



Collaboration: People and Performance at Their Best

by John Fisher, Principal Consultant, JMW EMEA



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In a recent and much publicised report, Sir Ian Wood lays out a bold strategy for the monumental task of maximising the economic recovery from the UK Continental Shelf (UKCS). In what he describes as “a watershed opportunity” to “extend the life of the UKCS and bring at least £200 billion additional value to the economy over the next 30 years,” Sir Ian details a clear way forward despite the many challenges facing UK off-shore oil and gas recovery and regulation.

Arguably the most prominent theme in this final report from the UKCS Maximising Recovery Review is a single and familiar word: Collaboration. More than 50 times in the 52-page body of the paper, collaboration is referenced as a critical factor in the high-stakes recovery strategy. To remove a multitude of barriers, to make something profitable out of what the report



describes as a patchwork of operations wrought with aging infrastructure and fierce competition, Wood writes that committing to collaborate is an essential part of the solution. Indeed, the report cites lack of collaboration as one of six key issues to resolve, and recommends a pledge “to improve collaboration” as one of eight commitments that regulators should seek from industry.

Already in the weeks following the report’s release, a new coalition of three UK oil companies announced a “Collaboration Agreement” to develop two fields. In press comments, the competitors cite the spirit of the Wood Report and their intention to work together to unlock assets and capture additional value by sharing key technical and operational information, and sharing infrastructure and data.

In the media, there is new momentum showing up with this phenomenon called collaboration. A simple Google news search brings up headlines and posts from a multitude of industries and countries around the world. The references range from political uprisings to the newest IT breakthrough strategies to social causes to make-or-break business challenges.

Why? If you look beyond the word “collaboration” to the concept in action, it all becomes very clear. True collaboration is more

powerful, and also more elusive, than many people appreciate. It is something my colleagues and I have given great thought to over the years, and which we have seen change the worlds of the people, organisations, and industries we work with, offering access to unforeseen possibilities and producing amazing results.

We all see the need to collaborate, but how do we actually achieve it? There is no simple recipe, but we can share insights rooted in experience and client successes.

KEY INGREDIENT: SOMETHING BIG IS AT STAKE

When you consider monumental achievements produced by people coming together in an unprecedented way, one common thread is that it didn’t happen simply because they were paid to come together. It happened because something bigger was at stake.

It’s a human phenomenon: people will jump in when they see that the need is great and the purpose is compelling. You could even say what they’re doing is often inherently unreasonable. After all, these individuals are willing to take a risk, to invest their time and energy in something they believe is worthwhile. There may be the promise of some return, but the return is an outcome that is valuable without necessarily being financial.

This is the case whether you’re talking about a political uprising, people helping after a flood or earthquake, or individuals facing a moment of truth in a business context. For example, we have seen a mining company receive shutdown orders, but convince headquarters to keep the mine minimally operational, and align the rank and file with the plan until the market came back (and it did). We have seen a major transportation services company at the brink of



disaster post-9/11, then emerge five years later with accolades as the industry's premier provider. And we've seen organisations who never before worked in an alliance come together on a risky, top-dollar, public project, and deliver award-winning performance under budget and ahead of schedule.

What brought these people together in such an unusual way was a shared commitment to a larger possibility – to an achievement never done before.

BUT WAIT: THIS IS NOT COOPERATION

In casual conversation, you may often hear the words “cooperation” and “collaboration” used almost interchangeably. But these are two distinctly different ways of people coming together.

People have been buying cooperation since the beginning of time. The first records you can find are of trades and contracts from ancient civilisations. If you think of buying and selling as cooperation, we surround ourselves with cooperation every day. On the other hand, collaboration can't be bought, but it can be inspired.

If the goal is meaningful for people, they're going to want to participate, and then everything else falls into place as it does. With cooperation, people cooperate because they're going to be given something - there's a trade of some kind. Collaboration is more principle-driven.

It's a bit like somebody going out of their way to tidy up some rubbish. They could just walk by, like many do, and if they act, they don't gain any payment or even any recognition. But for those who care about their environment, they create for themselves that if I don't do it, no one else will, so they act because “it matters.” That's an example of someone's willingness to act because he or she is serving some higher purpose. In our work, we have seen time and again that people generally want this sense of purpose in life and when they find it, they are unstoppable.

When collaboration happens, people find themselves wanting to win not because

signs up for something or chooses to participate. When people collaborate, they are connected to something larger than their self-interests – something perceived by client organisations and their people as a “noble purpose.” Individuals from the front lines to the Board room have in retrospect referred to a sense of a higher calling when describing the collective, collaborative will to do something great in the world.

When the people in an organisation or alliance of organisations have in common that shared sense of purpose, all bets are off on how high they can reach, and how much they can rise above self-interest.

This kind of collaboration can be at play when people are willing to accept the risks of failure rather than accept the status quo.

the boss is asking for it and not because their job is at stake, but because they care about what winning means. They're more interested in the outcomes than perhaps the credit they're going to get, or the personal gain that might usually be their motivation. You really can't purchase that from people.

That is why we say: Cooperation can be bought, but collaboration is priceless.

A NOBLE PURPOSE

The quality of the effort is distinctly different when a person or a group voluntarily

For example, we worked with a company during a restructuring that followed a very public financial crisis. The head of the organisation was able to inspire such a dramatic collaboration that in less than a year, people had shifted from doing almost anything to protect their jobs to volunteering for review committees which could decide that their own jobs, or those of their friends and colleagues, would be declared redundant. Their efforts were part of the heavy lifting required for significant new business wins, including a 20% reduction in operational



expenses and a 40% reduction in channel redundancies.

This kind of collaboration can be at play when people are willing to accept the risks of failure from being unwilling to accept the status quo. We have seen teams work countless nights and weekends until a critical objective is achieved, and not because the boss said "We're going to have to work nights and weekends." In such instances, people are naturally willing to go the extra mile, not because they're being paid to do so, but because what they're going the extra mile for seems worth it to them.

WHAT DOES COLLABORATION LOOK LIKE WHEN IT IS HAPPENING?

Collaboration happens when people decide, to a person, that they want to sign up for the team. Everyone's reason may be different, but the common denominator is that people elect to be part of something when it addresses a fundamental concern of theirs. Each person recognises something of significance

to them personally, and is drawn to an undertaking that strikes them as genuinely meaningful.

In a story of now-historic collaboration, multinational energy companies were encountering great difficulties in a remote North Sea location, each working to deliver first oil under tremendous pressures. In a bold move now known by

cited it as one of their more profound professional experiences.

It's a very unique thing to experience. When people have been in a collaborative venture, afterwards, they can't stop talking about it: how great the team was, how amazing the people were, and how special it was that they dealt with it together. They would recreate it if they could.

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observers as the Andrew Alliance, the longtime competitors agreed to join forces, and against many odds, succeeded under budget and six months ahead of schedule. The feat required collaboration that none of the participants had experienced before, and their success set a new industry standard. In interviews we conducted later with alliance partners, almost to a person, interviewees

But then they may notice the next time around, it doesn't have that dynamic; it's not the same.

Why? Because collaboration in a business context is rare and people confuse it with cooperation. Most business cultures aren't designed for collaboration; they are designed for survival. Collaboration calls for a higher order of commitment. Cooperation works very well for producing survival. That is why if you really need the performance only available from collaboration you have to figure out how to create an environment in which collaboration will naturally occur.

LEADING THE WAY TO COLLABORATION

With the exception of Sir Ian Wood and those of us tuned into the power



Steps to Move Towards Collaboration

STEP ONE: Understand what the people you lead really care about, beyond being paid to show up, and in what ways they could see your organisation as offering something meaningful enough for them to engage.

STEP TWO: Create with your people the great endeavour around which collaboration is sought – something revealed as really mattering to all involved, including you.

STEP THREE: Provide the opportunity for people to volunteer and sign up to the endeavour – and let them define the opportunities for action and the results they will pursue.

of collaboration, many people don't tend to think about collaboration as something they are trying to produce. What is more common is people having an intention. For instance, they see the need for a team, they get people into position, define what needs to be accomplished, and then people go to work.

In that kind of situation, sometimes it's an environment

of cooperation and sometimes it becomes an environment of collaboration. And usually no one necessarily knows why it went one way versus the other. Yet it matters immensely, because with collaboration, there's an all-encompassing shift, something new, beyond predictable and distinctively valuable and admirable becomes possible.

It all starts by a leader connecting with his or her

people about what they really, truly care about. But how do leaders know what that is? They really, truly listen. My colleague Lainie Heneghan calls this "radical listening." Her writings on the concept explain it clearly, but here's the upshot for leaders: "If you're not listening to them, chances are, they're not listening to you, either."

It's worth bearing in mind that many people haven't gone through the exercise of identifying precisely what really matters to them. Most of us don't walk around in life with that kind of clarity. Many people become resigned to a life that may seem even somewhat futile, and perhaps lack a substantial sense of purpose beyond some quality of "making it." When listening as a leader, one has an opportunity to hear new clarity, perhaps even help people find their way out of any mist or confusion.



Collaboration doesn't begin with a grand speech, or someone in the front of the room saying, "Well, we're the team that are going to get this done." It begins when leaders communicate in such a way that their people can see their own individual priorities and sensibilities reflected in what the enterprise is taking on.

MOVING FORWARD

I have been asked: *In the context of an organisation or industry, is there an imperative to go beyond cooperation to reach collaboration?*

In certain instances: Yes. If leaders are committed to taking their business or industry forward in an extraordinary way – a way that outperforms the norm and transcends the current reality – then collaboration can be crucial. In fact, I assert there are some challenges in the world that you can only solve through collaboration.

Case in point: the Wood Report and its clear vision on this topic. If the report's recommendations are implemented, there could well be a day when we are talking about the dramatic UKCS recovery, and the story of how industry competitors and regulators found a way to turn a critical situation into a new future for oil and gas in the nation.

In the examples of collaboration we have witnessed, people always collectively rose above and beyond any norms they had

ever known, far surpassing previous limits. And in all cases, collaboration had been inspired by a certain kind of leadership: leadership pointing toward a future that people get inspired about and want to build, because it matters.

We applaud such leadership. Because sometimes the only way to change your world for the better is to make it a collaborative one. Collaboration can be the path to remarkable results under even the most difficult of circumstances. And it can rewrite everything about what you thought was possible.

About the Author

John Fisher is a Principal Consultant with JMW Consultants, Inc., a Fellow of the Institute of Management Consultancy and a Certified Management Consultant. In more than 25 years of consulting, he has worked with executives and senior teams in companies around the world, in functional areas ranging from safety, simplification, drilling and completions, engineering, major projects, operations, high-value and sensitive commercial negotiations, information technology and procurement.

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