

Chapter Four

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration emerged as a strategy for addressing environmental and natural resource disputes in the 1970s. Since then, its use extends to a wide range of problems at state, regional, community, and neighborhood levels. These initiatives address a myriad of problems including economic development, urban sprawl, neighborhood empowerment, education, transportation, health care and governance.

Working together entails a profound shift in the premises Americans hold for how public issues should be addressed. Instead of advocacy, collaboration demands engagement, dialogue instead of debate, inclusion instead of exclusion, shared power instead of domination and control, and mutual learning instead of rigid adherence to mutually exclusive positions.

DEFINING COLLABORATION

Collaboration, as Carl Larson and I defined it in our 1994 book, *Collaborative Leadership*, goes beyond communication, cooperation and coordination. "As its Latin roots -- *com* and *laborare* -- indicate, it means "to work together." It is a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties to achieve common goals by sharing responsibility, authority and accountability for achieving results. It is more than simply sharing knowledge and information (communication) and more than a relationship that helps each party achieve its own goals (cooperation and coordination). The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party" (Chrislip and Larson, 1994, p. 5).

Our definition referred to community or regionally based multi-stakeholder collaborative initiatives. Sometimes called *ad hoc* initiatives, these processes respond to specific needs and often dissolve when the work is done. They differ from similar processes in another arena: inter-organizational or inter-agency collaboration. Community and regional initiatives include a broader range of stakeholders while inter-agency collaborations usually limit participation to representatives of concerned or affected organizations. For the most part, *ad hoc* initiatives focus on policy-making through collaboration where inter-agency collaborations pay attention to implementation of decisions already made. Other types of collaborative initiatives support mutual learning but do not seek consensus. This book concentrates on community and regional multi-stakeholder collaborative initiatives relying on consensus based decision making.

Collaborative efforts gain credibility and influence by insuring inclusiveness, managing a constructive learning engagement, providing information necessary for making good decisions, building

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the coherence of the group, and helping negotiate agreements that lead to action. Many of these efforts operate in parallel with the public sector. In public policy making, these informal recommending groups rely on their collective credibility to provide a credible and influential link with legislative bodies and implementing agencies. Sometimes communities and regions use collaboration to create new programs and partnerships independent of the public sector to address specific needs. These efforts build shared responsibility for solutions and strategies among implementing organizations.

WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

Several working premises or assumptions inform the practice of collaboration. These assumptions contrast starkly with the usual assumptions about how public decisions are made.

Political practices must be congruent and compatible with the commitment to democracy and a healthy civil society. Since the late 1980's, Americans have debated the status and health of the country's democracy and civil society. When current political practices lead to division, alienation, and distrust, they expend social capital. Collaboration provides an alternative means of civic engagement more compatible with the idea of a democratic society, one that builds social capital rather than destroys it.

The quality of public decisions stems directly from the quality of the engagement used to make them. All public decisions come from some form of public engagement whether through representatives, public participation or alternatives like collaboration. There are no high quality public decisions absent high quality civic engagement except by accident. Effective engagement comes through conscious intent, purpose and design. More inclusive, constructive, and well-informed engagements lead to better decisions. Working together offers a constructive response to a divisive civic culture, instability in policy making, alienation from public engagement, and lack of trust in governing institutions.

Public decisions must respond to the real needs of the community or region. Constructively engaging citizens in addressing the concerns that affect them enables public decisions that meet the real needs of a community or region. Policies imposed by outsiders typically fail because of lack of local support or lack of understanding of local concerns. Contemporary research on community and regional development unequivocally concludes that the best public policies come from the people most concerned and affected by those policies. Similarly, people commit to action because of their involvement in making the decisions. Collaboration offers a deeply democratic way of engaging people in a place in defining and addressing their own concerns.

People in a place should have some control over the forces that impact their lives. The apparently overwhelming forces of the free market economy, globalization, information technology, biotechnology, population growth and urban sprawl threaten the capacity of representative democracy to mitigate their impacts. The fragmentation of political interests prevents the coming together necessary for

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acknowledging these forces and guiding their impacts. A society lacking the means to shape these forces undermines the essence of democracy. Collaboration provides an alternative that leads to more encompassing and coherent responses to these challenges.

Understanding of others and of essential information about public concerns comes before judgement and decision. In public engagements, Americans tend to shoot first and ask questions later. In contrast, collaborative processes seek to build understanding before agreement. By creating a safe space, stakeholders let go of preconceived notions to allow new solutions and strategies to emerge. Appreciating values, perceptions, and experiences of others builds trust and mutual respect while destroying stereotypes. Perspectives shift by taking the time to clarify and comprehend information. Before rushing to judgement, collaboration creates shared understanding.

Constructive ways for bridging cultural boundaries will not be the norm of any one participating culture. Practitioners learned the hard way that processes peculiar to one culture do not work with other cultures and different traditions. Dominant cultural norms especially do not work with minorities. People do not intuitively know how to bridge cultural boundaries. Most do not have the attitudes or skills for working effectively with people from divergent backgrounds. Engagement across cultural boundaries requires respecting the diverse norms of participating cultures and, at the same time, providing a new and legitimate norm for working together across those boundaries. The practice of collaboration helps create new norms with the potential to reach across these lines.

In order for collaboration to work, all participants must engage as peers. In a collaborative engagement, each participant has equal opportunity to speak, to be heard, and to shape decisions. No one person or group dominates. People participate as peers with no distinctions made for position, money, power, role, race, sector, and so on. Working together helps meet the needs of all affected parties by engaging them as peers.

If you are going to collaborate, collaborate. Collaborative initiatives planned by a narrow, exclusive group of leaders or policy makers and then imposed on a broader group of stakeholders generally fail. In order to succeed, every phase of collaboration from conception to implementation must be accomplished by people who reflect the broader community through a credible and open process. Only by modeling collaboration can collaboration work.

BASIC CONCEPTS

Collaboration as an alternative strategy for addressing public concerns grows out of the increasingly destructive consequences of current political practices. The idea of working together incorporates several closely related concepts fundamental to its practice. These include the distinction between adaptive and routine challenges; the notion of a holding environment in which to do adaptive

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work; the use of facilitation to guide or orchestrate adaptive work; and the use of consensus-based decision making rather than majority rule.

Adaptive Work

At the end of the 19th century, the Progressive political movement envisioned a new model of governance. Technical and bureaucratic expertise could counter the corrosive and corruptive influence of powerful economic interests on government officials of the time. Because of the Progressives, a certain faith endured that experts and professionals in government could think through public concerns in a rational way and conceive comprehensive solutions that would work. Citizens and elected leaders identified priority issues through a political process and then mobilized the "best and the brightest" within government ranks to solve them. Public problems were routine in the sense that the expertise to address them either existed or could be developed. For most of the last century, this expert driven approach to public problems lived up to its early promise. At the turn of the 20th century, this approach rarely matches the challenges of public life.

Most contemporary public problems have no clear "right" answers. Some involve conflicts between differing technical or bureaucratic responses while for other problems no precise answer exists. Conflicting values impair the capacity of elected leaders and public agencies to develop acceptable solutions. Ronald Heifetz, Co-Director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, says these kinds of issues cannot be resolved by technical expertise or routine behavior: "To make progress, not only must invention and action change circumstances to align with values, but the values themselves may also have to change" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 35). Solving these problems requires new learning and adaptive work. Answers must be invented or discovered heuristically since they cannot be determined by experts.

Holding Environment

If competing values and differing positions mark public problems, the work of defining problems and solutions must be done by the people who hold these values and positions. Coping with a diversity of perspectives and values requires a suitable environment to facilitate this work. A collaborative process provides a structure for adaptive work.

Adaptive work requires learning. Learning requires engagement. Heifetz describes the need for a "holding environment" in which to do adaptive work and a means to "orchestrate conflict" inherent in these kinds of issues (Heifetz, 1994, p. 103). Put another way, adaptive work requires a conducive environment and appropriate tools to facilitate learning and discovery among diverse stakeholders. An

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effective holding environment provides a safe container with a purposefully designed sequence of actions and events -- a process -- that helps a group work together in ways that lead to agreement.

A collaborative process engages a disparate group of stakeholders with differing positions and, often, a long history of conflict and mutual distrust. A holding environment provides a safe setting -- both physically and emotionally -- and a fair process for adaptive work. Skilled facilitators may "orchestrate conflict" and guide the process. Leaders who can establish and maintain the holding environment "pace the work" to contain and regulate stress within the container (Heifetz, 1994, p. 109). An effective holding environment helps maintain sufficient pressure on the group to accomplish real work without overwhelming participants with too much stress.

Facilitation

Facilitation is a way of managing meetings that allows groups to work together constructively. The verb *to facilitate* means to make easier. A facilitator in a collaborative process helps make the work of stakeholders easier in a meeting or a series of meetings. A facilitator guides the process of how a group works together while remaining neutral about the content of its work. A process defines the way a group works together; content defines the substance of the issue itself.

For good reason, this is not a book about facilitation. Other excellent books cover this topic. Twenty five years ago, the ground-breaking work of David Straus and Michael Doyle helped define the roles, tasks and tools of the facilitator's discipline (*How to Make Meetings Work*. New York: Jove Press, 1976). Others like Sam Kaner (*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Philadelphia: New Society, 1996) and Roger Schwarz (*The Skilled Facilitator*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994) built on these concepts but always within the parameters of the earlier work. Collaboration and collaborative leadership extend the original ideas put forward by Doyle and Straus. Collaboration builds on three of the foundational concepts of facilitation.

First, *comprehensive agreements evolve from a series of smaller, less consequential agreements*. The complexity of public problems and the diversity of stakeholder groups make larger agreements impossible or incomprehensible without parsing them into smaller steps. Starting with basic agreements about what concerns should be addressed and the willingness to work together, collaboration then builds more complex agreements about solutions, strategies and actions.

A second basic concept of facilitation recognizes that *meetings or collaborative processes breakdown unless participants engage in the same activities at the same time*. The open - narrow - close framework organizes the work of a group in a consistent, predictable way. "All meetings are a series of discussions where participants are opening, narrowing, and closing on different topics and building agreements as they go" (Interaction Associates, 1991, Section 4, p. 6). A group gathers and clarifies information in an

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opening phase before organizing and evaluating information in a narrowing phase and reaching agreements in a closing phase. This framework informs the overall design of a collaborative process, the stages within the process, particular meetings in each stage and sub-parts of these meetings. The framework helps groups stay focused on the task at hand while moving forward in a coherent fashion.

A third basic concept of facilitation recognizes that *the work done ahead of time to create an environment for working together is as important as what is done in the engagement itself*. Preventions anticipate and help prevent problems in meetings or collaborative engagements. For example, gaining initial agreement on the process for working together helps prevent future problems. Similarly, seeking agreement on desired outcomes and an agenda for a particular meeting at the start provides a means for maintaining or regaining focus later in the meeting. Experience demonstrates that planning a meeting or a series of meetings requires at least as much time as the meetings themselves. Collaborative processes cannot work unless the meetings themselves work.

Consensus Based Decision Making

For more than two centuries, majority rule has helped Americans make public decisions. At the start of the 21st century, it may have outlived its usefulness. The tradition of majority rule and politics as a contest among interests has become increasingly destructive in the United States. When one side wins the zero-sum political game, the consequences are devastating. When no one wins, there is gridlock or stalemate. Rather than leading to progress and action, the tradition of majority rule divides the country, erodes civil society and undermines trust in the democratic ideal.

Instead of majority rule, a collaborative process seeks consensus on critical agreements. Through a constructive process "groups *can* forge agreements that satisfy everyone's primary interests and concerns" (Susskind, 1999a, p. xvii) and avoid the worst consequences of majority rule. Consensus decision making recognizes that adaptive work generally leads to deeper, more creative agreements with broader support for action. Innovative solutions and strategies emerge from a learning engagement not from a win/lose battle of positions. Consensus becomes possible through well-planned and well-executed collaborative processes. Through an inclusive, engaging and constructive process -- a good faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders -- overwhelming agreement can be reached.

REALIZING THE PROMISE OF COLLABORATION

Realizing the promise of collaboration can be likened to building a wheel: assembling a number of disparate parts creates a powerful tool. New working assumptions lead to new ways of making public decisions. New concepts and tools help fashion new processes. Look at what a community or region

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creates when collaboration works: a credible and influential stakeholder group with the cohesion that comes from constructive engagement, a carefully considered rationale for its recommendations, and strong leaders within the group that help facilitate its work. Stakeholders reflect the makeup of the broader community so cannot be mistaken for another special interest group or coalition. A fair and constructive process engages stakeholders as peers so no one dominates the results. The creative use of good information helps avoid bias. This powerful constituency for change leads to real results because of its capacity to hold implementing organizations accountable for action. Like a well-built wheel, a carefully crafted collaborative process is a powerful tool.



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