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CONCLUSION: ARE WE COLLABORATING YET?

By their nature, wicked problems are complex and enduring while their impacts are significant and often ubiquitous. Almost by definition, the solutions to these problems are also complex and time-consuming and can be expensive, requiring focus, flexibility and prioritisation, specific experience and expertise, as well as dedicated resources. Often, these requirements cannot be met by one organisation, let alone one person, and a flexible admixture of different skills, capacities and experiences needs to be applied at the right time, in the right doses, by different organisations and within the right decision-making framework. Indeed, these problems are often best confronted with a collaborative response.

The purpose of this volume has been to identify the essential elements of effective collaborative practice to aid in the solution of wicked problems, based on findings from five case studies undertaken in the community services sector in Australia and New Zealand. In this chapter, we recap the major elements discussed and seek to bring together the essential ideas associated with achieving effective collaboration.

Typically, governments and organisations are structured to focus on specific areas of operation, service provision and/or problem-solving. These structures are usually well embedded and follow traditional models in terms of how they operate and who makes decisions about what is done and when. These structures become comfortable and habitual as we become used to hierarchical control structures and to working within a traditional organisational policy and practice framework. Additionally, decision-making and resource allocation frameworks are nested in

formally identified spaces such as jurisdictions and/or industry areas. They are also enacted in the context of legislative and policy frameworks that seek to increase predictability and funnel decision-making into accepted pathways; managers expect to have control while responses to problems are expected to be within standardised conceptions of accepted practice. These primary operating spaces also impact on the operational environment and practice by signposting the legitimate modes of operation.

Government departments find it very difficult (if not impossible) to operate outside their jurisdictional remit, while non-governmental organisations (particularly the not-for-profit and community organisations on which we have focused in our cases) often shadow and service the jurisdictional framework within which government departments are obliged to operate. Additionally, innovation and risk-taking challenge government actors whose capacity to justify decision-making in accordance with precedent and policy authorisation is highly prized, especially given the propensity to assign blame for any mistakes made. Conversely, non-governmental actors often regard regulations, red tape, public service rules and risk-aversion as 'blockers' to outsiders wishing to attempt shared solutions to complex problems (Debus 2019).

Wicked problems often have the characteristics of being multi-jurisdictional and multi-programmatic; as such, they are complex and enduring because they do not conform or respond to the traditional structures of responsibility and authority within the purview of any one organisation or to the traditional policy and practice solutions that have worked elsewhere. Often, different organisations—government and private—need to pool their capacities to achieve positive outcomes. The pooling of capacity needs to occur at each stage of setting program or project objectives, development and design, resource allocation, decision-making as the program or project is implemented, and establishing the governance framework and formal reporting processes.

In this context, innovation, risk-taking and a flexible authorising environment are necessary to ensure the timely allocation of resources and structuring of the service delivery environment towards the solution of the particular wicked problem. Adding to this complexity, all of these attributes require a high level of trust between individuals and organisations.

However, genuine collaboration can be hard to identify and often organisations say they are collaborating when, in fact, they are pursuing some other form of joint effort. Indeed, they may use the appellation 'collaboration' out of ignorance about what genuine collaboration actually is.

Genuine and effective collaboration requires the coalescence of a number of attributes in leaders and decision-making structures that are often at odds with more traditional structures. As such, collaboration is often challenging, if not threatening, to traditional organisations and traditional managers as it relies less on hierarchical management structures and formal lines of command and more on a collective and genuine pursuit of the particular objective—even when that pursuit is best served by managers taking a back seat in preference to others better placed to make decisions and respond to problems.

As such, genuine collaboration often requires diffused, or distributed, leadership and flexibility, from both organisations and individuals, among whom roles are determined by knowledge and ability rather than positional authority. For collaboration to be successful, the authorising environment must be supportive of collaboration, not only in word, but also in deed.

Removing the barriers to effective collaboration

The existing business structures and processes within organisations can also impede effective collaboration. Traditional BAU can be damaging to collaboration. Indeed, the institutional and systemic barriers to collaboration that currently exist in government and organisations, together with the siloing of the public sector into segments and the shadowing of those structures by private organisations, present formidable barriers to collaboration both between organisations in the government sector and between government agencies and private sector organisations. These silos also create issues in collaboration regarding accountability.

Additionally, the rules-bound governance framework of BAU stifles both innovation and collaboration. Often, in practical terms, this means that collaborators find themselves working in environments where BAU no longer applies, where boundaries are malleable and there is little practical

guidance, notwithstanding the fact that the scrutiny of performance remains intense. To work effectively in such circumstances requires the support of authorisers—organisational decision-makers who sit outside the collaborative process and whose positive sanction is necessary to uphold stakeholder confidence.

Indeed, authorisers of collaboration, while often not directly involved in collaborative action at the coalface, are nevertheless vital to its success. As such, it is critical for authorisers to understand their role in collaboration, to distribute authority to collaborators when needed and to help create processes and spaces in which collaboration can thrive.

In Chapter 2, we discussed the 'transgressive' nature of collaboration— by which we mean that when people are asked to 'go forth and collaborate' they are effectively being asked to be disruptive. Disruption can be unsettling and can sometimes have adverse consequences. However, it can also be positive and empowering and can lead to innovation. Authorisers need to be prepared to provide executive cover for their collaborative leads as they disrupt BAU while utilising risk management strategies to minimise potential harms.

Collaboration would be better supported if policymakers were willing to allow more risk-taking and help create an authorising environment that embraces experimentation and accepts the possibility of failure. This could be established by policymakers helping to create new adaptive models for collaborative governance. Dealing with complex problems requires innovation, which cannot occur in the absence of risk. Governments also cannot expect to pass on all the risk to nonstate actors.

The status quo frustrates collaboration by constraining the ability of organisations and workers to efficiently and effectively mobilise resources and assets to respond to complex problems and by creating bureaucratic, operational and organisational barriers for individuals, families and communities seeking assistance with complex problems. Reducing the emphasis on traditional governance structures and instilling a collaborative mindset in government organisations—one that allows individuals and collaborative endeavours to take risks and innovate—would reduce some of the barriers to collaboration embodied in traditional structures and modes of operation. Moreover, governments and organisations can do more than reduce barriers to collaboration; they can also take a more proactive role in encouraging, enabling and rewarding innovation.

Building patience and trust: A supportive authorising environment

In Chapter 3, we discussed the whole-of-system change to which some collaborative initiatives aspire. The wicked problems with which collaborations deal can be longstanding and entrenched and require long-term solutions and thus a long-term perspective from organisations and government. When working on entrenched wicked problems, where results are hard to measure, all stakeholders need patience and trust before results can be identified.

Because of the potentially disruptive nature of collaborative processes and the deployment of non-traditional operating modes, collaborators can be subjected to enhanced scrutiny. The problems collaborators face are also often longstanding and entrenched and, thus, a long-term solution is required. Despite this, collaborators can be pressured to demonstrate tangible impacts early in the collaborative process. Authorisers and collaborators need to share an understanding of the expectations of collaboration and authorisers should not be impatient for results, as impatience often masks unrealistic expectations.

The intangible impacts of collaboration are not always accorded the importance they deserve and are difficult to report on. Even when results are tangible, it can be difficult to attribute improvements to any one party when there are many actors working towards the same outcome. In collaboration, everyone needs to learn to share accountability. Authorisers need to understand that collaborations require intensive processes of relationship-building, establishing legitimacy and trust.

Collaborative intelligence

When seeking to articulate the attributes of effective collaboration, it is necessary to first identify the structural impediments to effective collaboration. As such, in Chapter 4, we described and discussed the attributes that are necessary for effective collaboration: collaborative practice; the behaviours, attitudes and values that support and sustain collaboration; and a supportive authorising environment, which creates the organisational spaces within which collaboration can occur. Thus, effective collaboration requires both organisational intelligence and collaborative intelligence (CQ). Organisational intelligence is the collective understanding of an organisation and the structures

and permissions from leaders that need to be put in place to enable collaboration. CQ is the combination of skills and personal qualities required for effective collaboration.

Organisations with organisational intelligence will understand the relational nature of collaboration and the challenges of realising collaborative practice. They will have patience for collaboration and they will ensure the flexibility necessary to allow collaboration to grow.

The combination of CQ and a supportive authorising environment makes it possible for channels of trust and communication to be built between partners in collaboration, which, in turn, allow for broad agreement on the set of core issues and a shared understanding of the purpose of the collaboration, along with avenues for discussing the differences in perspective held by different stakeholder groups. Indeed, without both a supportive authorising environment and CQ, collaboration is unlikely to succeed.

Additionally, it is important to remember that collaborators must have the ability and confidence to challenge institutional rules and traditional practices when they are hindering the collaboration process. As discussed in Chapter 4, individuals involved in collaboration, and especially collaboration leaders, need a set of personal characteristics and capacities that extend beyond those that make up the traditional skill set of the public sector.

Formal and informal governance

In each of the cases, collaboration is subject to formal governance through a backbone group and/or a governance group consisting of partner organisations and, in some cases, organisations representing principal stakeholder interests. The primary purpose of formal governance is to provide an avenue for authorisation to collaborate and assurance that collaboration is occurring.

Although formal governance is indispensable, informal governance also serves important purposes. Whereas formal governance is usually exercised via agreed protocols or rules of engagement, and might be guided by terms of reference agreed among the parties and confirmed through an exchange of correspondence or an MOU, informal governance is more 'relational' than 'procedural'. Informal governance is concerned more

with maintaining communications, listening to concerns, modelling behaviours and creating legitimacy. Both formal and informal governance were strongly in evidence in each of the five cases.

Design for collaboration

As indicated previously, examples of good collaboration are hard to find because, among other reasons, collaboration is not well understood and many multiparty activities are described as collaborations when they are not. This reality has implications for determining whether collaboration is the best response to a particular problem and ensuring that collaborations are structured to be fit for purpose.

Collaboration partners and stakeholders each bring their own, often distinct, institutional and administrative histories to the table, along with their own diverse perspectives and stakeholder interests that affect how the collaboration works. When designing collaboration, it is important to arrive at an understanding of the unique contributions offered by each collaboration partner and the ways in which the respective strengths of the partners can be leveraged to further the aims of the collaboration. In particular, the capacity to offer evidence in support of a collaborative approach is essential to win support for the collaboration from partner organisations and external stakeholders.

The strategies for collaboration need to be built from a comprehensive understanding of the problems themselves and the social, political and institutional ecologies in which they arise. It is important to have clarity about aims, strategy, process, communication and conduct, as well as a shared understanding of the collaboration's objectives, rationale, strategic direction and proposed actions—all based on a common language. Collaborative aims and actions should be co-designed and, where possible, informed by the lived experiences of the people and communities that are the focus of the collaboration. Every person engaged in collaboration has the potential to act as a 'collaboration champion', and the 'soft diplomacy' they bring to bear—sharing good news and celebrating achievements—can be an important factor in generating and sustaining community engagement.

We also identified that it is important to confirm whether collaboration is the best strategy to address the issue at hand. This requires a clear understanding of the social, geographical and historical characteristics

of the particular issue. Although all collaborations might operate with a similar rationale, are obliged to address a similar set of practical and strategic problems and employ a similar suite of operational and governance disciplines, each collaboration is contextually unique. As such, collaboration is not a readily deployable organisational model or template; rather, it is a way of thinking and behaving.

Given the complexity of the problems requiring resolution and the unique context of each collaboration, it would be unwise for any government or organisation to unilaterally mandate a prescriptive model for collaboration. Instead, we must build each collaboration separately.

Importantly, genuine communication and constructive engagement are critical inputs into collaboration design. Indeed, in the cases examined for this study, collaboration leaders consistently exhibited an ability to engage in respectful conversations with a wide range of stakeholders about the purpose of collaboration and this, in turn, informed the design process.

Collaborative governance

In Chapter 6, we discussed the importance of authorisation and assurance and the communication channels that are required between the collaboration and the organisation. It is essential to establish strong management pathways to enable formal authority to cascade down to the collaboration and assurance to flow up to executive management. This requires open communication channels and trust between the formal authority and the collaboration. Additionally, it requires a leadership style different to that traditionally seen in hierarchical, rules-based organisations.

Collaborative leadership

Leadership is the bedrock of successful collaboration and, in Chapter 7, we discussed the nature of leadership in a collaborative environment. Collaboration is not a linear process but is complex, changeable and dependent on the sometimes unpredictable dynamics of interorganisational and even interpersonal relationships. As such, collaborative leadership needs to be sensitive to context and capable of frequent recalibration and adjustment should the need arise.

Collaborative leadership is not the mandate or prerogative of any single partner or individual. Leadership is not a 'role' or a 'position'. Rather, in the context of collaboration, leadership might be considered a set of qualities and behaviours exhibited at multiple levels by individual participants. In some cases, collaborations will attract people who already possess the qualities needed to establish and sustain collaborative action: the ability and willingness to listen, the capacity to understand diverse perspectives and communicate ideas, the ability to develop and sustain interpersonal and interorganisational relationships, the willingness to work with people to arrive at a common understanding of a problem and a common language around which to frame possible solutions and the moral courage and drive to achieve change. Not everyone will possess these qualities in equal measure, but they *can* be developed, encouraged and supported.

Place-based solutions

In Chapter 9, we discussed place-based solutions to wicked problems. Place-based approaches—often associated with the collective impact framework—present a unique response to problems rather than a one-size-fits-all response and are grounded in the lived experiences of the individuals and communities the collaboration seeks to serve. Our research reinforces the potential for collaborative action to enable bespoke responses to problems that are informed by, and responsive to, the characteristics of place and the specific circumstances of the people who inhabit those places.

To make this possible, it is necessary for all collaboration partners—especially those from within the government agencies that often provide resources and host the collaborative structure—to genuinely engage affected communities of interest and harness local insight. Understandably, this can be more difficult than it first appears owing to the fact that public servants are obliged to work within their agency's policy framework. For this reason, it is essential for authorisers to encourage collaboration leaders to 'curate' collaborative spaces in which knowledge and ideas can be shared, collaboration aims and strategies can be formulated and innovative local solutions can be developed and tested.

Building skills

According to many of the people we interviewed for our study, the skill sets and behaviours traditionally valued and incentivised by public sector organisations are not always well suited to meeting the challenges of collaborative action. Although the capacity for collaborative action might be lacking in organisations, it cannot be assumed to be naturally present in communities. It might be necessary, therefore, to invest in capacity building in both organisations and communities in order to fully harness local insight, identify and better align local capability, and in so doing empower communities of interest to clearly articulate their needs and preferred solutions, and normalise respectful conversations about difficult or sensitive issues and participating in collaboration design.

Collaborations need to earn the trust of stakeholders and thereby establish credibility and legitimacy. It is hard enough for individual agencies or organisations to win the trust of stakeholders—especially in policy spaces characterised by a history of unfulfilled expectations, policy failures and abrupt changes in direction. Winning trust can be even more difficult in multiparty settings in which collaboration partners bring their own 'baggage' to the table.

Collaborations are fundamentally about relationships between people rather than between organisations and collaborative purpose is about fidelity to collaboration aims rather than blind compliance with rules and operational norms. Of course, this often flies in the face of convention, especially in public sector organisations in which compliance with operational and procedural norms is sacrosanct. For this reason, organisations need to do more than pay lip-service to collaboration; they also need to proactively develop the human capital necessary for collaborative endeavour and ensure that collaborative capability is valued, encouraged and supported.

A final word

Although 'collaboration' has become something of a mantra in some policy domains, it is not a quick fix or a panacea for all problems. Collaboration is not easy; if it were, examples of effective collaborations would be easier

to find. There are barriers to collaborative action, including institutional rigidity, incompatible organisational values and operating systems, stakeholder resistance and cost (among others).

Cost is a factor worthy of careful consideration. Collaboration is not free or cheap and should not be regarded as an opportunity to do more with less. The desire for economy and efficiency is a powerful driver of decision-making in all sectors, particularly in those beset by resource scarcity. And indeed, collaboration might be a vehicle for realising a more efficient and effective deployment of resources. But collaborative action does not come out of thin air. Each of the stages of collaboration entails financial and opportunity costs as well as operational and reputational risks.

Genuine collaboration requires a significant investment of time and money in each of its stages. Moreover, organisational resolve and executive commitment are needed to authorise and empower those individuals charged with the task of making collaboration 'happen'. Accountability for success does not reside exclusively with those sitting around the collaboration table; it also rests with executive managers—the authorisers—who sit outside the collaboration itself, but who are responsible for organisational outcomes.

Some executive-level managers might think that the costs are too high given the levels of uncertainty and complexity that attach to collaborative action—and in some cases their reticence is well founded. Having said that, it is also essential to factor into decision-making the potential financial and opportunity costs—as well as the political and reputational risks—of *not* collaborating. Allowing wicked problems to persist in the face of evidence that prevailing programmatic treatments are not working also entails a range of economic, political and social costs. Rather than asking 'Is collaboration affordable?', reframe the question as 'Can we afford to not collaborate?'.

Collaboration is not for the faint of heart and it is not trite to suggest that collaboration is all about 'heart' in the best sense of the word. The many people to whom we spoke—each with experience at the front line of collaborative practice—exhibited intellectual commitment, passion and personal dedication to their collaborative endeavour. They also shared feelings of frustration and occasional despair concerning some

of the difficulties they encountered in framing a collaboration narrative and sustaining collaborative action. Importantly, no-one told us that collaboration was not worth trying, whatever the circumstances.

As we have observed elsewhere in this book, many collaborations fail, for a variety of reasons, including inadequate planning and problem specification, inconsistent executive support, unrealistic expectations, insufficient or inappropriate stakeholder engagement, a failure to implement measures to ensure continuity in the face of personnel changes or external factors such as changes in policy, a change of leadership or a change of government. The fact is, if people are given clear, unambiguous authority to collaborate and are allowed to thoughtfully curate secondary operating spaces in which multiparty collaboration can occur, most will embrace the challenge with goodwill and rise to the occasion.

Collaboration is the way of the future, but it is an art that has yet to be fully mastered. It is our sincere hope that this book will assist towards that end.

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