



Sherbrooke
Consulting, Inc.
1900 K Street, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
tel: (202) 737-3622
fax: (202) 737-4839
Sherbrooke@aol.com

Why Collaborations Collapse: The Four Most Common Reasons and How to Avoid Them

Jolie Bain Pillsbury, Ph. D.

Collaboration is defined as “to labor as the associate of another or others.” It is derived from the Latin root “to work together.” For those involved in a collaboration, it often seems to be, not only, labor, but “hard labor”. There is also a second meaning for the word collaboration – “to cooperate with the enemy.” This second definition also fits, because often collaboration requires working with people, who in other circumstances, might be considered their natural enemies. The nature of collaboration is to cross boundaries, and often those boundaries have gulfs of history and adversarial relationships.

In practice, collaboration demands a relationship that is more challenging than coordination or cooperation. Collaboration requires shared goals, shared investment, shared risk, and shared decision-making within boundaries set by the members of the collaborative to accomplish results which none of the parties could achieve alone.

Collaboration, by this definition, should not be entered into lightly. Many collaborations are frustrating, time consuming, and do not produce the desired results. The four most common reasons that collaborations collapse and how to avoid them are:

1. Leaping to collaboration. There has been a proliferation of collaboratives. Collaboration is often proposed as a strategy for solving very difficult problems. Frequently this is done without conscious thought of the consequences of collaboration. Sometimes a new collaborative is chosen without thought of how a new collaborative for a new purpose will relate to existing collaborative efforts.

Before leaping to collaboration, consider the following questions. If you can answer these questions with a strong affirmative, it will be more likely that your collaboration will have the staying power and focus needed to sustain it towards success.

- a. ***What tangible benefit or result will be created by collaboration?***
Can you describe this benefit or result in a manner that your neighbor or your harshest critic would think it was a good idea? If you cannot, go back to the drawing board and see if such a benefit is possible. You will thereby avoid the frustration of being involved in a collaboration that frustrates all its members because the purpose is not clear.
- b. ***How important is it that tangible benefit or result?*** If you were able to define a tangible benefit, then is that benefit VERY important to you? If it is not, then do not begin. Collaboration requires a process of give and take, trial and error, and investment and risk that is not worth it



**Sherbrooke
Consulting, Inc.**
1900 K Street, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
tel: (202) 737-3622
fax: (202) 737-4839
Sherbrooke@aol.com

unless what is on the other side of the investment has a high enough return for those involved. This question of importance needs to be answered both personally and organizationally, since the demands and investment will be personal as well as organizational.

- c. ***Is it better to do this alone or by some other method than collaboration?*** Once having defined the tangible benefit that is very important, then consider all the other methods for accomplishing results that do not have the psychic and temporal costs of collaboration. Thinking this through in a rigorous way will help clarify the necessity for collaboration and create a foundation for the members to use as a basis to figure out what to do and why.
- d. **What are the relationships and what contributions are needed for success?** Once you have decided that collaboration is the answer, you are still not done. The next series of questions will help define the relationships that are needed for successful collaboration. These questions can help you think through the issues that define the relationships:
- i) What do I have to put on the table?***
 - ii) Whom do I need as my collaborators?***
 - iii) What do I need from my collaborators?***
 - iv) What do my collaborators need to be part of the collaborative?***

If you can answer these questions, you will be well on your way to avoiding the creation of collaboratives that will fall of their own weight because collaboration was not a good strategy match to the goal and the players.

Frequently, you may find that in order to get funding or implement a program you are “mandated to collaborate.” There are three lines of defense.

The first line of defense is to apply the questions anyway and if the collaboration does not meet the tests, see if there is an existing collaborative that can be used as a platform for this work. Mandated collaboration usually stems from someone’s intuition that there can be benefits from working together. Look for a collaborative that already exists and might be appropriate.

If there is no appropriate existing collaborative, the second line of defense, is to NOT take the money or program if you have that discretion. Often, those who are lured into collaboration that is a mismatch regret it, and afterwards will say the program dollars or funding was not worth the effort.

The third line of defense is to find some way to answer the above questions in an affirmative way as possible, *i.e.*, reframe the purpose or up the ante on benefits and results.



**Sherbrooke
Consulting, Inc.**
1900 K Street, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
tel: (202) 737-3622
fax: (202) 737-4839
Sherbrooke@aol.com

2.

Death by planning. The death by planning syndrome occurs when there is an imbalance between process and product. Its symptoms are endless talk and little action. There is a sub-genus of this condition – **paralysis by analysis**. This occurs when endless analysis and quest for data substitutes for decisions. A third and very seductive version of this syndrome occurs when collaboratives create the illusion of progress, but the reality is actually of **circular motion through reorganization**. The best description I have ever seen of this third condition is the following quote which I first saw on the wall of a city official in Boston.

We trained hard, but every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing – a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing inefficiency and demoralization.

-- Petronius, AD 66

The fact that this quote resonates with us almost 2,000 years later is a testimony to the seductive allure of reorganization.

To avoid death by planning, paralysis of analysis or the circular motion of reorganization, apply the following rule of thumb:

If you cannot produce a tangible result, that is, a change in external condition within six months – you are not on right track. The way to figure out how to produce this improvement in an external condition within a comparatively short period of time lies in conquering a temporal paradox.

The temporal paradox. There are always multiple time frames – e.g., the long view, the medium view and the short view. You have to be a temporal contortionist to bounce back and forth between them. Before becoming dizzy, stop and think of the natural time frames associated with the result or benefit you are seeking – the school year, monthly payment cycles, quarters, fiscal years, etc. The short view is urgent. What can do in one of these periods? The medium view is for three of these cycles. Anything longer is the long view. These three points enable you to triangulate your collaborative action and focus to produce results. Once you have defined the results you want to create in the short, medium, and long range you will be forced to a more appropriate balance of process and product, driven to make decisions in order to take timely action, and only reorganize in those rare instances when the effort absorbed by reorganizing has a payoff that is tangible.

3.

The group hug barrier. There is a myth that collaboration is about feeling good and liking each other. If the collaborative can not generate and resolve the creative tensions of conflict and disagreement,



**Sherbrooke
Consulting, Inc.**
1900 K Street, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
tel: (202) 737-3622
fax: (202) 737-4839
Sherbrooke@aol.com

it will collapse. The collapse may be with a whimper where everyone is not speaking candidly and openly because they fear conflict which leads to “false agreement” and failure. The collapse may come with a “big bang” when the conflict comes out into the open and there is no way to handle it.

There are three things that can help overcome this barrier. They are:

- a) Create a “behavioral definition” of trust. In our private lives we extend complete trust to a circle of family or long term colleagues or friends. This standard of trust -- “1 trust you completely” -- takes time and strong value alignment. Another kind of trust can be built as you go in a collaborative. This trust is about making and honoring commitments in a thoughtful way. It is knowing that the person you are talking to will do what they say, and you doing what you say. The collaborative will last if this kind of trust is built.
- b) Similarly, create a definition of respect. Respect in our private lives is accorded to influential figures and heroes; or it comes from deference to power and position. Collaboratives need another kind of respect. That respect is built by listening and showing that you have listened. You show you have listened by saying or doing something DIFFERENT based on what you have heard.
- c) Acknowledge at the beginning that collaboration is not about liking or agreeing on everything. It is about having common interests and being willing to act on those common interests. It helps in this instance to have tight protocols, narrow boundaries and ways of working together that are interest based. Successful collaborations can exist where in one context the collaborators are rivals or antagonists and they can still set that aside within the boundaries of the collaborative. “Strong walls make good neighbors.”

4.

Leadership, leadership, leadership. Just as in real estate where the key to success is location, location, location, the key to success in collaboration is leadership, leadership, leadership. ***The lack of leadership is the single most commonly cited cause of collaboration collapse.*** The type of leadership needed for successful collaboration has the following important characteristics or skills: listening, speaking, and an approach to making decisions that is efficient and reflects the authentic support of the group that leads to action and results. In this context everyone in a collaboration at one time or another is called to act as a leader.

- a) **Listening:** Often in collaboration it seems that the members of the collaboration have checked their ears at the door. The ability to listen to each other is often a major problem, and skill of listening the scarcest leadership skill.



Sherbrooke Consulting, Inc.
 1900 K Street, NW
 Suite 700
 Washington, DC 20006
 tel: (202) 737-3622
 fax: (202) 737-4839
 Sherbrooke@aol.com

No one cares to speak to an unwilling listener. An arrow never lodges in stone...
 -- St. Jerome

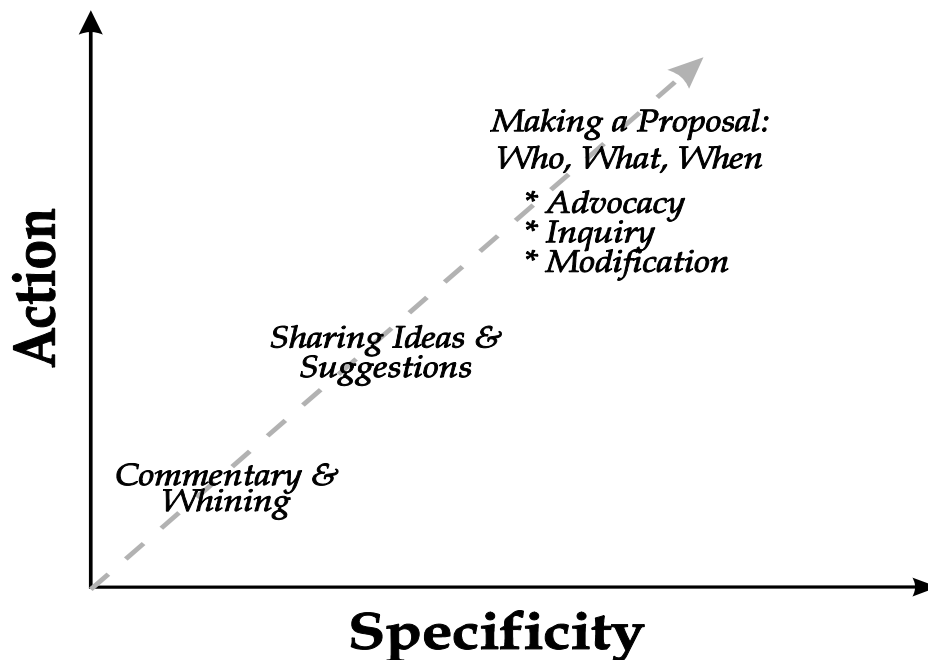
Be patient, be smart, be QUIET. At whatever level you presently are, spend most of your time listening to the level below.
 -- Carol Rasco

- b) **Speaking:** Leaders can model behavior that will help the collaboration move beyond talk to action and results. One behavior is **making a proposal**. Leaders make proposals so that time is spent constructively and productively, on what will move the group to solve problems and become accountable for action and results.

A proposal is powerful when it is clear, specific, and builds on the elements of other people's proposals.

The following diagram positions making a proposal relative to other common ways of speaking. The axes represent action and specificity.

- Movement to the upper right corner is movement toward **specific, high-value, action**;
- Low value is denoted by **commenting & whining**, these are non-contributory ways of speaking;
- Modest value is indicated by **sharing ideas & suggestions**, these are moderately contributory (except during **brainstorming** where they are desired); and, finally,
- Making a proposal**, places you in the high-value, high contribution arena.



- c) **Rule of thumb decision-making:** Collaboration requires crafting decisions that everyone in the group can support. One way of doing way of doing this is to make decisions by having every member of the



**Sherbrooke
Consulting, Inc.**

1900 K Street, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
tel: (202) 737-3622
fax: (202) 737-4839
Sherbrooke@aol.com

group signal their agreement, uncertainty, or disagreement relative to a proposed decision. Thumbs up means yes, thumbs down means no, and thumbs sideways means “I’m not sure”. A quick glance around the table will show whether support for the decision is possible or impossible. If it seems that support is possible, the next step in building support is to go to the people whose thumbs are down or sideways and ask them what decision they could support.

To be efficient, it is important not to spend a lot of time with people advocating their own views. Advocacy that does not address the issues or concerns of those who do not support a proposed decisions does not move them towards support. Conversely, creating a decision crafting process that focuses on the issues where there is disagreement or uncertainty enables the group to develop decisions with broader support. Ideally when members of the group explore each others underlying interests, concerns, or assumptions new ways to craft the decision are developed, greater trust is built, and the group can move forward to action and results. The group can also set time boundaries on their work, and acknowledge that at times seeking decisions that “everyone can support” is not feasible in the available time. The group can then use backup decision rules where decisions are made by a “super majority” or “majority”. However, finding the decision that everyone can support generally saves time in the long run, because the “dissenters” even in a super majority often will raise issues at later stages in the work, or not “own” the decision.

Conclusion

Collaboration is an approach that requires specific skills to be successful. The skills are: defining purpose, moving to action and results, building trust and resolving conflict. They can help avoid the most common reasons collaborations collapse and lead to successful results that can change communities and lives of people for the better.