

COMING TOGETHER ON COLLABORATION

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"Collaboration" is a term, like most, with a mixed bag of meaning. During the Second World War, the term "collaboration" was decidedly negative, referring to those who sided with the Axis powers in carrying out atrocities. Interestingly, one of my clients actually defined "collaboration" as "working with the enemy." Collaboration, at its best, does, in fact, mean working with those who think differently - so if that difference is perceived as inimical, his definition is correct.

In common parlance, however, "collaboration" is often used interchangeably with "coöperation," a fairly benign connotation. This is okay, except for the loss of the more active "working together" aspect that collaboration implies. To be cooperative, I can simply make you aware of what I am doing and walk away. To collaborate, you and I must engage.

And for many who have actually taken part in collaborative processes, the term may have nearly as negative an association as the WWII version, in that those experiences can be time-consuming, rabbit-trail chasing, unproductive and frustrating.

These three meanings represent, for many, how "collaboration" is typically understood:

- 1) something threatening, bordering on betrayal;
- 2) something fairly benign requiring little effort;
- 3) something idealized, but in practice, a time-sucking disaster.

Despite its variability and imprecision, "collaboration" is still, in my mind, the best term for the act and intent of working together toward a common end. And I will accept some imprecision since what I mean to convey by "collaboration" is a commodity in urgent demand today. Indeed, collaboration is being called for in nearly every realm: the environment, economics, technology, health, governance and politics. And the reason to me is plain:

- From a collection of diverse viewpoints comes a broader, more complete understanding of the subject matter.
- From this greater understanding, new awareness, perspectives and ideas naturally emerge.
- From this incubator of new thinking, comes innovation - entirely new ways to address problems that before seemed insurmountable.

And now, because we are in the midst of so many confounding, complex, and potentially game-changing issues, we need innovation like crazy.

So how does getting a bunch of different viewpoints (maybe even conflicting) together make for fuller understanding? You might think it's just the opposite: that the more people agree, the easier it is to delve into the matter and break new ground. I think this does work in those situations where we want to understand something in greater specificity and detail. That's why specialists deliver papers to a small group of similar experts: so they can get feedback on the rarefied view they are seeking. And that's extremely useful, but what I'm talking about is when the experts are stumped, when there is no expert yet because we're still grappling with just seeing the thing.

When the subject is something not at all specific yet, but rather involves multiple areas of expertise, it is complex for just this reason. It is cross-disciplinary and requires an integrative or generalist view to see all its corners. Things like climate change, renewable energy, global recession, food supplies, ocean health, water quality, air pollution, and pandemics, as well as the governance structures needed to address these issues, are all examples. It is my experience that the outsider, the newbie, sometimes even the seemingly simple-minded can ask a question that opens up possibility in ways no seasoned expert can do. Or one expert asks a question of an expert in another area, and that enlivens the thinking of both. The very presence of a rich body of experience and perspective, even if seemingly oppositional, is what opens up thinking.

I have witnessed this time and time again. The dynamic that takes place is clear. When the human mind pulls up out of specificity toward a broader view, more of a thing can be seen - just as when a plane takes off and suddenly one is no longer looking at the runway, but now seeing it as a small track in the expanded landscape. My view from seat A and your view from seat B may be quite different, and we need each other to create a complete view of what is out there. This is what convening a group of diverse thinkers can mean: achieving a view that is fuller, richer, and perhaps, even new in ways before unimagined.

From the broad view, made up of so many different parts, new connections are made. Ideas bump up against unfamiliar ones, making us reconsider long-held beliefs. Our "habit thinking" is challenged - what we know becomes uncertain, doubtable, and now the way is paved for the possibility of the new.

From years of working with groups on solving big problems, I have learned that when a group is certain it knows something for sure, it's often time to get some outsiders in the room to challenge the certainty. In fact, we do this all the time.

HOW DOES COLLABORATION LEAD TO INNOVATION?



When we're facing a persistent problem, we talk to others; we seek their take on it. We do this to open our thinking, get new perspectives, from which we can see things differently - and find a new solution.

So, it makes sense that when our collective understanding of the way things are is not getting us anywhere, the best course of action is to convene a diverse group to engage the issue. From this opening of the mind and the view, come new ideas. And these ideas may not even be new (not much is), but may be new applications of an old idea, or a new combination of ideas, or a new context for an existing idea.

All of this is innovation - and often, innovation is not a big bang, but rather a tweak that results in a big effect. That's just what we're looking for. Real innovation comes from NEW thinking; not just deeper thinking into one area or defense of the same thinking, but entirely new ways of seeing and talking about the subject at hand.

That's the case for collaboration.

The harder part is, once we agree we want it - and it seems suddenly that a lot of us do, how do we go about it?

How many times have I heard of people desiring collaboration, who go into a process with every intention of collaborating - playing nicely and working with others who may or may not share the same viewpoint or experience - but who come out of it battered and bruised, or simply bored to death from the sheer weight of conversation, of giving the floor to so many differing perspectives? And the whole enterprise often ends up in nothing. Lots of time, money and intention burned up on the altar of collaboration, until people just withdraw to go it alone. Too often.

This matter of how to make collaboration meaningful and productive is covered in.

ABOUT

ADVANCING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO BRING ABOUT LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

Author, Rebecca Reynolds is CEO and Principal of RRC, a firm specializing in supporting large-scale change endeavors.



Reynolds is a pioneer in building individual and group capability to achieve visionary leadership and strategy, collaboratively developed alignment on innovative solutions, and institutional rigor in their implementation.

Reynolds acts as strategic adviser to executive leaders on complex business and leadership challenges across industries as diverse as natural resources, the arts, public policy, and IT, on issues involving diverse stakeholders and long-term effects.

RRC advances visionary strategy development and then builds the requisite capacity to achieve it. Core capacity areas include executive leadership advancement, governance redesign, IT solutions, human capital development, and collaborative process—all to enable success in dynamic and complex environments with long-term impact.

Founded in 1991, RRC has served hundreds of clients in the government and non-governmental sectors on a broad range of issues. Government clients include the USDA Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Environmental Protection Agency, as well as collaborations involving the spectrum of stakeholder interests on land management and business enterprise issues.



**APPROACHING
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