How effective national and transnational collaborations are managed:

Siv Vangen

The Open University Business School

http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2013/papers/28

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
How effective national and transnational collaborations are managed:
The key lessons from research

Siv Vangen,
The Open University Business School, UK
the research base

• definition of collaboration:
  any situation in which individuals work together across organizational boundaries to achieve something that they cannot achieve on their own

• work with people directly involved in collaborative initiatives (ongoing since 1992):
  consultancy, facilitation, awareness raising, in depth interviewing, method development, government task force, direct involvement

• concerned with social issues such as:
  economic development, poverty alleviation, community care, health promotion, learning disability, education, unemployment, the environment, community planning

• and the commercial sector such as:
  supply chain alliances, property alliances, pharmaceutical marketing, PFI
Why collaboration?

we found an IT solution to sharing information when everyone told us we couldn’t do it

community representative
community development partnership
Why collaboration?

We’ve delivered ahead of time with reduced cost and better quality

chief operating officer utility partnership
Why collaboration?

There is this great burst of enthusiasm and excitement – it’s been absolutely fascinating, bizarre and amazing.

OU partnership manager
Why collaboration?

...when it works well you feel inspired ... you can feel the collaborative energy
collaborative advantage

... something is achieved that could not have been achieved without the collaboration

... when it works well you feel inspired ... you can feel the collaborative energy

partnership facilitator
common rational for collaboration

- access to resource; financial, technological, expertise
- shared risk
- efficiency
- co-ordination and seamlessness
- learning
- moral imperative; *there is no other way*
However...
we had great expectations ... after two years the partnership committee said we’ll stop that ... no business case could be made

Why not collaboration?
we have been cuddling each other for 10 year but we’ve made little actual progress

Why not collaboration?
... the (collaborative) project has worked out but, oh boy, it has caused pain

senior health promotion officer

... the rate of output is slow ... even successful outcomes involve pain and hard grind

collaborative inertia
collaborative advantage

... something is achieved that could not have been achieved without the collaboration

... the rate of output is slow ... even successful outcomes involve pain and hard grind

collaborative inertia
understanding collaboration

... oh boy, it has caused pain

why inertia rather than advantage

... you can feel the collaborative energy
understanding collaboration

focus on issues recognised by those involved as causing anxiety and reward in collaboration
understanding collaboration

focus on issues recognised by those involved as causing anxiety and reward in collaboration
managing goals

**common wisdom**
- the success of collaborations depends on the extent to which partners’ goals are congruent, shared and agreed
- organisational and individual agendas frequently make it difficult to agree goals

**common practice**
Tension between positive and negative rationales for promoting congruence or diversity of goals in collaboration.

At the principle level, congruence of organizational goals is argued to be essential because joint goals for the collaboration can be easily aligned to partners’ goals and this thus increases their commitment to the collaboration. Diversity of organizational expertise and resources is, however, perceived to be essential to gaining truly synergistic advantage from collaborating, but this, in turn, implies diversity of organizations’ goals. What makes the paradox, at the principle level, particularly noteworthy, however, is that the achievement of collaborative advantage can also be hindered by both congruence of, and diversity between, organizations goals. Too much homogeneity in goals can make organizations reluctant to cooperate and share information; too much heterogeneity leads organizations to seek different and sometimes conflicting outcomes.

At the enactment level, an assumption that runs through the literature is that agreement between organizations on joint goals for a collaboration is a requirement for its success; the presumption is that collaboration goals cannot be enacted unless they are explicitly acknowledged by all participants. Paradoxically, however, the same literature also points to numerous difficulties associated with reaching such agreement in practice. For example, organizations may have different
expectations that result in conflict; resource constraints can make compromises difficult; organizations may view policy implementation goals differently and agreement, when it is reached, may not move beyond a rhetorical commitment.
managing goals

common wisdom

the success of collaborations depends on the extent to which partners’ goals are congruent, shared and agreed

I wanted a clear vision, a set of aims and a clear set of outcomes. And without that I wasn’t prepared to play ball.

Director of Environmental Services
managing goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>the collaboration, the organizations, the individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>members, external stakeholders genuine, pseudo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>collaboration dependent, collaboration independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>collaborative process, substantive purpose explicit, unstated, hidden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overtness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Issue manifestations

e.g. individuals seek to incorporate own goals,
e.g. external parties influence the agenda,
e.g. expressed goals may be purely nominal,
e.g. irrelevant goals creep into the agenda,
e.g. process goals may be more important,
e.g. real goals may not have been expressed

Congruence between organizations goals tend to be the spur for initiating collaboration. However, both congruence at the individual level and of collaboration processes can help overcome lack of momentum. And even an external goal may enable partners to recognise their congruencies. Our research however, suggests that goal diversity is far more prevalent than goal congruence. This diversity can lead to expanded and unwieldy agendas, confusion, misunderstandings or just apathy.

First, it is highly unlikely that all the goals will be in harmony. Second, it is highly unlikely that any individual participant will know or understand more than a portion of the goals that are at play. Third, differing
perceptions lead to a low degree of mutual understanding even where there is individual knowledge or understanding. Fourth, because the entanglement is in a continuous state of flux, any mutual understanding of each others’ goals - and hence any agreement over a collaboration goal - tends to be short lived.

This analysis does not challenge the notion that agreement on joint goals for a collaboration is desirable but, since it explains why that is inherently difficult to achieve, it does question the practicality of this as a requirement for success.
A tangled web of goals

Genuine, congruent goals for a collaboration exist if at all in an entanglement of other goals that are both real and imagined.

Goal diversity is far more prevalent than goal congruence.

A dilemma in terms of strategies for identifying common objectives and agreeing on goals...
One the one hand

e.g. Goal diversity can yield expanded and unwieldy agendas, confusion, misunderstandings or just apathy.

One the other hand

 e.g. Too much scrutiny can reveal irreconcilable differences.

 e.g. Goal congruence that provide momentum for the collaboration can appear in surprising ways
collaborative advantage

... the bringing together of different resources and expertise provide the basis for getting advantage from collaborating

collaborative inertia

... joint actions must satisfy many different agendas
the practical conclusion ....

sometimes it’s best to get started on some action without fully agreeing on goals

we have to write a statement of aims to justify our existence ... my job is to find a way of writing it so that none of the parties involved can disagree

manager, area regeneration partnership
managing culture

**common wisdom**

Partners will bring to the collaboration different ways of being, interacting and working

**common practice**

If you are going to work collaboratively with another organisation there must be shared values and culture
managing culture

The organisation has a difficult culture and they’re very politically motivated, they get messages from on high that send them all into a bit of a spin

Encountering otherness

Cultural awareness is necessary to understand the issues affecting a collaboration
Managing culture

For a year I sat on the SIP [partnership] board as a nodding Dove... I hadn’t a Scooby what they were talking about...

Incompatible professional cultures

Terminology may not readily translate across organisational and cultural boundaries
Managing Culture

Incompatible Organisational Cultures

Work in spite of our systems, even with the best partnership we've got, we're struggling and clunky

Head of Business Development

Things that are easy to do in your organisation may not be straightforward to do in another
managing culture

I do it sneakily - I arrange things sneakily rather than put it in the budget

Incompatible national cultures

Things that are expected in one culture may not be acceptable in another
collaborative advantage

... the bringing together of difference (resources and expertise) provide the basis for getting advantage from collaborating

collaborative inertia

... joint actions requires a resolution of the points at which different cultures intersect
**Flexibility**, accommodate the intersection of different cultures. **Rigidity** preserve distinct organisational cultural resources.

**Autonomy**, Individuals need to act on behalf of their organisations. **Accountability**, Organisations’ interests must be protected.

**Complexity**, Embracing complexity is necessary to harness resources. **Control**, Control is necessary to steer the joint agenda forward.
managing trust

common wisdom

trust is a precondition for successful collaboration

common practice

suspicion is often the starting point - partners are needed where trust is weak
research says

- reinforce trusting attitudes
- aim for realistic (initially modest) but successful outcomes
- form expectations about the future of the collaboration based on reputation or past behaviour or contracts and agreements
- have enough trust and take a risk to initiate the collaboration
- gain underpinnings for more ambitious collaboration

the trust building loop
collaborations tend to be dynamic, “movable feasts”

- organisational restructuring and mergers
- new strategies
- new government policies and incentives

will change the structure and purpose of existing joint initiatives

and individuals will make career moves
it's hard to agree goals, accommodate cultural diversity, communicate and build mutual understanding, manage power relationships, build trust and maintain continuity in complex, dynamic structures.

dynamics make the trust building loop fragile.
Making it happen ...

What does leadership look like?

nurture, nurture, nurture
in the spirit of collaboration ...

**EMBRACING**

embracing the “right” kind of members

Example Challenge

Embracing those who would like to be involved when representation of stakeholders is problematic.

**EMPOWERING**

empowering members to enable participation

Example Challenge

Creating infrastructure through which all members can be enabled to participate in spite of inevitable differences in skill levels.
in the spirit of collaboration ...

**INVOLVING**

Involving and supporting all members

*Example Challenges*

Involving all members although they have unequal role and power positions in the collaboration.

**MOBILIZING**

mobilizing members to make things happen

*Example Challenges*

Encouraging members to work on behalf of the collaboration while recognizing that they need something in return.
towards collaborative thuggery

MANIPULATING THE COLLABORATIVE AGENDA
Example challenges: making things happen through ...
- imposing an understanding of substantive issues on members
- influencing the agenda via stealthy behaviour

PLAYING THE POLITICS
Example challenges: making things happen through ...
- probing the political undercurrents between and around members
- networking to find out who is worth the bother
Making it happen ... 
in the spirit of collaboration ... 

Achieving Collaborative Advantage ... with a little collaborative thuggery
those who lead successfully operate from both perspectives and continually switch between them?

... partnership means going behind people’s backs in a trustworthy sort of way

representative, health partnership
our conclusions ...

contradictions, tensions and dilemmas

complexity

multiple views

dynamics

frustration of intention
our conclusions ...

 collaborations are by nature inefficient

 use them sparingly

 energy should be reserved for situations when real collaborative advantage can be envisaged
our conclusions ...

achieving collaborative advantage requires compromise, energy, commitment and care

nurture, nurture, nurture
our conclusions ...

Recognizing success ...

Substantive outcomes
• Varied, relative and not same for all partners

Process of collaboration
• Building social capital

Emergent milestones
• Not planned but emergent semi-serendipitous
Say something about success:
May relates
our conclusions ...
managing to collaborate involves

understanding the complexity

accepting the pain

using the available tools as conceptual handles to aid thinking

knowing what to nurture

... everything I thought I knew about how to achieve change doesn’t feel good enough

it is a relief and a reassurance to see that the pain and grind of partnership work exists in other partnerships, not just my situation

I am beginning to understand what is going on
Managing to Collaborate: the theory and practice of collaborative advantage.