Creative Collaborations

by Marc Downie, Shelley Eshkar
& Paul Kaiser
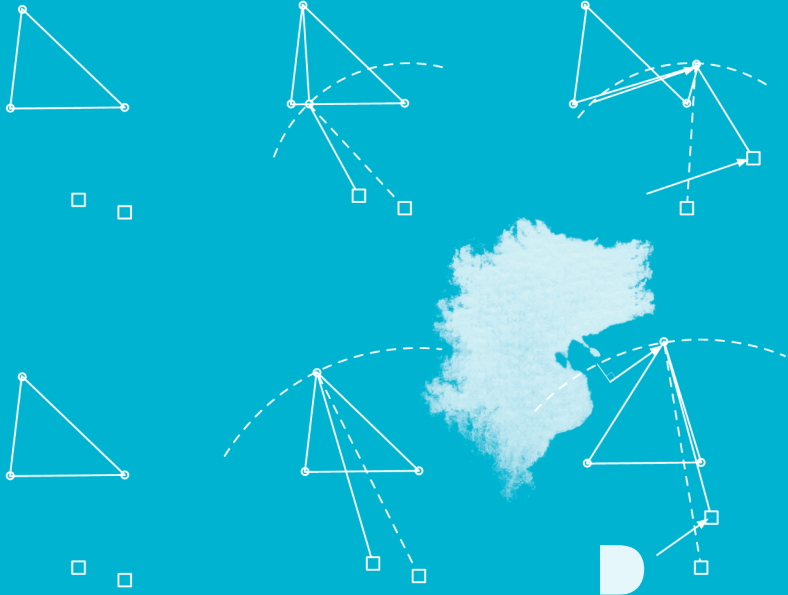
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SITRA

Creating room for creative collaboration

As an organization that's interested in sustainable wellbeing and having a mandate to work at the scale of an entire nation, our efforts at Sitra, The Finnish Innovation Fund, are almost always collaborative in nature. Quite simply, the challenges we focus on exist in the 'no-man's land' between existing silos of responsibility. They rarely have a single clear owner. Among other constraints, this is one of the defining characteristics of public sector innovation in the 21st century.

One of the challenges in this context is finding the confidence to enable collaborations that are truly creative: those which will result in unexpected outcomes that cannot be fully defined in advance. Such creative collaborations are the sharp edge of innovation, where risks may be higher but so too are potential rewards. To give ourselves some sense of security when venturing into these situations, we've comissioned this booklet of rules of thumb for successful creative collaboration from Marc Downie, Shelley Eshkar, and Paul Kaiser, three digital artists who together comprise the OpenEndedGroup. They've honed the practice of working with others during decades of multi-disciplinary arts projects, collaborating with artists such as Merce Cunningham, Bill T. Jones, and Robert Wilson as well with as with conductors, musicians, lighting designers, architects, scientists, engineers, and scholars.

The focus of this book is on how to get the most out of a creative collaboration as a full collaborator, but equally as important is the role of those who comission such work—organizations such as Sitra. Like the host of a good dinner party, we try to resist the urge to anticipate everywhere the conversation will go and everything it may entail. Rather, we concentrate on making sure the right people are around the table, that they're comfortable and capable enough to focus deeply, and that our expectations as hosts are clear and realistic. If we can eliminate all the risks in advance, it means the bar hasn't been set high enough.

Bryan Boyer
Strategic Design Lead, Sitra
Helsinki, August 2012

Collaborators

Work together on an equal basis in the over-all conception, elaboration, and revision of the project. Each ultimately bears full responsibility for all aspects of the project that they develop together.

Contributors

Fully grasp your intentions and aspirations and contribute particular expertise to the project, based on your prompts. Ideally they provide contributions that surprise you, exceeding what you initially specified. Responsibility for provoking, guiding and perhaps eventually rejecting their work lies with the collaborators.

Roles

Creative collaborations are a particular kind, in which by interacting with others you discover genuinely new ways of thinking about and then doing something together. Don't confuse collaborations of this sort with committees, for collaborators as we discuss them here not only conceive of the work, they also play principal roles in carrying it out.

There are five different broad roles that individuals might play:

Contractors

Identify and solve domain-specific problems, never straying from the exact bounds you set. Contractors are typically only as good as the specifications they get. In contrast to Contributors, Contractors cannot surprise you (except unpleasantly). Their responsibility is to be competent, not creative.

Curators

The person who may have initiated or sponsored the project, but who then turns over its execution to the collaborators (whom he or she may have helped to assemble, fund or provoke). Curators have no role within the creative collaboration itself, but can greatly influence its relation to (and reception in) the outside world.

Constituents

The audience or end-users of the product of the collaboration, whose perceived needs, expectations, and desires may well shape the project's means and goals. Constituents are not always physically present during the collaboration—yet their presence, real or imagined, presses upon the creative direction of the work produced.

First principles

Members of a creative collaboration:

— **Follow no leader** They interact with each other on an equal basis. They engage in a freewheeling dialogue whose process and outcome remain open-ended until they come to a shared conclusion.

— **Aim at invention** Collaborators occupy themselves with exploring diverse, far-flung, and even contradictory ideas, keeping at it for as long as required to alight upon a good and novel solution.

Successful collaborations tend to:

— **Involve the fewest number of collaborators possible**. Every additional core person involved in the collaboration reduces the prospects for a free, lively but integrated exchange of ideas.

— **Enlist collaborators with little overlap in their respective fields of expertise**. Overlapping skill-sets become redundant within a core group of collaborators. A diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds helps prevent competitive friction between collaborators; it also ensures that unarticulated 'shared wisdom' never obscures novel possibilties.

— **Establish complete trust and respect among all the main collaborators**. A minimal but diverse team can only function when the exchange between its members is based on complete trust and maximum transparency.

CLARIFY ROLES & RELATIONSHIPS

The most frequently misunderstood aspect of creative collaboration stems from a confused definition of collaborator. What is a collaborator? Who is a collaborator? Are you a collaborator?

The answers to these questions are vital. Here we've sharpened the definition of collaborator to mean only those participants who have a full and equal say in the project as a whole. However, while many collaborative projects involve only these main collaborators, some projects end up involving others who play different kinds of subordinate roles.

On previous pages we've provided a useful taxonomy of these roles, spelling out the specific responsibilities, expectations and investments of each one.

Never let those working in supporting or outside positions be mistaken—or mistake themselves—for collaborators. Never let those that are thought by others to be collaborators think of themselves as anything less.

Confusion or doubt about who has what role is the usual source of tension and conflict in a project. This frequently leads to miscommunication and flawed outcomes.

MUDDLE MAKES MUDDLE

The clarity—or the confusion—of a group's communications is almost always reproduced in what they create together.

When the communication is focused and straightforward, that coherence is reflected in the final design; but when it is oblique and twisted, that disarray comes through instead. Creative collaboration is more often than not interdisciplinary in nature; successful dialogue that crosses multiple fields of knowledge and multiple sets of values is always a challenge.

But the communicative practices within a group can be set up to fail even before they get to this difficult challenge. **Miscommunication is often underpinned by unclear roles.** When two people talk, and they don't share a common understanding about what's expected of them and what they're responsible for, what is said can be different from what is heard.

Another frequent cause is the **overcrowding of a collaboration**, whose members are too numerous and too redundant.

Even the slightest sense of **miscommunication should be taken seriously;** it is a key indicator of the health of the collaboration, not to be ignored at any stage of the collaborative process.

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Communication is central to collaboration because creative dialogue sparks ideas that the participants would never have had on their own. This is the reason to collaborate.

Such ideas arise in the marvelous space in between two or more minds, whose exchange of perspectives leads them to unexpected angles on things. Habit and pattern are abandoned, and assumptions are exposed, because collaborators are talking—the rapid articulation and interrogation that happens only in the exchange, not the solitary formulation, of ideas.

Starting from zero, you can **talk things into existence**, watching ideas solidify as they're traded back and forth in the conversation.

Historical examples abound—in science, Crick & Watson; in art, Braque & Picasso; in music, Lennon & McCartney; in technology, Brin & Page.

FEW HEADS ARE BETTER THAN TOO MANY

An overcrowded collaboration is an inefficient one. It entails a redundancy of overlapping roles among its members and synthesizing contributions from everyone can consume a disproportionately large amount of time.

It can be dangerous to confuse creative collaborations, where the intention is to generate truly new ideas, with the process of building wider commitment to move forward on a particular course of action. Both are important, and sometimes they happen in the same venue, but not always. Creative collaborations tend to work better with smaller groups who all have a unique contribution to make.

Overcrowding can result from an outside mandate—such as a committee whose members are assigned according to the representative perches they occupy in an institutional hierarchy. Reliance on titles and institutional positions can prevent the clear establishment of roles & relationships suitable for the collaboration at hand.

Roles—III

In such situations, it's often the case that the real collaborative work occurs in the interchanges between just a few core members. Unintended sub-groups within a collaboration are extremely divisive and are far easier to form when there are too many people. If you find yourself in this situation, address it head on before the collaboration suffers.

SET YOURSELF FREE

Carried away in a creative conversation, you may find a strange thing happening: losing sight of yourself, you start generating ideas that you'd never have guessed yourself capable of producing.

Part of this simply stems from the stimulating give-and-take of the dialogue.

A more subtle cause may be that in the openness of the exchange, you simply drop your guard. No longer do you submit your ideas to the powerful self-censor that ordinarily enforces a respectable consistency and coherence in your views.

Instead you can step a little out of character, seeing a bit beyond your usual habits and preconceptions. You can now rely more instinctively on what comes to mind, seeing no reason to judge it harshly since your collaborators don't. This sets your intuition free, allowing you to consider things expansively and to find ideas normally blocked from your view.

PAST PREDICTS FUTURE

Good collaborations can unleash new ideas in each participant, but don't expect such situations to provoke radical individual transformations.

At the end of the day, we are who we are. Having stretched oneself in the course of a collaboration—a bit, or even considerably—most people revert to past form.

If you feel the need for an entirely new kind of creative input, don't expect that to magically come from within the group—look outside for a new collaborator or other sources of inspiration. Analogous precedents from other fields or ethnography with your constituents are good places to start.

BAD IDEAS CAN LEAD TO GOOD

In a healthy collaboration, participants are free to blurt out whatever bad idea occurs to them. That's because that first idea may trigger a second, perhaps equally bad idea, which in turn may spark a third—this time brilliant.

The trust built up in a good collaborative circle gives everyone the confidence to advance an incomplete or inadequate thought, knowing that it may catalyze other ideas in the conversation and that no thought need be considered final until the whole group is satisfied with the conclusion. Once created, this space where failure is rapid, acceptable, expected and ultimately productive must be defended at all costs.

Watch out for fissures within the core collaborative group—subgroups that are willing to hear bad ideas only within themselves. This is a form of role confusion and muddled communication. Even when everything is going well, this spirit does not survive much contact with the 'outside world.'

The moments in which incomplete and partial ideas are presented to others on the fringes of the collaboration are dangerous ones. Keep collaborative idea-making to yourselves; when you present your ideas to the world, do so with a unified front.

BUT BEWARE THE GOOD IDEA

The compellingly *good* idea, presented too soon, closes off the exploration of alternatives. It seduces everyone with its cleverness, its elegance, and its symmetry, halting the collaborative investigation before it gets started.

The good idea can thus enslave your project: since it goes unchallenged and untested, its realization often leads to a brittle and flawed solution. So resist accepting the first couple of good ideas that present themselves, and see whether all the bad ideas add up to something much better.

One more point: the forceful presentation of the good idea can be symptomatic of an essentially troubled collaboration or collaborator. For the good idea can mask a power play by a member wanting to assert control over the group; it can be a display of ownership or rank; or it can be an attempt to fall back on pre-prepared material or received wisdom. None of these moves have a role to play in a genuinely creative collaboration. Resist them.

RUN A RELAY RACE

Collaborators are on the same team, and their competitive energy is aimed at outsiders.

They most resemble a team in a relay race, passing ideas to each other the way relay race runners hand off the baton. Of course, the collaborators' hand-offs are much more frequent and irregular, but the relay principle is the same. Moments of hand-off deserve special attention so that momentum and intelligence are not lost.

As one pushes an idea forward, the others catch their breath until it's their turn to continue. The gathering momentum of ideas can become tremendous, and the collaborators cover far more ground as a team than any could do alone.

SET THE BAR HIGHER

Not all collaborative work occurs when the group is working together. In between exchanges, individual collaborators are often expected to extend aspects of the project that fall within their expertise. In this phase, the group energy sometimes tails off, with some collaborators falling behind in their work and creating a drag on the project as a whole.

It is here that a kind of healthy competition between collaborators proves useful. While good ideas that "come from nowhere" can be dangerous, shockingly great work can be provocative and stimulating. A collaborator may perform his or her individual task exceptionally well, setting a usefully competitive example that others feel compelled to live up to. A self-sustaining creative collaboration works best when it is setting its own standards for its work internally, rather than relying on outsiders (bosses, clients, teachers, users, constituents).

To borrow from track and field again, this is like pole-vaulting. With a good jump, any collaborator has the power to set the bar higher, daring the others to match or exceed that feat.

Beware the good idea—08

DEFEAT THE STATUS QUO

Oppose the prevailing wisdom, kill the sacred cows. Better yet, personify your adversary and then attack the worthy 'enemy.'

Nothing motivates a group more strongly than setting us versus them, and your sharp opposition to their status quo prompts the insolent but fantastically productive question: what if they had everything wrong from the start?

This leads you to throw out the accepted wisdom, starting over from scratch. With an enemy sketched out, you're free to explore realms that had long been out of bounds under the rules of the old game. It also raises the stakes for the collaboration, challenging you and your peers to construct new ideas from first principles.

It's all right to make a caricature of your enemy by oversimplifying their position. At this stage you need sweeping differences, not fine gradations. After all, the complex (and carefully justified) internal structure of what has gone before is precisely what you are trying to cast aside.

A little rudeness is fine for now, as the internal language of your collaboration grows. There's time to be polite once you've reached a synthesis.

EMBRACE THE OPPOSITE

In the same way that you should start out with a clean sweep of accepted ideas, later you may find it equally useful to turn around and do the opposite—embrace once again the outside ideas you first spurned.

Reversing course from time to time helps for three reasons.

First, it calls your own assumptions back into question, always a valuable exercise.

Second, it may surprise you by making the old ideas new once again, now that you see them with a bit of distance.

Finally, it allows you to carefully and thoughtfully curate your assumptions, safe in the knowledge that your rejection or acceptance of a principle can be reversed later down the road. This leaves you safe to experiment with more vigourous positions and explore a wider range of options duing your collaboration.

DON'T SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE

Differences of opinion will arise in any collaboration, so a key question is this: how to achieve group consensus? How to avoid the paralysis of disagreement? The easiest and most common way is to split the difference between opposing viewpoints—but this is a weak and even cowardly form of compromise, yielding watered-down ideas that drive no meaningful change. Worse, it's a form of unexamined compromise—it neatly erases the reasons for the disagreement in the first place.

Disagreements are interesting! What's more, if all positions will ultimately get averaged out, participants will naturally take increasingly extreme positions. (If compromises are formed out of a sense of fairness, then participants will start to keep score.)

Rather than seeking full unanimity, consider the more flexible goal of **provisional consensus**—in a healthy collaboration, a dissenter can decide to support the majority decision provisionally, trusting that the group will revisit that decision should it prove wrong.

KEEP A TRACE

Even when, after a spirited debate, the group has settled on a course of action, don't bury any prior points of dissent— rather, in keeping with the policy of provisional consensus, simply hold alternative views in abeyance while the plan is acted upon.

If that plan proves faulty, then the group can easily track back to reconsider the original objections, which it can then act upon instead, taking a different fork in the road forward.

Document profusely: keep your post-its, flip charts, diagrams, and notes. But bear in mind that every so often it's helpful and healthy to erase the whiteboard and fill it back up from memory.

FOSTER DIVERSITY INSIDE

When you gather together the very best experts in a given field, they are likely to share roughly similar assumptions, methods, and goals—because they will typically share the same training, experience, and social identity.

This commonality can be a weakness that blinds the homogenous group to other possibilities. Their common expertise makes them search for the solution in the same reasonable areas—which is great if the best solution indeed lies there (they'll find it fastest), but not if it doesn't (they'll never find it).

A group of diverse individuals—all intelligent, but with different backgrounds, perspectives, and ways of working—will look all over the place for the solution. Together they will search more expansively for possible solutions, and if the best solution is to be found in an outlying area, one of them is much more likely to discover it there.

PRESENT A UNIFIED FRONT OUTSIDE

When the group has agreed upon a course of action, each member must present it to the outside world clearly and decisively. This holds true even if you have reached only provisional consensus, in which any second-guessing has been suspended. In other words, to the outside world you speak with a single voice, and the pronoun you use is 'we' not 'I'.

Why? Firstly, **the unified front you present to the world gives your decisions their force**. If the sources of change and creativity are within the circle of collaborators, dealing with the world at large generally requires consistency of purpose.

Secondly, by shielding the outside world from the complexities of your collaborative debate, by appearing as a single unit, **you reduce the costs associated with interacting with the world** and the costs the world associates with interacting with you. This makes it easier for you to work with consultants and contributors.

SPEAK YOUR MIND

Collaborative sessions can look decidedly strange to the outsider. Often they're fast-paced conversations that dart from one idea to the next, following chains of unexpected associations into areas seemingly far removed from the topic under discussion. Collaborators tend to relay their ideas in an idiosyncratic jargon that acts as the group's abbreviations, with words or phrases standing in for full thoughts. Conversations are sped up further by the tendency of the participants to run with an idea at its first mention: no sooner are the first few words out of one person's mouth than another has jumped in.

So blunt are some of the exchanges that they may seem to verge on rudeness, but if you look more closely, you see that no one is taking offense—a sharp rejoinder is often met with an appreciative nod or smile, which may be followed by a quick concession or a spirited denial or an abrupt change of subject. When a good idea arises, it converges out of seemingly disparate parts of the discussion, and the collaborators stand back to admire what has somehow emerged from between them all.

This does not mean that collaborators must be, or must become, best friends: healthy respect rather than warm affection is all you need to underpin a good collaboration.

PAY ATTENTION TO TENSION

When tension arises within the group, it can be a momentary by-product of everyday human friction, but it can also point to something more important, especially if it persists.

Roles—III

Such tension is often a telltale sign that the roles assigned to individuals in the group no longer fit. Someone initially thought to be a consultant or a contributor may have gradually shifted into full collaborative mode. Or sometimes, more distressingly, someone may fail in his or her role, at whatever level it is.

In any case, this tension can signal a crucial moment of potential change for the collaboration: either a new and productive realignment comes about or else it's time to wind it down and think about a bigger restructuring. It's better to have both promotions and demotions inside our taxonomy of collaboration happen quickly, cleanly and efficiently, forestalling any communicative muddle.

Muddle makes muddle—02

FILE YOUR FUTURE

Toying with the structure of a collaboration during a project is to be avoided. As you proceed within the present work, each of you should decide where your contributions, and those of your peers, belong. One hopes that most fit right into the framework of the present project and require no further thought.

Some of your contributions, however, may not—at which point you may start filing them away for the future. Thus the potential future context for collaboration can become very important for the present task at hand by creating a place for good but-but-different possibilities to live.

The hypothetical future that you construct while collaborating in the moment can be useful for containing 'scope creep', where a wealth of enticing ideas expand the boundaries of the task at hand beyond reason and then force the collaborative team to grow larger than it can effectively cope with.

Two heads are better than one—03

When enticing but overwhelming ideas crop up, decide whether they should be carried over into a future project instead, and if so whether it should be accomplished with the same group of collaborators, with a realignment of the group, or with a different group altogether.

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