ARTICLE | SOLVING THE PUZZLE OF COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Liz Weaver

There is a substantive amount of literature about collaboration and collaborative work but relatively little that identifies the nuts and bolts of collaborative governance including process, structure, accountability, engagement, and effectiveness. This article is for changemakers encountering challenges with collaborative governance within their work.

Community change leaders spend numerous hours at collaborative planning tables seeking to create more impactful solutions for their neighbourhoods, communities, or networks. And yet, the practice of collaborative governance remains challenging.

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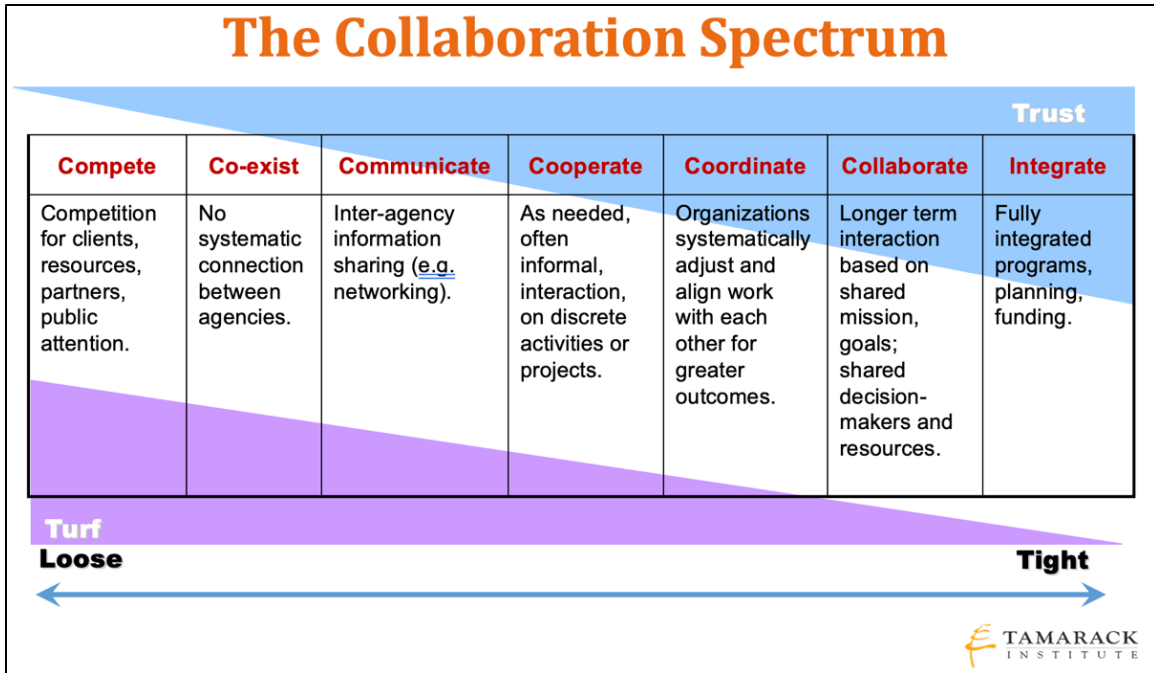
A foundation for my approach to collaboration is David Chrislip's collaborative premise:

> If you bring the appropriate people together as peers in constructive ways with good content and context information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organizations and the community.

The premise includes unique elements such as bringing appropriate people together, in constructive ways with good information and supporting them in creating authentic visions. Each of these elements is critical to effective collaboration but what about collaborative governance?

Collaborative governance is a formal or informal process where partners representing different interests make decisions together, share resources and strategically align to solve problems.

Tamarack, several years ago, developed the collaboration spectrum which distinguishes seven different levels of collaboration. This offers groups a range of options to consider in deciding the level of collaboration that is best suited to advance their collective work.

The Collaboration Spectrum

Compete	Co-exist	Communicate	Cooperate	Coordinate	Collaborate	Integrate
Competition for clients, resources, partners, public attention.	No systematic connection between agencies.	Inter-agency information sharing (e.g. networking).	As needed, often informal, interaction, on discrete activities or projects.	Organizations systematically adjust and align work with each other for greater outcomes.	Longer term interaction based on shared mission, goals; shared decision-makers and resources.	Fully integrated programs, planning, funding.

Trust

Turf

Loose ←————————————————————→ Tight

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BALANCING THE PROCESS, PRODUCT AND PEOPLE OF COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

The level and degree of formality of collaborative governance models and structures is often connected to the following factors:
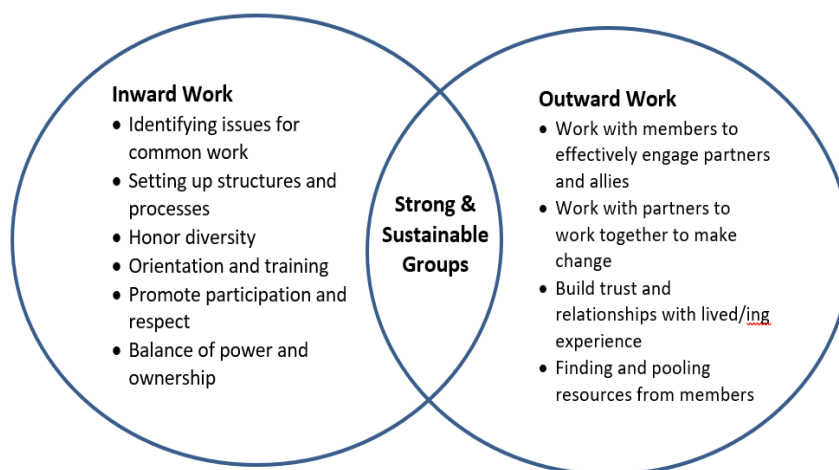
- context of the community
- history and experience with collaboration
- complexity of the problem or issue being addressed
- availability of resources to support the collective effort
- pre-existing relationships, connection, and trust between the partners

Collaborative governance requires the right balance between process and product. The process should be defined enough so that those involved are aware of the overall organizing structure, their individual roles, and accountabilities, an understanding of how to contribute to shared decision-making, progress and impact, and a sense of alignment and commitment between their personal and/or organizational and the co-developed and shared agenda of the collaborative effort.

Equally, collaborative efforts must also understand the pre-existing relationships, connections, and trust between partners. This will be different for each collaborative process. In some communities, there will be strong connections and ties and in other communities there will be lower levels of trust and connection.

Our Deepening Community colleagues at Tamarack identify the following as people challenge. A common mistake that groups make is that they focus on the doing and not on maintaining relationships. Maintaining partnerships is really about the relationships and trust.
There are two functions that partnerships and collaborative efforts need to do no matter what type of approach to collaboration they take:

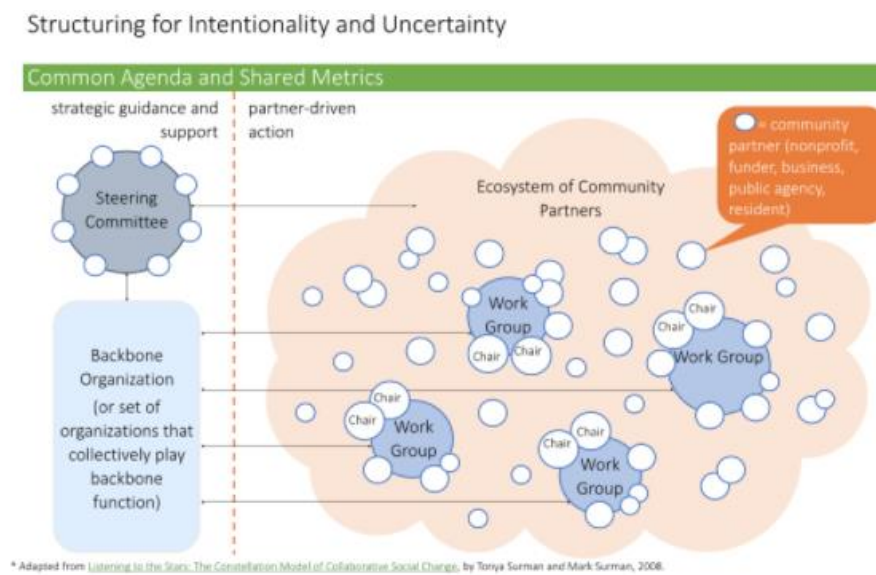TAMARACK INSTITUTE

Figure 2: Source: FD Butterfoss (2007)

Inward Work
- Identifying issues for common work
- Setting up structures and processes
- Honor diversity
- Orientation and training
- Promote participation and respect
- Balance of power and ownership

Strong & Sustainable Groups

Outward Work
- Work with members to effectively engage partners and allies
- Work with partners to work together to make change
- Build trust and relationships with lived/ing experience
- Finding and pooling resources from members

1. **Inward work:** these are the actions or activities that are needed to build, nurture, and maintain the group. This includes building the vision and goals, recruitment, training and retaining members. This is where building relationships and trust fit.

2. **Outward work:** these are actions that lead to achieving the goals of the group. These will focus on implementing the actions that will lead to the jointly established outcomes. Outward work effectiveness will depend on the quality of the internal coordination of the coalition and the level of trust developed by the inward work.

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE MODELS AND STRUCTURES

There is not a one-size fits all model for collaborative governance. Collaborate CIC in the UK published a recent report called Forms and Features of Collaboration in which they describe seven different approaches such as coalitions, collective impact, network collaborations and systems collaborators. For each example, they describe the value of that approach, the focus, the purpose, the mechanics, and the form or make up of the collaborative. As well Collaborate CIC provides a case study example which illustrates that form of collaboration in action.

It is useful to recognize that there can be many different models and structures to choose from when designing your specific collaborative governance approach.

A model that we often refer to at Tamarack is the Constellation Model of Governance. Tamarack has modified the constellation governance model to a horizontal in design. This means that the collaborative table and community eco-system are equal in power and connection but have different areas of focus. The leadership table (Steering Committee) table provides a strategic guidance and oversight approach while also looking to leverage the eco-system of community partners and actors.

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Structuring for Intentionality and Uncertainty

* Adapted from Listening to the Stars: The Constellation Model of Collaborative Social Change, by Tonya Surman and Mark Surman, 2008.

In the eco-system of community partners, some affiliate with the work, while others might be drawn in at a later date.

Another key feature of the model is that it takes a lightweight or high-level approach to developing governance documents. In the collaborative context, where constant shifts and changes are the norm, having a core set of lightweight operating documents is key to collaborative success.

Tamarack supports a network of 400 Vibrant Communities collaborative tables across Canada and the US. To support their work, Tamarack suggests the following as a set of governance documents to advance collaborative work. Each of these documents describes an important aspect of the core work and approach of the collaborative. These core documents are also useful resources when orienting new members to a collaborative table or when seeking funding or other support. These core governance documents should be revisited and updated annually since the collaborative's work is continuously evolving. They may require adjustments as the nature of the collaborate effort or people involved evolve or change over time.

SIX KEY TOOLS FOR COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

1. Governance Structure – A visual document which details the overall governance structure, roles of the different parts of the structure and accountabilities. The governance structure document might also include terms of reference or memorandums of understanding if these documents are required.
2. Principles for Working Together – Every collaboration should develop a core set of principles for how the partners would like to work together. This, when done at the initiation of the collaborative, should be revisited regularly and can be a guide when the collaborative goes off track.
3. Decision Making Strategy – This can be included in the governance structure document and in the Key Milestone document, but it is important that the collaborative agree to a decision-making strategy to guide their work.

4. Plan on a Page – This document is a synthesis of the core aspiration / common vision of the collaborative and provides high level details about the approach.
5. Key Milestone Report – During the course of a collaboration lifespan, the group makes choices or undertakes strategies. The key milestone report is a living document that reflects the purpose and key decisions which have informed the progress of the collaborative.
6. Regular or Annual Progress Update – Nothing builds momentum more than a group making progress and impact. An annual progress report is a time for reflection, sense-making and learning together. It also helps the collaborative reflect on what worked well and where the collaborative might focus next. An outcomes diary can be a helpful tool in tracking progress and reporting on results.

LEARNING FROM COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE COLLEAGUES

In a recent Collaborative Governance and Leadership workshop hosted by the Tamarack Institute, participants identified common collaborative governance challenges. These challenges were grouped into categories and potential resources or tools to help navigate this challenge were identified.

Area	Description	Potential Strategy
Shared Vision	• Coordinating vision and accountability and action • Lots of ideas hard to prioritize • Ensuring all parties with the same vision • Mission and vision become diluted at board level	Development of a shared theory of change or plan on a page
Collaboration	• Maintaining during a time of no face-to-face meetings • Getting everyone one the same page – challenging when one or two people aren't doing the work and so derails meetings and decisions affecting group dynamics • Constant communication needed • Different opinions about where we are on the spectrum • Trying to figure out a way of collaborating that isn't a merger • Top-down approach, lack of true collaboration outside of board room	Identify the core purpose of the collaboration through the collaboration spectrum tool.
Navigating Change	• Trying to maintain momentum during a crisis • Covid slowing the work • some lack of flexibility can may it difficult to respond to emerging issues/needs • Covid lack of personal initiatives • stress, burnout, dealing with everyone's personal lives • Capacity issues • Lack of capacity and commitment with some community partners	Using the Gives, Gets & Constraints Tool to build commitment. Read Leadership for Navigating Uncertainty
Structure	• Control and power struggles between partners and fiscal host • Difficult to establish role of local community governances versus organizational governance/leadership structures	Collaborative Governance Structures – Health Nexxus

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Area	Description	Potential Strategy
	• Developing governance structures at multiple levels (provincial, regional) • Unclear roles/overlapping responsibilities • funding disparities • How to share governance with Funder	Read: The value of Backbone Organizations – Collective Impact Forum
Leadership	• Resistant leadership and funding • We are a new group – eager but new • Staff are agile and responsive to community needs – governance between partners can require time to discuss and process • Get people to the table regularly who align with the priorities • differing values • Often balancing a lot of different needs / interests / priorities • More difficult to get multiple agencies on the same page	Read: Disruptive Times Require Skilled Changemakers
Turf	• Turf trust • Turf trust when it comes to who "leads" the group • Roles disconnect between partner who want to co-own/co-lead/co-manage and fiscal host who is risk averse • No process in place for how to handle conflict • collaborating only to get resources • Buy in from sectors (lack of trust between government and community)	Read: Turf, Trust, Co-creation and Collective Impact
Engagement	• Power to those with the most at stake • With a broad mandate many stakeholders can be involved - decide how many • It takes a lot of time • Community development difficult in these intense response - governance focus elsewhere	Read: Creating a Culture of Engagement
Progress	• Group's lose spark that may have existed at the beginning • Some work of the backbone is assigned but not covered due to limited capacity • Finishing off projects • Scope and timelines • Follow through with amazing ideas	Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact – FSG
Decision Making	• No formal way yet of making decisions • Challenge with how much is 'too much' shared decision making? • Accountability for moving collaborative decisions forward • Shifting mental models from centralized decision making to shared decision making • Communication - unclear on decision making role	Agile Decision Framework – Pleus

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Area	Description	Potential Strategy
	• Determining decision-making processes -- does everyone have to agree or only majority, etc? • Lack of clarity among the other collective impact partners on who makes decisions	

FINAL THOUGHTS

Collaborative governance stretches us to achieve more collectively than we might on our own. It also requires us to reimagine the organizational governance approaches and practices that we are more familiar with or adapt them to a collaborative context.   The process of collaborative governance requires attention to establish an effective foundation to successfully achieve impact. So many collaborations go astray because they have not paid attention to the process of identifying a shared agenda, determining how to effectively work together, and developing a strategy to move from idea to impact. It does not have to be onerous, but it does have to be planned. Good luck on your collaborative governance journey.

For More Information:
- Register for Tamarack's upcoming [Collaborative Governance and Leadership workshop](#)
- Visit the resource links in this article
- Are you experiencing a collaborative governance challenge? Book a coaching call with a Tamarack team member [here](#)

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