



# Three Key Capabilities to Ensure Successful Collaboration

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Collaborations are growing at an exponential rate throughout the global corporate landscape. Whether it's working together across functions, or different organizations coming together to deliver a project, all forms of collaborative arrangements are transforming the business models of companies and becoming essential to their viability. Yet survey after survey shows that a majority of collaborations don't deliver the results they were intended to achieve.

The reasons for failure include high level causes such as mismatches in corporate culture, poor communication or a breakdown of trust. Conversely, successes are often attributed to having chosen the right partners or good communications. However, conventional analysis doesn't identify what is or is not actually going on in the day-to-day workings of a collaboration—how people are behaving and operating—that has them succeed or fail. It camouflages some key capabilities required for success.

## Managing critical conversations

One of the critical capabilities required for successful collaboration is the ability to recognize and engage in conversations that arise at critical times at the outset, as well as dealing with inevitable setbacks along the way; the first failure to deliver a key target result, the transition period from one leader to the next. At such critical points, certain fundamental conversations arise which, for better or worse, set the stage for future decisions, actions and

behaviors of those involved in the collaborative effort.

The primary medium in which work is done today is, quite simply, conversation. The importance of good communication in collaborative efforts is well understood. However, the nature and quality of different types of conversations—those spoken as well as things that remain unsaid—have a big impact on thinking, behavior and action. That's not to say that generating, managing and intervening in basic conversations is all that's required for collaboration. However, a lack of insight and ability in this area makes the risks higher, and substantially increases the likelihood that the partnership will fail—whether succumbing to confusion or mistrust, failing to seize opportunities, or responding ineffectively to external threats.

The good news is that if conversation is key to collaboration success, then it is possible to develop the thinking and behaviors required for effective collaboration, by building a competence in managing critical conversations. The rewards for getting it right are high; the opportunity to resolve potential difficulties before they arise, the ability to shift attitudes, perspectives, assumptions and moods that govern day-to-day interactions and the ability to produce actions that are consistent with effective partnering in any endeavor. It can also pave the way for breakthrough results.

## **There are three core capabilities in conversation.**

### **Capability number 1: Recognizing there is never a blank slate**

When embarking on a collaboration, each partner brings to the table not only a defined set of competencies, assets and liabilities, but also very real ways of doing business, thinking and relating to other parties that have become established and habitual through the years, and are part of the basis of their success. In addition to history, each partner brings its collective experience and knowledge to date—not only insights and capabilities, but also attitudes, beliefs, dispositions and strongly held points of view. This collective experience means it's virtually impossible to start a collaboration with a blank slate.

To some degree, this background is recognized, particularly when the partners involved understand the difference that each party brings to the table. Yet the extent to which core issues are addressed often falls short of a full exploration and resolution of differences that may arise. The critical ability to discuss the undiscussable starts with setting known issues on the table from the start and moving to raise more challenging issues such as:

- Are our specific objectives and time frames aligned?
- Which types of information and capabilities will be shared—and which will not?
- What are our top priorities and our performance expectations for each other, and how will we measure our joint success?
- How will the collaboration affect specific accountabilities and role definitions of key individuals or teams? What skills or capabilities may be duplicated, and how will we deal with that duplication?
- If key people are redundant to the joint effort, how will they be dealt with, and how will the real human needs be addressed?
- What specific priorities will we set, as a partnership, beyond our respective corporate or functional agendas?
- How will we handle the aspirations and expectations of our people, so that they can align with our shared goals and commit to them as their own?

Such questions address concerns that often lie just below the surface, as people on both sides of a partnership come to terms with the ways the collaboration will affect their jobs, their lives, their organizational and financial future. Experience shows that it is frequently the unspoken values, needs and expectation that cause a collaboration to falter when obstacles arise.

### **Why critical issues are kept in the background**

Highly capable leaders regularly fail to raise difficult issues which can make or break the partnership. People are not fully aware of the impact these conversations have on performance and behavior every day, when they remain as unspoken background conversations. Background conversations include a full array of pre-existing, automatic responses that immediately come to mind with virtually any subject that may arise.

In order to build a foundation for a shared future, the partners must be prepared to recognize and acknowledge those views and beliefs derived from the past which might limit the creation of a future. This recognition often begins with the willingness to examine what remains unsaid—the pre-existing background conversations in which strongly held opinions, attitudes and points of view reside.

There are some simple things you can do to surface background conversations, for example:

- Regularly question your own assumptions
- Ask others what's on their minds
- Recognize when you are merely gathering evidence for your existing point of view
- Be aware of and address how you think other people might be listening
- Check what people heard.

Effectiveness in any collaboration involves not just addressing what people are saying but being able to hear and impact that which is not being said. The leaders in a collaboration must gain insight not only to what is disclosed but to what is present that they do not know about, the things on their partners' minds that are important to them, or may be sources of interest or concern, which are not being openly expressed.

### **Capability number 2: Creating defining moments**

In every collaboration, critical incidents or events surface that may serve, for better or worse, as turning points in the growth of the partnership. These circumstances can be positive, such as meeting a critical deadline ahead of schedule, an innovation that dramatically elevates the outcomes for the collaboration or breakthrough performance against set targets. More often, however, the incident arises by virtue of a problem or setback. If poorly managed, these problem events may trigger a tacit rejection of the partnership by one or both sides. Communication is shut down, collaboration

turns to mistrust or defensiveness—ultimately leading to the partnership’s demise. Yet these same events, appropriately recognized and managed, can act as powerful leverage points.

Often when a significant problem arises—one which could prove the undoing of a collaboration—each side begins a slide into explanations, justifications and finger-pointing at the other partner. Problems cause even smart, well-educated and capable people to revert to past behaviors, turning their focus to saving face, assigning blame, preserving a past strength or reputation and attempting to avoid the risks required in any significant new endeavor. This process, once begun, rapidly spirals into a vicious cycle of mistrust and recriminations. Partnership becomes increasingly more difficult, knowledge and resources are hoarded instead of shared, and eventually the promise of the collaboration gives way to an endless tangle of financial, legal and structural battles. Looking back, business leaders can often point to the critical event—or defining moment—that things took a turn for the worse; but often the unravelling appears as a mysterious process that they were powerless to halt.

With the high stakes involved in most collaborations today, there is much to be gained in building a facility with identifying potential defining moments and leveraging them for maximum advantage.

### **Defusing the reaction to problems**

The first step in effectively managing such events is to identify them as, potentially defining moments of a collaboration—moments that can be seized as an enormous opportunity to renew the focus, re-energize its people, recommit to a shared vision and re-examine the fundamental assumptions and actions that have led to this key point in time. Having identified the problem and the opportunity, it is important to defuse the immediate reaction and clarify the actual facts: What is the situation at hand? What happened to get us here? What choices do we now face? What constraints and opportunities are present as we attempt to move ahead?

Of course, clarifying ‘what is’ requires an ability to separate out facts from points of view or interpretations about them—a task much easier said than done in the midst of a perceived threat.

The partners in a large scale oil alliance found that coming powerfully to terms with their failure to meet key

targets actually provided a new opening for extraordinary performance during the next phase. As one manager expressed it: “At the end of the day, we had failed. We had to deal with this. With our consultants, we held a work session to help us get complete about failing—and also acknowledge the good things that came out of that effort. For example, we had saved a couple of months. We had taken a huge chunk of work and moved it forward. We had a new confidence and facility in creating a stretch game.”

At this stage, it is critical that the partners focus not on what is wrong with the collaboration or with their partners, but rather on what, if anything, is missing that could provide a key impetus toward the next level of success.

### **Someone’s problem is my problem**

It is inevitable that collaborations will face problems and setbacks. At these times it’s the ability to return to a vision of a shared future that allows for a profound and solid relationship even in the face of controversy or setbacks.

An ability to stand for the collaboration even in the face of breakdowns, starts with a willingness to be fully responsible for its creation and its success. Fully responsible implies complete accountability for everything that occurs in the context of the partnership—its difficulties and failures as well as its success. From this perspective, there is no right/wrong, no finger pointing or recriminations. Your partner’s problem is fundamentally your problem, no matter how convinced you may be that your partner is simply wrong. In fact, irrespective of who is to blame, who was involved when the problem occurred, or how flawed others’ interpretations of it may seem to be, without some kind of ownership of any perceived difficulty or failure, there is no opportunity for trust and collaboration.

When more than one party operates in this way, collaboration participants report instances in unprecedented creativity and innovation. Ideas and solutions which had not previously been considered, begin to occur with surprising consistency. It is such full and complete ownership of the circumstances, that allows even major crises to become the ‘defining moments’ that are later seen to have cemented the partnership and propelled it toward future success. When the partners take responsibility for the relationship to be a success, something extraordinary is possible.

Practices for creating defining moments:

- Recognize problems as the opportunity to strengthen the collaboration
- Defuse reactions to problems—separate the facts from the interpretations
- Operate from ‘Someone’s problem is my problem’
- Stay grounded in the shared vision for the collaboration
- Stand for your partners.

### Capability number 3: Developing a bias for action and results

In the glow of signing a new venture, some business partners are blinded by the harsh realities of their market environment. Turning inward to build relationships and structures, they fail to focus on setting and delivering business goals. It is remarkable how many collaborations have been established without any clear metrics for success.

Many parties embarking on collaborations focus so powerfully on what they consider to be cultural issues—merging styles, structures, and operating practices—that results take a back seat to the formation of the partnership itself. Maintaining this internal focus places the cart before the horse and virtually ensures that critical opportunities will be missed while the partners are working not on their business, but on their relationship.

The purpose of any collaboration is after all, not to build a new partnership but to achieve some business advantage that is unavailable, or impractical, for each partner to realize on its own. A clear articulation of this advantage—what it consists of, what future it promises, what is possible if achieved, and what opportunity it holds for each side—provides a basic framework in which the partners can move forward powerfully together.

Grounding the collaboration in a set of well-defined targets not only establishes a strong foundation for success; it provides a clarity of focus that guides leaders in key decisions, and allows new structures, processes

and systems to emerge in support of the goals at hand. In many companies, considerable time and energy are lost in endless struggles to get the processes right—leaving the field open to nimbler competitors who have kept their eye on the ball and their focus on the necessary results. Defining clear and measurable targets and interim milestones and holding people to account for them, provides clear parameters for the game and encourages behaviors and operating system that supports the targets—not those that are simply preferred by one side or the other.

Some tips for developing a bias for action and results include:

- Involve all parties in developing targets that are a win for everyone
- Establish and track shared metrics that show progress toward a breakthrough outcome
- Set clear and aggressive targets that demand new behaviors to be achieved
- Ensure targets are an expression of a compelling aspiration for the collaboration.

Most important of all, perhaps, is the creation of a game worth playing—an aspiration for the collaboration that is sufficiently large and uplifting that all partners are energized and inspired to act—a possibility beyond the business case. Partnerships offer significant advantages; however, they can bring abundant problems and uncertainties. If the partners are to transcend these obstacles, they must be drawn forward by some meaningful possibility that provides motivation for the difficult changes ahead, that paints a picture of success more powerful than present moments of failure, that elicits from all players a bias for action and focus on results—and that offers a context large enough for all partners to find themselves in the promise that it holds. When this context, along with the practice of key conversational capabilities are present, the necessary thinking and behaviors can be developed, and the extraordinary benefits of collaborations can be realized.

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