Together

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Your stories, insights, understanding are both welcome and encouraged. This newsletter is after all entitled *Together*, and is dedicated to our shared understanding

In This Issue

Together is an online newsletter directed to those with an interest in the collective behaviour of individuals and organizations. In this edition, we begin exploring some of the practices that make collaboration successful.

It may seem overly academic to say it but, good partnerships are *not engineered but learned*. This is because of the variety of people, organizations and purposes that go into them. Each is essentially unique. Consequently, there is no standard model. Best practices may be identified but in the end have little to inform another partnership with different people, organizations and purposes.

So how do we get better at working together? In one word - practice. With practice we build our tool box of responses so that we can bring out an appropriate tool at the appropriate time. With practice we get better at choosing the right tool for the right circumstance. It's a bit like wine tasting. After a while you learn the nuances of the process. You become a connoisseur. We hope therefore this practical taste will encourage you to explore the concepts and examples further.

Co-operation & Collaboration: I will if you will

While most people appreciate the need to work together with others, the requirements for successful cooperation are not well understood. Co-operation is frequently regarded as a matter of good manners or altruism. In addition, there is no guarantee that collaboration will be successful simply because senior managers choose to co-operate. Quite the opposite. Such assumptions can often guarantee failure.

This is due in part because the requirements for successful co-operation do not translate well into our traditional models of hierarchical management. But more importantly, the fact that co-operation is largely conditional or 'contingent' is almost always overlooked. Real partnerships are built on the tentative premise that "I will if you will". As a result, co-operation imposes relational and inter-organizational demands to *build trust* and *verify agreements* that are frequently under-resourced and under-attended to.

Although a recognition that 'go it alone strategies won't work' may get people to the table, it won't be enough to sustain cooperation over the contentious phases of social learning, resource sharing and joint implementation. Ongoing co-operation tends to be driven by a cost-benefit assessment, especially at the organizational level. Contingent co-operators will contribute as long as they perceive others doing the same and the benefits outweigh the costs of collaboration. Their voluntary participation can't be coerced; nor is it likely to last solely out of altruism.

Partnerships: Socializing the potential for working together

Partnerships tend to be unique for the people and organizations involved and the purposes they pursue. Consequently, the form and character of each partnership tends to be invented as a part of the process of social learning. While they shouldn't follow formulaic recipes, they can and should be the result of a conscious application of good collaborative mechanics, which are based on a variety of tools and practices.

Socialization practices are those which occur in the pre-collaborative period and typically involve trying to determine who to include, inviting them to self-enroll in change, facilitating a sense of shared possibility, and building a modicum of trust to move forward on. Each of these activities relies heavily on relationship building.

One such practice begins during the pre-collaborative period when the idea of a partnership can be shopped around among potential partners to explore whether sufficient interest, commitment and trust exist to pursue a partnership. I refer to this as the socialization practice.

This practice involves trying to determine who to include, inviting them to self-enroll in change, facilitating a shared possibility, and building a modicum of trust to move forward on. Each of these activities relies heavily on relationship building.

One frequently used method is called *stakeholder mapping* (or a variant of this called *value network mapping*) to determine the relevant stakeholders. These might include those who can help, those who can obstruct cooperation, those who have relevant knowledge and those who are impacted by a change. If one was to err, better to err on the side of inclusion.

In mapping these stakeholders, try to determine who is impacted by whom, their relative strengths, and what tangible and intangible exchanges take place

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What proves crucial to contingent cooperation is the *belief* that one's partners remain committed to collaboration and that they will not take advantage, implying in large measure a capacity to predict their partners' future behaviour.

In such "tit-for-tat" environments, partner communication and the ongoing assessment of each other's likely future behaviour can create a profound bias for or against continued cooperation. To discourage *free-riding*, partners must be sure to put in place monitoring systems and sanctions for uncooperative behaviour, but they may also need to find creative ways to leverage themselves out of these biases. This may require changes in both the internal or external incentives for cooperation.

Face-to-face interactions give many important clues as to a partner's future behaviour. Despite the ubiquity of email and Facebook, serious partners continue to want a personal relationship with each other.

Internal incentives may include changes to attitudes regarding fairness; to behavioral norms; to levels of trust; or to moral contracts or other ethical promises. Education, networking and relationship building are the principal tools here. External incentives may include: increasing the risks of non-cooperation (including the risk of detection); improving the net benefit perception; reducing benefit uncertainty; or increasing the costs of non-cooperation. External incentives are frequently applied through law, regulation and punishment.

But other tools are also possible, in particular the use of a partnership *facilitator / coordinator / networker*. In addition, partners could make liberal use of facilitated *face-to-face* meetings; staff exchanges; social gatherings; joint media announcements and MOUs. Some of these will help improve the quality of *human feedback* to better predict behaviour, while others will strengthen moral contracts and increase the costs of defection.

Stewardship: Who's really in charge?

In modern organizations, the assumption that someone is ultimately in charge is so embedded, that it generally goes without question. Our management and leadership systems were constructed on this premise. Yet the chronic inability of political leaders to move the yardstick forward on major policy fronts and the string of scandals, incompetence and fraud by senior corporate officers that has come to light in the wake of the recent economic meltdown should clearly give us pause to question it. According to Harris Collingwood writing in the *Atlantic*, the "cult of the heroic CEO" has been shaken to its very foundations.

"anyone could have run GE and done well in the 1990s. A dog could have run GE."

- Jeffrey Immelt, current CEO of General Electric

As a further indication, Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, recently commented to the *Financial Times* of London on his predecessor, management idol Jack Welch. Immelt said that, "anyone could have run GE and done well in the 1990s. A dog could have run GE."

It follows that if our leaders didn't get us into the mess, as most CEOs now claim, then they are equally incapable of getting us out. Don't depend on leadership. If *nobody's in charge* as Harlan Cleveland claims, who's running the show? This leads to a most daring idea in management circles - if no one is in charge, then everyone is. At GE there were so many good people in the middle of the organization that did the actual day-to-day job of running and coordinating the company that being in-charge was irrelevant.
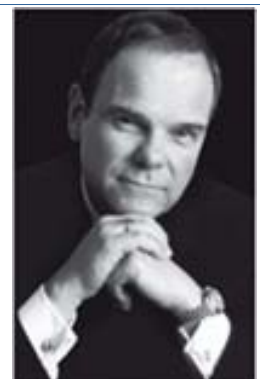
It's the practice of stewardship that replaces leadership in a "nobody in charge" world. Stewards don't direct people, they empower them to get the job done. They do this by guiding resources, information, connections and context to the right people, so that they can do what they have accepted responsibility to do. In an environment where nobody has all the knowledge, resources or power to be in control, stewardship is just the right coordinating mechanism to ensure people can work together in common pursuit.

Distributed Governance, Community Building & Democracy: Transitioning to mass collaboration

In the last issue we discussed the notion of *stigmergic collaboration*, or how large numbers of people can collaborate without having to resort to relationship building and pre-collaborative planning. While this approach has proven successful in the context of Internet-based wikis and open source software development, it's an idea that could fundamentally alter our concepts of democracy. Historically, representative democracy evolved due large numbers of people spread over large territories. Electing a representative and sending them to participate in regional or national forums seemed the only sensible and available option. That rationale no longer holds true.

The Internet makes the direct real time contributions of millions, even billions of citizens possible. The combination of *stigmergic collaboration* and the "*wisdom of crowds*' suggests the outcomes of large-scale direct democracy are likely to be superior to traditional democracy. An increasing number of thought leaders concur, including: Don Tapscott, Howard Rheingold, Clay Shirky, and Charles Leadbeater, for instance, have extolled the virtues of mass collaboration.

"There's a whole new model emerging where we become part of the government" - Don Tapscott, bestselling author of Wikinomics

In the past governments erected barriers to citizen dialogue to keep from being hijacked by special interests, says Shirky. "But as communication patterns make these groups more representative, the rationale for shielding government from communication with its citizens begins to decay because it becomes more representative simply to [be part of] that conversation." Mass collaboration puts additional pressure on governments to involve citizens in their own governance.

between them so you can quickly produce a more systemic view of the task or issue.

Peter Block refers to the need for an *invitation conversation*. This conversation invites people to participate without penalty to ensure their freedom of choice and commitment.

One federal government manager I have spoken with described an ongoing process of lunches and coffees with all potential private partners during which time the government's intent for a partnership could be candidly explored by companies and the capabilities of companies explored by the government contact. Transparency is a key issue here, meaning that the same story must be shared with everyone, as well as whom it is being shared with.

Such a conversation might explore how things could be different, what partners could contribute and what their costs might entail. It's an approach that encourages upfront ownership in the relationships, tasks, and ensuing processes that will ultimately lead to partnership success. It recognizes partners as co-developers of an initiative and not just as suppliers or service providers.

This conversation should not, however, be 'just talk' and include an expectation of work together and shared contributions. In a P3 sense, this may include an expectation to contribute to a vendor conference or co-design phase. In a community–based context, this may entail time commitments and the prospect of additional contributions furtheron, as change avenues are identified.

In accepting this invitation, potential partners would then assemble so as to understand what they each bring to the table: what skills and knowledge; what people; what tangible and intangible assets; and what authority. Clarifying the risks and rewards for each potential partner becomes an essential ingredient for identifying the costs of participation and negotiating the terms of any subsequent agreement.

David Strauss recommends *joint agenda development* for this first meeting. If consensus is what you want to encourage, you can begin with consensus on the process even if you don't know in advance the nature of final agreement that you will make.

Food for Thought: *Solving Tough Problems* by Adam Kahane

"The real problem we have is that everyone is talking and no one is listening."

This one of many profound observations that Adam Kahane shares in his recent book *Solving Tough Problems*. Adam has worked on some of the toughest, most complex social problems in the world. Beginning with an extraordinary experience with the Mont Fleur process in South Africa during the transition away from apartheid, he became involved in facilitating a series of extraordinary high-conflict, high-stakes problem-solving efforts.

His book is a personal journey, part how-to guide and part spiritual awakening to the power of people working together. He combines personal insight with the comments and reflections of numerous well known leaders -- many of whom were antagonists, yet come together to bridge the gulf between them.

He has organized the book as a series of cases – each with deep and compelling lessons to teach about how people can come together, and truly listen to each other in order to pursue a new possibility.

Early on Kahane points to the difficulty most people have with solving difficult problems. *"There is no problem so complex that it does not have a simple solution … that is wrong."* Why? Because the

solutions we look for tend to be external. The problem is with someone else. Someone else needs to change, or be forced to. Kahane's experience clearly points to the need to change ourselves.

"When we talk about 'solving a problem', we imply that we stand apart from the problem and can study it objectively and control it mechanically." But the problem is not out there but inside us. Kahane observes that when we begin to take responsibility for co-creating the present, that's when we gain real power to transform the present. Turning an old 60's adage on its head, he quotes humorously, *"If you're not part of the problem, you can't be part of the solution."*