



Working Relationships for the 21st Century

*A Guide to
Authentic Collaboration*

Collabor8ers
Nick Ellerby
Angela Lockwood
Gill Palin
Susan Ralphs
Bryce Taylor

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The Value of Authentic Collaboration

- Increased levels of **commitment** – once the full nature of collaboration is understood
- Increased quality of the **decision-making** that arises
- Higher degree of **accountability** that it promotes
- Increase of **self-esteem** and empowerment that it fosters
- The potential it creates for **innovation and deep change**

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The Collabor8 Group

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Introduction

1. To The Reader

We have co-created this booklet to act as an encouragement towards developing more authentic collaboration. The remainder of the introduction outlines our own collaborative inquiry process and some of the background. Section one sets the scene for collaboration whilst section two considers why collaboration is of its time and why we need to embrace more challenging approaches. Based on our own inquiry, the third section offers a guide to the phases of developing more effective collaboration, with a final section touching on some of the deeper issues that authentic collaboration can generate.

There are brief case studies throughout the paper that illustrate aspects of authentic collaboration in practice. With the support of readers and practitioners we aim to develop more examples over time through a website hosted by The Oasis School of Human Relations.

Visit www.oasishumanrelations.org.uk for more.

The Annexes at the end of the paper allow the four main sections to be shorter and more focused. The Annexes offer further detail to give the reader more understanding and guidance as is necessary.

2. Background

At the end of 2004 The Oasis School of Human Relations invited a group of CEOs, consultants and change agents to become part of a year-long inquiry into contemporary forms of leadership and the role of collaboration. Most members of the group had tried to develop a more collaborative style of leadership within their own organisations by working with Oasis in some form. There had been a wide variety of outcomes from these processes, and we were all intrigued to find out why some organisations had been more or less successful. But the UKLI was also a process to develop our understanding of what collaboration really means and its potential, not just a process to explain what had happened.

We were from different sectors and different positions in organisations, but our year long exploration had raised many common themes. Furthermore, we had shared widely our personal experience and reflections of the impact of attempting to work more openly and across boundaries in ways that were atypical. The results those efforts had brought about were not always those we wished. Each one of us could identify how our hopes for working collaboratively had met unexpected challenges that impeded it being adopted either easily or successfully. Through that process we all learned that genuine or, as we are terming it, 'authentic' collaboration is a much more arduous process than is often described and that it requires a willingness to learn at a deeper personal level and, in that sense, is a form of Whole Person Learning¹.

At about the same time, by one of those 'accidents of fate', Oasis itself was given an opportunity to participate in a much bigger inquiry – one that represented global businesses and international business schools – into '*how to develop the next generation of globally responsible leadership*' and, as part of the process, what '*globally responsible leadership*' might mean. The resulting partnership is known as the *Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI)*².

¹ In Whole Person Learning the very style of the approach itself challenges established notions of power, structure and authority, of decision-making and the potential for individuals to shape their own environment as learners and as peers. Whole Person Learning is explored fully in *Learning for Tomorrow: Whole Person Learning*, Bryce Taylor, Oasis Press (in conjunction with the GRLI), 2007.

² For those interested in learning more about how the UKLI and GRLI developed and evolved, this process is described more fully in Annex 13: *The Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative and the United Kingdom Leadership Initiative*. The website of the GRLI is www.grli.org.

3. Authentic collaborative engagement: the way forward

On completion of the initial UK Leadership Inquiry, eight of the participants wanted to continue their inquiry process into collaboration, together we launched Collabor8, a group that decided to meet four times a year to sustain a shared exploration of what collaboration means in practice.

From the connection with the GRLI we recognised that to be a globally responsible leader doesn't mean you are necessarily working on a global stage, but that you see the role and impact of your organisation in a wider context than traditional measures of success or failure may indicate. It calls for us to shape and create a positive vision of what organisations need to be, and how they need to operate, so they

“Leadership is a human quality that we can all embody and each one of us can take personal responsibility to play our part in the future well-being of life on earth...” Rick Cross

can contribute to addressing the challenges society has to face. Whatever individual ideas we have about what is right or required, we recognise we have no corner on wisdom and, indeed, even when we do have a sense of the 'what' and the 'how', fully achieving it is often beyond the horizon.

In the process of our inquiry, we have struggled with the traditional perspectives of leadership, often relating to being at the top of a hierarchy, representing a person with 'special' skills and vision, and having the capacity to know and communicate the direction for others. Instead, what has emerged is a sense of a leader as anyone committed and engaged in bringing others together, able to collaborate with others in authentic relationship, and seeing each person involved as core to shaping and influencing the impact they will have in the world, individually and collectively.

Writing in the Observer, (1st June 2008) Will Hutton makes the point that knowledge workers (that now make up over 50% of the Scandinavian workforce, for example) simply won't conform to the kind of strict authoritarian and hierarchical models of the past. Nor will their work get done by the use of such methods. When you want people to use their imagination you have to give them the freedom to do that and you can't simply licence 'when' they are to be creative. The conditions of contemporary organisational life undermine strict demarcation of roles and rigid positional functions. All that makes for pressure to move towards more collaboration and peer working.

Collaborative approaches are a way for us to bring more of our individual leadership characteristics to the fore, begin to face and live with uncertainty and discover the practice implications of the views and interests of all parties being heeded and heard. Our analysis persuaded us that collaboration was a positive way forward, both for an organisation and for the individual, and what became more apparent was that it is appropriate now, for the world we are working and living in. Further, our experience finally enabled us – three years after our initial inquiry was over – to begin to realise:

1. We had learned things that we only now begin to know.
2. We thought that capturing the learning might have a use beyond ourselves, but even if it did not, then it was certainly worth doing for ourselves.

We are aware that in our inquiry process, what has been learned on the micro level often has parallels on the macro level; what has been a truth for the individual or small group has, at times, had echoes within the larger context. As a result we suspect and hope that the learning we have begun to gather which relates to individuals and organisations may have wider resonance within

community, inter-organisational development and other settings. To this end we are very interested in hearing from others who are engaged in gathering their own experiences and learning as it relates to deeper forms of collaboration.

4. The Three Laws of Globally Responsible Leadership

We end the introduction with the three laws of **globally responsible leadership** from the GRLI Call to Engagement because it expresses a much wider set of concerns for those engaged in positions of responsibility and/or leadership that will increasingly form part of the mental outlook we have to take into account. It helps to set the wider context that calls for an approach to authentic collaboration as a foundation for sustainable development.

The Three Laws of Globally Responsible Leadership

The Law of the Environment

The natural system is not a stakeholder in our businesses; it is the ultimate foundation of the rules.

The Law of Interconnectedness

Everything, everywhere is linked in a single system therefore every action must be considered in the context of its effect on the whole system.

The Law of Engagement

Globally responsible leaders must become engaged in solving the dilemmas that confront us as a consequence of the first two laws

TABLE 1: THE THREE LAWS OF GLOBALLY RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

Section 1: What is Authentic Collaboration?

Collaboration occurs when a group of stakeholders consciously engage in an emergent interactive process, as they develop shared rules, norms and structures, to inquire, act or decide on issues related to a chosen domain.

1. Authentic collaboration

Collaboration is better understood as a concept than practiced as an approach. Most people would reckon they know collaboration when they see it and they believe, therefore, that they know what it is, giving such descriptions as: 'people getting on together'; 'people working it out together'. It is true that these kinds of definitions do get at an important aspect of collaboration, but there are other aspects that are increasingly critical in efforts to collaborate, whether between individuals, in teams, across units, between organisations or in forums where several groups or organisations are represented.

Authentic collaboration is about the **understood and agreed use of power** that those who are working together have explicitly discussed and agreed upon. Without that discussion and agreement, however collaborative the work, it is based on something else. It might look like collaboration; it might bring about worthwhile results; it may be what all parties are hoping for and it may even be *collaborative*, but it is not what we would describe as authentic collaboration.

It is this dimension of collaboration to which we wish to draw attention as we move through this document because it is not the way most people currently understand the term or expect to encounter it. However, in our view, current forms of collaboration are of limited durability. Sooner or later it is likely they will break down into traditional forms of relationship between those who have more power and those who have less, unless such issues are openly and consciously worked with. If left to play out unconsciously, the risk is that 'collaboration' becomes more like negotiation and/or discussion.

“Authentic collaboration depends upon agreed ways of sharing power and distributing influence that are transparent and negotiable.”

“Current forms of collaboration are of limited durability.”

Collaboration in this new form is seen as an emergent activity that will be required increasingly in workplaces around the world; not simply an optional approach in the organisational toolkit but an essential one for shared decision making, collective leadership, community engagement and active citizenship when faced with complex situations calling for shared responsibility and sustainable development. It is as important as knowledge capital, technological progress and financial viability in organisational settings.

Our view of collaboration didn't begin here though. It began where most people begin – with either the idea that to collaborate is a technique to address conflict situations or that it is a 'good thing' because it illustrates that people are getting on and willing to air and share their differences – something that is all well and good but not the end result. These starting points are simply the beginning.

2. Collaboration rooted in conflict vs collaboration as emergence

The prevalent idea of collaboration grew out of conflict approaches that were mapped decades ago from a problem solving approach (see *Annex 1: Characteristics of competitive and collaborative models*). In some ways the first principle outlined in box 1 embodies the very opposite of the values of collaboration in the sense in which it is espoused here. We do not view the person as separate from the problem; everyone who is part of the collaborative process is seen as a *whole* person and as such they bring all aspects of them to an authentic collaborative process. As a consequence there is much more engagement and inter-connectivity in the process; a necessary requirement given the future is going to call for more of a 'moral community'.

BOX1: THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF PRINCIPLED NEGOTIATION

- 1. People: separate the people from the problem*
 - 2. Interests: focus on interests, not the position*
 - 3. Options: generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do*
 - 4. Criteria: insist that the result be based on some objective standard*
- (Harvard Negotiation Project 1980)*

Further, in authentic collaboration people have choices and work with possibility whereas, in the past, collaboration has frequently been used as a disciplinary tool; 'You will not leave the room until agreement is reached', for example. Once again, this traditional view tends to equate collaboration with dispute resolution and conflict management or when difficulties of some kind arise. Our view is that collaboration is a good thing and that it can be a conscious and aware choice for a style of working and relating that fulfils so many of the demands of the 21st century. This is collaboration as a starting point – not something only to be considered when there is already an impasse of some kind.

3. Elements of Authentic Collaboration

Collaboration, as we discuss it here, is about seeking a **healthy balance between a philosophy of approach for the longer term and the development of a skills base** that most practitioners, at whatever level, are going to have to be equipped with in the short-term. Both these aspects require certain parameters to be in place for collaboration to be worth investment, and make no mistake, to embrace this seriously, investment is what is required; ask anyone who has really taken this way of working to heart and mind.

Authentic collaboration, in essence, **builds upon the positive qualities** already held within effective multi-agency projects, community development and team working, and **then offers further challenges**. The challenges of undertaking collaboration are particularly held in the areas of decision making, power and influence, engagement and accountability, commitment and action, and transparency of process.

No single interest group or stakeholder is allowed to usurp the process simply because they might have greater resources, or access to people of influence, or disparate levels of power. In a collaborative process, **partners are able to overcome differences and work towards common aims** with an agreed understanding of how, by when and by whom those aims will be met. Inevitably, different parties within a collaborative group will make different contributions – that is part of the beauty of this approach – and what is fundamental is that each is heard, and it is recognised and accepted that each party has a contribution to make.

ELEMENTS OF AUTHENTIC COLLABORATION

- *Identifies common aims and needs*
- *Creates strategies to meet those aims and needs*
- *Encourages involvement and commitment from all parties*
- *Challenges traditional power approaches: questions and explores how power is used / abused*
- *Increases relatedness and engagement*
- *Seeks balance between longer term needs and skills for the short term*
- *Builds upon existing positive qualities*

4. The place of power

Power is the key influence within our whole concept of authentic collaboration. How power is used and, perhaps even more important, how it is perceived to be used is, therefore, a fundamental dimension within any collaborative endeavour. We don't see a shift in the mentality of the CEOs, or leading shareholders of capitalism suddenly being converted to collaborative approaches per se. However, more recent global events do appear to be bringing about a willingness to explore new ways of working. The possibilities of collaboration beyond the traditional structures of power are being seen in community settings and within organisations seeking to shape new approaches to the workplaces of the future.

If we recognise that the world into which we are moving rapidly is going to make the power differentials of the players much more transparent and that this, in turn, will have a decisive impact on what unfolds, then much of what is needed in authentic collaborative working is being honest about how far those assumptions are available for examination and how soon we can get them into the open.

Power is still the name of the game regardless of where it lies, however that doesn't stop there being useful opportunities in more places for more authentic collaboration. It is recognised that one of the potential elements that enable the survival of the fittest within a Darwinian model is that of collaborative advantage³. Those species that have learned how to live collaboratively, as their context requires, sustain them for the longer term.

³ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, 1994, Collaborative advantage, Harvard Business Review, July / August, 72 (6), 96-108.

THE HESTIA PROJECT

Hestia (Greek for Hearth and Home) is a project that provides accommodation and support for women with complex needs. The process undertaken for transforming an idea into reality represents a project specific approach to collaborative working.

The Housing Association was approached by the Local Authority to assist them in finding a housing solution for a group of women who were caught in a “revolving door” syndrome; they were frequently evicted from hostels and bed and breakfast, occupied beds in mental health wings of hospitals, often turned up at accident and emergency, were well known to police, social workers and to the homeless section of the Local Authority. There were issues around drugs, alcohol, self harm, prostitution and mental health. The authorities were running out of places that would take these women and there was an acknowledgement they were vulnerable and that the pattern and cycle needed breaking with a “new” approach. The cost to the public purse was significant.

There was no strong view as to what the housing solution could be. A group was formed that included the Local Authority, Housing Association, Police, Probation, Health and Voluntary Agencies to work together. Each organisation had its own specific issues with these women – in common, though, was a real desire to try and find a sustainable solution that would benefit the women and the agencies involved, which up until that point had failed – this provided the focus and determination to work together.

It was a real collaborative piece of work that experimented with thinking, sought out solutions from elsewhere, challenged concepts and assumptions, and saw the whole project right through to the end. It was rare for anyone to miss a meeting, there was energy and drive around the table and complete buy in and shared responsibility to the outcomes.

The result was a cutting edge project that focused on the individual and provided tailored support plans delivered by a range of agencies. Funding came from Health and the Lottery, with a steering group overseeing the running of the project.

To date the scheme has trebled in size, it operates across two Local Authority areas, it is a Department of Health good practice project, it has had two external reviews that say conservatively it saves £500k to the public purse and, more importantly, we have successfully rehabilitated around 16 women back into the community.

The steering group disbanded and the project is now managed by the Association.