

“Cooperation, collaboration, and co-creation aren’t just interesting concepts, but functional requirements for thriving in the 21st century.”

Burgess et al., 2015



THE RADICAL GUIDE TO COLLABORATION



WHY THIS RADICAL GUIDE?

We find ourselves in a time of global crisis: ecological disasters, huge movements of refugees across the planet, pandemic illnesses, and growing social inequalities.

However, it isn't all bad news; matching this rise of problems is an unprecedented rise of solution-finders.

Never before have there been so many non-profit organisations, social enterprises and even corporate businesses looking to support the world they live in. If you are reading this guide, it's likely that you are part of that movement. You might be a project manager in a community health organisation or the CEO of a social enterprise. You might be an environmental scientist working on climate change campaigns or a business employee who is agitating for greener and more socially responsible practices. Regardless of which part of the positive-change web you currently represent, you have no doubt already worked out that the problems facing us are too big to solve alone. One person, one organisation, one community can only achieve so

much. Creating large-scale, transformational change requires many hands and many different perspectives.

As [systems thinking](#) shows us, issues like Indigenous Australians with a 20 year lower life expectancy than their non-Indigenous counterparts, or the steadily worsening bushfires in California and elsewhere, are not blips in an otherwise well-functioning global system. These are not isolated problems that can be easily fixed with simple solutions or new technology. Rather, they require complex, multi-faceted and, most of all, collaborative solutions.

This Radical Guide is based on the hard learnings and personal stories of a team of six people across three very different organisations in Australia who came together to find systems-level solutions for public health challenges. Our project was called [Culture Well](#). We called this guide radical because unlike most guides on collaboration we're openly sharing what went wrong in our project, what our hard lessons were and how you can avoid them. We've tried to get beyond motherhood statements and surface sentiments to talk about the sticky, challenging reality of working closely with other human beings who may have

different backgrounds, languages, needs, pressures and agendas. We encourage you to get beyond superficial partnerships that can tick the collaboration box and invest in relationships with real people who openly bring their whole messy selves to the table and learn how to productively and caringly work with each other.

Why?

Because we believe that unless we learn to work together across different sectors and cultures, both transparently and effectively, we will not be able to turn the rising tide of inequality, environmental devastation and deteriorating mental and physical health that is threatening to overwhelm us.

Collaboration isn't the answer.

But it is an important strategy to get to the answers that work for all of us.



JOURNEY MAP

How to Use This Guide



Preparing for Collaboration

If you are unsure what type of collaborative approach is right for you, start here.



Vital Insights

Want a quick overview of our most important insights into collaboration? [Start here.](#)



The Culture Well Project

Here's a bit more about us so you know who we are.



Essential Skills & Habits

This is the most important and radical part of this guide!



Activities

There are activity cards at the end of this guide to help you overcome problems and arrive at critical insights. You'll see them referenced throughout the guide.



Evaluation

Struggling to evaluate your collaboration? Here are some unusual tips from our impact evaluator.

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/ ONE VITAL
INSIGHTS INTO
COLLABORATION

1. Collaboration happens between people, not organisations

Signing a collaborative agreement between multiple organisations doesn't automatically result in their people finding it easy to collaborate. After all, the actual work happens between individuals, and to work well together requires personal relationships - the secret, invisible lubricant of every successful collaboration! Invest in relationships. [Read more.](#)



COLLABORATION HAPPENS BETWEEN PEOPLE NOT ORGANISATIONS

#2. Honesty and transparency underpin all successful collaboration

When brainstorming this guide with our team, honesty, transparency and courageous communication came up as key points again and again. At an organisational level this means openly discussing power dynamics, internal processes and constraints, budgets and agendas. On a personal level, this means sharing our inner experiences, struggles and confusion. These are the single most important habits to get into for effective collaboration and arguably the most difficult in a professional context. We found that remaining strongly mission-focused rather than organisation-focused helped us to overcome our resistance to this level of vulnerability. [Read more.](#)

#3. The process you use to achieve your outcomes has impact in and of itself

The process you use to get to the future is the future you are going to get (1). Inclusive and participatory processes are valuable in and of themselves because they break down power structures and strengthen community networks. Focusing on the process also means you minimise unintended, negative consequences and maximise positive ones. Our focus groups were a great example. Because we used highly-inclusive, systems-mapping methodologies, most participants (including the ones we didn't create interventions for) told us how therapeutic the process had been. The focus groups were not meant to be interventions, yet they still gave people greater understanding of the factors determining their health. [Read more.](#)

#4. Alignment on values, goals and roles in the early stages supports effective conflict resolution later on

Building a stable framework for the project is the very first stage of collaboration. This includes: creating a shared understanding of project goals, agreeing upon values and ways of working, and setting clear roles and responsibilities. If not done thoroughly, you will encounter many unnecessary problems along the way. This process sometimes feels unnecessary or overly 'feel good', especially when it comes to values, but we found that the time invested in this process paid off. The agreed framework and shared language this created streamlined and supported effective decision-making and the resolution of small conflicts many times over. [Read more.](#)

#5. Don't underestimate how long it takes to create alignment

Alignment, trust and interpersonal relationships are the crux of effective collaboration, but take time. And we mean LOTS of time. We'd thought that a single day dedicated to alignment was enough to kick-start the process and that the rest would happen naturally alongside 'doing the work'. Three months into the project and nothing much was happening. There wasn't enough alignment created at the beginning for the work to flow. Many funders want good collaboration but don't want to fund these 'fuzzy' early phases - the ones that make or break

collaborative efforts. Push back on your funder, fund it yourself or find other creative ways to invest thoroughly in this phase. [Read more.](#)

#6. Team members joining the collaborative later need thorough induction

A few times in our project, team members changed. Each time someone came onboard, we assumed they would be briefed by their own organisation thoroughly enough for them to get aligned with our collaborative team. We were wrong. Alignment needs to be created with each individual who joins the team, because after all, collaboration happens between people, not organisations. [Read more.](#)

#7. Embrace challenge and emotion

Challenges are an inevitable part of any collaboration and, when handled well, they can be great opportunities for new insight and growth. Take time to understand how a given conflict or problem occurred, and create space to unpack people's emotional reactions. Our hidden emotional world has a big impact on our professional work, especially in the challenging, conflict-rich environment of collaboration. In fact, conflict is a necessary and fruitful part of collaboration. Encouraging our team members to voice their concerns and express their emotions enabled more productive and effective work and allowed us to turn conflict into a productive part of the project. [Read more.](#)

#8. Get clear on the decision-making process

When organisations and individuals have different needs, agendas and pressures, decision-making can easily become a point of tension. Balancing the needs for efficiency and inclusion is key; the more shared decisions you make as a team, the more collaborative the process is, but including everyone in everything is time-consuming and expensive.

We found that we needed to set clear ground rules for decision-making by asking: which decisions can the project team make without consulting their organisation's senior management? Which decisions does everyone need to be involved in? And which decisions can specific organisations/people make alone? [Read more.](#)

#9. Making power dynamics explicit enables deep collaboration

Every collaborative partnership will have a unique composition of power dynamics and privilege. One partner might hold the funding, one might be closer to the ground and another might be more well-networked. Just as importantly, some team members may have socio-cultural privilege, or even just charisma, whilst others are operating in a second language. Have honest, sensitive discussions about what these dynamics are and how to mitigate them. Get comfortable talking about power. [Read more.](#)

#10. Collaborating organisations must empower their representatives to make decisions on their behalf, and to work in ways they are not used to

Collaboration requires a specific working culture that is agile, adaptive and equitable. However, each person in the collaborative is also representing an organisation that might have a different set of assumptions about how decisions are made and how power is distributed within a team. If collaborators in the team do not have explicit authority to share power and make decisions (largely) independently of their own managers, the collaborative process will be very slow. To minimise challenges presented by these differences, talk with the senior management of all the organisations at the outset. We wished we'd asked: if the project has a flat structure, how will people representing larger, more hierarchical organisations adapt to this? [Read more.](#)

#11. Collaboration is a practice

These insights are ones that need to be revisited again and again. Reaching alignment during initial brainstorming sessions doesn't mean that you will agree on all decisions to come, just as expressing your concerns once doesn't mean you won't have to do it again. These lessons need to be turned into habits and practiced over and over...and over. Resist the tendency to turn these into checklists that once achieved can be put aside. Rather, consider them new skills and ways of working that will support inclusive, collaborative engagement wherever you choose to coordinate with other humans.

WHO IS CULTURE WELL?

Culture Well is a deeply collaborative project that aims to find systems-level solutions for low wellbeing and high rates of chronic disease in refugee and migrant communities in Australia. This project is funded by the Federal Department of Health, and from the outset was intended to be exploratory and innovative.

[Read more here](#)

OUR THREE COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS:



Asthma Australia

A national health-promotion charity focusing on improving the lives of people with asthma, with significant infrastructure, public health experience and national networks.



One Health Organisation

A health-focused consultancy organisation specialising in facilitating collaboration, Collaboration Readiness Training, Co-Design, and capacity-building community health projects.



World Wellness Group

An integrative medical clinic specialising in healthcare for vulnerable people, particularly those with language and cultural barriers such as disadvantaged migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum. They operate as a social enterprise, health prevention charity and advocate for health equity.

Role in Culture Well: Relationship management. Program development & management. Data analysis.
Background: Anthropology. Nonprofit consulting.
Key Skills: Project strategy. Relationship building. Facilitation. Documentation.

Role in Culture Well: Public health philosophy. Systems thinking training.
Background: Philosophy. Nonprofit leadership.
Key Skills: Storytelling. Creative problem solving. Systems thinking.

Role in Culture Well: Lead facilitator. Program development. Project planning. Documentation.
Background: Corporate branding and communication strategy. Nonprofit consulting.
Key Skills: Project planning. Strategic thinking. Facilitation. Effective communication.

STEPHANE
Partner,
One Health Organisation



BENJAMIN
Partner,
One Health Organisation

TEAM MEMBERS

JANINE
Projects and Partnerships
Manager, Asthma Australia



NERA
Founding Board Member,
Head of Community Projects,
World Wellness Group

Role in Culture Well: Budgets. Reporting & Accountability. Project Management.
Background: Public health and preventative health programs.
Key Skills: Project management. Attention to detail. Systems thinking.

MICHELE
CEO,
Asthma Australia

Role in Culture Well: Champion. Strategic advisor.
Background: Nonprofit leadership. Social enterprise. Corporate marketing.
Key Skills: Strategic planning. Innovation. Leadership.

Role in Culture Well: Community liaison. On-the-ground networking. Event coordination.
Background: Public health. CALD health projects. Academic research.
Key Skills: Multicultural health research. Community development. Local stakeholder engagement.



/ TWO

PREPARING FOR COLLABORATION

2.1 WHICH TYPE OF COLLABORATION IS BEST FOR YOU?

Throughout most of this guide we refer to a kind of collaboration we call ‘deep collaboration’. This is the kind of collaboration that is essential for solving entrenched systemic issues with complex causes.

What sets this apart from other types of collaboration is the depth of the co-creation involved in the process; it’s a kind of long-form co-design process that gives all participating organisations decision-making power and ownership of both the process and the outcomes. But it isn’t all roses. Getting real about sharing power is messy. Building the trust and relationships required to do this well takes time and money and is something most funders don’t value enough to fund properly. When you have multiple voices and owners you have to be prepared for things to end up somewhere very different than you imagined when you set out: it requires continually rethinking how to achieve your strategic goals. However, it creates room for new ideas, unexpected benefits and strong connections that will continue to bear fruit for years to come.

ACTIVITY #1

6 Thinking Hats For Robust Discussions

Time required: 60+ mins

People: All relevant team members

Format: Round table discussion

De Bono’s ‘Six Thinking Hats’ is a tool for exploring problems and ideas from different angles. There are different ways of thinking about problems and ideas, and by consciously spending time in each of these different modes, you can uncover new insights and perspectives.

Activity Card

Yes, we are fans of deep collaboration. However, there is no ‘right’ way to do collaboration. The kind of approach best suited to short-term, well-defined projects is very different from the kind needed for long-term, complex projects. It is not always necessary to spend time and money creating strong alignment and building personal connections if the problem has a quick, relatively simple solution. Deep collaboration may also not be ‘right’ for you if you don’t have the funding to support it - even if your project might benefit from it. Consider the discussion questions on the following page when choosing your collaboration style.

KEY CONCEPT: COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Collective Impact is a framework or methodology for achieving large-scale social change through broad, cross-sector collaboration. First described by John Kanier and Mark Kramer in 2011 [\(2\)](#), it usually refers to a place-based initiative where a wide variety of local actors (NGOs, individuals, councils and businesses) coordinate their individual activities to more effectively influence a specific local problem.

There is a significant overlap between Collective Impact and deep collaboration. We think of Collective Impact as a form of deep collaboration, as it requires all the skills and actions laid out in this guide. However, deep collaboration also encompasses other forms and methodologies for working together, such as three NGOs coming together to work on a single project that addresses national issues.

Hank Rubin and Leonard Brock say that “Collective Impact really is much more than collaboration! ... Collaboration happens when we work together on the same project. ... On the other hand, Collective Impact focuses on change inside each partner organization. It begins when we, as a community, agree to a set of shared outcomes ... and then ... figure out what we – individually and organizationally – can best do to achieve those shared goals.” [\(3\)](#)

Discussion Questions:



- How complex is the problem I am trying to solve?
- How open to deep collaboration is my organisation and the organisations I want/ need to collaborate with?
- How much time am I able to invest into creating alignment?
- How flexible is the grant in terms of outcomes, outputs and activities?
- Do all partnering organisations have capacity to develop their crucial ‘soft’ skills like communication and transparency?
- What does your organisation hope to achieve through collaboration that it could not achieve alone?

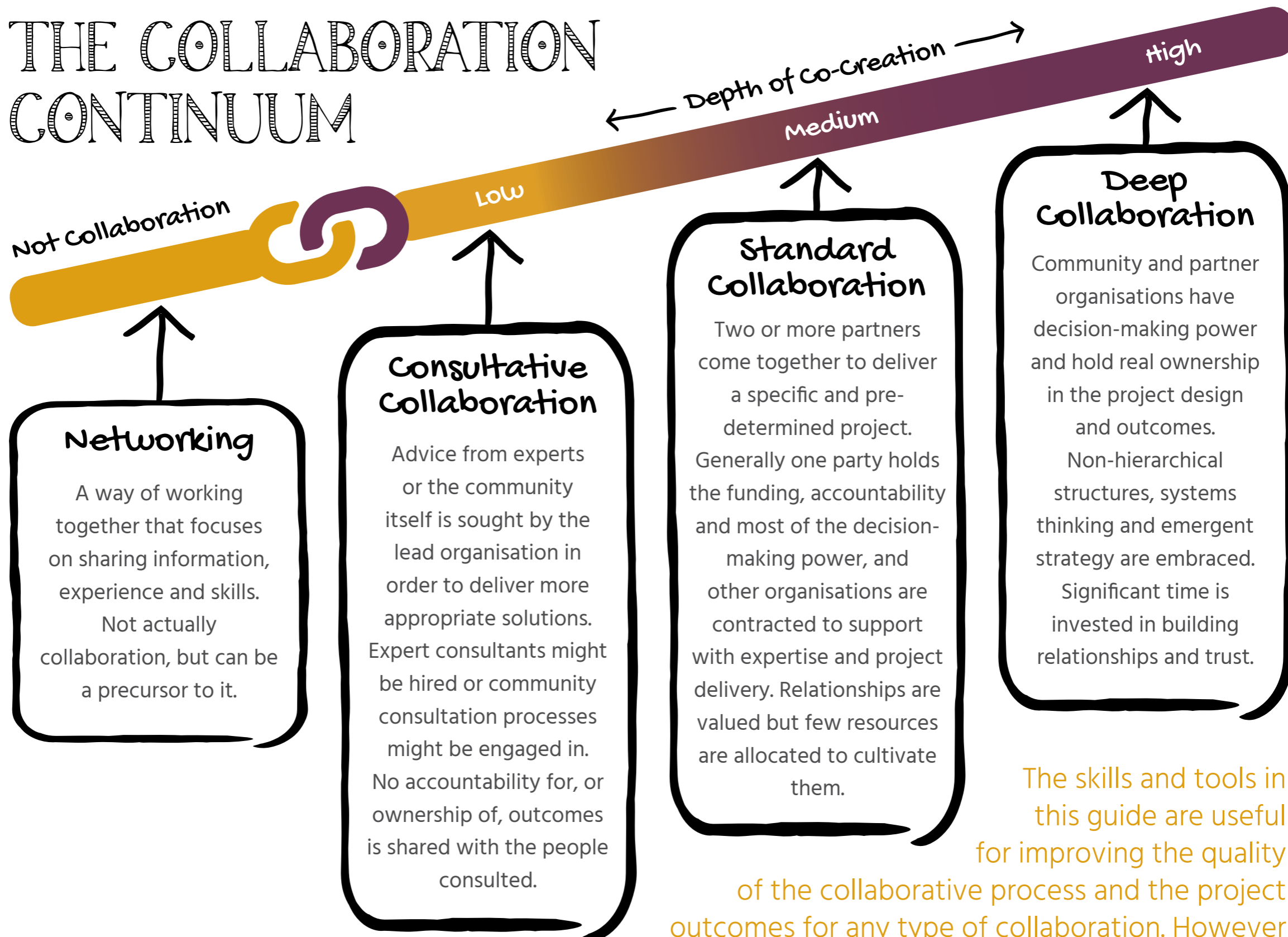
“ Collaboration is a very broad word. First and foremost ask, ‘What is collaboration to you?’ ”



NERA

Founding Board Member/
Head of Community Projects,
World Wellness Group

THE COLLABORATION CONTINUUM



The skills and tools in this guide are useful for improving the quality of the collaborative process and the project outcomes for any type of collaboration. However they are absolutely essential for those engaging in deep collaboration, including Collective Impact.

2.2 IS YOUR ORGANISATION COLLABORATION READY?

If your organisation isn't set up well for collaboration you will waste precious time and resources as your staff try to juggle the conflicting expectations of their workplace and the requirements of the collaborative project.

Before getting started with the collaborative work itself, we recommend considering how well your organisational culture and structure support collaboration, including how strategy is created and decisions are made, and how the collaborating parties' organisational cultures differ.

In the Culture Well project, it took us a long time to identify that issues relating to organisational structure and differences in culture were creating barriers to effective action in our collaborative team. A round-table discussion at the outset would have helped us eliminate unnecessary delays.

Discussion Questions:

- How are power and decision-making distributed within your organisation?
- Who has authority to change strategic goals and develop strategy?
- How can you support your staff to be good collaborators within the bounds of your organisational structures?



Understand the influence of organisational structure

Prepare for collaboration by thinking about how your organisation's structure and size will affect its capacity to collaborate easily. **We found that small, agile, flat-structured organisations adapt the most easily to deep collaboration**, as they tend to already work more collaboratively within their own teams. Larger organisations often require more structure and hierarchy simply to operate smoothly. This adds an extra challenge, as a rigid system of project officers, project managers and senior managers can easily prevent the adaptability and shared decision-making that allow you to leverage the skills of your collaborative team for greatest impact. The simplest way around this problem is to choose your collaborative project lead carefully. This person should have enough authority within the organisation to make important strategic decisions and to push back against the existing organisational culture where necessary.

Vital Insight #10:

Collaborating organisations must empower their representatives to make decisions on their behalf, and to work in ways they are not used to.



“ There was a time in the project when I was really struggling with the differences between my home organisation and the Culture Well project. It felt like both teams wanted very different things from me and I was out of my depth in navigating the complexities and contradictions that I faced. Even though our CEO is very supportive of this work, my organisation didn’t at the time have the processes in place to support this kind of collaboration. I wish I had been more open about feeling torn between two different cultures earlier on and let the Culture Well team know that I had pressures coming from my finance and legal departments that made me feel like deep collaboration wouldn’t be possible. The fact that I had only recently started work with Asthma Australia also made this harder for me. ”

JANNE

Projects and
Partnerships Manager,
Asthma Australia



Rethink strategy

Many organisations understand strategy as something created above and delivered below. This can be problematic because each decision needing to be approved by senior people will slow down the process. We found that collaboration works best when each of the collaborators - with their different networks and knowledge - are able to make fast decisions and adjust their strategy as new information or opportunities come to light. This is known as emergent strategy. Working with emergent strategy means you have to get comfortable with uncertainty, as the details of the project plan, the timeline and even the budget can keep changing. **How will your team manage and create permission for this level of uncertainty?**

Embracing the uncertainty of emergent strategy can feel impossible when the project funder expects you to provide and adhere to a carefully detailed project plan detailing 12 months of activities and KPIs. Be courageous in your conversations with funders - if you think that an adaptive strategic approach will be more fruitful for your project, negotiate this with your funder at the outset.

“ Collaboration thrives in non-hierarchical structures, when groups can self-organise and respond iteratively to achieve their project goals. If you are coming from a more hierarchical organisation, having the involvement of a senior manager on this kind of project is crucial. You need someone who has enough decision-making power and confidence to enable the emergent strategy that moves the project forward. ”



MICHELE

CEO,
Asthma Australia

KEY CONCEPT: EMERGENT STRATEGY

The world is constantly changing around us; the information we have today will be different tomorrow; every time we enact plans, we learn new things. These are the lessons that inform emergent strategy. This kind of strategy gets clear on the end goal, but allows the smaller tactical decisions to unfold and emerge as we walk the path towards

our vision of change. Responding and adapting to shifting circumstances allows for surprising innovation and the ability to take advantage of new opportunities. We have found that emergent strategy naturally goes well with collaboration, as each organisation brings their knowledge, their networks and their capabilities to the project, allowing it to evolve over time. [Read more here](#)

Explore your differences

When we work with organisations very different from ourselves, we are more likely to come across different approaches to strategy, decision-making and hierarchy. These differences in internal culture can create significant challenges, especially when they remain invisible.

Despite the challenges involved, we strongly advocate for collaboration across sectors and with other organisations very different from your own, as this is often the most fertile ground for innovation and systems change. Collaborating with divergent organisations means that more of the system of social change is involved. From a systems thinking perspective, this increases the likelihood of creating transformative, sustainable change.

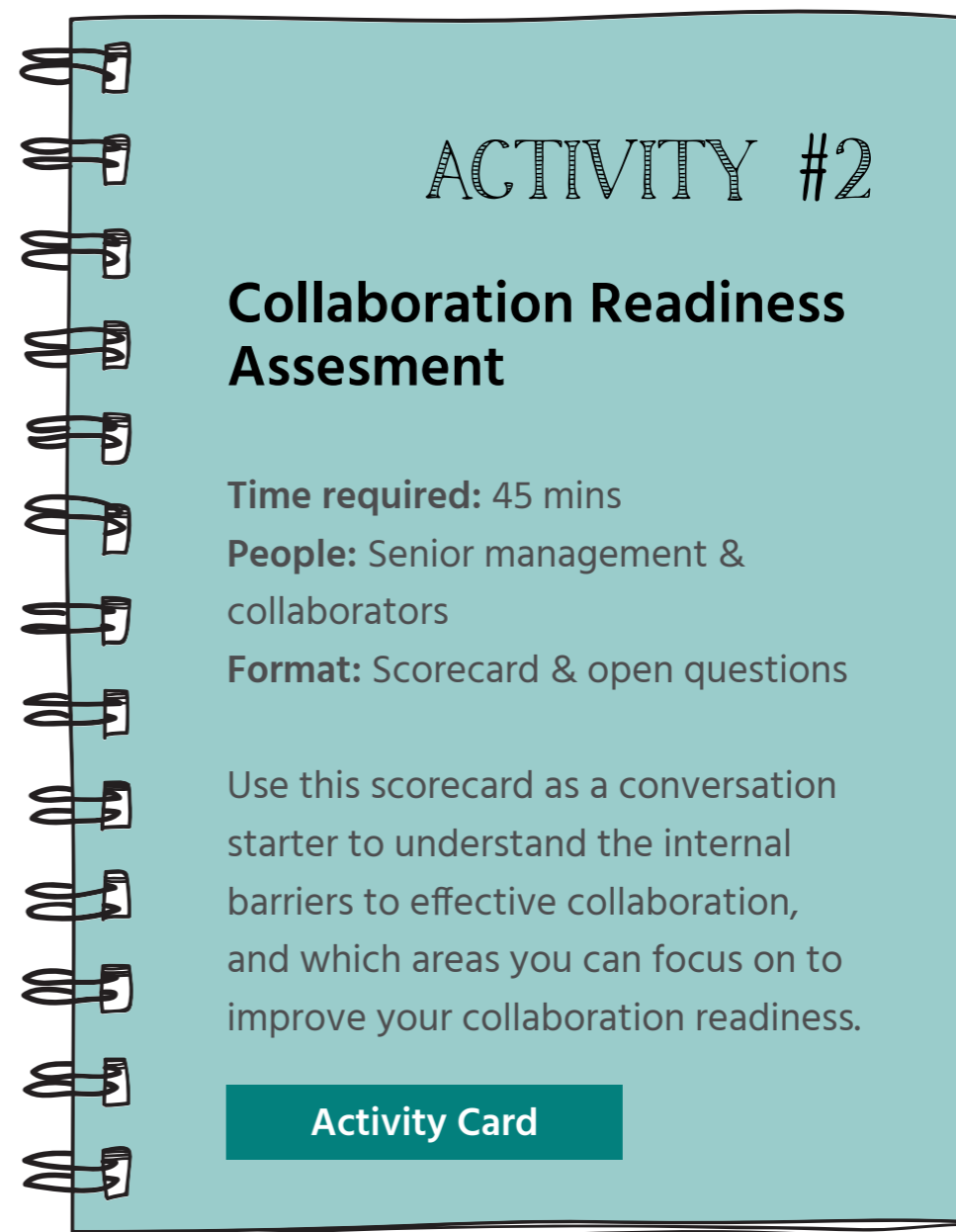
In order to mitigate the potential for conflict resulting from organisational differences, include culture clashes in your risk management process by teasing out what these conflicts might be and how to manage them.

How to prepare yourself well for collaboration

- Understand the type of collaboration you are going for and what it requires.
- Realistically assess your own organisation's readiness for this kind of work.
- Set up internal processes that support your representatives to collaborate easily.
- Put the most senior person you can on the collaborative team.

- Discuss your differences in organisational cultures across the collaborative, especially in regards to power, decision-making, adaptability and transparency.

This process can be facilitated internally, but is probably best done by an external facilitator with experience in deep collaboration.



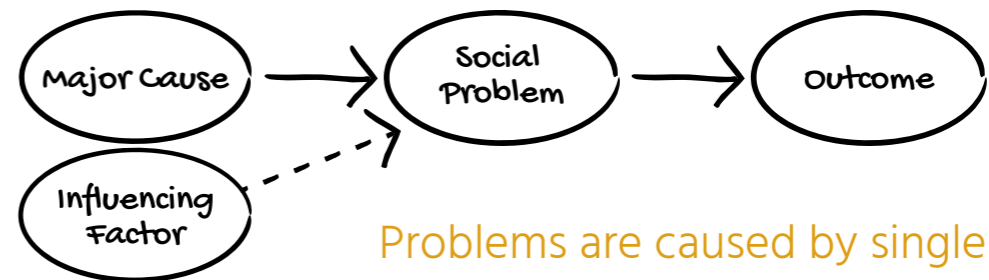
KEY CONCEPT: SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems thinking is a way of understanding social phenomena and problems using an ecological model. Rather than the usual way of seeing problems as having discrete, linear causes, systems thinking recognises that real life is messy, entangled and complex. Problems have many causative factors and influences. They do not exist in isolation: each factor or actor in the system is influenced by, and influences, many others. Relationships between things are often as important as the things themselves.

Systems thinking approaches to social change absolutely require collaboration; when we are trying to influence a whole system or network, this cannot be done alone.

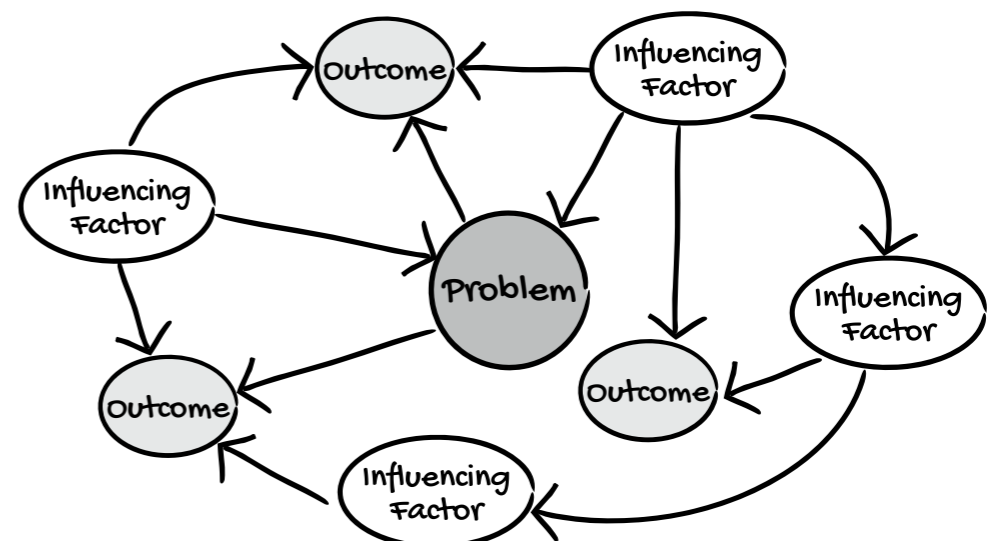
[Read more here](#)

Linear Causality



Problems are caused by single issues and occur in a straight line.

Complexity Theory

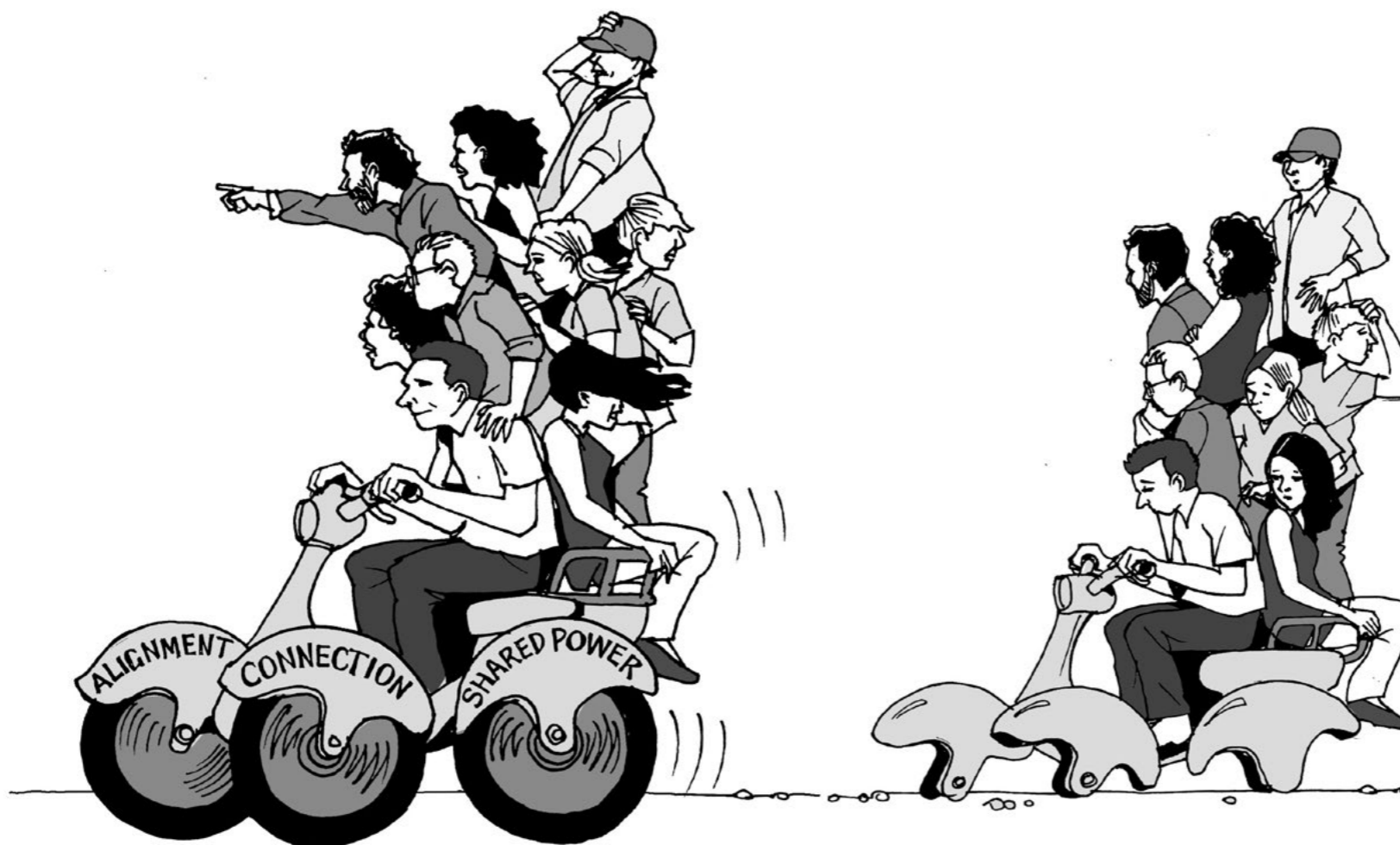


Problems are complex, with many influencing factors and feedback loops.



/ THREE

THE ESSENTIAL
COLLABORATION
SKILLS



Alignment, connection and shared power are the three wheels that the tricycle of collaboration needs to move forward.

Each of these requires time and resource to develop, and absolutely determine the success of your collaboration. Many collaborators unconsciously hope that coming together with a shared goal and a desire for social change will magically create the conditions required for collaboration. Unfortunately, it doesn't.

At the start of Culture Well, we wanted to just 'get on with it'. Understandable, but unrealistic. That's like getting on a tricycle without wheels and hoping that your desire to be at your destination gets you there. There is a tension here. The pressure

to get started on the work you have come together to do is at odds with the reality of the hard lessons we learnt: **that it's more productive in the long run to take the time required to create alignment, build connection, and distribute power for smooth collaboration.**

Each collaborative will have to find its own balance point with this tension, both at the beginning of the project and throughout the project lifecycle. We have called these skills because they must be practiced again and again: they are not something you attend to once and then forget about. Along the way, you need to pump up the tyres of those three wheels regularly to ensure smooth driving towards your destination.

Alignment

- vision
- values
- roles

Connection

- trust
- communication
- courageous conflict

Shared Power

- transparency
- decision-making
- co-creation

3.1 CREATE STRONG ALIGNMENT

Without strong alignment between all team members and organisations involved in the project, you will not be able to coordinate your activities towards a specific outcome.

Alignment creates the framework for effective collaboration. Don't make the mistake we did and try to clad the building before you build the framework - you will only have to start again later.

Do whatever it takes to get your diverse team on the same page across these four areas:

1. **Project vision and goals:** what you are trying to achieve?
2. **Values:** how you will work together?
3. **Motivations and organisational needs:** why you are doing this?
4. **Roles and responsibilities:** who is doing what?

Vital Insight #5:

Don't underestimate how long it takes to create alignment.

Align your project vision and goals

Co-creating the project vision with all team members and senior managers of the participating organisations supports the collaborative nature of the work to come. This co-creation fosters ownership of the project in all parties involved. It is not enough to simply define the vision in the grant application; aim to create a sense of excitement towards the larger vision and a sense of unity around the project goals in the process you use. In Culture Well, we co-created a 'Strategic Triangle', allowing each individual to articulate what the vision of the project was for them and to arrive at consensus around the most important project goals.

“ I think that not being part of the early negotiations around vision and goals significantly impacted on the others' trust in me to contribute to the project for the first few months. I didn't get the same alignment that the others got, and it took a while for me to prove my abilities . ”



NERA

Founding Board Member/
Head of Community Projects,
World Wellness Group

Example:

CULTURE WELL'S STRATEGIC TRIANGLE



Vital Insight #6:

Team members joining the collaborative later need thorough induction.

ACTIVITY #3

Strategic Triangle

Time required: 3 hours

People: All core team members & some senior management

Format: Team discussion & drawing

A strategic triangle is a tool for clarifying and presenting the short and long-term goals of your project. It allows you and others to see how individual activities ladder up into higher strategic objectives and outcomes.

Activity Card

Create shared values

Just like in any workplace or team, values set the tone for the way things are done and how competing issues are prioritised. They are the culture of the group, codified. When you bring a disparate group together you will undoubtedly have people with different values, coming from organisations who prioritise and reward values differently. Don't assume that because you are all looking at the same vision you will automatically share values.

Read more on [workplace values](#) here.

Creating clarity around values:

- Supports fast decision-making (useful with a large team)
- Bolsters effective prioritisation
- Holds team-members accountable for how things are done
- Provides a framing for difficult conversations

Start the process by exploring which values everyone shares and can agree upon as guiding principles for the project.

Vital Insight #4:

Alignment on values, goals and roles in the early stages supports effective conflict resolution later on.



ACTIVITY #4

Discovering Shared Values: Planets and Moons

Time required: 30-90 mins
People: All team members should participate
Format: Group brainstorming

'Planets and Moons' is a brainstorming technique for exploring a topic in both a broad and directed way. It encourages lateral thinking and helps organise complex ideas in a meaningful way.

Activity Card

“During the prep for our kick-off meeting the team insisted on dedicating an hour or more to a ‘values’ discussion. I come from a corporate marketing background, and this seemed like a fluffy ‘nice to have’ when we had so many other, more strategic things to agree upon. But actually, it proved to be an incredibly powerful tool to couch difficult conversations. In a tense moment recently, relating to organisational cultural differences, I was able to say, “In keeping with our value of radical honesty we all agreed was important, I feel like we need to talk about X.” We’ve referred to those values again and again, and they create permission to communicate certain things that would otherwise be hard to say.”



BENJAMIN

Partner,
One Health Organisation

Understand organisational needs and motivations.

It’s useful to know how a specific collaborative project fits within the broader goals of each participating organisation. **It’s important to look for and acknowledge the differences in values, needs and motivations, as well as the similarities.** Often, we think of different organisations that work in similar fields as being in competition with each other: the challenge of surviving as an NGO in an under-resourced environment is well-known. We found that when we understood the needs and motivations of each organisation, we were able to work together to ensure each organisation’s needs were being met within the project, rather than feeling in competition with each other.

What’s more, challenging and unconventional collaborative partnerships are often ended before they have time to bear fruit by people who are not active in the project and do not understand the value the project has for their organisation. Meeting individual organisational needs means that the motivation and enthusiasm to continue with the collaborative project is shared more broadly within our organisations - not just by the people actually in the collaborative team.

Discussion Questions:

- How do the vision and goals of this project support your organisation’s vision and mission?
- How does this project further (or conflict with) your organisation’s needs, culture or agenda?
- What additional benefits can your organisation gain by participating in this project?



Clarify Roles & Responsibilities

One of the single most important steps to enable effective collaborative work is defining roles of individuals and organisations as clearly as possible. It's likely that your organisations have come together to collaborate precisely because of their different experience and expertise. A division of labour in some aspects of the project is natural, however **watch out for the confusion and subsequent inaction that can arise when certain tasks fit in multiple people's areas of expertise or in no-ones.**

Role clarity is easier to achieve if you spend some time getting clear on the history, expertise and professional development goals of each individual, as well as the organisations involved.

“ You need to workshop the roles early, and come to an in-depth group understanding of exactly who does what. Have a discussion about why one person is doing something, instead of someone else. If you don't, you risk creating confusion, which leads to inaction, and can make some people feel that their expertise is unseen or unacknowledged. ”

NERA

Founding Board Member
/Head of Community Projects,
World Wellness Group



Creating role clarity supports:

- Accountability, especially for deliverables.
- Ownership, and a sense in team members that there are things they can just 'get on with'.
- Efficiency! Nobody is doubling up on work or needing to check in with everyone else all the time.

ACTIVITY #5

Role Mapping

Time required: 3 hours

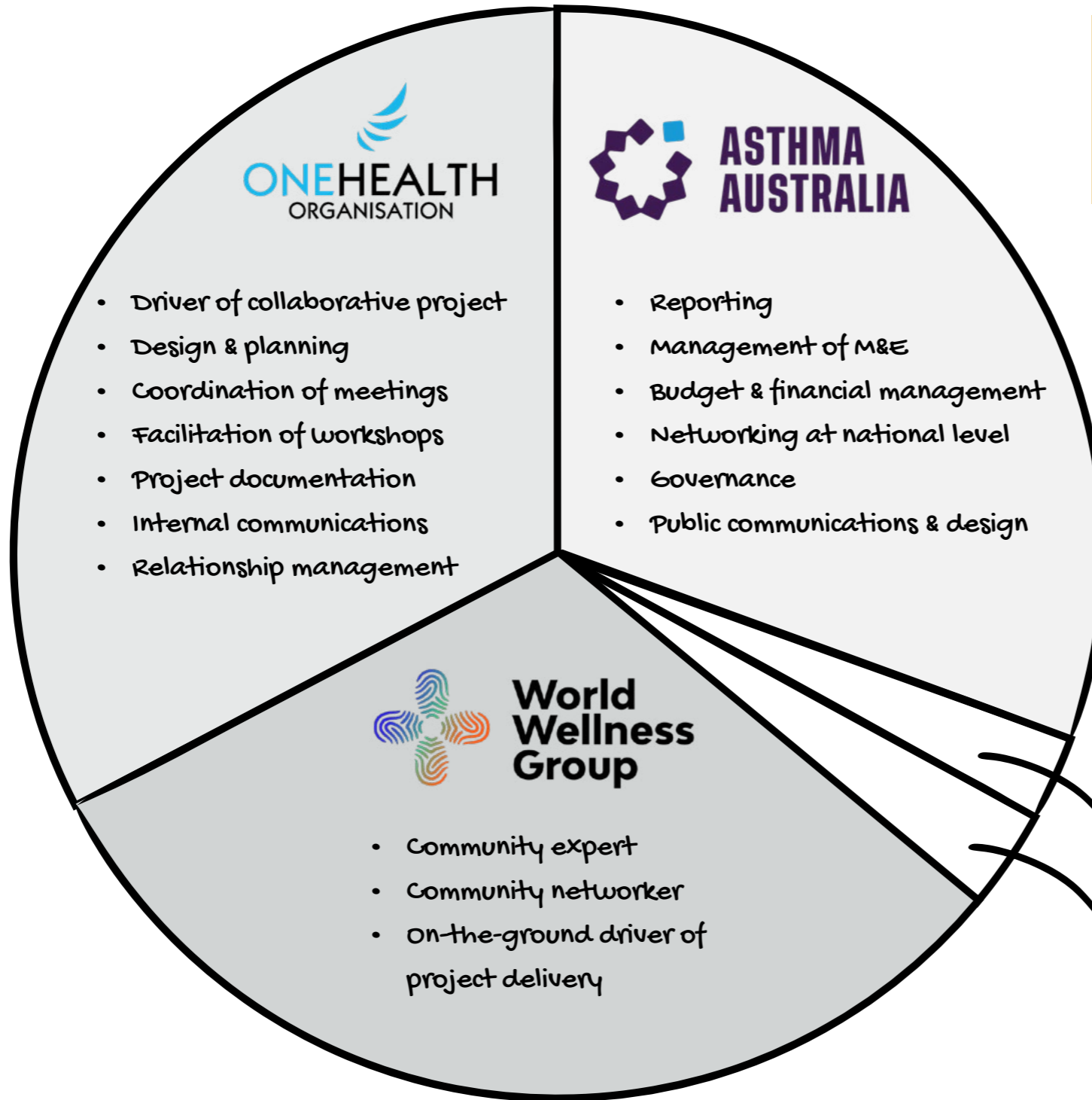
People: All key team members

Format: Short presentation, group brainstorming, open discussion

Role mapping helps us to more clearly understand who will do what. It creates clarity and alignment on roles and allows people to get to work with clearly defined tasks.

Activity Card

CULTURE WELL: ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES



Watch out for confusion when tasks are in multiple segments or none.

Are there any key roles & responsibilities missing?

We filled 95% of the pie between 7 team members across 3 participating organisations. We engaged external consultants to fill the blank spots.

Systems Data Analysis Consultant

Impact Evaluation Consultant

3.2 BUILD CONNECTION

Relationship and personal connection are generally undervalued in a professional context, and even actively discouraged, because real relationships are dependent upon vulnerability.

Unfortunately we live in a society that dissuades us from trusting people and often sees vulnerability as a sign of weakness.

Especially when it comes to the workplace, our cultural myths of 'it's a dog eat dog world' and 'survival of the fittest' teach us to hold back, appear strong and anticipate competition. Subconsciously, most of us believe that if we reveal your true and tender selves we will be taken advantage of or, at the least, not be respected. Many of us invest significant time and energy crafting a persona that is more confident, more competent and less confused than we really are.

How can we engage in the enormous, difficult and hugely personal process of working towards a functional and healthy world if we cannot drop our facades and engage openly with other people?

This is not just a philosophical issue: we found that a willingness to attend to the personal within the team supported effective delivery of tangible project outcomes.

“ Because collaboration happens between individuals, there needs to be a willingness to embrace the personal. We have to acknowledge that we are each complex individuals who get reactive and glitchy at times. There were personal issues between me and Nera that stalled the progress of the project significantly. This was not about OHO and WWG but about us as people. There needs to be permission to communicate about these personal issues, rather than just taking a professional stance that says 'This is serious strategic work, so I can't have emotional reactions.' ”



JIM

Founding Partner,
One Health Organisation

“ Connection skills actually saved our collaboration. There were a few moments when we were really going to walk away. Having Stephanie play the 'carer' role - listening to our concerns and being patient with our dramas - was what allowed us to stay. Every deep, in-depth collaboration needs someone to do this role. ”



NERA

Founding Board Member/Head of
Community Projects, World Wellness Group

How to Build Connection

- Dedicate time and resources to building connection
- Build a personal relationship by actively getting to know each others' backgrounds and history
- Practice vulnerability, open communication and transparency
- Be courageous and caring during conflict

In our experience, it helped to have a specific person who acted as our champion for connection to hold the team together, to help focus the other partners and to support the resolution of conflicts. Whether or not you nominate a specific person to be this Chief Connection Officer (or Internal Relationships Manager), having the following soft skills in your team will be crucial to your ability to deliver effective collaborative outcomes:

- Valuing relationships
- Being comfortable naming the uncomfortable
- Emotional intelligence and a high threshold for emotional labour
- Tact, sensitivity and approachability

It must, however, be stressed that the person who plays this role does not have to solve every problem or iron out every tension alone. Everyone must take responsibility for the quality and harmony of the relationships within the team.

“ Stephanie acted as a sort of informal connector for the project. She was inclusive, nurturing and comfortable with uncertainty. She actively listened and promoted equality of voice among the partners. Stephanie always pushed the spirit of collaboration so that, for example, even when one partner made a decision, the process of decision making would be experienced as a shared, collaborative endeavour by all three. This makes a big difference to the sense of shared ownership within a project. ”



TAIMUR

Independent Evaluator,
The Incus Group

Vital Insight #1:

Collaboration happens between people, not organisation.



KEY CONCEPT: THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY

In Brené Brown's infamous [TEDtalk on vulnerability](#), she argues that six years of social research have taught her one important lesson: getting comfortable with vulnerability is the most important thing we can do as mothers, as lovers, as friends, as workers and as societies.

Vulnerability is the willingness to be seen as the flawed human that you are. It is what allows connection and trust to happen. We try to protect ourselves from harm by hiding our vulnerability, but the reality is that we live in a vulnerable world. Our ability to live as whole-hearted humans depends upon us being openly vulnerable. We believe that this ability fosters better collaboration and better social and professional outcomes.

“ In the early stages of the project I felt like there wasn't trust in my experience. I felt that every time I said something I had to justify why I was saying that. My knowledge and experience hadn't been fully embraced. This made me feel surly and unwilling to share what I knew about this kind of work with the team. ”



NERA

Founding Board Member/
Head of Community Projects,
World Wellness Group

“Without trust we don't truly collaborate; we merely coordinate or, at best, cooperate. It is trust that transforms a group of people into a team.”

Stephen R. Covey

Vital Insight #2:

Honesty and transparency underpin all successful collaboration.

Build trust in relationships

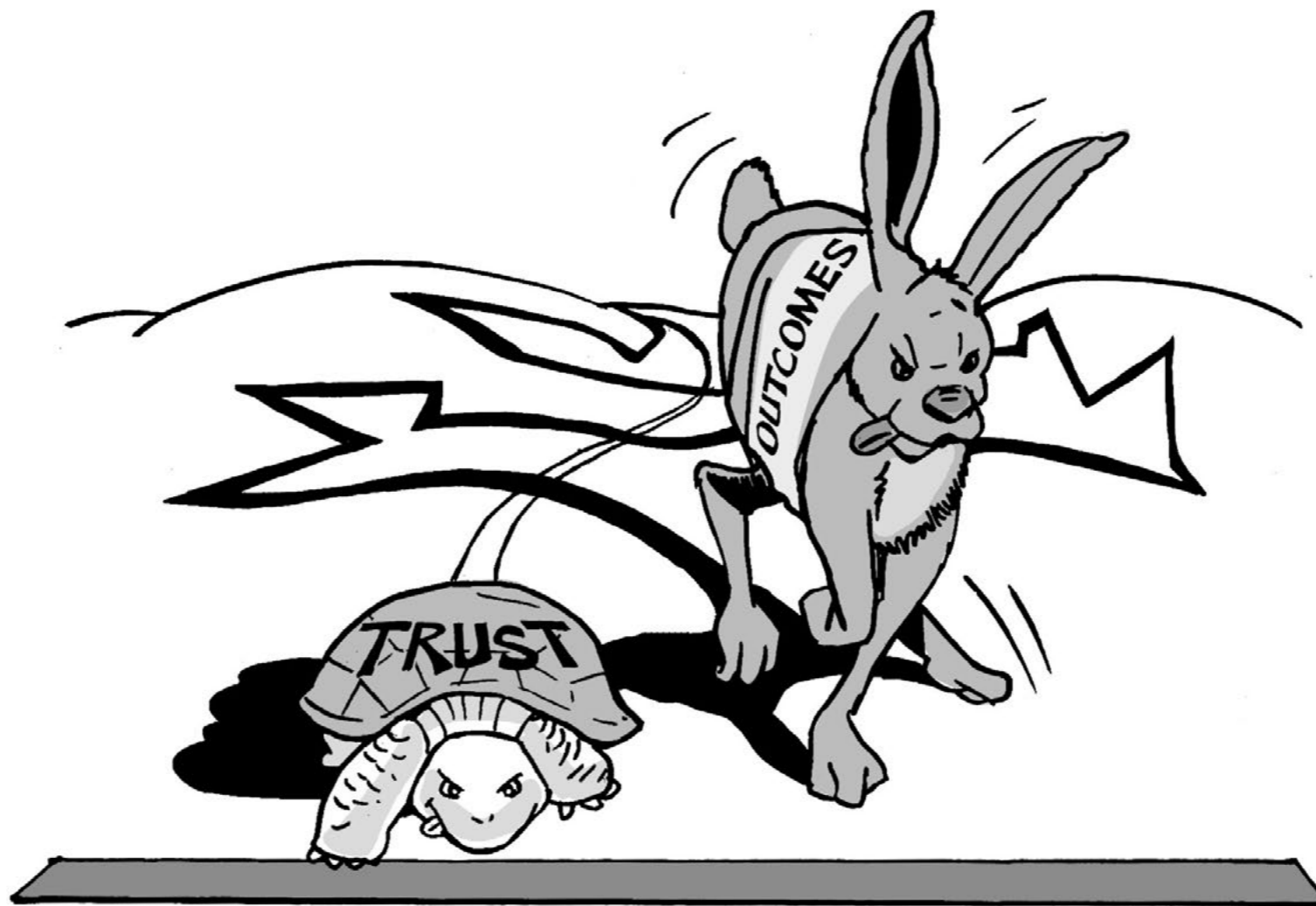
It is undeniable that trust is central to any healthy relationship. A quick internet search on collaboration or teamwork will turn up dozens of articles espousing the importance of trust in effective workplace culture, with many tips and activities on how to build it.

We agree that trust is important because:

- It enables us to take risks. Without risks, we rarely succeed.
- It allows us to ask for help. This solves problems and addresses roadblocks as early as possible.
- It enables innovation. With trust comes a freedom to try new things
- It creates a sense of 'psychological safety'. It allows us to be vulnerable and feel that even if we make a mistake or reveal a weakness, we will still be met with care and respect.

However, there is something that we feel is missing from these conversations: because trust is an emotional state that emerges over time, it is extremely difficult to manufacture on demand.

Let's face it: trust as an action item sits uncomfortably on your to-do-list between 'finalise agreed roles' and 'submit expenses to accounts team'.



Although we might instinctively trust someone upon first meeting, genuine trust takes time to develop as it is grounded in shared experience.

We start to trust someone when:

- We know and understand a person’s history, background and personality.
- We feel that our wellbeing matters to them.
- That person has shown themselves to be reliable, honest and accountable over time.

When you begin a collaboration, you must, as adrienne maree brown says, “move at the speed of trust” (4). You can’t force trust to arise, nor can you rush past the time needed to create it. You can, however, foster an environment that helps trust to emerge naturally. The easiest way to do this is to really get to know your colleagues as whole people by spending time with them outside the workplace. The single biggest shift in our productivity and alignment during our collaborative project was when we rented a house and took the whole team away for three nights. We called it the ‘Culture Well Slumber Party’, and it was specifically aimed at building personal relationships.

Foster open communication

Open communication is what allows us to build trust and relationships, deal productively with conflict and benefit from different perspectives. It's how we get beyond the 'polite and professional' and into the 'real and personal': the place where true collaboration happens.

“ Often we get stuck in politeness in groups and teams. Sometimes we think things but aren't brave enough to say them. What happened here was people being brave enough to say what they felt and how they were thinking, even when it had the potential to cause someone to be upset or disagree. In my experience, this level of open communication was radical and really deepened the collaboration. ”

MICHELE

CEO,
Asthma Australia



We must admit, this is something that Culture Well does really well. One of our original shared values is courageous communication. During challenging moments, we have pointed to this shared value, and it's given us permission to have difficult conversations.

ACTIVITY #6

Mirroring

Time required: 30-60 mins

People: All core team members

Format: Open dialogue

Mirroring allows us to hone our active listening skills. It helps us to pay close attention to what is being communicated, to ask questions and to clarify our understanding of what we are hearing.

Activity Card

OUR KEY LEARNINGS ABOUT COMMUNICATION:

Care and compassion are important.

Forthright and brave communication can be confronting. For this to be productive, and not simply destructive in relationships, it needs to be done with tact and compassion. Assume that everyone is doing their best and treat each other kindly.

Be an active listener.

Most of the time, we listen to respond, not to understand. When someone is communicating something challenging, listen deeply to what they are saying. Ask questions to clarify what their point is. Reflect back what you are understanding. Eg: "I'm hearing that you are finding it confusing and stressful that the deadlines keep changing. Is this correct?". This simple trick validates everyone's experience and improves understanding of each other.

Use Non-Violent Communication (NVC).

Marshall R. Rosenberg's work on Non-Violent Communication was a powerful tool for navigating the interpersonal aspects of our collaborative project. NVC can help us to separate observations from evaluations, learn how to express our needs and feelings and openly practice empathy. These techniques have been used in conflict resolution and collaborative projects the world over.

Open communication builds trust, and trust supports open communication.

The more you do one, the easier the other gets. At first it was hard to speak up with a group of unknown people. Now, it is second nature to us. We trust that our project team is a safe space to share vulnerable and challenging perspectives.

“ At an important pivot point in the project, an email from Janine to Benjamin and I offended us both and eroded our sense of being included in the team. When we finally expressed our disappointment a month later, we realised we had gotten it all wrong and invented our own narrative around what had taken place! This was a huge lesson for us. If we hadn't felt comfortable enough to express our hurt feelings, we would have continued with the belief that we were intentionally excluded from a critical project decision, which would have ruptured relationships and undermined the project. ”



STEPHANIE

Partner, One Health Organisation

Approach conflict courageously

Conflict and challenge are unavoidable in collaborations, especially those that span sectors. How you deal with these crisis points in the journey can often determine your success: will your differences result in conflicts that destroy your collaborative or in conflicts that enable deeper trust and more nuanced perspectives than either party was capable of alone?

Vital Insight #7:

Embrace challenge and emotion.

“ Ignoring conflict is counterproductive. Having ongoing tension between our team members impacted things. It made me put up a barrier and changed my attitude towards certain people in the collaborative. I wished I had said: ‘Can we pause; can we sort this out now? Because if we don’t, I won’t be able to get my work done. ”



JANINE

Projects and Partnerships Manager,
Asthma Australia

“ A collaboration is a lot like a friendship in many ways, and certain crisis points - when you go through a difficult experience together - can really strengthen a friendship. Similarly, there are crisis points in every project which can actually strengthen relationships. ”



BENJAMIN

Partner,
One Health Organisation

How to make conflict generative of deeper connection:

- Create a culture of open, non-violent communication in your team, where conflict is seen as a creative opportunity.
- Invest in fostering trust and psychological safety via personal relationships, empathy and active listening.
- Make privilege and power dynamics explicit.

Session Highlight

CULTURE WELL SLUMBER PARTY

After a few months, something felt like it just wasn't clicking and our productivity as a team - dispersed across three different organisations and five different cities - wasn't where we wanted it. The Culture Well team thought the best way to address this would be to spend three days working together in person.

We rented a house in Brisbane, took turns cooking dinner and really got to know each other - both personally and professionally. We did get plenty of actual 'work' done like budgets and

workshop design, but what we found was that the daily activities designed to build personal relationships and the incidental social time at the end of the day, is what helped us turn a corner.

We got to hear one another's personal stories, to get a feel for one another's qualities and to understand what collaboration meant to one another. After this slumber party we all noticed a significant increase in productivity and effective collaboration.

Two activities that made a difference:

- Seven Minute Life Stories
- Elephant Questions



ACTIVITY #7

Seven Minute Life Stories

Time required: 30-60 mins

People: All core team members

Format: Partnered Discussions

This simple 'get to know you' exercise is very effective in building trust and connection amongst your team, laying the foundation for effective collaboration.

Activity Card

ACTIVITY #8

Elephant Questions

Time required: 40 mins

People: All core team members & other stakeholders

Format: Musical chairs

Elephant Questions help us to name the 'Elephant in the Room', or the thoughts and concerns that may be uncomfortable or vulnerable.

Activity Card

3.3 SHARE POWER

Sharing power is one of the most challenging aspects of collaboration, however largely determines the depth of the collaborative approach.

With shared power comes shared responsibility and the resulting focus and dedication of all parties to achieve the task at hand. The level of power and the level of dedication are usually directly proportionate. A completely equitable sharing of power is rarely possible, but this doesn't mean that you cannot engage deeply with the question of how to share power and how to account for the power that can't be shared.

“ Power in a collaboration is about exerting influence, making decisions and moving the project along. It is neither positive nor negative in and of itself, but it is always present. With Culture Well, each of the partners recognise the impact of the other partners' power differential but sometimes missed opportunities to adjust power imbalances to improve the collaboration. For example, the three partners could have established a joint funding agreement or agreed to having the same number of team members at all meetings. ”

TAIMUR

Independent Evaluator, The Incus Group



Make power and privilege explicit

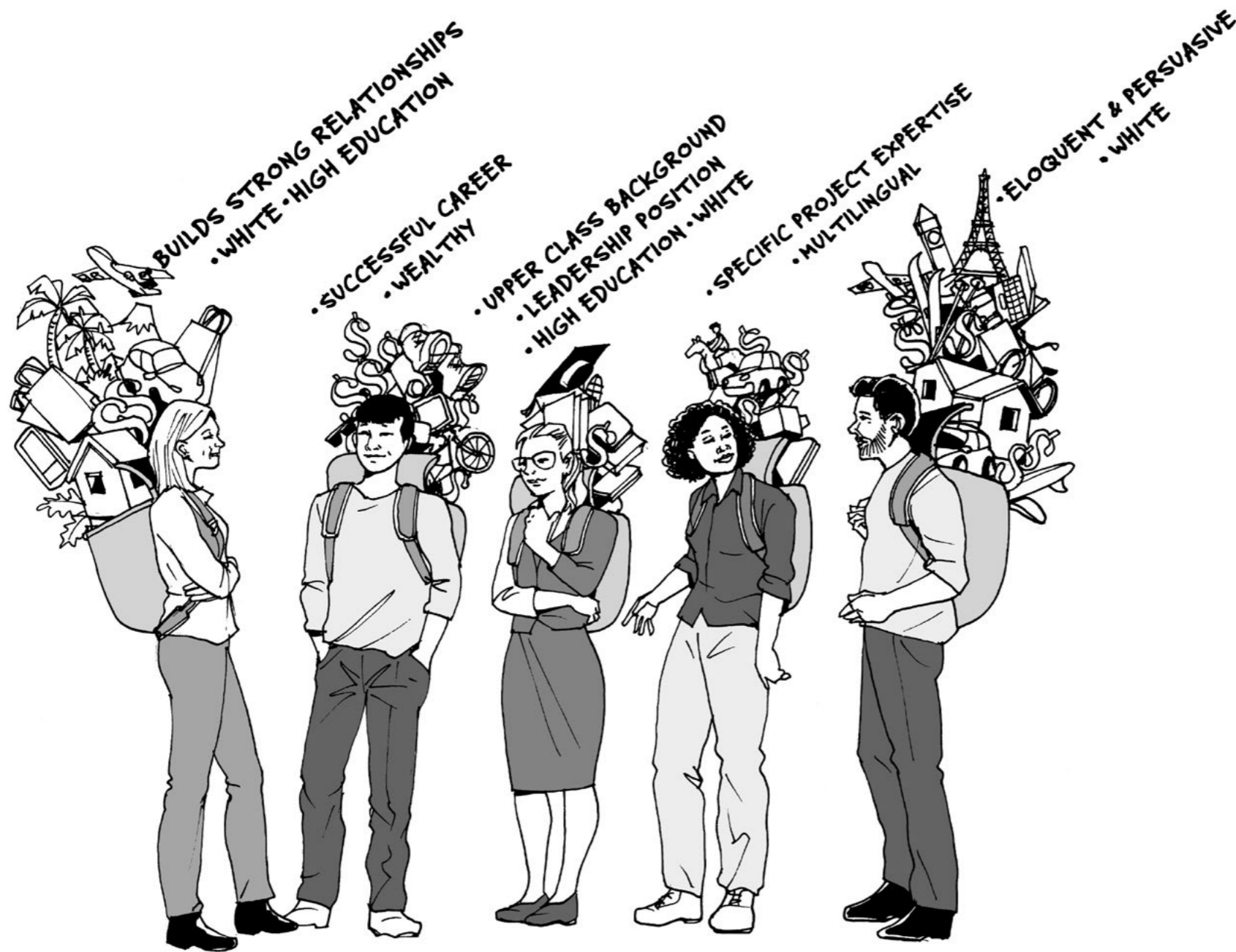
Just like privilege, power is often invisible to those who hold it. At the outset, each organisation in Culture Well was largely aware of how the power and privilege of the others constrained what was possible but blind to our own power and personal privilege. In fact, it was our independent evaluator, Taimur Siddiqi from Incus, who drew our attention to this point over a year into our work together.

Each of the three Culture Well organisations has their own kind of power that has influenced the unfolding of the project. The factors that contribute to the power dynamics in our collaborative are:

- Asthma Australia is the largest, most established and best funded of the three organisations. It is also the organisation holding the funding and reporting to the government on outcomes.
- One Health is responsible for project design and as such has a high level of ownership and visibility, has three team members at most meetings whereas Asthma Australia and World Wellness Group have only one.
- World Wellness Group is functioning as the 'voice of the community'. Because Culture Well is a community-led project, Nera's voice holds more weight in any decision affecting the community than any other single voice does.

Vital Insight #9:

Making power dynamics explicit enables deep collaboration.



THE INVISIBLE BACKPACKS OF PERSONAL PRIVILEGE

Personal privilege is another kind of power that plays into a project.

Our individual background and upbringing, as well as a variety of personal attributes, have an impact on the way we show up in a collective space, and also affects how we are considered and listened to by others. Greater personal privilege will mean that you unconsciously expect your opinion to be heard, are more confident in sharing your expertise and ideas and are more likely to contribute to decision-making. Race, gender, sexual orientation, class, positions of authority, working in your first language and your personal charm and attractiveness are all types of privilege, and these contribute to the invisible power dynamics at play within a group of any kind.

Invisible power dynamics are often destructive to collaboration. It is not always appropriate or possible to fully share power within a specific project, but it is always possible to make power dynamics and privilege explicit. We wish we had set aside some time to have a round-table discussion about this topic. From the clarity that emerges after a discussion like this, you can get creative and collaborative about how to share power and account for individual privilege.

Discussion Questions:

- What unique power does each organisation hold in this project?
- What kinds of privilege does each individual have in their backpack? Gender, language skills, education, charisma, age, class and experience are all relevant.
- How do we account for the ways that power and privilege affect our project?
- How do we promote fair conflict resolution in the face of existing power dynamics?
- Are there any ways we can share power more equitably?



Be inclusive with decision-making

Decision-making is a tangible and practical form of power in any project and is best done as inclusively as possible. Although inclusive decision-making is the cornerstone of our approach, sometimes contractual obligations and/or internal structures

mean that one organisation has the final say on certain aspects of the project. For example, if one body received the funding, then they may be constrained by certain requirements from the funder. This does not mean that collaboration is automatically reduced; when you know what the non-negotiable deliverables are, you can decide as a team how you are going to achieve them.

Even when the final say on decisions is held by a single organisation, commit to creating space for others to contribute to the process of decision-making.

UK systems-change foundation, Lankelly Chase, talks about 'devolved decision-making' [\(5\)](#), whereby the people on the ground have the power to make decisions quickly and adaptively. The idea is that people at key leverage points in a project should have more decision-making power than people in boardrooms. After all, they are more likely to be able to respond creatively to the complex, unique situation at hand.

Our experience is that a deep collaboration requires two things when it comes to decision-making:

1. A decision-making process that is as inclusive as possible between the organisations involved
2. Project team members having the authority within their own organisations to respond to make decisions quickly and independently

Vital Insight #8:

Get clear on the decision-making process.

KEY CONCEPT: CONSENSUS VS INCLUSIVITY

There is a longstanding fear that shared decision-making results in very little action: unless all members of the team fully agree, a decision cannot be made.

This 'consensus paralysis' is addressed well in Frédérique Laloux's book [Reinventing Organisations](#). He suggests a process that requires an individual who is making a decision to ask for input or advice from the other people in the team, especially if they have relevant expertise or experience. Once the decision-maker has heard and considered the opinions of others, they circulate the decision that seems appropriate to them. Only if someone has a principled objection to that decision based on a conflict with shared values does discussion continue. That is, someone having a preference for another option is not enough to change the decision.

This method makes it possible to create an experience of all parties being involved in the decision-making process, without everyone having to agree at all times. It allows us to avoid 'consensus paralysis'.

“ I found that when making decisions, it was really important to ask people whether they had any advice or experience they thought was relevant to contribute. Even when one person had the final say about something, making a space where everyone's opinion and expertise is valued created a sense of wide-scale agreement on the decisions, even when someone had expressed a contradictory opinion to begin with. ”



STEPHANIE

Partner,
One Health Organisation

Co-create solutions with community

If we are to have a hope of designing solutions that work for everyone, we must include the very people who we are seeking to support in the design process. Community consultation is now par for the course in any social change program, and co-design is rapidly gaining popularity. You do not need to use any specific methodology for co-design (but [ideo.com](https://www.ideo.com) has great tools). Rather, a relentless curiosity about how the community understands the problem at hand, and how they imagine it can best be solved, will ensure that your project shares power and agency with the community to the greatest extent possible.

Culture Well was designed to ensure the voice of the community was loud and clear both while unpacking the problem and designing solutions. We prioritised inclusive and participatory processes that recognised the community members involved as experts in their own lives and agents of change within their own community. These processes and activities not only gave us great insights and data but were a social-change intervention in their own right.

Our initial focus groups were a great example. We used Luke Craven's Systems Effects (6) mapping methodology to unpack the complex causes and feedback loops in chronic disease at both the

Vital Insight #3:

The process you use to achieve your outcomes has impact in an of itself.

individual and community level. Most participants - including the ones we didn't create interventions for - told us how therapeutic the process had been. The focus groups were not meant to be interventions, yet they gave people greater understanding of the factors determining their health and a greater sense of control over their own experience of health and disease.



“What surprised me about the maps, is that it was basically a reflection on what my life is about. It was showing things that you kind of know that's going on, but it's an eye-opener when you see it all on the maps. It helps to see where you can start making a change.”

Samoan focus group participant. Female, age 32.

UNUSUAL TIPS FOR EVALUATING COMPLEX COLLABORATIVE WORK



1. Get Creative with How, What and When you measure

Deep collaboration and systems change work are both messy: the path and the destination are often in flux. This can at times be at odds with the standard evaluator's way: following a logical sequence of steps to determine the success of a project. This doesn't mean we can't deploy the familiar measurement tools in the evaluator toolkit (interviews, surveys, observations), but we do need to get more creative, flexible and comfortable with uncertainty. It means staying close to the project team and adapting, or even revising, your evaluation framework as the project unfolds.

2. Worry less about being objective and more about being effective

As an evaluator, I often feel I should strive for an arms-length, objective assessment of the project. In some projects, that works well but in others, too much emphasis on being objective and neutral can impede our effectiveness as evaluators. I wasn't unbiased as I wanted Culture Well to succeed, but I also wanted to independently assess whether it did and to generate insights for the team. To do that well, I needed to know how the

partnership was faring and whether today's 'next step' was the same as yesterday's. In hindsight I wish I had spent more time with the team and played the role of facilitator and advisor more often. This would not have compromised my ability to effectively evaluate the project but rather increased my insight into the nuanced nature of the project at hand.

3. Prioritise frequent written and verbal insights over formal reports

Deep collaboration and systems change both depend on learning to respond and adapt successfully. As an evaluator, you have a unique opportunity to provide real-time, actionable feedback in a timely way that strengthens this capacity. You do not need to wait until a formal evaluation report is ready, 6 months after that information would have been useful to the project team. I shared summaries of survey data and reflection interviews every few months. This both helped the project team and helped me better manage and report the large amounts of evaluation data.



By Culture Well's independent impact evaluator, Taimur Siddiqi @ [The Incus Group](#)

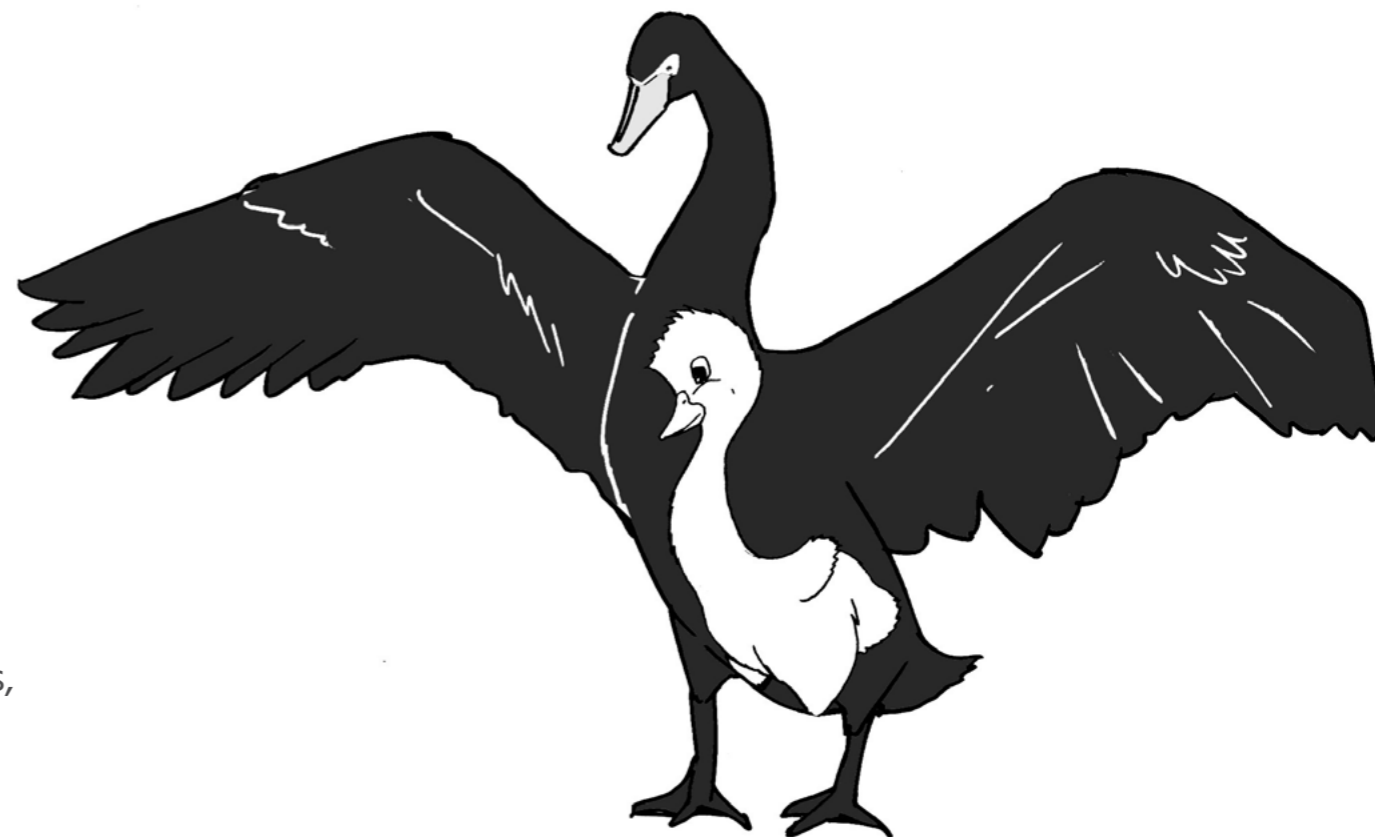
TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS, TRANSFORMING PEOPLE

This guide was written and created during the Covid-19 pandemic, mainly whilst our team members were in lockdown in Australia. This pandemic has thrown a different light on all our of lives, refocusing us on what is important both individually and collectively.

More than ever there is a sense of urgency with regards to finding better systems for our communities and the world at large: better systems for responding to disasters, better systems for governing during hardship and better systems for supporting vulnerable people.

Creating this kind of systems change requires us to learn to work productively with other individuals and organisations across the divisions of sectors, cultures and ideologies. As different perspectives become more and more polarised, learning to bridge this gap becomes increasingly transformational of our societies.

Becoming skilled in deep collaboration requires us to face our own relationships to power, to vulnerability and to trust. It requires us to learn to truly listen and communicate with care. In



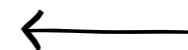
this regard, deep collaboration does not only transform systems and social problems, it provides an opportunity for personal transformation as well.

More than ever, our world needs us to be able to collaborate well, in a way that invites many voices to the table around a shared vision for change. This guide is a small piece of the collective journey towards a skilled community of collaborators.

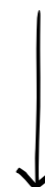
“ I now realise that, prior to the Culture Well project, I was heavily focused on efficiency and outputs rather than looking more broadly at outcomes. In fact this process has allowed me to understand the difference between the two - outputs are what you were expecting to get out of a process when you began, while outcomes incorporate a whole suite of things that you were not necessarily intending on - and it's these that very often create lasting value and greater impact. ”



BENJAMIN
Partner,
One Health Organisation



JANINE
Projects and Partnerships Manager,
Asthma Australia



STEPHANIE
Partner,
One Health Organisation



“ I've really learnt to value the soft skills of relationship building, conflict management, creating connection and just supporting everyone to be heard. Before this project I thought that to be a professional adult required I leave the personal at home. But I've realised that ignoring the personal doesn't make it go away, it just makes it go underground. ”

“ I've taken the lessons from Culture Well into my work with Asthma Australia - I've set up meetings with people all over the organisation just to get to know them for half an hour. Culture Well has really brought me the notion that you have to bring the personal into the professional, otherwise there is a certain level you can't go beyond. The feeling that you know that person and can pick up the phone and ask something, be brave enough to ask for clarification or advice and not feel shy to look stupid. It feels like you can jump into the work at a deeper level and discuss disagreements openly. ”

“ Being involved in the Culture Well project has forcefully reminded me of my own prejudice and bias in communication with others in working relationships. It was a very challenging experience which made me dive deep into my inner self. And I believed that I had already learned so much over the years on working in partnerships! It made me want to try harder to understand the world we all share. It has positively changed my future approach to collaborative projects. ”

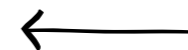
JIM
Founding Partner,
One Health Organisation



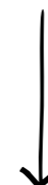
“ In Africa I was told ‘If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together.’ Fifteen years later this project has really highlighted for me that going far means going slowly, it means travelling at the speed of trust but no faster. I wish I’d realised this at the beginning of Culture Well, and been less impatient! ”



NERA
Founding Board Member,
Head of Community Projects,
World Wellness Group



MICHELE
CEO,
Asthma Australia



“ Culture Well is one of our more innovative and risky projects. We know new approaches are needed to transform health outcomes and that we can’t do it alone. Having a go at doing something differently has been like a roller coaster: nerve wracking, exciting, frustrating and inspiring. I have personally learnt about the power of courageous conversations to confront what is going on for people; both to bring it into the open to be able to work through it and build stronger trusting relationships, as well as helping team members make sense of what they are thinking and feeling. ”



ACTIVITIES
THAT SUPPORT
DEEP COLLABORATION

SIX THINKING HATS FOR ROBUST DISCUSSION

Context:

De Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats' is a tool for exploring problems and ideas from different angles. There are different modes of thinking about problems and ideas, however it is easy to get stuck in just a few of them. By spending dedicated time on each thinking mode, teams can uncover hidden insights, unlock creative thinking and see that many different perspectives are true.

This tool has become part of the workplace language of our team and informs many discussions. We recommend using it when exploring the discussion questions in this guide.

Why use it?

- To solve complex or complicated problems
- To pressure test existing ideas or thinking
- If your team is unable to come to a shared understanding of how to solve a problem
- If you need creative solutions or insights

Time required:

20 MINS EACH

Allow at least 20 minutes per problem or idea

Who should participate?

Any part of the collaborative team or the whole team

Materials required:

Whiteboard or butchers paper and pens

Process:

1. Familiarise your team with the six thinking hats (as outlined on the following page).
2. One person should 'wear' the Blue hat. This means that they are facilitating, and it is their job to remind others when they are reverting to their default thinking hat and encourage people to stay on the hat in question.
3. Write the question, issue or idea on butchers paper or a whiteboard.
4. Decide how many minutes you will spend on each hat, and use a timer to keep track.
5. Go through the hats one by one, starting with White and ending with Green. Discuss the issue at hand only from that specific angle for the dedicated time period.
6. Capture notes as you go, ideally in different sections of the paper or in different pen colours.
7. Once you have gone through all the hats, have an open discussion about how people now think about this issue, question or idea.



The process hat

Thinking about thinking.
Facilitator's hat.

Key Question:

What process should we use to work this out?



The creative hat

Ideas, possibilities,
add-ons.

Key Question:

What are the wildest creative solutions we can think of?



The data hat

Information and data. Neutral and objective.

Key Question:

What do we already know about this issue?
What do we need to find out?



The positivity hat

Positive aspects.
Logical reasons are given.

Key Question:

What is great about this issue?
What is the opportunity?



The feelings hat

Intuitions, hunches,
gut feelings. No reasons are given.

Key Question:

How do I feel about this issue?



The critical hat

Difficulties, weaknesses,
dangers. Logical reasons are given.

Key Question:

What could go wrong with this idea/issue?

Credit: Edward De Bono: <http://www.debonothinkingsystems.com/tools/6hats.htm>

COLLABORATION READINESS ASSESSMENT

Context:

Collaboration isn't always the best way forward. If your internal culture or processes are at odds with the modes of working and thinking that collaboration requires, then it is likely to be a challenging, expensive and ineffective process.

Being honest about where your organisation is at is the first step in making great strategic choices.

Why use it?

- To work out whether to start a collaborative project
- To understand why you might be struggling with an existing collaboration
- If you need clear sense of whether your organisation is ready for deeper collaborative approaches
- To identify areas that your collaboration representatives will need extra support in to collaborate well

Time required:

45 MINS

Who should participate?

Your organisation's senior management team plus the staff member/s who will be representing you in the collaborative project

Materials required:

Printouts of the following 2 pages for all participants

Process:

Score yourself along each scale on the following two pages. It is best to use this process as a deep discussion tool with your senior management team and the individuals who will be working on the proposed collaboration.

Collaboration seems like the thing to do, but we haven't thought about the challenges and benefits very much or how this collaboration will affect our broader organisational goals.

How clear are you on the reasons you are collaborating on this project?

We've thought deeply about whether collaboration is the best approach, and we have decided that not only does the issue at hand require collaborative approaches, but also that collaborating will further our own goals and vision.

We focus on productivity and efficiency. People are rewarded for working hard, not talking about their feelings.

How much does your organisation value and support the development of 'soft skills' like communication?

Interpersonal soft skills are central to our organisational culture. All of our staff are trained in these areas and encouraged to develop them.

Strategic plans are developed by senior management and there is little room for flexibility in how it is delivered or changed.

What is your approach to strategy and adaptation?

Our on-the-ground team members contribute significantly to strategic development, and we expect them to adapt the strategic plan to the circumstances as they go.

We have concrete timelines, activities and outputs that we must deliver on in our funding agreement or similar.

How much flexibility do you have with the approach, timeline and outputs of your project?

Our funders, board etc. understand this project is collaborative and innovative and expect things to change significantly as we progress.

Any significant decision must be approved by the manager through formal approval processes.

Who has authority to make significant decisions?

We encourage staff members to make important decisions independently.



We're able to do a single day workshop on this, but then have to start the action.

How much time and resources do you have to build relationships and alignment?

We have the ability to dedicate a month or two to the initial stages of building alignment.



To be honest, I think our board/funders etc. would expect us to keep our cards up our sleeve and ensure we retain as much control over the outcomes as possible.

How willing are you to actively share power and authority with your collaborators?

We already talk openly about power and privilege within our organisation and teams and are curious about what it is like to actively share power with collaborators.



**Add it all up.
Which side do you lean towards?**



Collaboration is likely to be very problematic as you don't currently have the skills or the culture that facilitates effective and fruitful collaboration.

You may need to use more traditional collaborative approaches or work out specific systems to support your collaborative staff to engage well with the collaboration. Perhaps they will need explicit permission to work in ways that differ from your day-to-day working culture.

You are so ready for deep collaboration and are well positioned to get a lot of out of the process.

STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

Context:

A 'Strategic Triangle' is a simple tool for clarifying and presenting the short and long-term goals of your project. It allows you and others to see how individual activities ladder up into higher strategic objectives and outcomes and provides a great reference throughout the project lifecycle to make good strategic decisions quickly.

Doing it as a collaborative group creates strong alignment.

Why use it?

- To get clear around what you want to achieve and the best way to go about it at the beginning of a project
- To streamline, cull or prioritise activities or ideas
- To clarify alignment around what you are trying to achieve and/or how to get there

Time required:

3 HOURS

Who should participate?

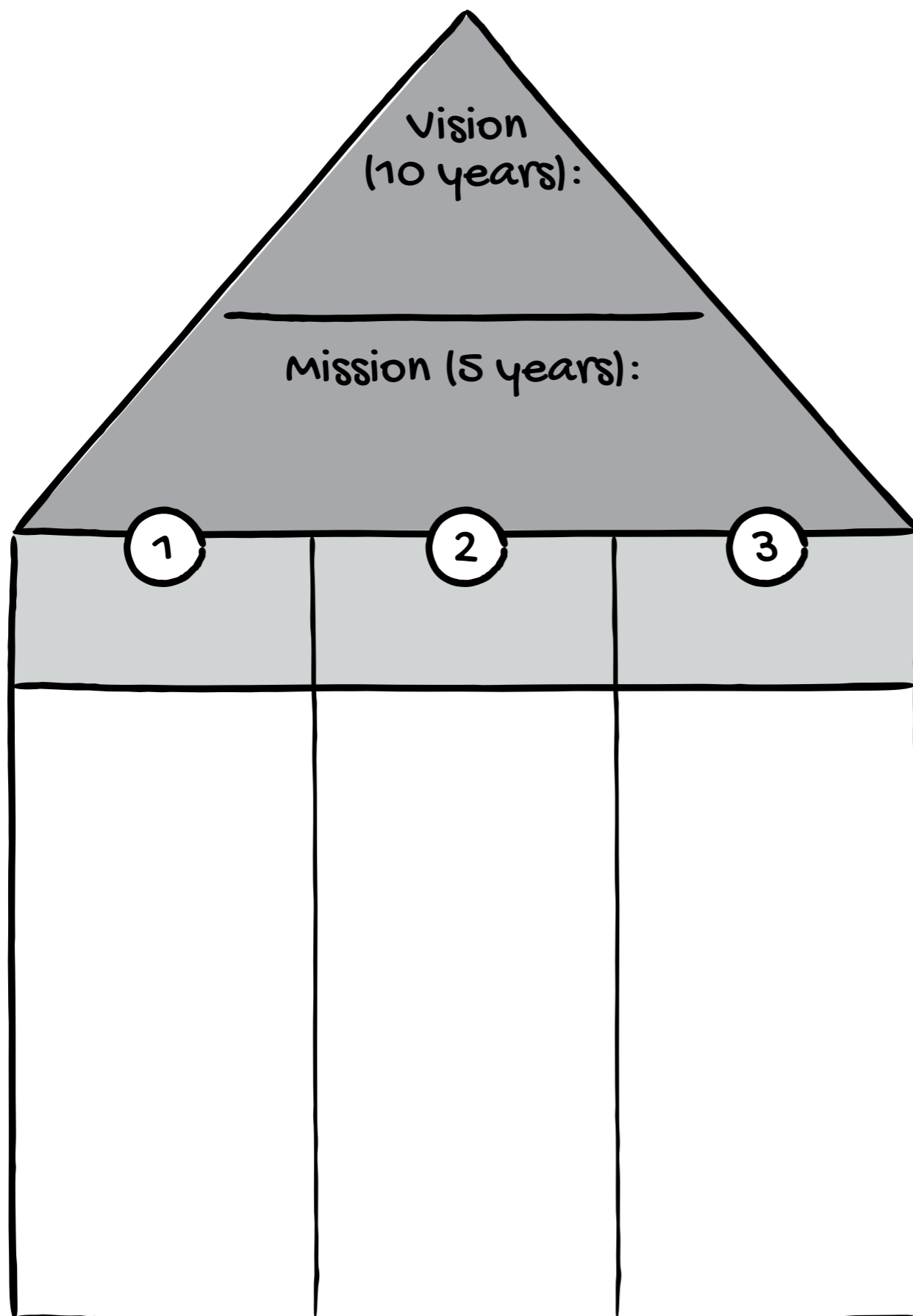
All core team members and at least one senior manager from each organisation

Materials required:

Whiteboard, markers, sticky notes, butchers paper

Process:

1. Draw the 'Strategic Triangle' on a whiteboard or butchers paper.
2. Work on each segment of the triangle until you are close to agreement.
3. Explain what each segment is (you can use the thought starter questions in the image below if needed).
4. Each person writes their own version (or a few versions) of that segment in private, then shares with the group.
5. The facilitator writes all of the individual versions up on the whiteboard, and highlights any repeating themes or words.
6. The group discusses what an interim version of that segment could be.
7. After going through the whole triangle, return to the top and see if any further clarity has emerged around the best phrase for each segment.
8. Remember: strategy is the art of knowing what not to do or include.

**Description:****VISION:**

The big dream that you are hoping to achieve or contribute towards with your project.

Thought starters:

What do you want to be known for in 100 years?
What would have to happen for you to say 'great, we're done now'?

MISSION:

The milestone goal that will let you know you are well on your way to achieving your vision.

What is a tangible 'slice' of your vision that, provided all goes well, you can imagine actually achieving in this project?

STRATEGIC PILLARS:

The three outcomes you absolutely need to get right during the following 12 months in order to deliver your mission and vision.

What needs to be in place to make your mission possible?
Often a structural, financial and program pillar?

DELIVERABLES:

Key project deliverables or activities that enable your strategic pillars.

This creates context and direction for the activities. If an activity doesn't fit into one of your pillars, perhaps it should be culled.

PLANETS AND MOONS

to discover shared values

Context:

'Planets and Moons' is a fast and structured brainstorming technique that creates consensus by accounting for individual ideas and then identifying recurring themes for further exploration.

In this instance we are describing how to use this exercise for discovering shared values, but it is excellent for any brainstorming you need to do.

Why use it?

- To develop and agree upon shared values
- To find consensus or agreement on the most important themes within a larger topic
- To break down a complex process or problem into identifiable and more manageable parts

Time required:

30-90
MINUTES

Who should participate?

All team members should participate

Materials required:

Butchers paper, pens, sticky notes in at least 2 colours

Process:

Step 1: Individual ideas

- Get clear on the question you are exploring. In the case of values, it would be: "What are the most important values for us to adhere to when working together?"
- Spend 5-10 minutes as individuals writing down all possible responses. Use post it notes and only include one idea on each post it note.
- Keep going – when you think you have run out of ideas, push

yourself to come up with more - these ideas will likely be the most interesting ones!

Step 2: Present and cluster

- One by one, present your ideas back to the group and stick them up on butchers paper or a wall where everyone else can see them. Explain what you meant by each one as you put it up.
- If someone else has already put a similar idea up, place yours next to theirs. The same idea occurring multiple times indicates it is important.

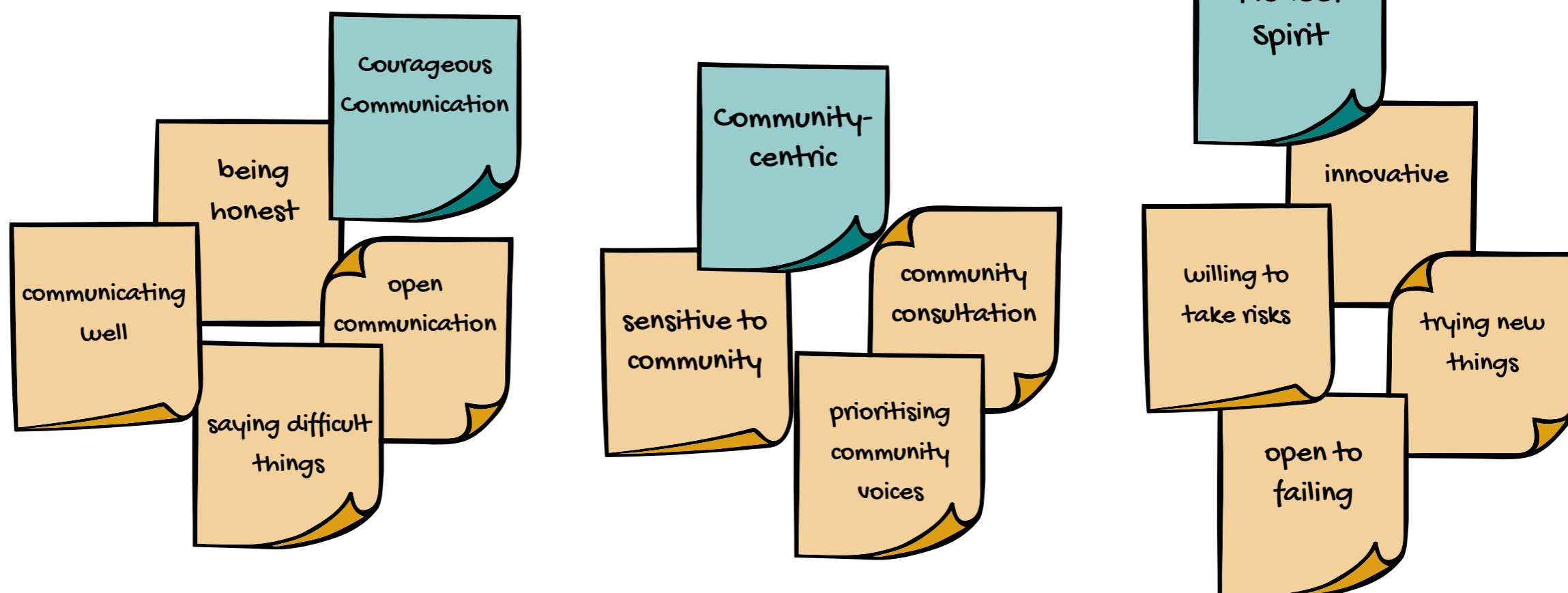
- Once everyone has finished putting their ideas up, play with creating different clusters that feel like they have similar ideas in them. The trick here is to look at different ways you could group ideas together. At this stage, it's all about exploring nuance.
- For example, you may have a theme emerging around 'Animals' and another around 'Plants' – or you might decide to collapse these and create one cluster called 'Nature'. Alternatively, you might split a theme called Nature out into two separate themes: one called 'Plants' and another called 'Animals'.
- When you are happy with the clusters/themes, circle all the

notes in that cluster and give the cluster a name that describes what it is about.

Step 3: Developing the clusters

- Work out how each cluster could come to life in your specific context. In this instance, how could it be articulated as a value? You can use the individual ideas within the cluster as jumping off points for creative ideation, or combine a few together into a more substantial idea.
- Write your list of developed values onto butchers paper, then cull and prioritise them until you get to a maximum of 8 values.

Example



ROLE MAPPING

Context:

When people come together to work on a project it is vitally important to have a shared understanding of who will do what. This activity creates clarity and alignment on roles and allows people to get to work with clearly defined tasks. It supports people to be proactive and self-accountable.

Why use it?

- To create clarity around roles for the individuals and the organisations involved
- To create clear accountability areas
- To create alignment

Time required:

3 HOURS

Who should participate?

All key team members must participate

Materials required:

Butchers paper, sticky notes in at least 2 different colours, markers, Bluetack

Process overview:

1. Create a profile of each person's and organisation's professional skills and attributes.
2. Use 'Planets and Moons' to brainstorm and delineate all the work tasks and categories required by the project.
3. Allocate tasks to individuals via discussion.
4. Finish up with an open discussion about potential challenges.

Step-by-step instructions:

Create individual professional profiles

1. Start by understanding each individual's work history, experience and skills. Ask each person to talk for 3-5 minutes on this topic, then ask anyone else in the room who knows them professionally to add any other key points. The areas covered should be:
 - Relevant work history and experience
 - Unusual work history and experience
 - What are they good at?
 - What do they love doing?
 - What are they bad at?
 - What do they hate doing?
 - What are they less-than-good at or less-than-passionate about, but can do if no one else can?
2. Create a synopsis for each person where it's easy to see during the brainstorming session.
3. Do the same for each organisation involved - what are their strengths and weaknesses, what are they bringing to the table, what external restrictions may affect roles?

Brainstorm and delineate tasks and activities

4. Do a 'Planets and Moons' process ([see page 24](#)) to capture all the different tasks that are needed to get the project goals achieved. Group the tasks into activity areas and name these activity areas.

Allocate tasks

5. Create an open, facilitated discussion around which activities - or groups of activities - are an obvious fit for certain

individuals/organisations.

6. Discuss how to allocate what remains. Take into account the availability of team members, organisational needs/priorities and willingness to learn new skills.
7. Take particular note of which activities don't sit comfortably in anyone's remit. These might require professional development or external contractors.
8. Also take note of where multiple people have clear expertise in the same area. This area should be allocated to one person only, however they may have a requirement to seek advice from the other experienced person.

Write up role descriptions

9. Get each individual to write up their role description, including accountabilities and KPIs. Share this with the group for discussion and feedback.
10. Group people into their organisations, and have them write up an organisational role description. Share this with the group for discussion and feedback.

Discuss learning and conflicts

11. Finish with an open discussion around:
 - How similar are the roles to what people had previously understood?
 - Where are there overlaps between roles that might be confusing? How can we address these overlaps to create clarity?
 - Does anyone need greater resources (time, support, other) to be able to deliver well on their role?
 - Where will the group need support (training, consultants, internal support) to deliver the project well?

MIRRORING

Activity #6

Context:

The most important and under-developed communication skill is active listening. The core of active listening is to pay close attention to what is being communicated, ask clarifying questions to ensure you understand and then reflect back to the speaker what you have heard to receive confirmation, before adding your own perspective, story or information.

This sounds like a simple exercise but people unused to mirroring may be surprised just how difficult it is to deeply listen and understand the other person, when our tendency is to want to 'contribute' to the conversation.

Why use it?

- To increase awareness of the role of listening in communication
- To improve active listening skills
- Allows the speaker to feel respected and supported

Time required:

30-60
MINUTES

Who should participate?

All core team members

Materials required:

Chairs arranged in groups of three

Credit:

Adapted from:
<http://www.communicationskillsactivities.com/>

Process:

1. Set up the team into groups of three. This can be done on Zoom breakout rooms if your team is dispersed. One person is the speaker, one is the listener and one is the observer.
2. The speaker is to tell three stories about their life. Start with something simple such as what they ate for breakfast. Then move on to more complex and emotive stories such as a recent argument with someone close to them. It is even more powerful if the stories are about interactions between the speaker and listener.
3. As the speaker tells each story, the listener paraphrases the important points of what they are hearing, and mirrors this

back to the speaker. The listener may ask clarifying questions, however may not add new information, opinions or stories about their own experience. The listener continues to mirror until the speaker agrees that the essence of their experience has been accurately reflected back to them.

4. The listener must remember that it is not their job to resolve the issues raised in the stories, provide advice or ask questions about the outcome of the issue being discussed.
5. After the 3 stories are shared and reflected, the listener, speaker and observer discuss what they noticed about the activity.
6. The participants switch roles and repeat the activity until all have been the speaker, the listener and the observer.

SEVEN MINUTE LIFE STORIES

Context:

Trust arises when we feel we know another person: their history, their personality, their experience. This activity is a simple way to 'get to know' your team members and is very effective for building trust and connection.

Why use it?

- To build trust
- For better teamwork
- To create connection

Time required:

30-60 MINS

depending on size of group

Who should participate?

All core team members

Materials required:

Chairs set up in pairs, timer

Process:

1. Set up the room with chairs in pairs, a little away from each other for some degree of privacy.
2. Ask people to pair up with someone from a different organisation who they don't know well.
3. Each person has seven minutes to tell their life story to the other, making sure they include events that have resulted in them ending up working on this project.
4. Each person then shares three reflections about their

partner's story with the broader group:

- "Something that surprised me about my partner's life was..."
 - "Something that I could really relate to in their life story was..."
 - "Something that was really different from my experience was..."
5. Allow time for unstructured social time afterwards, to allow the newfound connections to be explored.

ELEPHANT QUESTIONS

Context:

Elephant Questions help us to name the 'elephant in the room', or the thoughts and concerns that may be uncomfortable or vulnerable. Effective communication within a team requires courage and openness, as well as trust that we will be listened to and respected, even when we say things that others don't like.

These questions are a quick way to practice courageous communication and to create a safe space for authenticity.

Why use it?

- Improved skills in courageous communication
- Increased sense of trust and psychological safety

Time required:

40
MINUTES

Who should participate?

All team members can participate, including people more distant to the project, such as senior managers, finance managers etc.

Materials required:

Chairs and timer

Process:

1. Set up the room like musical chairs - an inner circle and an outer circle, facing each other. Ensure that anyone who knows each other well are in the same circle.
2. Use a timer that can ring every minute.
3. Each person in the pair has one minute to respond to each of these three open sentences, making each round 6 minutes. It is important that the listener only listens, and doesn't respond to what is shared by the speaker.
4. Elephant questions/open sentences:
 - "My biggest doubts about this project are..."
 - "What you need to know about me to work well with me is..."
 - "The 'elephant in the room' is..."
5. The outer circle changes place to sit with the next person after each round.
6. Allow at least three rounds.
7. Open a 10-minute group discussion for reflection on what was challenging, what was rewarding and what was surprising about the exercise.

FURTHER READING



Book



Article



Film



Podcast

Non-hierarchical org structures



Reinventing Organisations

by Frederic Laloux



Holacracy

by Brian Robertson

Systems thinking



Introduction to Systems Thinking

by Daniel Kim



Systems Change Behaviours

by Lankelly Chase



An Ecology of Mind: A Daughter's Portrait of Gregory Bateson

by Nora Bateson



Systems Thinking for Social Change

by David Peter Stroh



Thinking in Systems: A Primer

by Donella H. Meadows



Complexity

by Radio 4, BBC

Nonviolent communication



Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life

by Marshall B. Rosenberg

Team dynamics



Lencioni's 5 Dysfunctions of a Team

by Jessica Zartler



Teamwork: The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

by Patrick Lencioni

Emergent strategy



Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds

by adrienne maree brown

Trust and psychological safety



Google thought they knew how to create the perfect team

by Michael Schneider



Why trust matters at work

by Dori Meinert

ENDNOTES

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The Radical Guide to Collaboration was written in 2020 by Stephanie Clerc and Madeline McGarvey, in collaboration with the Culture Well team: Nera Komaric, Janine Philips, Benjamin Haynes, Jimi Wollumbin and Michele Goldman.

[Who is Culture Well](#)

Contact: culturewell@onehealthorganisation.org

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