# Talking Right:

## the promise of collaboration

by Bruce Anderson

## Introduction

Collaborative groups are popular these days across a wide span of interest groups. Conservationists and loggers are coming together with local communities to talk about sustainable forests and economies; low-income housing groups are aligning with food and anti-racism groups. mental health organizations are now actively cultivating collaborative relationships with schools, judicial systems, other social service agencies and community groups to design and implement programs that are more effective in helping youth who are in danger. Agencies who have operated in the same community for years, but who have had little contact other than mutual referrals, are now trying to design working arrangements that share resources, sustain healthy interpersonal working relationships, and produce genuine customer satisfaction.

If you ask some folks who are involved in a collaborative group why they are a part of it, they describe their efforts as setting right some of the injustices done by large bureaucracies in the past. Ask another member of the same group why they are a part of it, they will tell you their boss told them to show up. Still other members are eager to accomplish goals they have been unable to achieve on their own, while the person sitting down a couple of chairs has shown up because she is afraid of what would happen if she didn't.

Such is the nature of a collaborative group at the beginning. The promise of collaboration is that, while the interests of individual members may vary through the process, the result of the collaborative will have been to deepen and sustain the relationships between members while they work towards achieving goals that would have been impossible for one member to achieve on his/her own.

## What is a Collaborative?

The term "collaborative" is an umbrella term for the structure and processes used by a group of individuals who have come together to achieve a goal. There are many different models for collaboration, but within the differences are some general themes that keep emerging as attributes which distinguish collaboratives from other kinds of workgroups. (See page 3 box labeled *"Foundations For Collaboration)* It is important to note that the membership of a collaborative may be made from any collection of groups, and a collaborative may even be made up of different departments within the same company or agency. Groups can be comprised of any kind of business (profit or non-profit), volunteer service group, school, or other entity that is recognized by the parties as a group with something to contribute. In general terms, collaboratives are relationship-oriented and tend to be formed around activities that will require sustained interaction between the parties for a duration of time.

## How is a collaborative different from other types of workgroups?

There are three fundamental criteria of a Collaborative that distinguish it from other types of workgroups (see box "Are you collaborating, or is it something else?" ) First, the participants are willing to look at changes in the fundamental power relationships and traditional patterns of working together, with particular attention paid to the inclusion of traditionally under-represented groups. Second, collaborative workgroups pay focused attention to increasing the relational capacity of the participants. This does not mean "group therapy", but rather attention to agreeing on communication strategies, clarifying how decisions will be made and who gets to make them, having a conflict resolution process agreed to and in use, and

> **Work may call for muscle, know-how, and a sweet hand, but, as soon as we are engaged with other people, something else more important is required.…To love is to talk right. This clarity may be more essential to living and working with others than strong feelings and kind flowers.**
>
> **James Hillman**

sufficient attention paid to clarifying similar and divergent values and acknowledging the interests of all parties. This attention to relationships is based in the understanding that for trust to be built, collaborators must spend time getting beyond surface level judgements about each other. William Stafford, in his poem *A ritual to read to each other*, starts out by saying:

> *If you don't know the kind of*
> *person I am*
> *And I don't know the kind of*
> *person you are*
> *A pattern that others made may*
> *prevail in the world...*

Third, each member of the collaborative has expanded their horizons beyond the goal of meeting just their own needs. Collaborators *feel* the desire (and act on it) to help other members increase their capacity and satisfaction.

**Collaboration on the roof**

Years ago, Gina and I decided to add a family room onto our house. Knowing that shingling the roof was an important task to do correctly in order to avoid leaks, I invited my father to come and help. I had memories of him roofing our family home when I was a child. I am proud to say that he and I made it on the roof together until noon without an argument.

The struggle began when we were discussing the proper number of nails to put into each shingle as it was fastened to the roof. After a long discourse by my father on the merits of a two-nail per shingle strategy, I remember just looking at him and saying, " No. I am going to put as many nails as I choose into each shingle, and you can do whatever you want with the shingles you are applying." My answer to him was based in a desire to have my own way. After all, it was my house, my shingles, and he had come to help me. From where I was seated, it looked to me like all the balls were in my court. I remember, at the moment I told him I would be doing it my own way regardless of his expertise, being keenly aware that he was right. It didn't matter. In that interaction, the struggle for a son's autonomy from his father was being played out according to a centuries old story.

Gina, ever vigilant to the merits and the pitfalls in my character, was visibly moved by my story of my father's abuses when we got off the roof at lunch. I could tell she was moved partially because of her feeble and unsuccessful attempt not to laugh while I was pouring out my story, and also by her gentle reminder to me that this was yet another example of the painfully slow learning curve that I was enmeshed in related to the understanding of how power works in relationships. I distinctly remem-

## Are you collaborating, or is it something else?

Consider the different groups you have working relationships with. Which level are you operating at? What would you like to change?

### Level One: Isolated Work
Not actively destructive to the other

### Level Two: Networking
Exchanging information for mutual benefit. Involvement with the other for self-enhancement.

### Level Three: Coordination
Exchanging information and altering current activities/schedules for mutual benefit to achieve a linked purpose.

### Level Four: Cooperation
Exchanging information, altering activities/schedules, and sharing resources for mutual benefit to achieve a linked purpose.

### Level Five: Collaboration
Exchanging information, altering activities/schedules, sharing resources for mutual benefit to achieve a linked purpose, and intentionally enhancing the capacity of the other.

**Adapted from Arthur Himmelman**

ber, after telling her my story, deciding that both of them were out to get me.

Gina, my Dad, and I were *almost collaborative partners* in the roofing project. **1. We had a defined task to accomplish.** Come hell or high water, that roof was going to be done by Sunday night. **2. We had differing self-interests.** My Dad was genuinely interested in contributing his skill and knowledge to the task, I was interested in maintaining control over decisions made related to the task, and Gina was interested in supporting me and seeing that the children were not hurt by tools and shingles flying off the roof. **3. We were aware that this project was dependent on long-term relationships.** If we could not complete this project successfully, what would that say about our family? In some ways, our futures were intertwined and dependent on the successful completion of this project. **4. We each brought different capacities and skills.** My Dad brought knowledge about shingling. I brought a strong back, an ability to learn new skills, and a desire to complete the task within a given time frame. Gina brought a desire to listen compassionately to my story, a willingness to mediate, and an attention to all things peripheral to the roofing task. **5. We had control** over the planning, the methods used to complete the tasks, and evaluation of our success.

**Where we got stuck**

As a group, we got stuck at the sixth element. What could have made us *collaborative* partners, rather than simply individuals engaged in a task together, would have been the addition of the three most difficult elements of collaboration:

**6. Intentionally working to enhance the capacity and outcomes of the other partners.** Enhancing the capacity of the other partners requires each collaborator to welcome the other partners into the relationship by finding ways for each members gifts and skills to be drawn out and utilized, seeking ways for each partner to be acknowledged and honored for their contributions, and finding ways to contribute to other members needs and desires. The sixth attribute requires partners to have a genuine desire for the other partners to be successful. To *feel* that desire, and work towards it. Clearly, I was the stumbling block in the potential collaborative. Even though I invited my Father into the project, I did not do any of the three things required for enhancing his capacity. According to the "*Are You Collaborating…*" diagram on page two, I was stuck at Level

One (Isolated Work), while my father and Gina were demonstrating Level Four (Cooperation).

**7. There is acknowledgment of past injustices, with action taken to correct imbalances and heal wounds.** It's no accident that this element is often avoided in working relationships. The first five elements can be accomplished by juggling resources, time, and tasks without an open demonstration of emotion. But true collaboration has an element of the heart to it. And anytime the heart

is involved, there is the possibility for strong feelings to arise, which often first take form as conflict and work towards harmony. To be willing to collaborate is to be willing to engage in conflict. In our situation, to successfully complete the roofing job operating *collaboratively* would eventually require talking about our past and re-imagining how a father and son could share authority in the future.

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**8. Each member has expanded their horizons beyond the goal of meeting their own needs and is in service to other group members needs.** In a world that focuses on self-satisfaction, personal gain, and independence, it often seems as if cooperation and mutual help are contrary to organizational and personal goals. When this element is genuinely in play, each member thinks "we" instead of "I", and finds ways to intentionally surpass other members initial expectations. Needless to say, our ship had sailed long before we reached this element.

**What helps collaboration be successful?**

Here are some examples from the long list of helpful tips for successful collaboration:
•Diligently addressing the social injustice history of collaborative partners. This involves telling the story from different vantage points, listening carefully to how individuals have been effected, providing opportunity for healing to occur, and designing specific strategies that work to change old patterns.
•Targeting traditionally under-represented groups to be members.
•Acknowledging the need for both *first intelligence* (knowledge of bureaucratic systems, intellectual understanding, formal education) and *second intelligence* (innate gifts, intuition, spiritual capacity) to be valued for their different capacities and contributions.
•Conflict resolution methods learned, processes

agreed to and used. This may require outside facilitation in the initial stages to avoid apparent bias.
•Not framing the collaborative as "some people gaining power" and "some people losing power", but as each participant getting their unique needs met in companionship with other participants.

**Remaining Vigilant**

The difficulty in setting up and sustaining a collaborative occurs during each stage of the process, at least partially because the collaborative model requires questioning the fundamental assumptions about the power of participating members during each step of the developmental process. As a way of continuing the dialogue related to authority and collaboratives, here are three issues that I believe merit particular attention and vigilance in order to keep the groups mission and activities collaborative.

*1. Using collaboration when it's not the right tool.* To many people, the idea of collaboration implies a deeper level of engagement, involvement of traditionally under-heard voices, and more sustainable decisions. Because of the promise of both the process and the outcomes of collaboration, there is a tendency for regulators to recommend, or even stipulate, that collaboratives be formed as a condition of receiving funding or remaining in compliance with existing regulations. Unfortunately, this can sometimes mean that a regulators desire for "everyone to be at the table" means collaboratives are formed when they are not the most appropriate, efficient, or necessary tool.

Collaboratives take considerable energy and time to initiate and maintain, and should only be used when other forms of decision-making cannot be depended on for equitable outcomes. Certainly,

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every decision made does not need to be collaborative, but it often takes some collaborative decision-making before members begin to depend on and trust the decision making integrity of other partners.

*2. Non-genuine authority transfers.* Some years back, social service agencies adopted the practice of establishing advisory councils as a way to engage service users and other community members in providing feedback about the organizations

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practices and plans. In the advisory council model, individuals are free to contribute ideas, but the final authority for decision-making remains firmly embedded in the leadership of the organization. A close inspection of some current "collaboratives" seems to reveal that the advisory council approach has now been hidden within the umbrella of collaboration. Former members of advisory councils may now be seated at a collaborative table, but still hold little formal influence or decision-making authority. Still in an advisory role, these collaborative members are not seen with the same level of capacity, influence, and ability to contribute as other members of the collaborative.

*3. Collaborative empowerment vs. collaborative betterment.* Arthur Himmelman has developed some very comprehensive work related to understanding collaboration (see Communities Working Collaboratively For A Change. 1992). One contribution of his that has been helpful to me is the distinction between *collaborative betterment* and *collaborative empowerment*. The fundamental issues that separate the two are how authority is used and whether or not the collaborative is sustainable without institutional resources and control.

Collaborative *betterment* is identified by the characteristics of: a)large and influential entities do analysis and define problems, usually in terms of institutional frameworks and values, b)governance of the collaborative is controlled by institutions, community is in an advisory role, c)staff are responsible to institutions, d)action plans emphasize the

ideas of professionals and experts, and e)implementation processes do not include giving up control of decision-making and resources from the authority of the primary institution.

On the other hand, collaborative *empowerment* is characterized by: a)establishing the process in a community setting, b)early work is related to values, c)stories and data are both used, d)agreements to proceed are on the basis of community identified goals and outcomes, e)power is equally shared by community and institutions, f)evaluation is done in public settings on a continual basis, and g)community control of resources necessary to sustain the activities are in place prior to the end of the collaborative.

Betterment has the overriding notion of a large bureaucracy doing something "good" to a local community. Empowerment has the overriding notion that defining what is "good", how it is delivered, and how it is evaluated, all require significant control by local noninstitutional citizenry.

As social service agencies move more towards community development practices as a way to expand help, engage communities, and share power, these two approaches to collaboration will continue to serve as a basis for distinguishing the willingness of institutional representatives to genu-

> **The defintions of *collaborative betterment* and *collaborative empowerment* can serve as a basis for distinguishing the willingness of institutional representatives to genuinely share power and resources.**

inely share power and resources.

**Ending**

In the end, the proliferation of collaboratives may just come down to walking the talk. As social service agencies rally around the ideas of community development, self-determination for social service users, and power-sharing forms of engagement, it is highlighting the fact that the internal practices of many social service agencies are not in alignment with the goals and expectations those same agencies have for their customer base and the communities they serve. Could it be that the best

way to learn how to improve a community's capacity to include children and families who are at the edges is to learn how to collaborate amongst ourselves first?  Collaborative structures can provide the framework and opportunity for that learning.

For collaboration to be enduring, it depends not only on the counting of successes and the spreading of stories, but also on a fundamental shift in each collaborators desire to move through conflict as a way to sustain peace.  Collaboration, at its core, is peacemaking.  To call it otherwise would be to disregard and lessen the courage and commitment of individuals who have participated, and will participate in the future, in collaboratives. As William Stafford writes, in the last lines of *A ritual to read to each other*:

*though we could fool each other, we should consider— lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.*
*For it is important that awake people be awake, or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep.*
*The signals we give—yes or no, or maybe— should be clear; the darkness around us is deep.*

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