



COLLABORATION A SPECTRUM OF APPROACHES

BY LIZ WEAVER

A PART OF THE COLLABORATIVE
GOVERNANCE & LEADERSHIP SERIES



TAMARACK
INSTITUTE

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Collaboration is at the core of Tamarack’s approach to community change. From our inception as an organization, our community-based partners were encouraged to build their change efforts to include multi-sector partners, collaborating across traditional and non-traditional leaders in the community.

This approach to multi-sector or cross-sector leadership also emphasized the inclusion of individuals with lived and living experience in the collaboration conversation. This was the early 2000’s and was not a typical practice at that time. More often, collaborative tables were formed with partners who had pre-existing relationships or worked in a similar field.

After many years of supporting community-based, collaborative efforts, Tamarack began to understand that collaboration was not just a single activity but rather a spectrum of approaches which is adapted to the unique circumstances of each group or collaborative.

DEFINING COLLABORATION

The Collaborative Leadership Field Book, written by David Chrislip, published in 2002, defined collaboration as a process of bringing the *appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization and the community*¹.

The collaboration premise provided a way of defining collaboration that challenges thinking about collaboration. The following elements are worth reviewing in more detail:

- **Appropriate people:** Shift your thinking to consider who are the individuals with spheres of influence who could advance the collaborative work more intentionally
- **Constructive ways:** Developing principles for working together or engagement early on can help collaborative members be clear about expectations and commitments
- **Good Information:** Understanding the context of the collaboration, the community narrative, data about the issue, and the readiness of the community to change are all elements of good information

Overlaid across the Collaboration Spectrum are two elements. When groups are in competition, co-exist or are connecting to communicate, there is a higher level of turf or disconnection between the groups. The collaborative groups, while contributing to the collaboration overall, are guarded and less likely to fully share in outcomes. The nature of the relationship is much more transactional.

As groups focus their collaborative efforts to intentionally cooperate, coordinate, collaborate or integrate, the partners will need to focus on building trust and sharing power. The success of the collaborative effort will depend on the effectiveness of the partners to build and deepen trust.

Collaborations can stumble when partners around the table do not fully engage with the shared intent or purpose. This is where trust can break down. It is also the space of disconnection. Building trust and sharing power will be explored further in a later paper in this series. However, collaborative leaders have to focus equally on the process of collaboration such as building trust and engagement as well as the product of collaboration, achieving a shared outcome.

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THE PEOPLE AND PROCESS OF COLLABORATION

Successful collaborations focus on both the people and the process of collaboration. The individuals around the collaborative table are key. Building collaborative relationships which focus on trust, sharing power and leadership, and developing opportunities for deep collaboration are important strategies. When the collaborative effort includes individuals from different sectors and bringing different perspectives, the relational aspect of collaborative work is more significant.

Many collaboratives kick off their efforts by focusing early on building the relationship between partners. The early meetings should include opportunities for connection conversations.

Connection Questions:

- Why is it important that you have joined this collaborative table?
- What would you like to learn through this collaborative experience?
- What gifts are you willing to share with the collaborative table?
- What does effective engagement look like for you?

The process of collaboration is equally important. Getting early agreement about the nature of the collaboration and the focus of the shared work can build relationships and commitment. Too often, collaborations focus solely on the work or outcomes of the collaboration and neglect to pay attention to the people and the process.

CLARITY BUILDS COLLABORATIVE COMMITMENT

The Collaboration Spectrum provides clarity about different types of collaborative efforts. Tamarack developed [a tool](#) based on the categories identified on the Collaboration Spectrum^{iv}. The [Collaboration Spectrum Tool](#) supports collaborative groups to identify and define the purpose of their collective effort.

In facilitating this tool with multiple collaboratives, Tamarack has found that there is not always a shared perspective about the type of effort the group is collaborating around. Often, we find that individual members are defining the collaborative approach differently. The Collaboration Spectrum Tool enables partners to gain clarity about the shared or collective effort. Clarity builds trust and trust builds a stronger sense of collaborative commitment.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON COLLABORATION: A SPECTRUM OF APPROACHES

Collaboration is seen as an imperative when communities and groups are seeking to tackle complex challenges or move from idea to impact. Having clarity about the nature of the collaborative effort is an important first step in this process. The Collaborative Premise proposed by David Chrislip and the Collaboration Spectrum provide two useful approaches to defining collaboration.

Collaboration efforts should focus on two important factors: **the people** who are invited to or participate around the collaborative table and **the process** of collaboration itself. This paper reviewed two ways of describing collaboration, The Collaborative Premise by David Chrislip and the Collaboration Spectrum are two approaches which define the collaborative relationship. Collaborative tables which focus both on people and process can achieve better results and impact by creating alignment, shared purpose and a focus on results and impact.

ABOUT LIZ WEAVER

Liz Weaver is the Co-CEO of Tamarack Institute and leading the Tamarack Learning Centre. The Tamarack Learning Centre advances community change efforts by focusing on five strategic areas including collective impact, collaborative leadership, community engagement, community innovation and evaluating community impact. Liz is well-known for her thought leadership on collective impact and is the author of several popular and academic papers on the topic. She is a co-catalyst partner with the Collective Impact Forum.



This is the first paper in a series about Collaborative Leadership and Governance. The papers will be released starting in August 2022. We invite your comments and feedback. If you are a member of a collaborative table, we would love to hear from you. Please email Liz Weaver – Liz@tamarackcommunity.ca

ⁱ David Chrislip, *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook*, 2002, John Wiley & Sons, <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Collaborative+Leadership+Fieldbook-p-9780787966836>

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Tamarack Institute, *The Collaboration Spectrum*, <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/collaboration-spectrum-tool>

^{iv} *Ibid.*