Collaboration

…. … a critical success factor or clichéd illusion?

Collaboration – what is it and how does it differ from cooperation?

Look around you and pretty much every organisation and business will have collaboration listed as one of its workplace values and behaviours. But I often wonder if the meaning and intent of the word really understand? If you ask a dozen people you're likely to get a dozen different suggestions about what it means. And even more if you do an online search.

A Google search brings up the following definition of collaboration: *"the act of working with someone to produce something"*.

The ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth http://www.aracy.org.au) factsheet (2013) states *"collaboration generally refers to individuals or organisations working together to address problems and deliver outcomes that are not easily or effectively achieved by working alone"*.

An online business directory (http://www.businessdirectory.com) provides the general definition *"a cooperative arrangement in which two or more parties (which may or may not have any previous relationship) work jointly towards a common goal"*.

WhatIs (http://www.whatis.techtarget.com 2005) defines it as "a joint effort of multiple individuals or work groups to accomplish a task or project" and describes it in terms of synchronous and asynchronous collaboration in the context of Information Technology (IT).

Himmelman (2002:p3) defines collaborating as "*exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose"*.

In the IT world collaboration is often used to refer to social software that enables people to communicate and work together on tasks remotely with one blog suggesting that the term is *"so heavily overused and over-hyped it's becoming meaningless"* (www.thoughtfarmer.com).

NSW Health (NSW Ministry of Health, 2012, Health Professionals Workforce Plan 2012-2022) cites *"collaboration – Improving and sustaining performance depends on everyone in the system working as a team"* as one of its CORE values (Collaboration, Openness, Respect, Empowerment).

Though there are differences in how collaboration is interpreted across industries there's a common theme of working together towards a shared goal. Definitions echo Helen Keller's quote *"alone we can do so little; together we can do so much more"* to the philosophical Darwinian "*Those who have learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed"*! So there's a strong message that to survive, and thrive, in both corporate and public worlds, and to get more stuff done effectively people need to collaborate. However further research suggests there's a time and place for everything.

I've recently been prompted to question collaboration in the context of my work as a facilitator and health professional; do we really know what collaboration is and how to actually work that way with colleagues and consumers? While the intent is often good it seems to have become a clichéd illusion that is difficult to realise and sometimes an unpleasant experience for those involved, and for stakeholders who are excluded. Importantly, the culture and practices within an organisation will enable or inhibit good quality collaboration and subsequent outcomes. It needs to be role modelled at every level, particularly by influential leaders and managers.

As I've been running workshops exploring person-centredenss for health care professionals and consumers I've had many opportunities to hear from people who experience workplace/ organisational culture at the care or service interface. Through these experiences I've become increasingly aware that a significant challenge to the provision of person-centred care is the lack of collaboration. Or more precisely the illusion that we work in collaboration with consumers and colleagues when at best we work cooperatively and at worst simply tell people what we've done for them and think that makes us the world's best collaborators! So perhaps the timing to rethink collaboration is upon us.

Judging by the dates of publications (books and online) it seems interest in collaboration has escalated over the past 10 years. Its mention in publications first appeared in the late 19th century with a slow incline for almost 50 years, and has increased dramatically since the early 21st century (https://www.google.com.au/#q=what+is+collaboration).

What is collaboration (and what is it not)?

Most people are capable of working cooperatively; the phrase 'I'll help you if you help me' is often heard exchanged between workers and departments. However each individual is usually working on their own task and towards their own goal, and there's not a high need for crossing boundaries, compromising on resources, making tough decisions and trade-offs that affect each individual or department. When people collaborate they work (co-labour) on one shared goal and this requires some specific skills and processes.

Collaboration is more than keeping people informed; it requires actively engaging all collaborators in all aspects of the work. It requires flexibility so resources and support can be shifted to where the greatest need lies.

It's not about focusing on individual roles and tasks but on shared efforts required to work across boundaries and meet shared goals. Everyone in the collaborative is equally responsible for the tasks and the outcomes. This requires clear articulation of the shared outcome and agreement to accept the impact this may have on individual or team goals for the greater good.

It requires those affected by decisions to be actively involved in decision-making. This includes consumers and is particularly true in healthcare where collaborating with consumers (NSQHS) and including them in decision-making can be misunderstood, with a tendency to "educate [the patients'] about what they need to do" (Trede & Higgs 2008: 50) rather than allowing them to make the best decision for them.

> *"People who are engaged in ground-breaking collaborations have high regard for people who challenge and test their ideas"*
>
> (Ashkenas 2015)

When should collaboration be used (and when is an alternative approach more suitable)?

There can exist a false belief that no task and decision can be made without collaborating with all stakeholders, that it's the proper thing to do. However, not all work needs collaboration and many situations will result in better outcomes using other processes. Choosing the right process requires some information such as impact of the decision, time and resource availability, the extent of buy-in needed, the level of expertise required, and the environment or culture in which the decision is being made as well as the desired culture http://www.aiim.org/What-is-Collaboration#sthash.UzfNzY9F.dpuf
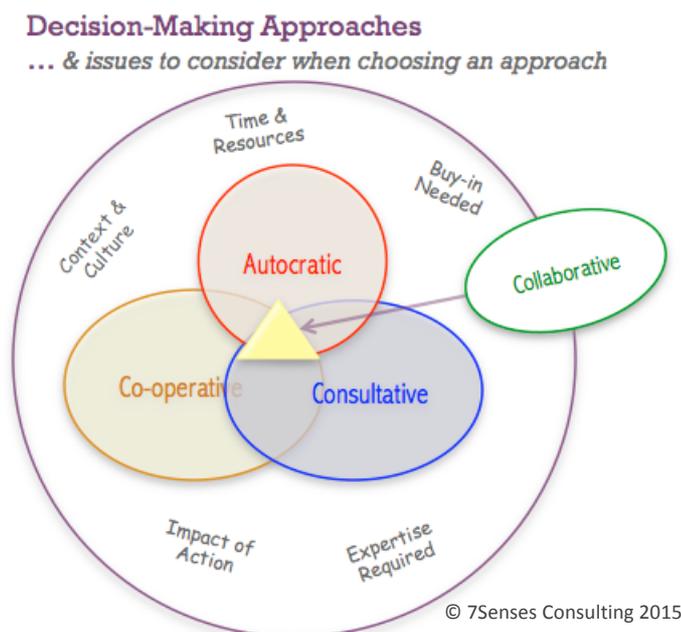
Where the responsibility for a decision and outcome sits with one person and that person has the authority to make the decision, and little information sharing is possible, then an autocratic decision-making approach is best.

When others have some useful information and their early involvement would help with implementation, a consultative model may be suitable.

Where two or more people help each other out with their individual work they cooperate to achieve.

Where others have useful information and/or a valuable perspective about the issue, they are significantly impacted by the decision and a high level of buy-in from them is crucial to success then a collaborative model is probably most relevant.

The following diagram identifies issues for consideration before choosing a decision-making approach.

Decision-Making Approaches
... & issues to consider when choosing an approach

Time & Resources

Context & Culture

Buy-in Needed

Autocratic

Collaborative

Co-operative

Consultative

Impact of Action

Expertise Required

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Asking yourself these few questions will help you decide who to direct, consult or collaborate with:

1. Who would you need to collaborate with (identify the stakeholders)?
2. What information do they have / need – think problem, outcomes, options?
3. What influence have they got – interest and impact?
4. How will they be impacted by the decision?

What enables individuals and teams to collaborate with others?

According to Smallen and Leach (1999) there are five keys to successful collaboration using the acronym NICER https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/html/erm/erm99/erm9945.html:

- **N**eed – that is common to all parties and strongly felt, because it's hard work and takes time and energy.
- **I**ntimacy – establish trust early, feel safe to share information, speak openly and be vulnerable.
- **C**ommunication – electronic allows timely communication, however collaboration requires some face-to-face where nonverbal cues can be experienced.
- **E**quality – in power, responsibilities, sharing of credit and authority. Where unequal status exists a "state of de facto equality" must be created!
- **R**espect – for each other's talents by building on strengths and compensating for weaknesses.

Other authors suggested the following to **enable** collaboration:

- Having a governance framework with clearly mapped milestones and a timeline.
- Genuine permission to speak up – quiet politeness might be comfortable but is never helpful.
- An interest in all perspectives
- Creative bargaining skills.
- Openness to challenge and to being challenged.
- Facilitation of meetings, dialogue and decisions.
- Great Leadership!

> *African Proverb "if you want to go fast go alone, if you want to go far go together"*

Some of the **inhibitors** to collaborating include competing objectives, confusing collaboration with teamwork or cooperation, insufficient time or when a quick decision is all that is needed or when people's values differ to the point of conflict. Now you can see where great leadership comes in.

Costs and benefit of collaboration

Costs	Benefits
- Time – to set up, develop collaborative relationships, and work collaboratively - More work eg emails, meetings, challenges, diversions and support - Loss of performance recognition if contribution goes unnoticed - Group think and rejection of outside information - Shared responsibility for outcomes and outputs; some people prefer to claim responsibility for their own achievements. - Loss of status and authority - to allow an equal playing field.	- Increased buy-in - Pooling talents and knowledge - Opportunity to try new things and innovate - Opportunity to shine, to demonstrate talent and ability - Shared ownership and achievements

Note the 'cost' list is significantly larger than the benefits list so it's worth considering if collaboration is really the best approach to use!

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