

Collaboration Design

**A Step-by-Step Guide to
Successful Collaboration**

Mark Elliott



First published in 2019 by Starling Books,
an imprint of Collabforge Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia

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Cover and text design by Peter Long

Typeset by Rebecca Dahl

Printed in Australia by IngramSpark



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

9780648439820 (hardback)

9780648439837 (paperback)

9780648439844 (ebook)

To Keri
Cedar, Lucas, Jasper, River

I'm so grateful to be building this wild ride with you,
even as we ride it.

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Introduction

You can't avoid collaboration. The term appears in most corporate strategies, political speeches, government policies and community initiatives. From organisational transformation and international relations to climate change and the elimination of poverty, the concept has become the panacea for just about everything that falls into the too-hard basket. If only we could collaborate, we could solve ... [insert your wicked problem of choice here].

Not only is collaboration popping up everywhere as a kind of all-purpose fix-it, it's used interchangeably with a whole slew of closely related terms: cooperation, codesign, communication, cocreation, user-centred design, design thinking, innovation, deliberation, agile development, even social media.

So why is everyone talking about collaboration, and what does it really mean?

The world we live in is becoming more complex and interconnected by the day. As we literally wire everything and everybody up to everything and everyone else, we are producing vast amounts of new information, understandings, perspectives, opportunities and issues. This is making it more and more difficult to get anything done without

impacting others. We are creating the need for more collaboration simply by creating the modern world.

But while we may be forcing ourselves into more collaboration, the flipside of this is that collaboration done well can deliver truly great results. Genuine collaboration creates a sense of shared ownership, inspiring those involved to achieve higher levels of participation and productivity.

For government, successfully involving stakeholders in policy creation is more likely to result in ‘voluntary compliance’, reducing the need for monitoring, regulation and policing. For businesses, collaboration represents an opportunity for innovation by creating joint ventures, connecting internal units, and codesigning products and services with customers for a hand-in-glove fit. For not-for-profits and community organisations, collaboration can improve volunteer retention and deliver more impact through broader, better participation.

In general, products, services, programs, policies and strategies that are produced through genuine collaboration have the potential to actually be *better* than if they are developed by a small, closed group. They are more likely to address the needs of their users and to be promoted by those involved. This is extremely powerful because people trust the voices of their peers over the urgings of an organisation. And as we all know, those who write the plan don’t fight the plan – it’s a rare person who wants to see their own creation fail.

But here’s the rub: the biggest challenge in converting this promise into reality is that, while I might feel I know what collaboration means, and so might you, *we* don’t. As a society, we haven’t yet developed widely shared understandings and methods for how to go about it. Rather, as individuals, we generally assume that others hold the same views regarding collaboration as we do. In reality, if you ask any two people what they think collaboration means for a specific situation, they’ll typically tell you quite different things. This causes problems down the track when collaborators discover that they each have different

expectations, or that they haven't actually agreed on how they'll work together. This means that successful collaboration in professional environments often comes down to whether or not you happen to be lucky enough to be working with someone who also shares your collaboration approaches, ideas and experiences.

The fact that we find ourselves in this position is actually quite understandable. Everyone, in every culture, collaborates on every topic imaginable. So it's reasonable to think that the ability to collaborate well is simply in our DNA. This unspoken assumption dominates the thinking in organisations of every type: we should be able to throw together a team at a moment's notice, and as part of their collective professional capability, they should be able to immediately collaborate and produce high-quality outcomes. But this simply isn't true. Each new collaboration is confronted by a *capability curve*: all collaborating groups perform with less capability at the outset but improve as they cocreate a shared culture and practice.

There is an upside to this unreasonable expectation. We, that is humanity, have a *huge* opportunity to improve our work together! By creating and sharing great methods of collaboration, we can dramatically increase the reliability and efficacy of the efforts we make to address our greatest challenges. And it's not crazy to think that this can happen, because it already happens, all the time. We have a track record of suddenly becoming aware of a pattern of activity that needs formalising in order for us to reach our greatest potential, and just getting on with this.

As a simple example, consider project management, a discipline often confused with – and inappropriately applied to – collaborative projects. It was not that long ago historically speaking, in the 1950s, that some very smart people began to recognise that there was a particular pattern of work in organisations that was consistent, and that would benefit from a structured approach. Nowadays, there are so many different project management methods that it's not uncommon

to hear someone ask a question like, ‘Do you use PRINCE2 or Agile?’ My dream is to live in a world where we ask a similar question about collaboration, a world where there’s a range of collaborative approaches suited to different types of settings and desired outcomes.

Contributing one such method is exactly the purpose of this book. The approach presented here had its genesis in a PhD I completed some 15 years ago and has been refined through a decade of application at my company, Collabforge. It has been the basis for delivering over 500 projects with governments and public-sector bodies.

Throughout this journey of practice, learning and hard-won experience, my team and I have come to believe that great collaboration is something that can and should be designed. We also believe that the capability to do this, and to effectively carry out collaboration, is something that can readily be learned. To support this, we have developed techniques that rely on specific ways of understanding and doing collaboration – ways that are relatively easy to grasp and apply, and when done well, deliver immediate and consistent results.

The Collabforge method has the following simple structure.

Three principles pull together the core elements of a general theory of collaboration: the basis for understanding how collaboration works in all contexts, at all scales, in every culture around the world. These principles underpin our entire methodology and will be revisited throughout this book.

Six stages provide a guide for how any collaboration will unfold through time, as well as a framework for understanding where to focus your efforts at different points in this process. These stages are grounded in the three principles and will help you understand what challenges you should expect and how to deal with them.

Part II dedicates a chapter to each of the stages of collaboration:

- 1 Decide – how to make a conscious decision about whether or not to collaborate

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- 2 Convene – how to bring people together and establish the conditions for cocreation
- 3 Cocreate – how to get people creating together in a variety of settings and conditions
- 4 Resolve – how to work through the tensions and challenges that will arise
- 5 Maintain – how to maintain momentum and keep participants interested and engaged
- 6 Grow – how to involve more people while maintaining focus and momentum

Finally, the 36 *tools* are the best practical techniques we've discovered and developed over the years at Collabforge. These tools represent the means of delivering our collaboration method, and they require no previous skills or experience to apply. Each tool is presented within the stage most relevant to it in Part II.

I've worked hard with my team to present this knowledge to you in a format that will be easy to engage with and straightforward to apply, irrespective of where you are in your collaboration journey. Whether you're a practitioner looking for an injection of skills and knowledge, or just interested to see what improving your collaboration capability might do for your prospects, this book should give you what you need.

Part I

Understanding Collaboration

CHAPTER 1

What Collaboration Isn't

Another Buzzword

Collaboration has become a bit of a buzzword of late, especially among our leaders. Its increasing appearance in government policies, political speeches and corporate strategies conjures up a particular ethos or intention – a *vibe*, if you like – of people working together closely and genuinely. However, its use in these contexts typically falls short of any specific meaning or definition. This is because those who use the word rely on an assumed shared understanding of it.

When using a well-known word, it's reasonable to expect others to understand what you mean. It's also reasonable to want to signal a particular intention or value set in regard to working with others. However, things break down with the assumption that invoking the word 'collaboration' is enough for everyone to know how to get it done. Great outcomes can't be expected from collaboration after the mere mention of the word, no matter the gravitas of the speaker.

It may sound like I'm coming down hard on leaders, but the current situation regarding collaboration isn't really their fault. There simply aren't robust frameworks and methods of collaboration that leaders can easily reference or adopt – although addressing this problem is precisely the purpose of this book.

Genuine, impactful collaboration also requires leaders to put themselves in situations where they can't always control the other participants, much less the outcomes. And leaders must be willing to admit that they don't have all the answers, which can be especially difficult for them – not just because the psychological make-up of the average executive, politician or entrepreneur compels them to lead forcefully, but also because of what we expect from them. We often exalt these folks, putting them on a pedestal and having very high expectations of them. In essence, we reinforce the need for leaders to be non-collaborative. We look to them to cut through, take charge, be bold, push ahead.

So while I do believe that leaders need to adopt a more nuanced perspective when they speak about collaboration, I would say the same goes for the rest of us too.

When specific and important results are expected from collaboration, the term itself needs explicit definition. Further, when collaborative participation is not voluntary – such as when a chief executive officer (CEO) delivers a collaboration mandate – then people can feel forced into it, ultimately giving far less to the process than if they'd felt part of the original decision. If leaders expect genuine collaboration, then they need to lead by example, acting collaboratively when building the case for collaboration.

Let's stop using collaboration as a buzzword. Instead, explain what you mean when you say it and involve others in the discussion. Remember that genuine collaboration is something we do *with* other people, not something we *tell* them to do.

The Command-and-Control Mindset

One of the most challenging aspects of collaboration is that it requires a certain mindset. Unfortunately, this mindset doesn't come naturally to everyone, despite all of us having had collaborative experiences – just because everyone eats doesn't mean that we're all great cooks.

Rather, it's something most of us have to work at. Even after having spent more than 30 years as a collaborative musician, and the last 10 years running a collaboration business, I regularly find myself needing to refine and improve my mindset, certainly as much as I develop my skill set. I'm constantly surprised by the nuances involved when collaborating with different people in different settings.

For example, I've recently had some fun putting together a band with other parents who live in my neighbourhood. Some of them were at one time professional musicians who gigged with the greats, while others have dreamed about being in a rock band since high school. But having not rehearsed with a band for a decade – since Collabforge and four kids took over my life! – I've found that my mindset has been retrained by hundreds of government collaboration projects, and that it isn't quite right for the highly informal and personal nature of band collaboration. Things got a little awkward when I suggested formal collaboration processes during rehearsals, which was hard to avoid doing because of my mindset.

So mindset matters, but one often applied (incorrectly) to collaboration I characterise as *command-and-control*. It's transactional and design-and-deliver in nature. Those with this mindset position themselves above or outside the need for collaboration. They tend to focus on establishing the parameters, mechanisms and incentives for collaboration, while not actually collaborating themselves. They think along the lines of: 'It's my role to make sure things get done, and done right ... I need to keep people on track'. But this view can kill the spirit of great collaboration, and in turn the potential for great outcomes.

The shift from a command-and-control mindset to one more suited to collaboration starts with *open listening* – really hearing what others are saying and taking on board their needs and interests. It focuses on helping the participants to feel secure, thereby inspiring them to share more freely. It cultivates a deeper appreciation for the personal interests and approaches of those involved, not just the subject matter

at hand. Of course, this is easier said than done if the culture you work within is strongly hierarchical. In this kind of setting, it will take a fair amount of work for all involved to cultivate mindsets that encourage better collaboration. Fortunately, the Collabforge method, detailed in Part II of this book, is designed to help you make this change.

Confusing Technology with Collaboration

A collaborative mindset means recognising the importance of good communication, and the fact that hard work goes into achieving it. Effective communication involves the obvious things like style, tone and clarity of message, but equally important are the channels that we choose for different situations. A presentation, phone call, email or face-to-face chat can all deliver the same message, yet have a considerably different impact on those involved. This is especially true when you consider the role of technology in any given collaborative initiative. Throughout this book, I will talk about how to make the most of technology, but there's one point I want to make loud and clear up-front: collaboration is not a software tool.

Software can support and even enable collaboration. But a specific technology, no matter how advanced, successful in other contexts, perfect its features, or generally whiz-bang, will *not* in and of itself guarantee that collaboration will happen, let alone happen well. As you'll discover in later chapters, how particular groups go about adopting technology is a complex process – interestingly, one that mirrors many of the dynamics of how participants adopt collaboration initiatives. Social proof, which is the proof that comes from seeing your peers adopt or advocate something, is the primary driver for both collaboration and the technologies that support it.

Another mischaracterisation is that file-sharing equals collaboration, which is akin to saying that an intranet is the only collaboration tool an organisation needs. File-sharing can streamline collaboration, even make it possible in some cases. But peers sharing files doesn't

equal collaboration. Files get shared for a great many reasons, only some of which are collaborative in nature. In fact, files can be shared for quite anti-collaborative reasons, such as stealing or leaking information, or exposing someone's failings. Similarly, intranets support any number of organisational needs, with collaboration being only one of them.

A parallel issue here is how we're beginning to rethink the structure of the physical spaces we work in, so as to have a more positive effect on collaborative outcomes. There is a related and growing trend that goes by a variety of names, such as 'hot-desking', 'open-plan offices', 'activity-based work environments' and 'co-working'. The basic principle is that more-open and mixed working environments will lead to more-productive interpersonal collisions and serendipitous meetings, which in turn will result in collaboration. But like the use of technology to support collaborative interactions, co-working and hot-desking are not collaboration – they will not guarantee that you work well with others, or work with others at all.

Avoiding C-Washing

Bringing about great collaboration means paying attention to a range of design and interaction considerations, which we'll explore in later chapters. But above all, consciously designing the appropriate conditions, settings and technologies for collaboration requires a specific and shared understanding of what collaboration is.

Meaningless or dishonest environmental commitments are known as *greenwashing*. Use of the term 'collaboration' in high-level policy and strategy contexts without any substantiation of how it will be enacted, I call *c-washing*. Like environmental impact and corporate social responsibility, when addressing organisational policy and strategy, leaders can find themselves mouthing what's clearly the right thing to say, but with little associated substance or a sincere intention to back it up.

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Espousing collaboration in this way, empty of specific meaning and intent, will do little for you or your organisation. It's far more likely to cause problems by setting false expectations. Instead, rally yourself and your prospective collaborators around a shared belief regarding the value that collaboration represents. The following chapter gives you a starting point for doing this.

CHAPTER 2

What Collaboration Is

A Working Definition

So what, then, is collaboration? The answer depends on how you're coming at the concept. For example, it can be a noun: 'That collaboration was amazing'. This usage emphasises outcomes and experience. And then there's the verb: 'Shall we collaborate on that?' This puts the focus more on process. There's also the adjective: 'That wasn't very collaborative'. This stresses a quality or way of being with others. Putting each of these three lenses over collaboration helps us to see its different dimensions, while putting them all together provides us with a holistic view: collaboration delivers outcomes and experiences through processes that are characterised by a particular way of being with others.

Understanding and exploring all of the dimensions of collaboration has led me and my team to the method presented in Part II. The foundational concept of the Collabforge method is that, while there are many aspects and interpretations of collaboration, fundamentally, it happens when participants together create shared understandings and ideas that enable the realisation of an outcome.

These shared ideas may be plans, the recognition of pre-existing notions, interpretations of something newly encountered, or genuinely novel concepts. Regardless, the ideas must be jointly held prior to any outcome being pursued. As a result, the group must go through a process that plants the same ‘idea seeds’ in the minds of those involved. This process must also cultivate, validate and grow these ideas as they continue to be jointly held in the minds of the participants.

For example, let’s imagine you and I are sitting together during an engaging presentation at a conference. Afterwards we strike up a conversation, during which you draw my attention to aspects of the presentation I hadn’t thought about, helping me to confirm what it was that I liked so much about what was discussed. At the same time, you help me to see positives in some of the elements that I was critical of. At this point, we both spot the presenter leaving the stage and decide to talk to her. You and I relate to the speaker our opinions and interpretations from a shared perspective, both of us on the same page with a nuanced understanding of the presentation. This shared understanding provides a platform for the presenter to respond, enriching my ideas and understandings as well as yours through clarifications and further background. Over the course of another five or 10 minutes, the platform that was initially an understanding shared between you and me, continues to expand until it includes the speaker’s perspectives and ideas as well.

This scenario is a very simplistic example of collaboration, but it draws out the key elements: the mindset (being open-minded as we all discuss ideas of interest), the process (turn-taking in a conversation that progressively involves more participants) and the outcome (a jointly held interpretation of a presentation, one that exemplifies a greater depth of understanding than any individual perspective).

Expanding this little story, perhaps the three of us (you, me and the presenter) get excited by the prospect of sharing our jointly held ideas with more people. I say that I have a few clients who would benefit from

seeing the presentation, and you mention a working group that would love it too. We then settle on the three of us having lunch together to continue turning over these ideas, to see what we can make happen. This brings into play the cocreation of a shared plan and outcome.

Consolidating these elements gives us the fundamental arc of collaboration (see Figure 1), as well as a working definition of the term:

A shared understanding enabling a shared vision, followed by a plan that supports the realisation of an outcome.

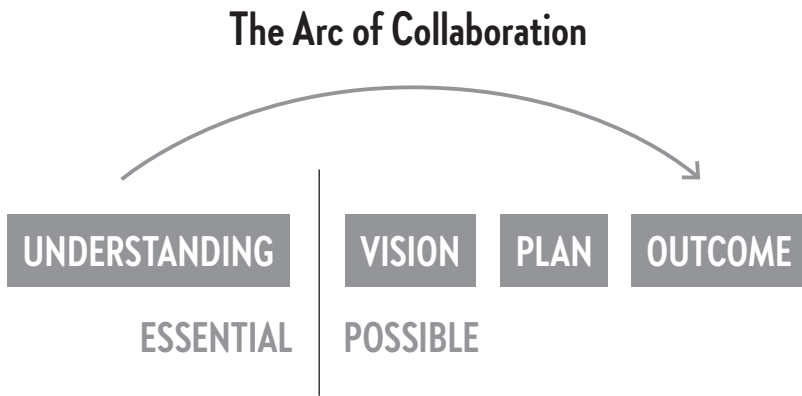


Figure 1. The Arc of Collaboration

Of course, you may not choose to, or be able to, progress through all of these steps, but to greater or lesser degrees, they are all required for genuine collaboration to take place.

Cocreation

At the heart of genuine, real or authentic collaboration – however you might characterise collaboration that goes beyond being a buzzword or simply ‘working together’ – sits the notion of *cocreation*, or put more plainly, people creating something together. This ‘something’ is, at its root, always an idea. That is, the cocreation must exist first and foremost at the level of ideas. Even if the thing to be created is a

About the Author



Mark Elliott is a sought-after keynote speaker, author and consultant. In 2007, after finishing his PhD, Mark founded Collabforge, a firm that specialises in helping organisations turn their collaboration challenges into high-impact innovation opportunities. Mark has led Collabforge in delivering over 500 projects with Australian and international government agencies and universities.

Mark has published and delivered keynote presentations on his work to the United Nations, federal governments, international think tanks, and academic and professional conferences around the world. Mark is also a performing musician and composer, having worked collaboratively as an artist his whole life. He has played in countless bands, written works for orchestras and ensembles, and performed in experimental improv groups.

Mark now lives in Melbourne, Australia with his wife and four high-energy boys.