

Becoming a Collaborative Leader

The Psychology of Collaborative Maturity ©

Dr Neil Preston

Organisational Psychologist - PsyOpus

It's all about asking the right question

Many people and organisations bandy around the word 'collaboration' without really knowing what it means. *Collaboration* is a word which sits comfortably with other words like *transparency*, *openness* and *accountability* without any of us being none the wiser about what they really mean. It seems every time we try to close down a definition for such words they slip out under our desire to make them accountable to what we want them to mean – hence they soon deteriorate into platitudes of corporation speak and buzzwords. Like *happiness*, *collaboration* is something we all want but we cannot agree on what it is.

Instead of answering the question of what *IS* collaboration, as an Organisational Psychologist and having observed and worked with hundreds of teams, I wanted to tackle it from a different view, which is how do we know or experience collaboration and what enables and disables it to emerge. The question thus became:

what are the psychological conditions necessary to know you are collaborating?

Via Negativa – the negative way

Sometimes we can't understand what something is, but we can understand what it is not. In the early decades of plane flight, pilots found their destination by the pilot hearing one beep to turn to the right and two beeps to turn to the left. The coordinates were navigated through *via negativa* – they did not know exactly where the destination was – they only know when they were off course. By following these simple rules they were able to get to their destination.

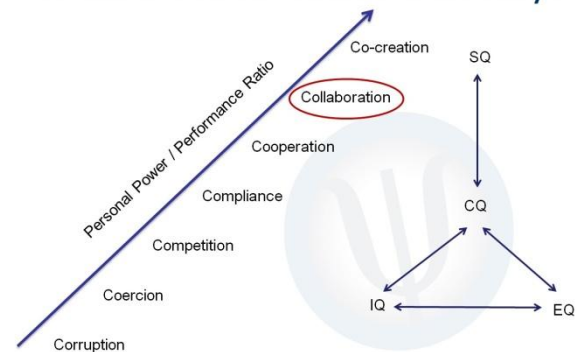
So when I came to reflect on the psychological conditions of collaboration I had some pretty good

ideas about what it didn't consist of. By examining non collaborative ways of relating, maybe I could get closer to what collaboration looks like.

All models are wrong - some are more useful than others

What makes a model work is its' ability to consistently explain reality – that is, how things are. The model below is the result of my efforts to help answer the question on conditions of collaboration.

What is collaborative maturity?



Using the figure above, collaboration could be placed on a continuum of personal and organisational maturity and development. Certainly what collaboration does not have in it is the desire to *compete*, to *coerce* or *corrupt* others into your way of seeing a problem and its solution. Indeed collaboration does not necessarily include too many aspects of *compliance* and *cooperation* since both of these make the assumption that the group who needs to collaborate understands both the problem and the solution and that all that is required is to follow clear steps towards a solution.

For collaboration to truly exist, the *intention* on why somebody is seeking help to solve a problem is critical – and linked to this is the performance / power ratio. Simply put, those who use more collaborative techniques seek performance to solve a problem and not personal power to convince they are right. In other words, collaborators intentionally serve the solution to the problem, coercers serve power.

Tell me about your childhood

Whether we like it or not Western people have a hard time escaping Freud and his theory on human development. Essentially the theory argues that human growth is developmental in nature and dependent upon a combination of 'healthy' environments and 'good' genes. Recent research in developmental psychology understands that the way a person is securely attached to their parents in the first 5 to 7 years can have a significant impact on their ability to regulate their emotional life. Whatever the theory, it seems that we bring our history with us and this impacts on how we relate to each other and the level of maturity we have to collaborate with others. In some sense, collaboration is all about how we relate to others and whether we have some awareness on what is driving our intentions to collaborate. How we can come into awareness about our intentions and to understand their motivations has a big impact on the success of the collaborative process.

The four considerations of collaboration

It seems to me over the years of helping organisations solve complex problems by getting people together to solve them, there are four considerations needed – these are:

- know your problem
- know yourself
- know others
- know the price of collaboration

Let's take each in turn.

Know your problem

Often people do not understand the nature of their problems. Often organisations employ 'naive simplistic' solutions to complex problems. A simple axiom is:

collaboration is commensurate to complexity

The assumption that experts can solve complex problems alone is perpetuated by 'the rugged individual hero' myth so pervasive in Western culture. It is a naive assumption. Complex problems need groups of people to solve them because no

one person knows the entire question and solution to a complex problem.

Know yourself

Self awareness is critical in collaboration. Some people are 'power players' not 'performance players'. Power players don't serve a collaborative solution but one they have pre-ordained. Often this is driven by the complexity of the situation and 'developmental' needs for security, esteem or power and control. We bring our history to our problems and without awareness they may disable collaborative maturity.

Know others

How we relate to others matters in collaboration. In our technologically driven culture we tend to 'objectify' others as a type rather than a person. We can be weak at transpersonal psychology, which is the basic skills of understanding others and recognising that consideration of other points of view are essential in the collaborative process. To genuinely seek to understand, - that is to 'stand under' another point of view, is critical to collaboration. A refusal to do so is a refusal to collaborate. This is why there is a *price* to collaboration.

The price of collaboration

Complex problems are emergent and contingent. They require leaders to be 'comfortable with ambiguity' or to see ambiguity as opportunity. Over the years I have seen the difference between those who *manage* and those who *lead*. Managers close down complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty while leaders keep the space open enough for new and exciting solutions to emerge out of the dialogue. So what is the price then to allowing emergent solutions? Simply to die to the desire to always know, to always be right and the need to convince others you are. Ultimately a collaborative leader 'serves the solution' – and so how does a collaborative leader serve the solution? By creating the conditions necessary for collaborative solutions to emerge. So what are these collaborative conditions? This is discussed in the subsequent papers in this series on collaborative leadership.