

# COLLABORATION | THE ROLE OF THE CONVENER

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The role of a convener of a collaboration is critical to the overall success and impact of the shared effort. A convener is an individual or group of individuals who take the lead responsibility for initiating the collaborative effort. This person or group is critical in the early stages of the collaboration and are responsible for initiating the collaborative idea and seeking to move forward the opportunity. They also are key to recruiting and bringing initial collaborative partners together. The Collaboration Handbook describes the role of a convener in the following way.

*“A skilled convener needs good organizing and interpersonal skills, especially the ability to challenge assumptions. Those who travel with this tour guide must see her or him as a capable and neutral person. These skills help the convener establish the trust necessary to reach the destination. The convener helps create the routine (rituals) that make our journey enjoyable and satisfying.”<sup>i</sup>*

Conveners of collaboration must have the capacity to bring a constituency of partners together and then engage them in working collectively toward a shared outcome. Collaborations will stumble and fail if no-one is willing to engage or if the partners around the table perceive that the convener is only advancing their own leadership or organizational priority. Conveners require strong interpersonal, organizational, and outcomes focused skills.

## GETTING PEOPLE TO THE COLLABORATIVE TABLE

Chris Thompson, a collaborative leader, and consultant, describes the leadership required for convening collaboratives as galvanizing leadership. He describes galvanizing leadership as the ability of an individual to galvanize others around a compelling cause and through strategic engagement, move the partners toward action. He notes that this galvanizing leadership can come from many places in a community and does not always sit only with those in the role of senior leader in an organization, government department or business.

Thompson notes that galvanizing leadership is less about a command-and-control approach but instead relies on people skills including building relationships, building trust, personal credibility and a commitment to engagement and the cause.<sup>ii</sup>

Galvanizing leadership, according to Thompson is easy to recognize. Galvanizing leaders have the distinct capacity of engaging others around the collaborative table. They are also able to build agreement to work collectively toward a common cause and shared outcomes.

Galvanizing leadership can be found in different organizations. Thompson notes that philanthropic, business and government leaders often bring additional capacities and resources to galvanize partners.

Galvanizing leadership can also be found in individuals in communities. “When leaders step beyond the interests of their own organizations and persistently and consistently advocate for improved outcomes within a complex system, galvanizing leadership is present.”<sup>iii</sup>

**Galvanizing leaders have the distinct capacity of engaging others around the collaborative table.**

## PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CONVENERS

Conveners of collaborative efforts share the following personal characteristics. If the collaborative effort is focused on advancing an organizational outcome, they build bridges between the organization and the collaborative partners. If the collaborative effort is focused in population level change or a systems level impact, the convener has the capacity to work across systems and silos and engage diverse partners to work toward the common purpose. The [Organization Development Institute](#) describes the personal characteristics of collaborative leaders in the following way.

*Successful collaborative leaders are adaptive to different contexts, including culture, language, and expectations. They create a trusting atmosphere that enables others to take risks and innovate. They are comfortable with conflict and will use it constructively where it occurs. They understand mutuality and the value of win-win solutions.<sup>iv</sup>*

The convener of a collaborative effort pays attention to core elements such as understanding the context of the shared work and clarifying key concepts and language. They recognize that individuals around the collaborative table are bringing different interpretations, skills, and expertise.

The convener or conveners are both outcomes focused but also recognize that most collaborations take many twists and turns. This means that they must also bring adaptive capacity.

Effective conveners are also skilled in navigating cultural contexts and addressing disparities in collective efforts. Increasingly, effective collaborative efforts focus on centering equity in collaborative efforts. [Centering Equity in Collective Impact](#)<sup>v</sup> is the focus of a recent paper by the Collective Impact Forum which describes centering equity as addressing the systemic and structural barriers impacting racialized individuals and communities, Indigenous peoples, and individuals with disabilities. The paper describes five strategies for centering equity:

1. Ground the work in data and context, and target solutions.
2. Focus on systems change, in addition to programs and services.
3. Shift power within the collaborative.
4. Listen to and act with community.
5. Build equity leadership and accountability.

Each of these strategies seek to actively address disparities in systems and structures. Grounding the collaborative work in data and context enables the collaborative partners to base strategies in the reality impacting individuals in the community. Shifting and sharing power is about ensuring that individuals with the lived and living experience of the problem are engaged in shaping solutions. Conveners who commit to centering equity in collaborative efforts will create solutions which address community needs or opportunities.

## KEY ROLES FOR A CONVENER

There are 10 distinct roles which are led or shared by the convener to ensure effective collaborations. As notes in a previous paper, the convener plays a key role in ensuring the successful beginning of a collaboration and creating the conditions for the collaboration to end well and with purpose.

During the different phases or stages of the collaborative effort, the convener may lead or share roles with other members to deepen commitment and engagement. The convener may also, at some points, engage external facilitation to support the group to navigate particularly challenging issues.

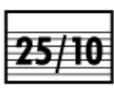
1. Begins the collaborative experience in a thoughtful way
2. Building trust and relationship amongst collaborative partners
3. Hosting and facilitating effective meetings by establishing collaborative norms
4. Creating opportunities for effective and inclusive engagement
5. Mediate conflict and disputes
6. Disclosing self-interest and conflicts of interest
7. Create opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and decision-making
8. Monitors and communicates progress toward collaborative goals

- 9. Celebrates individuals and shared successes
- 10. Ends collaborative experience with learning and reflection

## KEEPING PEOPLE AT THE COLLABORATIVE TABLE

Effective facilitation skills are critical for conveners in the early stages and during the whole process of the collaborative effort. Two go-to resource websites which support effective facilitation skills are [Liberating Structures](#) and [Session Lab](#). Both websites provide conveners and collaborative partners with a wealth of information, approaches, and facilitation tools. [Session Lab](#) is useful as the website provides conveners with design template as well as links to a variety of different facilitation tools.

The [Liberating Structures](#) website, book, and tools are focused on supporting collaborative efforts seeking to influence systems change. The website contains 33 unique tools for conveners and organizations to advance innovation. In addition to the tools, the website designers provide helpful directions for conveners to adapt the tools to their context or to sequence the implementation of tools to deepen the experience or learning of collaborative partners.

|   |  |  |   |  |   |   |
|---|--|--|---|--|---|---|
| LS Menu<br>              | Wicked questions<br>        | What³ debrief<br>               | Min specs<br>                | Heard, seen respected<br>  | What I need from you<br>     | Integrated autonomy<br>    |
| Design elements<br>      | Appreciative interviews<br> | Discovery and action dialog<br> | Improv prototyping<br>       | Drawing together<br>       | Open space<br>               | Critical uncertainties<br> |
| 1-2-4-All<br>            | TRIZ<br>                    | Shift & share<br>               | Helping heuristics<br>       | Design storyboards<br>     | Generative relationships<br> | Ecocycle<br>               |
| Impromptu networking<br> | 15% solutions<br>           | 25 : 10 crowdsourcing<br>       | Conversation café<br>        | Celebrity interview<br>    | Agree/certainty matrix<br>   | Panarchy<br>               |
| 9-whys<br>               | Troika consulting<br>       | Wise crowds<br>                 | User experience fishbowl<br> | Social network webbing<br> | Simple ethnography<br>       | Purpose to practice<br>    |

A strong collaborative experience which keeps people at the collaborative table is one that seeks to deeply involve and engage participants by providing them with opportunities to generate new thinking, engaged in problem solving and co-design the approach together.

## CO-DESIGN IS A CONVENER COMPETENCY

Tamarack embeds co-design in our collaborative approaches with community. Conveners who deeply understand their local contexts and the skills of their partners know that co-designing collaborative efforts will leverage the collective capacity that all bring to the table. **The Power of Co** describes collaborative governance as sharing power, believing in people and their strengths, clear leadership, and inclusive processes.

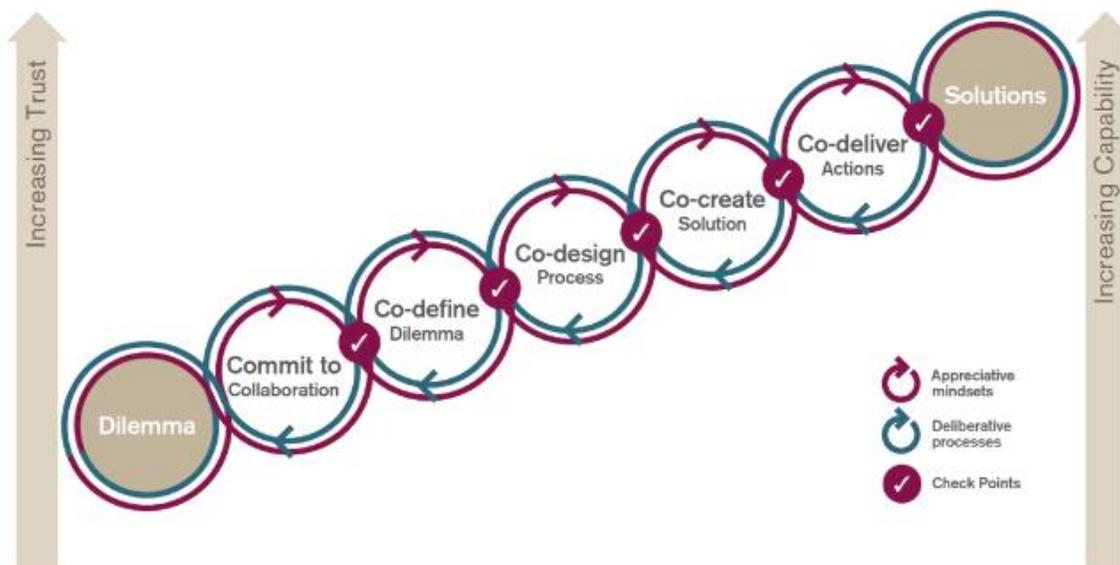
**Appreciative** – focusing on strengths, abilities, and energy of stakeholders to find enduring solutions to challenging problems.

**Informative** – encouraging conversations to share an understanding of all perspectives, to learn together and to build respect and trust between stakeholders.

**Deliberative** – sharing knowledge and working together to co-create new ideas and solutions that are informed, sustainable and enduring.

**Iterative** – starting at any point in a problem-solving or decision-making process but, like a seed being planted, needing the right environment and conditions in which to thrive.<sup>vi</sup>

**The Power of Co** further describes a process which can be used by a convener to engage partners at every stage of a collaborative process. The process begins with the convener or collaborative partners defining the dilemma or opportunity they are collectively facing. The



collaborative group moves through shared, deliberative cycles which including committing to collaboration, co-defining the dilemma, co-designing the process, co-creating solutions, and co-delivering actions. All of these steps are designed to lead the collaborative effort from the dilemma phase to the solution phase.

The overall approach developed in **The Power of Co** is a series of cycles which provide collaborative tables to move from one circle to the next. However, they also recognize that collaborative groups may move through a cycle, come to agreement around a decision, but then in the next cycle, obtain new information which requires them to move back to an earlier cycle. This should not be considered a failure but rather an opportunity to gain additional clarity and discernment.

Tamarack Director Lisa Attygalle recently wrote a series of website posts about [facilitating codesign virtually](#).<sup>vii</sup> In these posts Attygalle describes how to use the double diamond framework as an approach to engage collaborative partners in sharing perspectives, forming a common vision or approach, building new ideas, and then determining a path forward. The double diamond framework includes a series of divergent and convergent conversations which create the space for conversation, dialogue, and debate, prior to developing agreement around a solution. The double diamond framework can be used in each of the stages of co-design and can be a useful tool for conveners of collaborative efforts.

## FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT CONVENING COLLABORATION

Many collaborative efforts are initiated quickly without much thought given to the critical role of convening leadership. This paper asks you to pause and to consider the convening role. Some collaborative efforts are convened by a single person and others are co-convened by two or more partners.

Tamarack has noted that there are collaborative tables which are convened by four leaders each representing a different sector or perspective: business, government, community, and citizen perspective. Having multiple partners engaged in co-convening a collaborative takes more effort and coordination across the co-convening table. However, these collaboratives deeply commit to the integration of diverse voices at both the leadership and the partner's table. In this design, the convening partners are seeking to share power and to center equity in their collaborative work.

### **Tools for Building Your Convening Practice:**

- Liberating Structures - <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/>
- Session Lab - <https://app.sessionlab.com/>
- Tamarack Institute – [Facilitating Co-Design](#)
- Collective Impact Forum – [Centering Equity In Collective Impact](#)
- Design Council UK – [Double Diamond Process](#)

This paper described the mindset and skillsets required by convening leaders. It also provided links to web-tools which can help conveners be more effective facilitators. The convener assumes the lead responsibility for launching the collaboratively successfully and with purpose. From the start, the convener must galvanize and engage partners throughout the process.

***The Collaborative Governance and Leadership Series***

*This is the fourth paper in a series about Collaborative Leadership and Governance. The papers will be released over the course of fall 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](mailto:Liz@tamarackcommunity.ca)*

## 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.



<sup>i</sup> Collaboration Handbook. Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey. Michael Winer and Karen Roy. Amherst Wilder Foundation. Page 54.

<sup>ii</sup> Collaboration. A Handbook from the Fund for Our Economic Future. Chris Thompson. Page 13.

<sup>iii</sup> Collaboration. A Handbook from the Fund for Our Economic Future. Chris Thompson. Page 15.

<sup>iv</sup> Organization Development Institute. Collaborative Leadership. January 27, 2022. [What is Collaborative Leadership :: ODI \(development.org.nz\)](#).

<sup>v</sup> Collective Impact Forum. Centering Equity in Collective Impact. 2022. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/centering\\_equity\\_in\\_collective\\_impact#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/centering_equity_in_collective_impact#)

<sup>vi</sup> The Power of Co. The Smart Leaders' Guide to Collaborative Governance. Twyfords. 2021. Page 12.

<sup>vii</sup> Tamarack Institute. Facilitating Co-Design. Lisa Attygalle. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/latest/facilitating-co-design-virtually-part-1>