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# **COLLABORATION IN CONTEXT**

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## **Collaboration in Context**

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## COLLABORATION THEORY FOR COLLABORATION PRACTICE: TRANSFER DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Siv Vangen

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to make a contribution to collaboration theory (e.g., Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Genefke & McDonald, 2001; Gray, 1985,1989; Huxham, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 2000a, 2000b; Mandell, 2001; McCann, 1983; Osborne, 2000) and in particular to process theory on the transfer of substantive knowledge on collaboration to management practice. For the purpose of this paper and the research upon which it is based, collaboration is defined broadly as any working agreement spanning organisational boundaries.

Notwithstanding differences in precise imperatives, collaborations across the community, public, and private sectors are generally set up in the search of some form of collaborative advantage (Huxham, 1996). In practice however, numerous factors mitigate against success (Huxham & Vangen, 2000c), and reports of failures are great (e.g., Bleeke & Ernst, 1991,1993; McCann, 1983; Newburry & Zeira, 1997; Osborn, Denekamp & Baughn, 1997; Pothukuchi & Park, 1996; Thakur & Srivastave, 1996; Webb, 1991). Understandably, individuals employed to manage partnerships express a great deal of frustration and pain (Vangen & Huxham, in press).

Whilst the debate amongst researchers on the main issues pertaining to collaborative processes is ongoing, there seems to be general agreement that collaborative processes are highly demanding and require appropriate attention by those involved. Although some forms of support are available, for example, in the form of guidebooks (see Winer & Ray, 1994; Wilson & Charlton, 1997; Rosenthal & Mizrahi, 1994; Laughlin & Black, 1995), to date there is not much material publicly available capturing any serious and successful attempt at making the knowledge of collaboration available to practice. This paper is based on a research project undertaken with the aim to explore the means by which theory on collaboration may be made accessible and useful to those endeavouring to collaborate in practice (Vangen, 1998; Vangen & Huxham, 1998). The aim of this paper is to convey a set of collaboration themes and a set of design principles for transferring insight to practice that emerged out of that research.

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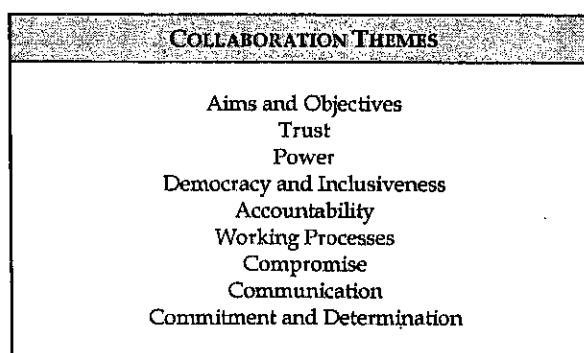
Pages 149 - 159

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### COLLABORATION THEMES FOR TRANSFERRING INSIGHT TO PRACTICE

This section is focused on the type of content that may be appropriate and relevant for collaboration theory to be transferred to practitioners. It is structured as a set of interrelated collaboration themes (see Figure 1) identified out of concerns repeatedly mentioned by practitioners as causing pain and reward in collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 1996). As such, each theme represents a broad category of issues that have relevance to the management of collaborations. For each theme a structured, albeit brief, description of related issues as well as examples of challenges and tensions associated with them are provided. This theme based approach is in contrast to other approaches to understanding partnership work, which typically focus either on the identification of a range of success factors (e.g., Gray, 1985; Long & Arnold, 1995; Lorange & Roos, 1993; Mattesich & Monsey, 1992; Pearce, 1997) or seek to identify stages or phases in the process of collaborating (e.g., Das & Teng, 1997; Kanter, 1994; Gray, 1989; McCann, 1983).

Figure 1: Collaboration themes



The theme labelled *aims and objectives* captures issues raised consistently by practitioners in a whole range of settings and is concerned with reaching agreement on the collaborative aims for the partnership. Typically, practitioners say that having clarity of purpose is essential as it helps them to be clear about why the collaboration is undertaken and why they are a part of it. It is argued that clarity and agreement on aims minimises false expectations and misunderstandings of the tasks to be undertaken which is seen as essential to operationalise their collaborative intent. However, individuals also call for a need to compromise on different agendas and suggest that agendas and priorities of individual organisations somehow need to be incorporated into the collaboration's agenda. Given that organisations usually come together to create collaborative advantage precisely because they each have something very different to offer, accommodating different agendas is understandably difficult. Indeed, individuals provide numerous examples of situations in which they have not been able to reach satisfactory agreement on the collaborative aims. This tends to cause a great deal of frustration, and individuals seem to imply that if

they could only agree on what to do, actually doing it would be a simple matter. In reality of course, this only represents one of the many hurdles to be overcome. A discussion on how to manage differences in aims and objectives in practice can be found in Huxham and Vangen (2000c).

Another management hurdle relates to issues pertaining to *trust*. Indeed, trust itself is required simply to enter into a negotiation about aims (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Practitioners frequently and repeatedly talk about the need for trust suggesting that trust is essential if collaboration is to be successful and enjoyable. However, individuals are also frequently providing examples of hostility, fighting, and mistrust indicating that they often perceive a lack of trust – or at least an inadequate level of it – in their own collaborative relationships. Dealing with mistrust and building trust between members are therefore seen as important if the collaboration is to move forward. For a discussion on the management of trust, see Vangen and Huxham (2003).

Practitioners also talk a great deal about *power* issues, and they frequently do so whilst simultaneously talking about trust. They provide numerous examples of power games, power plays, and power struggles, indicating that power issues are frequently seen to be problematic. Comments about glory seeking and the claiming of credit for collaborative achievements are frequently made. These comments often suggest that the powerful party has the ability to pick and choose when, and how, to acknowledge their involvement, and that decisions to do so are frequently based on whether or not collaborative efforts are seen as successes rather than failures. Individuals express a great deal of frustration over such power play and see it as hindrance to trust building. Thus, issues concerned with power-relationships are seen as significant contributors to mistrust and to the hampering of trust building (Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

In light of the above, it is perhaps not surprising that practitioners also talk about the need to overcome issues of inequality and power differences between members. The *democracy and inclusiveness* theme concerns the issue of inequality as well as issues pertaining to who should be included as members, the nature of membership, and the size of the collaborative group. For example, practitioners argue that it is important to be inclusive and to genuinely involve everyone with a stake in the issues over which the collaboration takes place. Yet individuals also argue pragmatically that membership should be limited to organisations and individuals who can commit enough time and resources to facilitate continuity in the undertakings of the collaboration. Similarly, whilst individuals argue for democratic and consensus based decision-making, arguments supporting the need for equal commitment are also made thereby suggesting that access to the collaborative agenda is based on the ability and willingness to be committed. Issues giving rise to tensions such as these are recurrent. The reality of most modern collaborations is that rather than membership being carefully planned, with clear rules about democracy and inclusiveness, the structure of collaborations and associated membership issues tend to evolve alongside changes in the collaboration's contextual environment. Frequently, such emerging structures are characterised by complex hierarchies in which one collaboration is a member of another collaboration. Membership is usually less than clear with very many individuals being involved and frequently with some individuals being involved in different capacities (Huxham & Vangen, 2000b).

The complexity of structure is perhaps one of the key sources of individuals' expressed concerns about *accountability*. Individuals involved in collaborative activities express concerns about what organisation, collaboration or other constituency (if any) they and others represent when they participate in the collaboration. For example, even if individuals can work out their own accountabilities, tensions may arise due to the need to be accountable to the organisation as well as to the organisation in which they are employed. Additional complexities often arise out of concerns to be democratic and accountable as well as to tackle a wide range of related problem areas.

The various complexities surrounding modern collaborations certainly call for the need to pay attention to the *working processes* by which the collaboration happens. Inherent in this theme are individuals' expressed concerns about the need for co-ordination and leadership. Individuals frequently suggest a need to address a range of issues including having a constitution and an appropriate structure of the collaborative group, addressing working processes by working out how to work together, finding ways of providing continuity at and between meetings, and addressing effectiveness, progress, and evaluation. It is frequently argued that cohesiveness and task orientation is needed for the collaboration to move forward. The theme also includes comments about lack of responsibility and leadership with numerous indications of the dilemma between leadership being required but not allowing anyone to take over (Huxham & Vangen, 2000a; Vangen & Huxham, in press).

These expressed concerns are not surprising given that collaborations inevitably bring together organisations and individuals with different professional expertise, different work practises and standards, different individual styles of working, different organisational cultures, norms, and values, different management styles and decision-making procedures, and so on. It is usually not pragmatically feasible to attend to all such differences, and this is perhaps the key driver for the need to *compromise*. Practitioners thus provide numerous examples of compromises required to: accommodate different values; adapt to different ways of working; and, recognise that things easily achieved within one organisation may be tedious and difficult to achieve in another. Practitioners typically also say that willingness to compromise on different agendas is essential to moving forward in a collaborative way.

Another necessity in moving the collaboration forward is the need for appropriate *communication*. Individuals often express a great deal of frustration over this issue perhaps because communications typically fall short of that required to facilitate collaboration. Practitioners' call for more adequate communication relates to the typical complexity of collaboration structures. This in turn suggests that sophisticated communication channels are required between the individuals concerned with the daily management of the collaboration, between this group of individuals and the organisations they represent, and finally between the collaboration and the wider community. Given this complexity, it is not surprising that individuals frequently find that communication is inadequate. Paying attention to appropriate use of language to address the different professional expertise of individuals concerned with the day-to-day management of the collaboration is only one aspect of this. Dealing with communication between these individuals and their respective

organisations whilst essential is also very tedious. Gaining the goodwill of stakeholders outside the collaboration may also be essential as research suggests that they often have as much influence on the collaborative agenda as do individuals centrally involved in the collaboration (Vangen & Huxham, in press).

Finally, the theme labelled *commitment and determination* captures a range of issues that sum up what is required to overcome the many challenges inherent in collaborative activities. Practitioners say that commitment to the collaboration is needed both in the shape of genuine support of the partnership aspects and the substantive purpose of the collaboration. Comments frequently relate to the need to involve individuals who are dedicated and committed to the aims and philosophy of the collaboration and to have individuals who are able to commit on behalf of their organisations. In practice the latter usually means individuals at the executive level who have the necessary autonomy and authority to act on behalf of their organisations. The obvious tension here being that individuals in this capacity may not afford the necessary time required to be a committed member. Rather, it seems necessary to recognise that commitment is bound to vary and that there is a need to resolve different levels of commitment. However, numerous comments seem to suggest that individuals do recognise the necessity to be determined about making it happen. Being committed, accepting that partnerships evolve over time, and recognising that collaboration can take a lot more time than anticipated are all believed to be important attitudes for individuals to have. These issues all amount to the need to continuously nurture the collaborative activities if the hoped for collaborative advantage is to be achieved (Huxham & Vangen, 2000c).

This section has aimed to identify issues typically of concern to practitioners, which in turn suggests what theory must address to be of relevance and interest to practitioners. The next session addresses how to transfer the theory.

#### *Design principles for transferring insight to practice*

This section focuses on the set of design principles developed as a result of the research discussed above. The aim is to discuss the general characteristics and properties of the design principles for a process for transferring insight to practice (see Figure 2). A description is provided to capture what each design principle is intended to address in terms of collaboration activities and in terms of a process for transferring insight to practice. Specific suggestions are given on the way in which issues captured by each design principle may be implemented in the design of the transfer process.

Design Principle 1: *'Tool up' individuals whose role it is to be concerned about collaboration processes, rather than target individuals involved in collaboration whose role it is to achieve substantive ends*, reflects very deliberate attempts at identifying possible audiences at which the transfer of collaboration insight could be effectively targeted (Vangen, 1998). A number of different audiences were identified but it was decided initially to focus on partnership managers, primarily because they need to be concerned about the processes by which collaboration happens compared to, for example, individuals who would be primarily concerned with achieving substantive aims. As such, partnership managers may be on the look out for help and actively seeking more understanding about collaborative processes. They would therefore be more



easily accessible, would benefit greatly from having tools to help them actively convey and use that understanding, and would be providing leverage as they potentially work with a large number of practitioners and hence ultimately provide a wider impact. More recent research also suggests that individuals acting in this capacity tend to be very influential in leading the collaboration (Vangen & Huxham, in press).

Figure 2: Design principles for transferring insight to practice

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR TRANSFERRING INSIGHT TO PRACTICE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 'Tool up' individuals whose role is to be concerned about collaborative processes, rather than target individuals involved in collaboration whose role is to achieve substantive aims.</li> <li>2. Account for individuals' potentially immense differences in culture, background, education, and motivation.</li> <li>3. Account for individuals' different perceptions of what collaboration actually is.</li> <li>4. Convey that a sound understanding of the complexities of collaboration will enhance collaborative practice.</li> <li>5. Convey insight in a way that is instantly meaningful to individuals in the target audience.</li> <li>6. Balance the need to capture and explore the complexities of collaboration against the need for simplicity in understanding and ease of use.</li> <li>7. Allow individuals to explore the complexities of collaboration in the context of their own experiences.</li> <li>8. Balance working with and according to individuals' experiences and introducing the theory on collaboration.</li> <li>9. Allow individuals to develop appropriate behaviours, tools or other responses for themselves - albeit prompted by suggestions from the transfer process - rather than give highly prescriptive advice on these.</li> </ol>

Design Principle 2: *Account for individuals' potentially immense difference in culture, background, education, and motivation* aims to reflect reality of many situations in which collaboration takes place not only across organisational boundaries but also across the community, public and private sectors, and sometimes across national boundaries. As such, collaboration tends to involve people from highly different educational, professional, and cultural backgrounds. The extent to which this matters will obviously vary, yet it is likely that such differences need to be accounted for.

The pragmatic implications for the transfer process therefore is the need to prepare and transfer theoretical material in ways that render it accessible and useful to individuals whatever their idiosyncratic needs may be. For example, this affects the level of sophistication and complexity at which the insight can be transferred as some individuals will be more accustomed to dealing with highly conceptual material than are others. Similarly it affects the means by which the

insight can be transferred; that is, it may not be possible to take full advantage of multi media facilities. The chief challenge is that such individual differences will have to be accounted for at the same time through the same transfer mechanism.

Design Principle 3: *Account for individuals' different conceptions of what collaboration is* aims to reflect the reality that a single universally accepted definition of collaboration does not exist. Since collaboration tends to pull together a range of different individuals with a range of different backgrounds (Design Principle 2) it follows that collaboration naturally means a range of different things to different people. For example, some would regard collaboration as any work spanning organisational boundaries whereas for others collaboration implies equal balance of power. Thus, individuals within any target audience are likely to have very different perceptions of what collaboration is.

The pragmatic implication is the need to ensure that individuals find the theory relevant by incorporating into the transfer process their own interpretations of collaboration. The design of the transfer process must therefore be such that, in practice, it becomes possible to work with multiple definitions of collaboration. A transfer process based on the collaboration themes may facilitate this. Highly prescriptive processes will necessarily have to be specific with regards to the type of collaborations to which the recommendations pertain. The collaboration themes, on the other hand, capture issues typically causing concern or reward in collaborative practices regardless of the specific nature of collaboration.

Design Principle 4: *Convey that a sound understanding of the complexity of collaboration will enhance collaborative practice* suggests that there may be a need to convey the complexity often inherent in collaborative activities and that an understanding of such may enhance individuals' ability to manage. Individuals, in particular those who have not themselves experienced a great deal of exposure to collaborative activities, are not necessarily aware that working across organisational boundaries can be extremely demanding. They may therefore not give due attention to how they manage their collaborative activities. This design principle therefore suggests that an understanding of the complexity of collaboration may prepare individuals for the challenge that it implies.

The implication is that there may be a need to communicate the complexity of collaboration to the target audience. There is a need to demonstrate the relevance of the theoretical material by conveying theory in such a way that individuals perceive it as practical. Thus, the theory must be conveyed in ways that will provide insight to the reasons why collaborative practices are difficult and provide pragmatic suggestions for addressing them.

Design Principle 5: *Convey insight in a way that is instantly meaningful to individuals in the target audience* aims to address the need for relevance of the theory. Individuals involved in collaboration are usually concerned with achieving progress with regards to the subject of the collaboration rather than being primarily concerned with the collaborative processes *per se*. Therefore, individuals are not likely to pay much attention to the theory unless it is instantly obvious that it will enhance their progress with regards to the substantive aims.

The implication is that regardless of transfer mechanism chosen, individuals would have to be encouraged to use it. The theory must therefore be presented in ways that instantly grabs the attention of individuals in the target audience. In practice, this often means that the theory must be presented using clear and simple concepts with which individuals can easily identify. However, the pictures to be presented may be more sophisticated if the individuals have more experience. For example, individuals who have themselves been exposed to the difficulties of collaboration are likely to identify instantly with the concept of collaborative inertia. In general, theoretical concepts that genuinely reflect collaboration in practice are likely to grab individuals' attention provided that the individuals themselves have had enough exposure.

*Design Principle 6: Balance the need to capture and transfer the complexity of collaboration against the need for simplicity in understanding and ease of use* aims to convey that, taken together, Design Principles 4 and 5 present a dilemma. Presenting a clear and adequately simple picture of collaboration (Design Principle 5) can be very misleading and lacking in complexity and detailed information about how to manage collaborative activities (Design Principle 4). Thus, there is a tension in that the instantly meaningful picture may be ultimately too simple to provide real practical guidance.

The pragmatic implication is that there is a need to find ways of balancing complexity versus simplicity. The focus on the collaboration themes may facilitate this as it enables the separation of theory into manageable chunks, which may provide the necessary simplicity. An elaboration of any one of the collaboration themes may provide individuals with valuable and holistic insight pertaining to that theme without at once having to gain a full understanding of all the aspects of collaboration. An appreciation of the complexity may be gained by elaborating the extent to which and the way in which the themes are inter-linked. A holistic understanding of collaboration can be gained gradually and incrementally by elaborating on a single or a few collaboration themes as and when the individuals in the target audience perceive it to be relevant. The relevance relates to exploring themes as identified by individuals' own experiences as discussed below (Design Principle 7). Thus, the focus on collaboration themes may provide the necessary balance between providing a simple and useful picture and at the same time conveying the complexity of collaboration.

*Design Principle 7: Allow individuals to explore the complexity of collaboration in the context of their own experiences* aims to address the issues captured by Design Principles 2, 3, and 4. It suggests that not only should individuals be encouraged to explore the complexities of collaboration (Design Principle 4), but they should be able to do so in the context of their own experiences so as to account for their differences in culture, background, education, and motivation (Design Principle 2) and different perceptions of collaboration (Design Principle 3).

The pragmatic implication is that the transfer process needs to be designed in such a way that it explicitly enables individuals to consider the theory in view of their own experiences. Thus, the theoretical material must be structured in a way that enables the link to be made. This may in turn put restrictions on the means by which theory may be conveyed. Some media, such as written text, do not provide enough flexibility to effectively allow for this. The theme-based

approach may ensure that individuals can, as a minimum, recognise that the theory has a direct link to their experiences. It also provides a great deal of flexibility in terms of preparation of the theory, the sequence by which it may be transferred, and the means of transferring it.

*Design Principle 8: Balance working with and according to individuals' experiences and introducing the theory on collaboration* suggests that a tension may arise from the need to build on individuals' experiences (Design Principle 7) and the need to introduce collaboration theory (Design Principle 4). Building on individuals' experiences is key to the transfer process and may be a sensible starting point. Yet, moving on from that to introducing insight in a prepared format so as to draw pragmatically on the theory of collaboration is problematic.

The dilemma is that whilst building on individuals' experiences is a sensible starting point, introducing theory by building on that starting point is problematic because it requires a fairly dominant approach. That dominant approach will in turn contradict with building the transfer of the insight on individuals' experiences. If, on the other hand, the approach is dominated by participants' experiences, then that will be done at a risk of not being able to convey key insight. Thus, the benefit of the theory including the non-obvious aspects of it may be lost.

The pragmatic implication is that great care is needed to get beyond a mere exploration of participants' experiences to actually introducing theoretical concepts. This generally requires preparation of structure and theory. The theme-based approach may be used as a way of anticipating individuals' experiences, and the preparation of the theory to be transferred may be based on that. This may provide the necessary balance between being able to prepare the theory to be transferred and a structure for transferring it whilst at the same time allowing individuals to have an influence on the agenda.

*Design Principle 9: Allow individuals to develop appropriate behaviours, tools or other responses for themselves rather than give highly prescriptive advice on these* captures the notion that the process for transferring insight to practice should provide individuals with the necessary understanding of collaboration activities to develop their own ways of facilitating collaboration among others. The focus on collaboration themes is obviously a key integral component of the proposed process as discussed above (Design Principle 9).

The implication is that the design of the process for transferring insight to practice should provide individuals with a thorough understanding of collaboration rather than provide highly prescriptive advice on how to help practitioners collaborate. The process should provide individuals with insight about collaboration, concepts for explaining collaboration activities, and suggest ways and means of raising awareness about collaboration to equip them to develop their own responses.

## CONCLUSION

This paper argues that an approach to transferring collaboration theory to practice could usefully and explicitly incorporate, and be informed by, the collaboration themes. The rationale is founded on a genuine wish to ultimately provide practice-oriented theory. Most modern collaborations are complex and challenging to manage, and as such, it may be helpful to break the practice-

oriented theory about the management of collaboration into appropriate sections. This can allow collaborators to adapt a developmental approach to their understanding of collaboration. As the collaboration themes capture issues typically of concern to collaborators, they also help to ensure the relevance of the theory to be transferred. Another reality of many modern collaborations is that they attract individuals with highly different backgrounds and needs. A focus on the themes can take account of individuals' different conceptions of what collaboration actually is. In addition, as a focus on issues pertaining to collaboration processes rather than on step-by-step processes *per se*, collaboration themes can inform both the type of theoretical insight to be transferred and the way in which it is transferred.

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