

# What may be the 10 Conditions for Collaboration to Emerge?

from trait to state models of leadership ©

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## Give us your top 10

As an Organisational Psychologist who works in complexity I am loathed to give the 5 steps to this or that which we often see in organisational literature. It seems however, that many people prefer these lists and I am often asked to compile them for easier consumption with my clients. While I am not a great fan of essentialism, I will reluctantly provide my “top 10 conditions” for collaboration to emerge. But before we start, some backgrounding is required.

### From Causes to Conditions

Other papers I have written in this series support J.R. Hackman’s (2012) argument that at the end of 30 years of research in organisational psychology, we need to move from causes of group leadership (collaborative leadership) to conditions that allow collaborative performance to emerge. It is my opinion that collaborative leadership is a skill that can be learnt, and not a trait that someone either possesses or develops as a characteristic of their personality. Essentially, we need to move away from leadership formation as a development of a person, and more to the application of skills known to empirically improve team and organisational performance. In addition, Wooley et al. (2010) describes collective intelligence as an emergent property that arises when certain conditions are present within teams. So essentially (there’s that word again), collaboration is an emergent property where certain conditions need to be present to say with some confidence that people are collaborating with each other and not asked by other means to *comply*, *compete* or even be *coerced* in certain processes and outcomes. So here are the top 10 conditions that I’ve noticed that need to be present to say we are collaborating with each other.

#### 1 - A Compelling Purpose

Goal clarity is essential in collaboration. That is, we need a compelling purpose that “energises team

members, orients them towards their collective objective, and fully engages their talents” (Hackman, J. 2012: 437).

#### 2 – Power neutrality

Their needs to be sufficient power neutrality for collaboration between people to emerge. This does not mean *being* “power neutral”, this is impossible in human interaction and possibly dangerous. There always exists nested hierarchies both formal and informal within human groups. When power is too imbalanced, people will not collaborate, or they will sense that they will be asked to comply with dominant ideologies. Using collaborative methodologies that relatively flatten power structures can be helpful in collaboration.

#### 3 – Psychological Safety

This condition is related to the previous. If people do not feel psychologically safe they will not speak their truth. Truth speaking is an essential element in collaboration, but psychological safety is the condition that allows truth speaking to emerge. Truth speaking reduces group think and employs collective intelligence necessary to solve complex problems.

#### 4 – Decision Influence

People within teams and organisations are not only required to speak their truth, it is important that there

are conditions which allow this truth speaking to actually influence decisions. Most dialogue in “community engagement” programs are “inform models” where the community is *informed* on what is going to happen – that is, you are welcome to speak your truth (feedback) but the decision on the action is pretty much determined (little to no decision influence). “Influence models” consider the governance needed to allow the wisdom of collective intelligence through dialogue and collaboration to influence decisions. If people can speak their truth but not influence decisions, the most common outcome is frustration and worst, what social psychologists call “learned helplessness.”

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#### 5 – Turn taking

Wooley (2010) in her fascinating experiments in group performance found that turn taking in dialogue increases collective intelligence. That is, if you want to maximise the collective or collaborative intelligence of a team or group,

ensure there are sufficient conditions for people to take turns in contributing to the dialogue.

### 6 – Sufficiency

Voltaire once said that “the perfect is the enemy of the good.” Collaboration with others is messy business and it is very rare if at all impossible to reach 100% agreement. If there is 100% agreement with others, be very suspicious – it is likely that something other than collaboration is going on – more likely coercion and tyrannical group think. I would recommend this following rule of thumb – “where psychological safety and strong decision influence is present and 80% or more agree with the solution or action – go for it.” You can’t bring everyone along with you for various complex reason that can’t be explained in this brief paper – but if most agree within a safe environment, it is more likely to be an elegant solution or action, compared to “expert opinion” alone.

### 7 – Ambiguity tolerance

Control freaks cannot stand collaboration. This is because with dialogue and collaboration, the problem and its possible solution is unclear or has multiple contingencies. We may need to get used to the fact that life is pretty complex, and people feel for many reasons that it is getting more complex. Great collaborative leaders are comfortable enough with ambiguity to allow for solutions to emerge out of robust and safe dialogue. Those leaders who can’t tolerate ambiguity shut it down to reduce anxiety but not necessarily to solve a problem.

### 8 – Mature emotional intelligence

There are oodles of research that suggests *that self-regulation, openness to new ideas, and conscientiousness* to follow them through (see Paper 7 on the relationship between Personality and Performance), are some of the best predictors of success. You see, the problem when there is sufficient psychological safety in a team or organisation is that people have a habit of speaking their truth and often we don’t like hearing it! It takes mature emotionally regulated people to absorb criticism and more importantly to separate an idea from the self. Often people mistake their very ideas with their very selves. Maybe we can blame Rene Descartes’ *meditatio 1 (I think therefore I am)* but at any rate knowing the difference between having an emotion or thought and being an emotion or thought can be all the difference in creating steps towards being a collaboratively mature leader.

### 9 – Select for Collaborative Skills

I remember Ruth Wageman a brilliant Organisational Psychologist in group research once say something like “if team members are not selected for collaborative skills in mind, disband the team and start again.” More technically, the starting conditions for a team to perform well includes those who have the skills of collaborative maturity. I know of a Dean of a large city Cathedral who did not select the best technical organist to join their Cathedral community, but rather the one that displayed the greatest ability to get along with others. This is sufficiency at its best. There may not be much discernible difference for many parishioners between a very good church organist and a great church organist, but most people know there is a great difference between someone whom they can get along with, and a rigid old stick in the mud! In todays complex world, technical proficiency is not enough – can you get along with others?

### 10 – Conditional and Organisational Support

Even the very best collaborative teams will not exceed if there is little to no material and conditional support within the organisation they work for. Collaboration is not magic. It can only really thrive when the material support of time and money, and the non-material support of a positive culture and trust come together to allow for collaboration to emerge. Teams and people need to be rewarded and recognised for excellent performance.

*Leadership are values and behaviours  
worthy of imitation*

*Dr Neil Preston*

My definition of leadership is simple – *leadership are values and behaviours worthy of imitation*. Why is this the case? We are imitative creatures, we look to each other to find out what is worthy of imitation in social environments. It is up to you as a leader to choose which values and behaviours to adopt because rest assured they will be observed and often without knowing – imitated.

In short, it seems to me, if these conditions are not present, it is difficult for collaboration to emerge in your team or organisation.

#### References:

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- Wageman, R. *Leading Teams: Unleashing the Power of Collaborative Intelligence* The Australian College of Organisational Psychologists WA Workshop. 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2017, Perth Western Australia.