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School of Government



Curtin University

Multiparty Collaboration for Public Benefit

Discussion Paper 3— Building relationships and trust

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June 2018

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3. Building relationships and trust

Engaging with internal & external stakeholders

Collaboration leaders and partners invest an extraordinary amount of time in communication: with each other; with the executive, middle management and frontline workers of their own organisations, agencies or community groups; and with the range and variety of external stakeholders who are in some way affected by the collaboration.

There has to be a need amongst the stakeholders that there's a problem. The collaboration, to me, is getting the stakeholders together around a common problem and then using the collaborative approach to try and agree on what is the path forward to resolve that problem.

Three consistent messages from each of the case investigated for this study are: communication is the bedrock of collaboration; communication is both labour-intensive and time-intensive; and, effective communication requires empathy, active listening and patience:

It's the style of leadership, it's the style of collaboration. At the end of the day, if you spent an hour with people, they could feel very involved, very listened to, very much own the process when they leave. You could spend two hours with people and they could feel like they were never consulted. So it's not so much the time and the money; it's the quality of the time that's spent with them.

Managing communications and flows of information is an important element of collaborative practice. Keeping authorisers and stakeholders 'in the loop' is essential. A consistent feature of each of the cases examined for this study is the willingness of collaboration leads to engage in respectful conversations with a wide range of stakeholders about the purpose of the collaboration. Such conversations are not simply about informing, but also about eliciting information and soliciting views; about demonstrating a capacity to listen and to give weight to people's opinions.

It's all about relationships

Interviewees across all cases spoke about the importance of relationships—and relationship building—as the bedrock of effective collaboration. Constructive relationships—interpersonal and inter-organisational—are the precursors of trust, credibility and legitimacy. For many working at the frontline, the interpersonal takes precedence over the inter-organisational:

It comes down to individual personalities and people type. I know because I worked on the frontline for a very long time. But if I needed something done I knew who to pick up the phone and talk to and who would move the mountains for me and who wouldn't.

And, when it comes to earning the trust of external stakeholders connectedness to local communities is a distinct advantage:

... part of the primary operating mechanism or principle is if you don't have a relationship, then you can't earn the trust. So you've got to work through it. You've got to grow the relationship to then earn the trust to then get the social licence. I think that's why 99 times out of 100 having someone that's local but with credibility is quite important.

Middle management resistance

In those cases where collaboration has its origins in policy decisions promulgated by agency leadership, and implementation rests largely with frontline officers/workers, it has been observed that mid-tier managers can be a source of resistance. Typically, such resistance was described in terms of territoriality—mid-tier managers protecting their 'turf'. What is particularly interesting is that collaboration partners report encountering resistance from mid-tier bureaucrats within their own organisations in spite of unambiguous executive level support for collaboration.

It is at this level, perhaps, where the dominant incentive structures reward territoriality, conservatism, risk aversion and excessive focus on outputs—all qualities that militate against genuine collaboration. It cannot be assumed that understanding or support for collaborative approaches exists at all levels within partner organisations—whereas communication strategies around collaboration tend to focus on external audiences, it is possible that internal messaging tends to be neglected.

We've had management buy-in, once we get the leadership buy-in. Then to implement it at an organisational level, what we are seeing is there needs to be that next level middle management buy-in. Otherwise you're going to hit road blocks and it stalls. And they're some of the challenges that we're coming across at the moment.

Expert facilitation

Some of the cases—Change the Story, WhoStops—have taken advantage of expert third party facilitation in the early stages of their establishment in order to help the parties to arrive at a shared understanding of the problem and a shared vision of the way forward. Facilitation helps to break down barriers, establish commonalities, address differences and create trust in shared endeavour. To some degree, other cases have also relied on individuals exercising a brokerage role to bring parties to the table and, to some degree, to assist the collaboration team in its communications with external stakeholders (thereby building legitimacy).

Establishing trust and legitimacy

"Authenticity" is critically important in winning the trust and cooperation of stakeholders, and in demonstrating legitimacy and earning a 'licence' to collaborate. Being 'local' is not alone sufficient. A number of interviewees emphasised the importance of authenticity, illustrated by the following account of the consultation process underpinning Change the Story:

I think authenticity had to sit at the core of it, because otherwise the whole thing would crumble. You can't speak to this audience and that audience using

language that is common to both and brings in difficult theories and framings for some people without there being authenticity at the core of the process, the consultation, the partnership. That's tough stuff; it's not something you can necessarily articulate and say, "This is how you do it." ... I think process wise you can say this is what makes co-design different from just going out and doing it prior to your consultation, but I also think a big part of it is a willingness to participate in a process that is a partnership approach rather than a power dynamic.

In another setting, a former Childrens' Action Plan (CAP) official remarked on the esteem in which local Children's Team leaders are held and the trust accorded to them in their local communities as important factors in the success of teams in Rotorua and Gisborne:

That's what it was all predicated on—genuine, authentic, open minded. But also the passion and the commitment, absolutely wanting to make the difference for the community. Community-minded people that wanted the best for their community and the children and families in it. Those aspects you'd rate 10 out of 10 in those two communities. They are just very evident, and that's what's important that they can teach the others—what did they do to get that. It wasn't just saying it will happen; they showed it. They demonstrated it. Their actions every day showed that. They went the extra mile all the time.

'Trust building' forms an integral part of building collaborative ways of working. In general, trust building needs to be 'led' and, in general, it might be expected that in any collaboration there will be a lead entity. The lead entity need not always be the organisation with the largest financial exposure—it is perfectly possible for collaborations to be led by entities that have a perceived legitimacy or moral authority that exceeds their financial investment. And, in fact, it is possible that such a delegation might enhance, overall, the perceived legitimacy of the collaboration amongst affected communities of interest.

A major barrier to effective collaboration is the prevailing incentives that discourage the kinds of trust and relationship-building upon which collaboration rests.

Three of the cases in particular, Change the Story, Children's Teams and WhoStops, emphasised the importance of utilising analytics to aid 'sense-making'. This was particularly important in making the case for a collaborative approach, authorising the deployment of assets and resources, building trust and support amongst varied stakeholders, and gaining legitimacy. In the case of WhoStops the involvement of researchers from Deakin University added considerable weight by conferring authority and legitimacy to key messages about obesity.

Some of the cases investigated have taken advantage of expert third party facilitation in the early stages of their establishment, to help the parties to arrive at a shared understanding of the problem and a shared vision of the way forward. Change the Story utilised expert facilitation, as did WhoStops. Facilitation helps to break down barriers, establish commonalities, address differences and create trust in shared endeavour. To some degree, other cases have also relied on individuals

exercising a brokerage role to bring parties to the table and to assist the collaboration team in its communications with external stakeholders.

Obtaining social licence

Linked to the notions of trust and legitimacy is the perceived need for collaborations to have the express or implied permission of communities of interest to engage in collaboration. These might be 'communities' in the conventional sense of villages, towns or regions characterised by a shared identity and established social networks. They might also be 'interests' as manifested in civil society groupings, beneficiaries or users of services, institutions or even professional groupings (clinical practitioners, industry groupings, etc.). *Prima facie*, it would seem obvious that for communities of interest to be meaningful there would need to be avenues available for expressing and aggregating the views of a community, however it is defined.

In New Zealand particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between Crown entities and Māori/Iwi. A high proportion of the population in each of these communities identifies as being of Māori descent (37.5% in [Rotorua](#), 48.9% in [Gisborne](#) and 26.2% in [Whangerei](#). Source: StatsNZ). Moreover, in each of these communities Māori households figure disproportionately in the caseloads of agencies charged with the protection of children. In these communities public administration is still viewed through a post-colonial lens by Māori/Iwi (Ruckstuhl *et al.* 2014) and for this reason, the rollout of Children's Teams is seen by many in the Māori community as requiring a 'social licence to operate' (see Appendix 4.1). As one interviewee observed:

One of the things that we've had fed back to us when we've moved further north is—this is particularly from iwi—"Hang on a minute, this is another thing that the Crown and government are imposing on us without actually talking to us about it first."

That is something we'll have to grapple with as the relationship between the iwi and Crown evolves into different partnerships, which might sound all very fluffy, but it is actually something that's quite salient in the north because of the fact that iwi are becoming some of our largest partners and post treaty settlement in a whole different space in terms of working with iwi and the Crown because they're moving beyond grievance and reconciliation and reparation into being strategic economic partners who want to make their own decisions and have an expectation that it will be a senior discussion about what the government wants to do with them separate to or at least well in advance of something being rolled out in their area to go, "Oh, we want to pilot a children's team. Will you come and work with us?"

Bottom-up or top-down?

The collaborations represented in the cases each exhibit elements of both bottom-up and top-down approaches (which can also be expressed as 'centralised' versus 'localised'). Each takes a steer from below—either from the community or a community of interest—while using top-down processes to moderate community

views and shape a practicable path forward. In cases such as WhoStops or CBEM there is an evident emphasis on locally empowered and locally led initiatives. One of the architects of the ACT's Throughcare initiative offered the view that frontline staff sometimes 'know best':

When you engage with the people who are at the service delivery end, in my view, they're more practice-exposed so they have a sense for innovation, learning lessons from what they do on a day-to-day basis, things like that.

However, in the case of the Children's Action Plan there was an evident tension between the local Children's Teams and governance groups and the CAP Directorate/Ministry in Wellington. As one Children's Team member expressed it

I think the children's team approach seemed to go through a bit of a phase of being very, very prescriptive on everything, and that hasn't sat particularly well with a desire to do things that are more aligned with an Indigenous approach. So I think that is also something where we've got a rub. ... it's a challenge for collaboration in any space with prescriptive elements—the need for flexibility and agility.

A similar view was offered by a member of a Children's Team governance group:

I think we had a number of kicks back around, "No, don't accept that. That's not how we roll here. This is what we want to do." I think [CT Director] was continuously going back and saying, "Yeah, no"—"Yeah, I hear what you're saying, but no, that's not going to work."

A member of another governance group described a situation in which the local Children's Team successfully pushed back on the prescriptive elements of the model:

We actually went back and instead of reporting negatively to Wellington, we said, "We're not going to do this. We're not going to achieve those. We're not going to stick to those KPIs for these reasons. But look at the fantastic work we've done. We've engaged with all these families, all these kids, all these success stories." It was at that point that we were given a bit of a free reign to go for it and operate independently of what all the other children's teams were doing who were still working to their prescriptive, centre-led regime.

However, one former official offered a candid appraisal of the tensions involved:

I think there were shifts at a policy level around the degree of prescription versus the degree of flexibility. And I think that caused mixed messages for teams on the ground. So that kind of desire to be prescriptive as a means of driving the momentum I don't think it had that effect; I think it served to confuse and cause people to resist a little bit where it didn't work at a local level. That has been a bit of a journey really of trying to capture almost a cookie cutter prescription that would allow rapid rollout and then a realisation that that wasn't actually achieving its purpose and that we needed a great deal more flexibility in what suited each location.

Some officials working in the CAP Directorate in Wellington took the view—for essentially sound reasons—that there needed to be some consistency between the practice and operational elements of the Children's Teams in order to support the

collection of data and to compare social impact. Within this consistency, they felt, there was ample room to tailor local responses and build upon local strengths. This tension was neatly encapsulated by one former CAP official:

There was too much say from the centre about how things had to be done, but there were reasons for that that the communities couldn't see. So we came with templates and we were telling them that they must do this, they must do that, they must do the next thing. At a local level they really resented that. But what they couldn't see at that local level was the pressure that the centre was under to make sure that whatever you did there you were recording it in a nationally consistent way. So there was always this tension between the two.

Managing expectations

The collaborations examined all exhibited long lead times for design and implementation. This involved intensive and complex processes of relationship building, establishing legitimacy and trust, collectively framing the problem and agreeing ways of working. One interviewee told us:

I think one of the key messages that's been good for people is that it is a four to five-year journey. It is not something that's been expected to be achieved in one year, two years.

One former CAP official offered the following account of the process leading to the rollout of the Children's Teams:

... we realised, "Gosh, just to set this up took way longer than we ever imagined," just getting people on board with the concept of it let alone to actually come together and work together and actually achieve some results. The political cycle for us is three years ... So that was one of the key learnings—collaboration takes time and continual energy from everyone. These are not words Treasury takes kindly to, and we really struggled to get their support, we had to compromise each Budget cycle and got less and less funding each time.

Collaboration partners sometimes experience significant pressures to 'get things done' in order to meet the expectations of parent organisations, executives and stakeholder communities. The levels of personal commitment brought to collaboration by those engaged in it, coupled with a demanding authorising environment and the natural inclination of decision-makers to want to see "results" can inadvertently give rise to an unhealthy work environment that can leave people feeling depleted and exhausted.

In addition, a number of the interviewees remarked that they experienced some pressure to demonstrate impact early on in the life of the collaboration. They made the point that collaboration requires a significant up-front investment of time and effort in relationship-building. This is something, they say, that sponsoring organisations often do not understand or factor into their expectations. The process of communicating collaboration aims, agreeing operational protocols, socialising with internal and external stakeholders, and gaining trust is time-consuming and complex, but absolutely necessary to gain the commitment and legitimacy necessary to achieve results.

Demonstrating impact

Another recurring theme in each of the cases is the importance—and problematic nature of 'evidence of impact'. One interviewee put their finger on the problem through recourse to an aphorism:

I heard somebody say the other day that the plural of “anecdote” is not “evidence”.

It is generally acknowledged that the design of interventions should have a sound evidential base in order to persuade decision-makers, authorisers and stakeholders about the soundness of the approach. Once collaboration has commenced, authorisers and stakeholders expect the collaboration to produce evidence of impact (see lead times). This is problematic in that the relationship and trust-building phase of collaboration can take a long time. In the early stages of collaboration leads sometimes struggle to reassure authorisers that they are making progress because evidence that relationships are being built is not accorded the same value as conventional measures of impact (e.g. number of clients served etc.).

There is often institutional impatience around evaluation and impact measurement, as suggested by one observer:

I get annoyed sometimes about, “Can you evaluate it? Can you tell us what’s happening?” These things take time in terms of how you manage them. And it takes away the human context.

In the case of the Children's Teams, it was observed by participants at the coalface that apex authorisers (senior executives, ministers) did not consider the creation of a new service delivery culture or the establishment of new forms of collaborative relationships as offering evidence of impact. There was, rather, impatience for more orthodox measures notwithstanding the fact that it was first necessary to go through a lengthy process to reimagine and build a new service architecture (sometimes in the face of institutional resistance).

It takes time to establish a different way of working and it is not always possible to immediately attribute observable changes to this or that element of the new system, assuming there *are* observable changes in the short to medium term. The reality is, with regard to long-standing entrenched social problems, a long-term perspective is required.

Discussion points

1. Our findings suggest that stakeholder engagement around collaboration differs from conventional approaches to engagement around policy or programmatic choices facing government: what do authorisers need to understand about the requirements of 'collaborative engagement'?
2. What aspects of the authorising environment might act to constrain or preclude expressions of 'authenticity' by collaboration leaders or partners, and what can authorisers do about it?
3. How can authorising entities—especially those in the public sector—accommodate the concepts of 'legitimacy' and 'trust' in the policy process?

Multiparty Collaboration for Public Benefit — Discussion Paper 3

4. How—if at all—might the concept of ‘social licence’ be operationalised so as to reinforce collaborative approaches?
5. What are the key challenges involved in encouraging hierarchical, ‘high control’ organisations to accept the possibility of localised, bespoke approaches to social problems?
6. What do authorisers need to understand about the investment of time and effort required for relationship-building as part of any collaborative initiative and the implications of that investment for the path to demonstrable impact?

References

- Ruckstuhl, K., Thompson-Fawcett, M. & Rae, H. 2014. Māori and mining: Indigenous perspectives on reconceptualising and contextualising the social licence to operate. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 32, 304-14. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2014.929782>