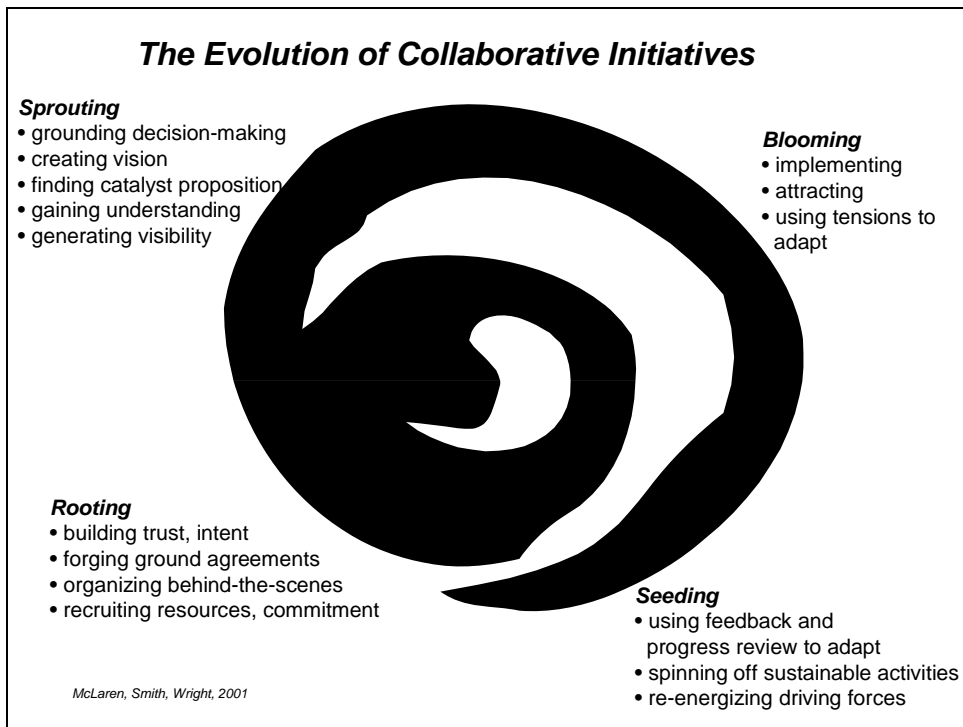


Figure 2

Following on the above, it is our hypothesis that the greater the level of penetration of the inter-organizational collaboration in to the core of a participating organization, the greater the destabilization of participating organizations' boundaries. Many nonprofit organizations have looser boundaries that can lead to uncertainty about purpose, roles, responsibilities, and their scope of authority once collaborative efforts begin to affect their routine way of working. As OD practitioners, we typically work with organizations' boundaries early in a change effort. This could mean putting in place temporary structures and practices, to prepare for the inevitable boundary destabilization that comes with change[25, 26]. Collaborations often have both intended and unintended effects on participating organizations, and on the larger environment.

D. Next Steps

This paper is a sampler of the fruits of our ongoing inquiry into the role of organizational development within inter-organizational collaboration within the non-profit sector. Our intent is to extend the inquiry space to clients and peers who are working in this fascinating domain. We invite others to engage in the inquiry. Contact:

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