

# Recognizing Contingent Co-operation

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It is increasingly apparent from the experiences of many community networks that many diverse, local stakeholders can effectively work together even if they do not normally interact. This was clearly evident in the large majority of the cases I reviewed in the context of Ontario's Connect Ontario program (Wilson & Foster, 2006), as it has been in many of the other cases of successful collaboration I have examined as part of research conducted at the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa since the late 1990s.

Yet successful collaboration is far from the norm in business, in government or in the third sector. "In the case of organizational theory and practice, the problem that has proved most intractable has been the coordination of people and resources." (Sarason & Lorentz, 1998:13)

In business, where research has been more extensive, it is held that approximately 90% of partnerships, joint ventures, alliances fail -- with failure being defined as early termination or failure to deliver on targeted objectives. While the idea of P3s is becoming commonplace in public sector circles, government involvement is frequently criticized, often in terms of its arbitrariness and top down approach, its inability to align its own goals with the goals of participating partners, its inability to be responsive in the light of evolving conditions, and its unnecessary bureaucracy. As I observed in Connect Ontario, these types of criticisms could emerge even when it was the government's specific intent to avoid them, largely because of a lack of recognition by all parties of the nature of partner commitment.

It has also been observed by many commentators that even within a single level of government, effective cooperation between departments and agencies can be elusive in spite of high level agreement on the need to do so. As a former deputy minister once explained to me, "Government is a multi headed thing. There is no one who is really in charge. If you're dealing with government you can be dealing with different departments who don't talk to one another and are usually off in different directions." Enabling government to coordinate people and resources around a common policy objective thus remains a chronic problem.

It has been my experience in examining various types of collaboration and interviewing key public sector decision makers that while many people understand the need to cooperate, the requirements for delivering on successful cooperation are not well understood -- in part because they may not fit the 'business as usual' patterns of government or because it is erroneously assumed that a commitment to cooperate by senior managers is itself sufficient to sustain collaboration. In the private sector this latter assumption has been one of the major stumbling blocks of successful cooperation because the organizational needs (as opposed to leadership needs) imposed by cooperative activities end up being under-resourced and under-attended to.

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My experience also suggests that there are three stages of collaboration, each having its own requirements that need to be addressed in order for the partnership to succeed. The first is the *rationale for cooperation* that involves getting people to the table with a willingness and openness to at least to try to work with others. This is usually driven by a strong belief among potential partners that they can not achieve their goals alone. This is the stage that most people 'get'. The third stage involves a period of *self referral and reflection* on the part of the partners that includes celebrating their success, collecting the organizational memory (lessons learned, best practice, etc.) of the partnership, and reassessing any future role for the partnership and other opportunities for the partners. This post partnership reflection is rarely attended to effectively because most collaborative initiatives are time limited hence there is little incentive to capture the social and intellectual capital generated from a partnership for future use.

The second stage is the working stage of the partnership that begins by building trust, continues through a period of social learning and joint decision making, and finally on to the undertaking of joint action. These steps are well recognized.

However, what is often overlooked and not well recognized, is that participating partners are usually 'contingent co-operators', that is, they are willing to contribute as long as others do as well. They do not participate out of coercion or out of some sense of altruism. Their voluntary participation is wholly practical, based on the assumption that the participation of others will benefit them more than the cost of their contribution. Typically, organizations will continue to participate in a partnership only so long as the costs of participation are outweighed by the contributions by other organizations. For instance, one interviewee in a Connect Ontario project commented, "I would not have taken on the leadership of a project taskforce without knowing that other community leaders were doing similar tasks in other areas which would also benefit us." The consequence of this prevalence of this 'contingent cooperation' among collaborating partners underscores a strong need for transparency and monitoring so that everyone can be reassured about the levels of cooperation and commitment of their partners.

Howard Rheingold commented in his book *Smart Mobs* (Rheingold, 2002:176) that "monitoring and sanctioning are important not simply as a way of punishing rule breakers but also as a way of assuring members that others are using common resources wisely. That is, many people are *contingent cooperators*, willing to cooperate as long as most others do (what Ostrom has referred to as the 'commitment problem'). Thus monitoring and sanctioning serve the important [*and I would say essential*] function of providing information about others' actions and levels of commitment."

The fact that partners are 'contingent' means that if insufficient resources are dedicated to the function of monitoring and sharing project information, the partners will likely lose confidence in the commitment of others. In this scenario, each partner may know their own real-time costs but be uncertain about the real-time benefits being contributed by others. This uncertainty will in turn jeopardize an initiative's continuity due to fears of being on the losing side of 'shirking'. Thus a

level of resourcing sufficient to keep all the partners adequately informed becomes not just a 'nice to have' element of any partnership but an absolutely essential component.

This monitoring function can take several forms. The most successful of which is the funding of a partnership networker, someone who is constantly talking to partners, sharing information and news, listening to their concerns, resolving their conflicts, and asking their advice. This function is often performed by the project champion but rarely is it one that is sufficiently resourced. Frequently the same champion is also loaded with project management duties, project marketing, project administration, as well as with technical responsibilities. However, if the person's networking activities are insufficient, then the partnership as a whole is put in jeopardy.

As Sarason and Lorentz observed (1998:37), while better coordination may remain the fundamental focus of most organizational reforms, there is scant attention, if ever, paid to the need for someone to do the actual coordination, as if coordination emerges by itself spontaneously from the different pieces of the organization properly juxtaposed. Yet "when we engage in meaningful conversations people develop new levels of trust, they become more cooperative and forgiving. People stop being so arbitrary and demanding when they are part of the process"(Wheatley, 2005:70). The reason why the partnership networker role works so well is that their conversations contribute to an ongoing process of information exchange and collective learning, one that corroborates partner commitments and validates their continued participation.

There are other mechanisms that can help to sustain coordination among partners including, the generation of common knowledge resources, facilitated partner meetings, the use of MOUs and other tools for establishing progress markers, story telling and case reviews, opportunities for regular feedback and direct information exchange, and governance modelling characterized by low entry and exit barriers. Some of this monitoring activity (the more routine and codifiable information) can be provided by secure online solutions but much of it requires people talking to people. In an environment where knowledge, resources and power are increasingly distributed, this ability to effectively address the needs of 'contingent co-operators' is gaining critical importance.

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