

Benefits of Effective Collaboration for You and Your Organization

Introduction

The ancient wisdom that “two are better than one for they have a good return for their labor” is just as true today as it was when it was written. This piece of advice has played out repeatedly in history. For example, in the 19th century, the United States experienced a significant migration of individuals from close-knit, eastern cities to the “wild west” to take up occupancy of mostly isolated, large plots of land. Over time, these remote “neighbors” rebuilt houses on conjoining corners of their properties to restore the much-needed benefits of a small community. Now we have the “iGeneration” who prefer less face-to-face interaction (except via FaceTime) but have become one of the most “connected” and collaborative generations in history.

The same can be said of the business landscape in many parts of the world, where a rise in collaborative organizations such as partnerships, LLCs, industry associations, technical alliances and consortia representing a multitude of missions and purposes is pervasive. Even individual businesses and private citizens have benefited by participating in “platform-based” collaborations like Amazon, Airbnb, Uber and dozens of other “app-based” ecosystems. These trends are showing up in books with titles like *Platform Revolution: How Networked Markets are Transforming the Economy and How to Make Them Work for You* and in articles published in Harvard Business Review with titles like *In the Ecosystem Economy, What’s Your Strategy?*

Are businesses better off by collaborating with others, even with competitors? Are all collaboration approaches equal or are some models of collaboration more effective than others? What are the building blocks of effective collaboration? Significant value to your business and your own personal fulfillment can be found in the answers to these questions.

What is Collaboration?

Much like a jeweler carefully explores the multiple facets of a diamond, looking at multiple definitions of a word can produce a clearer picture of its multiple nuances. Take, for example, the following definitions of collaboration:

- to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor [Webster]
- the action of working with someone to produce or create something [Dictionary.com]
- the process of two or more people or organizations working together to complete a task or achieve a goal [Wikipedia]

Two repeating themes are “two or more” and “achieving/producing”. Keep those two themes in mind as we proceed with another definition.

Heidi K. Gardner and Herminia Ibarra in a May 2, 2017 Harvard Business Review article entitled, “How to Capture Value from Collaboration, Especially If You Are Skeptical About It,” offer the following definition:

“Collaboration is a way of working that attracts and involves people outside of one’s formal control, organization and expertise to accomplish common goals.”

They go on to say that, “many of today’s most important challenges are so complex and multifaceted that they can only be tackled by teams of experts from disparate domains. To solve them, professionals must be able to harness ideas, people, and resources from across disciplinary and organizational boundaries.”

Added to the list of “two or more” and “achieving/producing” is the concept of disparity or better, diversity. Diversity is not just about skin color or socio-economic standing; it’s about working with someone or something different in order to consider other viewpoints. For some, this may be an uninvited notion. Working with someone different, not to mention a competing company, can bring panic and a deep-seated suspicion that exposure, not benefit, will result. But the person (or company) that continues in their independent and non-collaborative thinking will continue to produce the same results and potentially miss out on innovative ideas and approaches that come from someone different.

Value of Effective Collaboration

The concepts of two or more, achieving/producing together and diversity in participating people/organizations may surprise you in the value it can bring to individuals, companies/entities and even entire ecosystems/markets. Take for example, a member-based association comprised of individuals volunteering their time and effort to advance a mission or purpose in a particular industry. Consider the chart below showing the multi-faceted value brought to participating individuals, to the association and to the broader industry the association serves.



Figure 1 – Collaboration Brings Value to People, Companies and Industries

Think of this same model for a citizen rallying a community to collectively ask the city leadership to improve safety measures around a school or library. Alternatively, consider a congresswoman who gained a diverse perspective when she visited a brothel in Mumbai, India. She was so appalled by what she saw that she returned and launched a collaborative organization called Shared Hope International, whose mission is bringing an end to sex trafficking through a three-pronged approach – prevent, restore and bring justice. That congresswoman and others engaged in the organization, found great fulfillment in active collaboration to improve a troubling part of society today. There is tremendous value in effective collaboration individually and collectively.

Results of Effective Collaboration

As just noted, working with others that “round out” our own abilities – because they bring valuable but different perspectives – can result in a multitude of beneficial results. In the business world, many examples exist of outputs of effective collaboration to consider. What makes it safe to plug in a toaster in different houses? Answer: Both the house’s wiring and the toaster followed “code” or “standards” that were collaboratively developed, no doubt, by “two or more” with different skills and abilities.

Many who walk around large cities like Chicago or New York will notice some buildings are designated as LEED® (Leadership in Energy and Environment Design) certified. The United States Green Building Council has published guidelines for building “green” structures and certifies buildings based on a collaboratively developed LEED rating system.

In addition, green buildings are comprised of green components such as windows and doors. The Window and Door Manufacturing Association collaboratively developed technical bulletins that translate LEED guidelines into actionable information that builders can use in selection of their windows and doors to contribute to a goal of LEED compliance. The bulletins also inform manufacturers of raw material usage guidelines (e.g., percent of recycled materials) in order to contribute to a building’s overall LEED certification. These technical bulletins are developed, reviewed and approved by teams of mostly competitive manufacturers that choose to cooperate to support a greater goal of environmental responsibility.

Building Blocks of Effective Collaboration

So far, the notions of “two or more”, “achieving/producing” and “disparity” or “diversity” has been discussed as essentials to effective collaboration. However, are there more building blocks necessary? The answer is a resounding “YES!”

The most important building block to effective collaboration is a well-defined context or mission for the collaboration. Some of the best examples of productive collaboration can be found in not-for-profit organizations that manage their activities according to a well-defined (and understood) mission. The mission of the American Red Cross prevents and alleviates human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors. Lamaze International has a mission to advance safe and healthy pregnancy, birth and early parenting through evidence-based education and advocacy. Applied Client Network is a peer-to-peer support group driving participant’s successful usage of the Applied Systems technology. These organizations all have one thing in common; every program they launch and operate contributes directly to fulfilling their respective missions. Keeping the mission or context clear and at the fore of all activities is the first building block to effective collaboration.

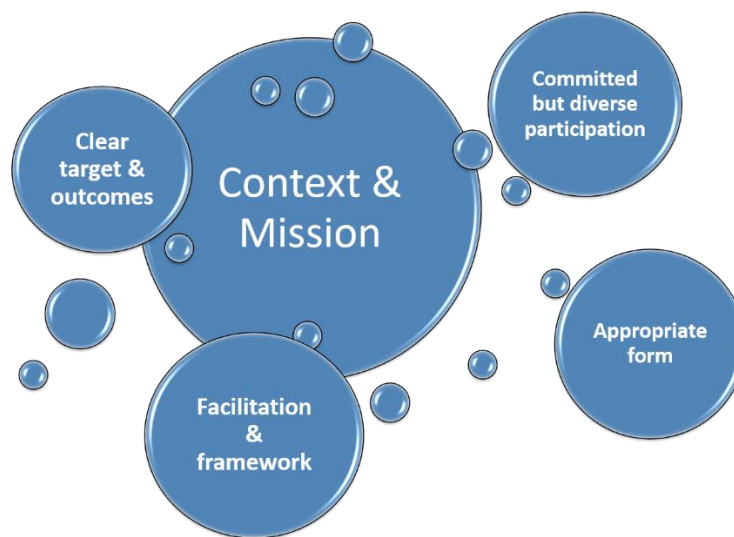


Figure 2 – Critical Building Blocks for Effective Collaboration

A second building block is a clear target or deliverable of the collaboration. Stephen Covey made famous the principle of “begin with the end in mind” in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. That principle holds for effective collaboration as well. To say it another way, if you aim for nothing, you will hit it every time. Effective collaboration requires a clear definition of the intended result that is consistently and continuously understood by the team members throughout the organization or project.

A third building block is people committed to achieving/producing together. An organization or project can have the perfect mission and a well-articulated end-goal, but without committed people willing to work together and representing diverse perspectives, neither the mission nor the goal will be accomplished. Obtaining interested and available participants in vital collaborative activities is a constant challenge, especially among volunteer organizations like associations. Association staff are often called upon to “fill the gap”, but this can limit the diversity and creativity found in a broader base of participants. Finding ways to align “bite sized pieces” of collaborative activities with volunteer’s “day jobs” is one silver bullet to obtaining active volunteer participation so that results can be achieved together.

A fourth building block is the appropriate form of the collaboration. As introduced earlier, collaborations can take on a variety of different forms ranging from cross-group projects within an organization to cross-organizational partnerships, LLCs, joint ventures, industry associations, technology alliances and consortia. The form selected for a given collaboration depends largely on the requirements of the previous three building blocks. Diversity of perspective and perceived impact would suffer if a single organization attempted to produce an industry-wide standard. Alternatively, a global alliance is probably not needed to perform short-term testing between two competitive solutions. Before starting a collaborative effort, it’s best to answer the following questions to determine the best form:

- Is the mission best accomplished within a single organization or is some sort of multi-stakeholder form more appropriate?
- What is the best way to develop the targeted deliverable of the collaboration?
- Will the deliverable be better received if developed by a single or by multiple parties?
- How can the right set of committed people be engaged to meet legal and financial goals and limitations?

The answers to all of these questions provide a clearer understanding of whether a form supporting a single- or multi-stakeholder approach is appropriate.

This leads to the final building block for effective collaboration, a flexible framework and experience-based facilitation. This building block affects two phases of an effective collaboration, the design of the collaboration and the execution of the collaboration. Collaborations vary as much as their missions, their end-goals and their forms. When designing a collaboration, a flexible yet repeatable methodology for clarifying mission and context, confirming an intended deliverable, gathering the right set of committed

participants and wrapping all of this into the right form is a valuable and timesaving asset. When combined with an experienced facilitator, many “potholes” can be avoided and ramp-up time to kick-off can be shortened. Once the collaboration is appropriately designed, engaging participating people around a known framework can make the collaborative organization or project multiple times more effective and save time, energy and money. A popular framework in the software industry is agile project management where the “scrum master” plays the role of a facilitator. Technology-based alliances, such as SD Association and the Open Safety and Security Alliance, were designed with technical steering bodies and work groups, both with identified facilitators, in their operational frameworks. This combination of framework and facilitator ensures that the work is appropriately shepherded and milestones for completion of outputs are appropriately tracked. The point is that if one does not have a framework nor a trained facilitator to guide both the design and the execution processes, effective collaboration and timely results may be compromised. Don’t rule out the value of engaging trained and experienced consultants or others to help design new collaborations or to ensure existing collaborations are both efficient and productive.

Getting Started

Perhaps this paper has sparked an idea of how effective collaboration could benefit you or your organization. Perhaps it has uncovered some missing building blocks or surfaced the need for improving one or more aspects of existing collaborative teams. How does one begin new collaborations or improve existing ones?

The starting point is always context. Does the context in which you wish to launch a new collaboration or improve an existing one have a clear mission as a foundation? Getting the mission right and, more importantly, rightly understood by collaboration participants is the first step.

But for now, let’s assume that the mission is clear and clearly understood. The next step is to look again at the mission through a “lens” of collaboration. In what ways might a new or improved collaboration produce something new or better that helps fulfill the mission? Are we “stuck” in doing the same thing in the same way and, if so, what opportunities exist to better fulfill our mission? Is a new form for the collaboration needed in which case a new design phase may be called for?

With mission, form and deliverable clearly in mind, turn now to mapping those to existing employee or volunteer engagement as well as considering new recruitment of collaboration participants. To support the building block of diversity and to get fresh perspectives, recruitment may lead to developing partnerships or formal/informal relationships with other organizations with similar missions but different approaches. Once collaboration ideas are in place, willing participants are considered and diversity is established, it’s time to launch a pilot project.

The pilot should be mission-focused, have the correct form, have a clear deliverable in mind, include a diverse team and ideally, have a framework and facilitator to lead it to productive completion. Many collaborative organizations use the concept of a “Birds of a Feather” or “BoF”. The concept is that when a mission and intended deliverables are articulated, interested parties often “flock together” to participate. Successful organizations have used “BoFs” to refine missions, clarify deliverables and timelines and answer many of the questions about effective collaboration raised earlier in this paper.

The downside of pilots or “BoFs” is that they wrongly carry a stigma that they can be stopped simply because they are pilots. Resist the temptation to cease a collaborative pilot mid-stream. Completing a pilot will provide valuable lessons for the next pilot or for future collaborative projects. Effective collaboration is not built overnight, but through many attempts, a little failure, and a lot more mid-course corrections.

Once the pilot is complete – and hopefully successful – it’s time to use that success to expand into broader scopes of collaboration and increased participation. Take time at the end of each project to evaluate alignment to the building blocks of effective collaboration, making necessary tweaks to frameworks and, if needed, to participating team members.

Conclusion

Many of today’s most successful businesses, organizations and individuals thrive on effective collaboration. They understand their mission and collaborate to accomplish pre-conceived goals for themselves and their target audiences, all in a form that best enables success. They celebrate diversity and use flexible frameworks to facilitate effective outcomes. In addition, they aren’t afraid to ask for help from experts that have helped others successfully collaborate. While they may not think about it anymore – because it has become second nature to them – they know that two are better than one for they have a good return on their labor. Good luck in your future collaborations and may they be effective, productive and personally satisfying.

About the Author

Steve Crumb thrives on effective collaboration. In his role as Executive Director at Inventures, a SmithBucklin company, Steve works with companies large and small where co-development, cooperation and effective teams are a daily practice. For the past 25 years, Inventures has helped its clients launch, operate and grow collaborative organizations and projects. The best practices collected and improved over those 25 years have resulted in collaborative frameworks and a team of experienced facilitators willing to make your new and improved collaboration projects most effective. Learn more about Inventures at www.inventures.com or reach Steve Crumb at scrumb@inventures.com.

