



Moving Beyond Definition: *Assessing Patterns of Collaboration*

By Royce Holladay

According to Dictionary.com, “collaborate” means to work together or cooperate to accomplish a task. But what does it really take for a group of unique individuals to come together to create a true collaboration? The definition tells us what to do, but the question people often ask is how to do that.

In times of rapid and complex change, one of the most common challenges clients share is about how to create and sustain effective collaboration. Leaders ask employees, who otherwise are highly professional, skilled contributors, to work as a team to accomplish a task or series of tasks. Sometimes, the teams take off, creating relationships and activities that move them toward assigned goals. Other times, however, leaders find that teams they create move into internal conflict or unhealthy competition, and are unable to move toward set goals. What makes the difference?

In HSD, we move beyond surface challenges to explore the underlying patterns of interaction and decision making that shape the culture of a team. Exploring those patterns together and asking team members to track their own progress on more productive patterns engages them in a different level of accountability and action.

We have identified a set of patterns that contribute to generative interactions and collaboration.

- **Know where you are going together.** A team charter or assignment often outlines the technical or outcome specifications for a task. The challenge comes when the team members don’t take time at the beginning to clarify those expectations. Team members must be clear with each other about what the specifications mean in day-to-day work and how those outcomes and measures contribute to the resilience of the whole organization.

Each team member has his/her own work to do, programs to develop and implement, and people to supervise. Too often team members maintain the focus of developing and implementing their own programs. Their questions are program-centric: How should these other team members be informed about my work? How can their work support my program? Where do our programs and implementation overlap? They see the work of the team in the context of their work first.

In reality, the overall collaboration is on the larger scale. Deciding, framing, and shaping the larger issues through the larger context of their shared goals and accountabilities sets the context of the greater whole system. Then decisions about individual work, programs, and people are coherent and contribute to the whole at that larger scale as well.

- **Engage in shared Adaptive Action.** Sharing work in a team is about sharing decision making and expertise to plan the next wise action. Members of effective teams consider current and desired patterns of the whole system, and then gauge the potential impact of shared and

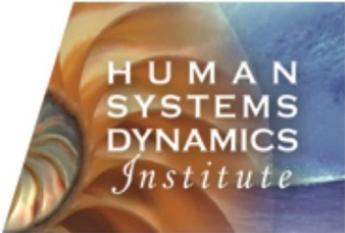
individual decisions on those patterns. They consider the whole of the project, rather than just the portion that is their own responsibility. Shared Adaptive Action does not ask any individual to ignore their own accountabilities or to abdicate their responsibilities. What it requires is that decisions about those accountabilities and responsibilities are informed by the needs and perspectives of the whole team and the desired outcomes at the larger scale, as well as by needs and perspectives of the smaller pieces.

- **Grant and generate voice.** In collaborative work, team members engage with each other to understand the work to be done, to negotiate differences that matter, and to take wise action toward greater whole system functioning. In HSD we talk about responsibilities inherent in these engagements. Each person grants voice to others, with the intent to understand what's being said, both verbally and nonverbally. At the same time, each individual generates voice by speaking clearly and completely, by avoiding jargon and hidden messages, and by making sure their messages meet others' needs. Granting and generating voice in a collaborative relationship depends on the ability to stand in inquiry. Collaborators put aside judgments, disagreements, and assumptions to engage deeply with their colleagues and co-workers.
- **Give and take productively.** Each individual in a team brings unique information and perspective to the work to be done. Successful collaboration depends on the degree to which each of those individuals share their unique expertise and questions, accept what others bring, and negotiate across differences that emerge. This level of reciprocity and personal authenticity allows for richer, more resilient responses that take advantage of the wealth of expertise in the collaboration.
- **Share access to resources.** Collaboration calls for equitable access among the collaborators. Whatever they need—information, fiscal or material resources, time, influence—has to be distributed across the whole in equitable and accessible ways. When regulations or policies preclude full sharing, as in the case of personnel confidentiality, for example, what matters is that each individual has the information or resources they need, with full understanding of any constraints that may exist around that access.

Each person takes on accountability for setting conditions in individual and shared work to shape these patterns, and the team's shared Adaptive Actions allow for constant shifting and responding to needs in the system. In sharing the responsibility for shaping these patterns, each member of the team moves to a greater level of understanding the system's needs and contributing to the greater success of the whole.

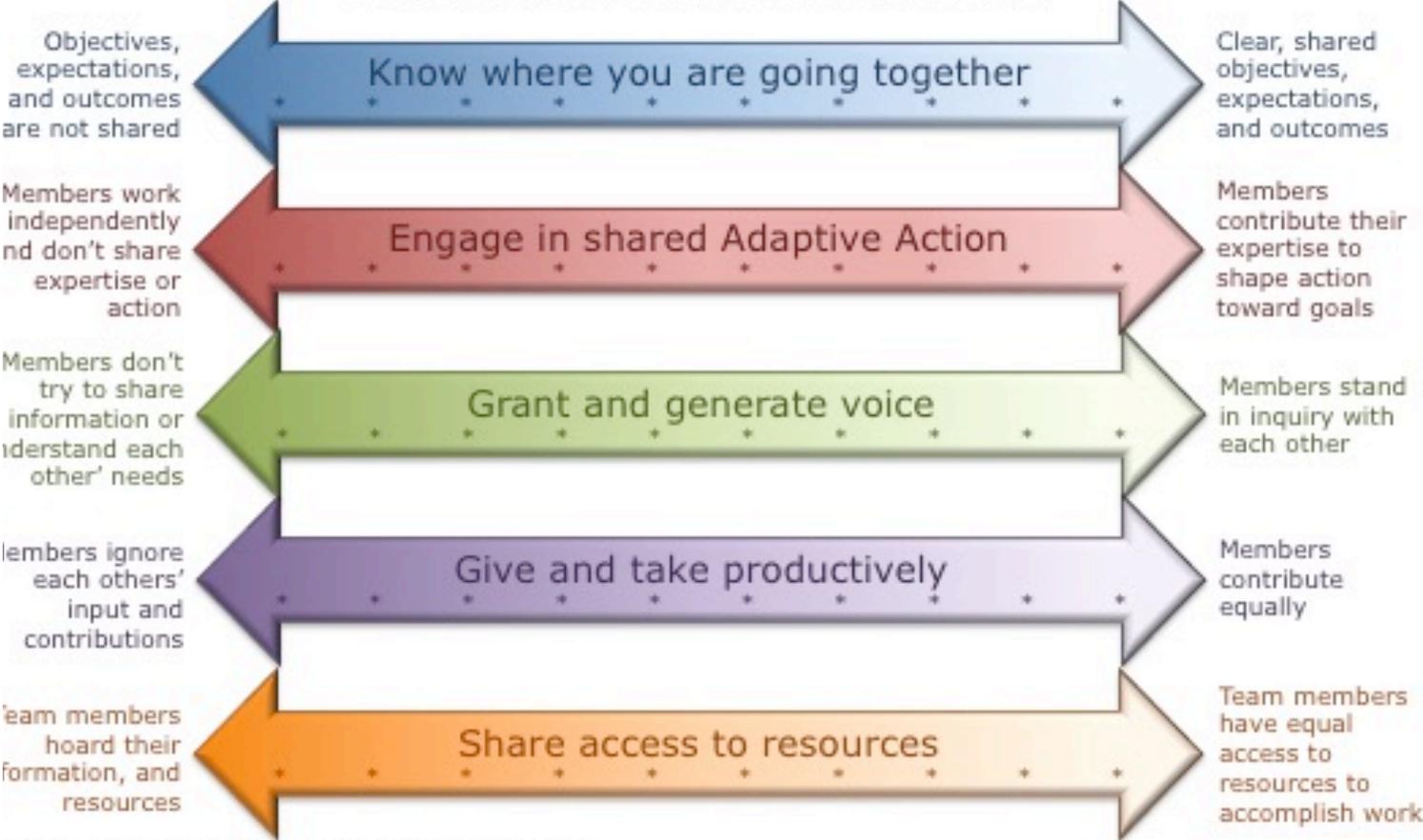
This month's Change the World model offers a way for you to assess your own performance, individually or as a team, on each of these patterns. Not to be considered as an end in itself, this assessment offers a springboard for shared exploration of the questions it might surface. Use it with your team to see where you currently stand and open a conversation about how you can bring shared work to new levels of collaborative performance. Let us know what you learn.

Royce



Collaboration Self-Assessment

Reflect on your performance individually and as a group of collaborators in each of the areas. How would you consider what is fit for function in each pattern, and how would you take action to move toward greater fitness on any of the following patterns?



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