

COLLABORATION | Beginnings and Endings

LIZ WEAVER

The world is fast paced with multiple demands filling our daily agendas. Collaborative involvement is often a more minor priority for many of us. And yet, collaborative efforts can have a powerful impact. The act of working collectively across people and sectors has a multiplying effect and can lead to impactful new programs, services, or system level changes.

With the pressure to meet multiple demands on our time, we often rush into collaboration and think less about launching well, and even less about ending well. Instead, many collaborative efforts focus on ‘the what’: the end goal of the collaborative rather than ensuring that the individuals around the collaborative table are connected, engaged and prepared to successfully achieve the shared purpose or goal of the collaborative process.

This paper will address two critical parts of the collaborative process: the beginning and the ending. Both are integral. A good beginning sets the foundations for an effective collaborative experience. A strong ending creates the opportunity for reflection and learning. A strong ending also creates the conditions for future collaboratives to be successful.

START WELL: COLLABORATION BEGINNINGS

There are many different reasons why a collaborative effort is started: the funder is seeking collaboration as a condition of funding; the lead organization knows that other groups in the community are working on a similar issue and invites others to the table; there have been previous collaborative partnerships that have been positive; or organizations and leaders are trying to achieve impact on a complex issue. Collaboration can occur with a focus on developing and delivering a new service or program. Or it can be focused on shifting policies and systems. Sometimes collaboration occurs inside an organization itself when multiple departments begin to work together. All of these examples and more set the condition for collaboration.

CONVENING THE COLLABORATION: BUILDING YOUR COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP SKILLSET

The role of convener of the collaborative is an important one. It requires a set of skills that can enhance the experience for everyone. In a recent online article, [Proofhub](#)ⁱ identified the following ten essential teamwork and collaboration skills. On the surface, these skills and practices seem self-evident. Diving deeper into the list illustrates that conveners of collaborations should consider the inner and outer work of supporting collaboration. They should consider their role and enthusiasm for the collaboration process itself and also the hard skills designed to ensure overall effectiveness of the collaborative experience.

Building Your Collaborative Leader Skillset

- Know your collaboration purpose and goal
- Strike the habit of complaining
- Use time wisely
- Be an active listener
- Practice conflict management
- Be reliable
- Practice respect
- Share your enthusiasm
- Communicate regularly
- Have strong interpersonal skills

DEFINING THE COLLABORATION BEGINNING: HOW TO BEGIN

Deb Halliday, Halliday and Associates begins her recruitment process with [100 cups of coffee](#)ⁱⁱ. She describes this as entering into the collaborative space with a beginner's mind. She shows up at people's offices with two cups of coffee, one for herself and one for the other person. She engages the potential partner in a conversation about the collaborative idea, exploring hopes, possibilities and, at the same time building trust.

The beginning of any new endeavor can be like a honeymoon – where relationships are new, goodwill is running, and the future is wide open. By engaging many different perspectives through an activity like 100 Cups of Coffee, you can develop a more nuanced understanding of the issue and the underlying system, as well as begin to see where the promising levers of impact lie.

DEFINING THE COLLABORATION BEGINNING: THE CASE FOR COLLABORATION

The first step to launching a successful collaborative effort is to have a reason to collaborate. What potential outcomes or results of gathering a group of individuals around a collaborative table? **Developing a clear and compelling case for collaboration is an important first step.** Here are some early questions to consider.

1. What problem or opportunity are you seeking to address?
2. What outcomes are you seeking to achieve?
3. Who else is working on this problem or opportunity?
4. What does the data tell us about this problem or opportunity?
5. Would address this problem or opportunity benefit from a collaborative approach?
6. Who or which organizations would be effective collaborative partners?

Not every effort, program or service proposed by an organization requires collaboration. There might be times, after answering the above questions, when you think, does this effort really require the establishment of a collaboration table?

Collaboration is work and requires a thoughtful and intentional approach. If you do not have sufficient resources to effectively engage in collaboration, you should carefully consider this approach. As well, if the case for collaboration is not compelling enough, you might consider advancing the work as a single organization. Being realistic about the need for collaboration is important. Collaborations fail when the focus is not compelling enough or the individuals around the table don't understand why they are there or what the purpose and outcomes might be.

DEFINING THE COLLABORATION BEGINNING: WHO TO INVOLVE

Determining the case for collaboration will naturally lead to thinking about who should be around the table. Depending on the scope and scale of your collaborative effort, consider those individuals and organizations who are already doing related work.

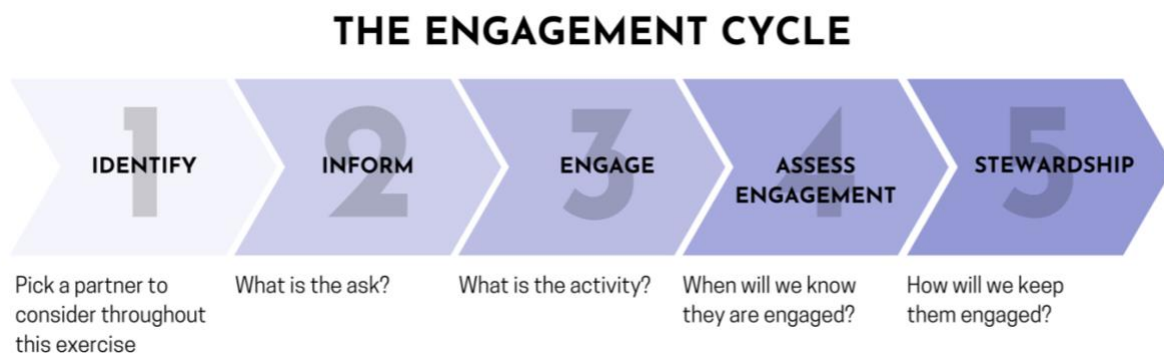
In some cases, the collaborative effort will be designed to include individuals from a single sector, for example a funders collaborative or a non-profit services collaborative. In other cases, the collaborative might be designed to include individuals representing multiple perspectives and/or sectors.

If the collaborative is seeking to have a population level or community change level impact; it is important to include both diverse perspectives and importantly individuals with the lived and living experience of the problem or opportunity. Tamarack co-published a [10 Guide: Engaging Individuals with Lived/Living Experienceⁱⁱⁱ](#) which describes effective inclusion strategies.

DEFINING THE COLLABORATION BEGINNING: HOW TO INVOLVE

The Engagement Cycle is a useful tool for considering how to involve individuals in collaborative efforts. The Engagement Cycle has five important steps.

1. **Identify:** Identify the individual or individuals you are seeking to involve in the collaborative. What do you know about them? What would draw them toward participation and engagement?
2. **Inform:** Consider what role you hope the individual will play or what contributions you hope they will make. The more clarity you have about the 'ask' the more likely you will be successful.
3. **Engage:** Consider how you might engage the person. In some cases, if you do not have a direct connection with the person, you might need the support of others to develop an effective engagement strategy.
4. **Assess Engagement:** Consider the ingredients of a successful engagement strategy. For example, if you want to engage a business leader in your community around the collaborative table, successful engagement will mean that they show up and they participate.
5. **Stewardship:** Consider how you will keep individuals engaged and over what time period. This allows you to define the length and terms of the collaboration.



DEFINING THE COLLABORATION BEGINNING: THE COLLABORATIVE PREMISE

David Chrislip, a leading thinker on the topic of collaborative leadership, describes the collaborative premise as *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.*

The collaborative premise highlights the people and process of collaborative efforts. When starting a collaborative effort, consider both people and process.

In [Simple Ways to Build a Collaborative, Successful Work Environment](#),^{iv} author Sherrie Campbell provides the following ways for building collaborative success.

1. Build a clear and compelling case for collaboration
2. Communicate expectations
3. Establish collaborative goals
4. Leverage collaborative member strengths
5. Foster cohesion between members
6. Encourage innovation
7. Keep promises and honor requests
8. Encourage people to socialize
9. Recognize, reward, and celebrate collaborative behaviour

END WELL: COLLABORATION ENDINGS

Many of us have had collaborative experiences that have not ended well. There are lots of different ways that collaborative experiences end poorly. Some collaborations just die quietly because fewer and fewer people show up for the meetings. Other collaboratives end because the funding envelop has closed. Others end because the collaboration champion has left their organization and no one else cares enough to reconvene the member. The anticipation and enthusiasm which launched the collaborative results is lost when a collaboration ends poorly. How would you like your collaborative experience to end? Even when negative circumstances prevail, you can still end the collaborative relationship in a positive way. There are always lessons to be learned.

The following table provides ideas for navigating positive and negative ending experiences:

Positive Ending	Negative Ending
<p>Examples of positive endings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collaborative effort has achieved its purpose • The collaborative effort is time bound 	<p>Examples of negative endings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collaboration convener left • The collaboration members no longer show up • Funding is no longer available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify that the collaborative project is coming to completion • Host a reflection session with key collaborative partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare in advance of this meeting to address a negative ending

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have we done well? • Where could we have improved? • What should we do to improve our next collaborative effort? • Document your results and share back with partners the results you achieved together • Send a gratitude note or gift to individually recognize each partners' contributions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share with the collaborative partners the reason for the collaborative coming to an end • Host a reflection session with key collaborative partners • Ask the questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have we done well? • Where could we have improved? • What should we do to improve our next collaborative effort? • Document the lessons learned from the collaboration • Send a gratitude note to each partner thanking them for their contributions
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Negative collaboration experiences may have a splash and ripple impact. When collaborations end quietly or just disappear, levels of trust are diminished. If you hope to engage the individual or organization in future partnerships, they may be more hesitant because of a negative experience.

Taking the time for reflection, for sharing lessons learned and for celebrating collaborative contributions is important. This time builds connection, relationships, and knowledge. Ending well should be a goal of the collaboration.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON COLLABORATION BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

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Starting well and ending well are important to collaboration success. Being thoughtful and intentional about the beginning and ending of the collaboration experience has both short term and long-term impacts. In the short term, a collaboration, launched well from the beginning will be an engaging experience. Partners will know that you have thought about case for the collaboration, and you have considered the how and why partners are around the table. These actions are important to build early trust and relationship.

Ending well is equally important. Spending time considering the achievements of the collaborative and their contributions creates strong connections and the opportunity to both learn and improve future collaborative efforts. Partners will feel seen, heard, and respected. Taking the time to send gratitude notes or to personally thank collaborative partners individually will build relationships and connections into the future.

While being thoughtful and intentional about the beginning and ending of a collaboration takes time and may take additional resources, the investment you make will pay dividends throughout the collaboration experience and in future opportunities.

Tools for Building Effective Collaboration Beginnings and Endings:

1. Tamarack Institute: [100 Cups of Coffee](#)
2. Tamarack Institute: [Community Reference System](#)
3. Tamarack Institute: [Top 100 Partner Exercise](#)
4. Tamarack Institute: [10 – Engaging People with Lived/Living Experience](#)

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.



The Collaborative Governance and Leadership Series

This is the second paper in a series about Collaborative Leadership and Governance. The papers will be released in July, August, and September 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 Proofhub. How to Improve Teamwork and Collaboration Skills. [Easy ways to build up your teamwork and collaboration skills \(proofhub.com\)](https://www.proofhub.com)

ⁱⁱ Tamarack Institute. 100 Cups of Coffee. Deb Halliday. 2017. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/latest/100-cups-of-coffee>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tamarack Institute. 10 – Engaging People with Lived/Living Experience. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/ten-2019>

^{iv} Entrepreneur. 10 Simple Ways to build a Collaborative, Successful Work Environment. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/302126>