



## **Trust – the glue in effective collaborations**

### ***Julian Powe***

*The collaboration started well based on great expectations together with strong mutual trust. Then things began to go wrong. One CEO wanted to move quickly to bid for a significant contract, but the other organisation began to feel that she was becoming inaccessible and their contribution was being ignored. Tensions rose and the collaboration started to unravel. The third party who had been involved as a trusted advisor to the collaboration from the start then intervened, open dialogue was renewed and both organisations made adjustments. The collaboration has gone on to achieve excellent results.*

Stories like this are increasingly common in the nonprofit sector. Many charities that would previously not have done so are now collaborating due to funding pressures and the move to larger contracts; a changing external environment. Thinking the unthinkable has become the order of the day – talking to that competitor charity or even working with that much less capable nonprofit down the road!

This is absolutely not just a nonprofit sector trend. The latest biennial IBM Global CEO Study, called *Leading through Connections*, is based on 1,700 CEO interviews in 64 countries. The convergence of the digital, social and media spheres is “connecting customers, employees and partners in new ways to organisations and to each other. CEOs are naming collaboration as the number one trait that they are looking for in their people, with 75% of them calling it critical”.<sup>1</sup>

A high level of trust is a critical ingredient of successful collaboration, not least because it lessens the major elephant trap of cultural difference. The challenges and difficulties in achieving successful collaborative efforts mean that trust is often placed under considerable strain in a range of different relationships, and needs to be preciously guarded and sustained.

*‘I am not sure I rate the other organisation’s skills and capabilities.’*

*‘As a trustee of this charity, I think that the whole thing is moving too fast. I do not think that the CEO has got the timing right.’*

*‘We have not got on too well with their CEO in the past, which makes me wonder whether we can trust the other organisation as a whole to deliver.’*

*‘I have to trust the Project Director, and allow her to make the right judgements for this collaboration, keeping us informed as we go. But that is not to say it is easy.’*

Our experience at the Centre for Charity Effectiveness leads us to offer **five frames** and **five action areas** to support the leaders of collaborative enterprises develop and sustain the trust levels they need.

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<sup>1</sup> IBM Institute for Business Value (2012). p06.



## **Five Frames**

### **1. Getting under the skin of trust.**

How can we make the concept of trust more understandable, something to be practised and improved? Charlie Green at Trusted Advisor suggests that, above all, we like to do business with people who genuinely care about us and our interests.

His Trust Equation itemises four ingredients of strong trust based relationships:

- Reliability – the dependability and predictability of our actions and commitments
- Credibility – the authority of our voice, our opinions, our knowledge and our experience
- Intimacy – our ability to create safe conditions for close relationships through our discretion, our empathy and our listening
- Self-orientation – our focus. If I am mainly focused on my objectives and interests rather than yours then my trustworthiness is likely to decrease. But if I am mainly focused on your objectives and needs and genuinely interested in them, then my trustworthiness is likely to rise<sup>2</sup>.

Ed Schein's influential work, *Helping*, also argues for the trust building power of simply offering and accepting help and assistance.<sup>3</sup>

### **2. Surfacing resistance.**

Bruce Tuckman's 1965 *Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing* team development model, remains an important frame in collaboration.<sup>4</sup> The more quickly and effectively we can surface understandable resistance, then the better we can move through these stages. Resistance is above all the fear of loss and charities often have several potential 'losses' to fear in collaborative enterprises including control, hard won performance on behalf of beneficiaries, identity, quality relationships with key stakeholders, job and career prospects and funding.

### **3. Engendering real dialogue.**

'Communication, communication, communication' is the mantra for collaborative efforts: intense, on-going and unified with a real sense of transparency. Different audiences hearing different messages carried through different media can easily misinterpret these, undermining trust in the process. The quality of conversation between partners really matters.

Isaacs' topography of dialogue moves away from controlled discussions and debates characterised by advocacy and competition towards more skilful conversation and reflective dialogue involving exploration, strong listening and the generation of new insights.<sup>5</sup> Such dialogue, skilfully developed, also helps us avoid the biases that can easily afflict us as a result of irrational perspectives (for instance, deriving a view of an organisation from one person's opinion, or from disliking a counterpart such as the Finance Director).

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<sup>2</sup> Maister, D., Green, C., Galford, R. (2002). pp.69-83.

<sup>3</sup> Schein, E. (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Tuckman, B. (1965).

<sup>5</sup> Issacs, W. (1999).



#### **4. Giving ourselves and our collaborative partners time to think.**

All would surely agree as to the importance of investing substantial time in collaborations, building strong mutual understanding at the beginning and sustaining that investment throughout the process. But the many competing priorities crowding in on our time can make this extremely difficult to achieve.

Let us consider Nancy Kline's frame for constructing a powerful Thinking Environment.<sup>6</sup>

*'Everything we do depends for its quality on the thinking we do first'*

#### **A Powerful Thinking Environment – Ten Components**

- **Attention** – *'The quality of our attention determines the quality of other people's thinking'*
- **Incisive Questions** – *'Incisive questions remove limiting assumptions, freeing the mind to think afresh'*
- **Equality** – *'Knowing you will have your turn improves the quality of listening'*
- **Appreciation** – *'A 5:1 ratio of appreciation to criticism helps people think for themselves'*
- **Ease** – *'Ease creates. Urgency destroys'*
- **Encouragement** – *'Competition stifles encouragement and limits thinking'*
- **Feeling** – *'Crying can make us smarter'*
- **Information, Sometimes** – *'The Thinker needs information – at the right moment'*
- **Place** – *'A Thinking Environment says back to you, You Matter'*
- **Diversity** – *'Diversity raises the intelligence of groups'*

Three of these components stand out as particularly helpful in collaborative ventures:

- **Attention** – *'The quality of our attention determines the quality of other people's thinking'*

Kline suggests that raising our game in the way we pay attention to our collaborative partners, and suspend our biases, can make a huge difference. We might usefully reflect on the many limitations we bring to our own listening – how we finish others' sentences, interrupt, look away, spend our 'listening' time preparing what we are going to say next, and get too easily distracted.

- **Incisive Questions** – *'Incisive questions remove limiting assumptions, freeing the mind to think afresh'*

It pays to slow down early on to give ourselves and our partners time to think and to answer Kline's excellent question – *'What do we already know that we are going to find out in a year's time?'* And also ask questions such as:

- *What would it take to do an outstanding job together in satisfying the need of our beneficiaries?*

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<sup>6</sup> Kline, N. (1999).



- *If we were clearly achieving 100% of our common purpose and vision, what else would we be doing together?*
- *What are we assuming that is stopping us collaborate really effectively?*

- **Ease** – ‘Ease creates. Urgency destroys’

Kline suggests that ease is the space that a Thinking Environment needs to stay intact, really hard to achieve in our frenetic world. Yet, the more we are at ease with ourselves, the better quality attention and help we give to others.

*“The best conditions for thinking, if you really stop and notice are not tense. They are gentle. They are quiet. They are unrushed. They are stimulating, but not competitive. They are encouraging. They are paradoxically both rigorous and nimble.”<sup>7</sup>*

## **5. Paying attention to engagement levels.**

Collaborative efforts really take off when all stakeholders are strongly engaged. David Macleod’s four key drivers of engagement are a useful checklist for leaders seeking to ‘bind’ all collaborative parties in a spirit of trust:

- A powerful narrative setting out the why, what, how and when of the collaboration and connecting with everyone’s roles and contributions so that they can all see the part they are playing
- Highly effective communication, vertically, laterally and externally
- Strong values and behaviours consistently demonstrated by the joint leaders of the collaboration
- High quality managers, engaging inspiring and focusing their people in the day to day task.<sup>8</sup>

## **Five Action Areas**

We hope these action areas are helpful to organisations considering a collaboration or merger. We have also illustrated them with brief case studies drawn from recent experience - they are anonymised to protect client confidentiality.

### **1. Do not rush, particularly at the beginning – Create time to think**

Invest time to limber up, think together, establish common ground, surface resistance and create the environment for ‘seed corn trust’.

### **2. Always pay attention to vision, intent and next steps**

These are three key ingredients of successful collaboration:

- Vision - real sense of shared purpose that lights up the desired direction for the collaboration
- Intent – mutual interest, supportiveness and common values that generate collaborative warmth
- Next Steps – collaborative actions that propel us forward, meeting the different needs of the various parties.

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<sup>7</sup> Kline, N. (1999), 37.

<sup>8</sup> MacLeod, D., Clarke, N. (2009).



Keep an eagle eye open for the following characteristics throughout the collaborative effort and make the necessary adjustments (they will all come up at some stage):

- ‘Spinning wheels’ – Vision and intent are strong but you are going nowhere. Time to focus on next steps!
- Grinding it out’ – Intent and next steps are fine but it is all process and metrics and execution; where are you going and what difference are you making? Time to focus on vision!
- ‘Passive aggressive’ – Vision and next steps are in place, but it is all brains and no heart, insufficient warmth and trust, with a lot of blaming. Time to focus on intent!

### **Case study 1**

*We recently worked to support the merger of two organisations. One was failing due to an unsustainable business model and a shortage of funding. The Board bravely decided to approach another charity, aware that in this merger the majority of staff would be made redundant, including the CEO. But trustees and management alike trusted their vision, believed passionately in the services that they were delivering and that their beneficiaries demonstrated a still unmet need. Their vision and intent provided the glue for the successful merger.*

*The other organisation, in the same service area, also understood the vision and service need and realised that a fuller range of services offered by the merged organisation would be more attractive to their funders and commissioners. For this Board and management this vision justified the time spent in achieving the merger.*

### **3. Make trust levels an explicit focal point for the collaborative enterprise**

Treat trust as a ‘precious and fragile commodity’ by making its establishment and sustenance a key part of the collaborative process, as important as the overall strategy. Give yourself a model such as Charlie Green’s Trust Equation, educate your people about it, secure ownership and commitment, and regularly measure progress against it.

### **Case study 2**

*Trust needs to be built not only between collaborating parties but also within organisations, especially between Board and management. We worked with 12 advice organisations wanting:*

- *To identify areas of common interest in developing a collaborative Bidding Framework*
- *To understand the strengths and potential areas of opportunity for individual organisations*
- *To consider the different roles organisations might play in a collaborative bid*
- *To agree collaborative working principles and to use this as the building blocks to construct an outline bidding framework.*

*Through a series of workshops representatives of Boards and management shared in the process, building trust between and within the organisations. As a result, each organisation’s Board readily signed the final agreement because they had shared and understood the process.*



#### **4. Imbue the communication process with strong dialogue and engagement**

Pay attention to this, building a communication approach with a powerful narrative, strong information exchange, effective listening, and high levels of transparency. It is much better to say 'We don't know' if the facts are not yet clear. Above all, particularly in the conversations across the leadership teams, encourage a style of dialogue that is full of curiosity, genuine inquiry, empathetic listening and a strong desire to find and move forward on common ground.

##### **Case study 3**

*In one particular piece of work, our consultant used a change management approach to building a collaboration that explored contract readiness. Particularly useful when there are a large number of participants in the collaboration, a regular reexamination of the Red, Amber, Green status of key areas, helped surface issues, preserve focus and kept the collaboration moving forward.*

*In particular, through feedback loops, the effectiveness of communication (not just delivered, but heard and understood) could be checked. Other key areas for iterative review included checking the consistent engagement of stakeholders, the collaboration 'fit' and the cultural aspects of the collaboration. Additionally, resourcing collaboration is essential to success but often overlooked.*

#### **5. Use a good Trusted Advisor**

Bring in a third party who can help you facilitate the process, mitigate conflicts, overcome obstacles and engender deep levels of trust. Such a trusted advisor is best characterised by a deep understanding of the people side of collaboration; an ability to bring people together to talk about what is important to them and surface the difficult issues; and real patience. Above all, they will be great listeners and will genuinely care about you and what you are trying to achieve in the collaboration.

At Cass CCE our knowledge of the sector and our experience in supporting mergers and collaborations leads to our understanding that for this work to be successful and for maximum value to be created for the end beneficiaries, then it requires input way beyond checklists and process.

#### ***A final thought***

We hope that these thoughts are helpful and should be delighted to hear your views and perspectives.

And a last thought – strong collaborative efforts, based on trust, have the potential to become effective platforms for subsequent mergers that really deliver the great results that can so often elude full merger processes.



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## About the Author

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