

Developing the Craft of Collaboration – Part 1

*In search of actions that cultivate and
recreate the possibilities of better
collaboration*

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Acknowledgments

What follows in here and in [the linked resource paper](#) is offered to support people develop the craft of collaboration. I see collaboration as the music through which we exist together. It seems appropriate to acknowledge the people who have been in my life and allowed me to be in theirs.

What I have learned emerges from spaces in which I have spent my life working with others. I particularly acknowledge what I received through colleagues and many friends in the Jesuits, Carmichael Centre, Mísean Cara, Dóchas and other organisations and networks through which I have met people.

Since 2016 I have benefited greatly from connection with [Caplor Horizons](#) and their work to rethink the life of organisations. As one of their Advisors focusing on network collaboration, I have learned much with them about how people can bring their best to work. I am grateful to all at Caplor Horizons for the priceless gift of encouragement.

Many thanks to all who took part in the Caplor Horizons Action Learning group¹ over the past year for the grounded, honest and sincere search for better ways forward on collaboration.

In early Covid Days I learned a huge amount about networks while taking part in the Network Leadership Training Academy run by Visible Network Labs.

I also acknowledge with gratitude and admiration the brilliant thought and insight of the people whose writing related to collaboration it has been so exciting and liberating to read.

One of the greatest sources of inspiration I find for collaboration is in the beauty people create together through music. A piece I often return to is Beethoven's 9th symphony and in particular this version: [Som Sabadell Flash mob version](#).

And to the families and communities I belong to a hundred thousand thanks.

¹ Lorna Pearcey, Iain Patton, Dr. Kemal Shaheen, Ralph Sequeira, Dr. Sharon Turnbull, Amber Lauder, Sharon van Schalkwyk, Nick Reed

Introduction – stuck stories

What's the story in the world where *you* live?

There probably seems to be a lot of challenges at personal, organisational, and social levels. Maybe a fair bit of 'stuckness'?ⁱ Inabilities to move forward constructively, meaningfully and with sufficient impact? It is also my guess that realistically the only way to move forward is to do better together.

My objective in putting these pages together is the hope that they might help you to pause, and to wonder differently about the possibilities of collaboration. What would it take for us to craft better collaboration?

I think of collaboration as a craft. I see it as a set of practices, competencies, and experience. We can develop these to cultivate the **extraordinary possibilities of together**. Sure, collaboration is a common word. It is invoked with apparent ease. To name it as a craft, is to point to the difference between almost absentmindedly dabbling in it or consciously acknowledging that that we can develop a level of mastery in collaboration. That mastery gives birth to unimagined possibilities. It matters that it can be done at Beethoven 9th symphony levels.ⁱⁱ

Origins – Caplor Horizons Action Learning Group

As befits any thought and wondering about collaboration my thinking emerges from past and ongoing dialogue with many other people.

I have worked for many years in faith-based organisations, NGOs and networks of NGOs. Over the past year I have worked with Caplor Horizons on a joint project. We have tried to dig into the foundations of more effective collaboration. We have explored the world of collaboration through a range of actions. These included large group seminars, management and board sessions and an Action Learning Group specifically focused on more effective collaboration.

The Action Learning Group brought eight people together. They work in a variety of not-for-profit contexts. They share a sense of the urgent need to find ways to collaborate better. The learning was grounded in people's experience of real-world collaboration. We tried to make explicit the practices and thinking beneath that collaboration, and the search for ways to give collaboration a better chance. Taking the time in structured and honest conversations helped us identify steps we were motivated to use to cultivate collaboration. I learned the value and necessity of listening to the other. As a 'believer' in collaboration, listening to other people's honest reflection helped me confront the reality that the word collaboration is itself for some people part of the problem. The word can have negative connotations. To get beyond this we need to rediscover ways to have open and honest conversations that reconnect us to the magic of fundamental human experiences of collective effort and action. Central to that journey of discovery is being honest about the limits of the perspectives we may have (for me as white, European and male). Our perspectives can and must be developed by hearing and learning how people from other times in human history, from other Non-European

cultures and continents have such wisdom to add to learning to the why, the how and the justice of human togetherness.

The authors and websites listed in the bibliography point to another set of dialogue partners. They give me great light on what it might take us to get better at collaboration. In particular all the Caplor Horizons thinking expressed in 'The Change Maker's Guide to New Horizons' brings out the very real limitations of many ways of organising. They state "that we urgently need new forms of organisations for more sustainable futures". This learning directs my attention not just to new organisations but to what happens in the spaces between organisations.

Personal origins of interest in collaboration

Every day I read the newspapers I am struck by one thing. Most of the stories point to our inabilities to this point to learn to collaborate better.

All my life I have had the nagging belief that better tomorrows only come from bolder and braver collaboration today. I believe it is people – you and me – **who make more dynamic and genuinely transformative collaboration possible**. We can access the potential of tapping unimaginable possibilities of human collaboration only **when we pauseⁱⁱⁱ to reflect** as individuals and as members of many social groupings on what it takes. From there we can begin to make personal and organisational choices to act differently, to explore, develop and build new possibilities of collaboration.

In 'collaboration conversations' people often ask me for examples or case studies that prove that it is possible to 'do this' collaboration. At a personal level, I can think of many examples that support my belief in what human collaboration can achieve. No matter the difficulties of specific moments in history the longer-term perspective confirms the hope in the transformational change we can achieve together. Even the relative fragility of those triumphs – such as that achieved through the peace process in Ireland – only further highlight **the miracle of what people made happen when failure would have been so much easier**.

I can also think of many ordinary extraordinary examples **where collaboration makes life better today in the places I am connected to**. We live in an age where corrosive cynicism constantly and insidiously infects public space and discourse. This makes it easy to miss the collaborative magic that is always happening. Think of what is unfolding in play groups, in classrooms, in surgeries, in neighbourhoods or in sports clubs. Or recall the ways communities step up to support people through struggle, bereavement and loss.

The evidence I find is entirely persuasive. For me. But it may not be for others. So rather than focus on providing cases which you can prove fall short, I invite you to seek the evidence and examples from your own life, to **ponder it and identify where collaboration is the spark that fires the possibilities of your life**.

Doing that ties well to understanding collaboration as more craft than management tool. In attending to the questions set out in part two, I know I have got better at sensing and moving forward the possibility of what we can achieve together. It is a bit like listening to the disturbing discordant noise an orchestra makes during its warmup. Even then you can have a basic confidence in the beauty that can be given expression when each person uses their talents and gifts with others at the right moment as part of co-creating something from nothing. Newspapers paint pictures of war, conflict and division. Yet it is also my experience that the lives of real human communities are shaped by much more positive forces of care, kindness and commitment to building better with others.

Outline of Paper

From this work two papers have emerged.

The first part offers a '**9-R Framework**' for *immersion into the experience of collaboration*, grounded in the Action Learning Group's reflective search.

The second ([which can be found here](#)) offers a **four-part action framework** to *design and deliver the craft of collaboration*. The framework is aligned with the Caplor House model. It explores each of these nine questions.

- 1) What are the **essential key resources** to pack to build better collaboration?
- 2) What would a **negative scenario** for collaboration in this context look like?
- 3) What would an **alternative positive scenario** for collaboration look like?
- 4) Why does much better (intentional, consistent, skilled) collaboration **matter**?
- 5) What are the **key blocks** to effective collaboration?
- 6) Where might be a **good place to start on building better collaboration**?
- 7) What would better collaboration look like **in your context**?
- 8) What **structures** help collaboration?
- 9) Is collaboration **just a means**?

I offer you these reflections with their lessons learned together, questions and wondering as pointers towards another road that diverges in the wood. My suggestion is to choose to explore any of the questions that appear to lead towards the next most promising steps. By making time to explore slowly and reflectively some or all of the questions – for most benefit, with others – hopefully you might have some new light on where the road to more effective collaboration calls to you.

As a person of faith, I take great inspiration from St Paul's line – *Glory be to [God] whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine*. The pages that follow explore how this power might break out in and from us.

The Nine Rs of Effective Collaboration

This introductory text expresses some of the key learning of the group of people who took part in the Action Learning Group run with Caplor Horizons in relation to more effective collaboration.

Reflections inspired by an Action Learning Group

We are people who work and act in the not for profit/NGO sector.

We met and continue to meet to explore how we could become better at collaboration in and with other organisations and beyond our organisations. Finding ways to collaborate better matters to us. We each see different possibilities and better futures if we – and those we interact with – could take more effective action to collaborate.

We approach this search as sobered enthusiasts. We think of ourselves as on the side of those hopeful about what we can achieve together. Experience has taught us and teaches us that collaboration is hard work. If collaboration holds promise, and a certain wonder, it can at times also reveal scars we bear. We can each think of times it failed us. Left us unable to move forward on the path we thought, more we hoped lay ahead. Broken for so many reasons. Ego, fear, too much certainty, too much (perceived) scarcity, too little space, closedness, too top down, too bottom up, too dependent on people who move, too much worn down hope in humanity, wider cultures of control, of capitalist competitiveness, of individualism, of hierarchy, of patriarchy, of money, power, government and public service power and practices and experiences of colonial power.

And its breaking can hurt. To propose or invite collaboration means facing a certain vulnerability. It can break again.

For all that we each believe and together believe in trying again.

Partly we see **no way to the better visioned world without collaboration**. The big systemic changes our world missions us to – more sustainable, more equal, more just worlds – simply cannot be achieved without urgent widening and expanded collaborations. Whether globally, regionally, or right down to the local level, better seems to demand doing better with others.

On reflection experience also teaches us that **there are many who really give it a go and stick with it**. Sometimes maybe we have missed the extraordinary collaborations that happen daily, maybe too close to be seen. Widely shared narratives of division blind us to humanity's unquenchable thirst to be mutually helpful. We have seen, we do see people, who voluntarily, in freedom **strive to build what can only be built together**. We all know open people, generous people, brave people who opt to hold onto and out for the possibilities of shared futures.

Through nothing more innovative, costly, or cutting edge than giving some time, respect, and an open ear to each other in our group **we have collaborated to dig into the substance of collaboration**.

Through the possibilities of conversation, we have experienced the mystery of attentiveness to the important together. We have tasted the joy of being able to think out loud, to explore; the glorious freedom of not having to pretend to have a final answer. The giftedness of the compassion, the wisdom, the self-reflectiveness and honesty of other people. The relief that what I struggle with is not only my struggle. Mission accomplished because only with others can we sense what collaboration has been, is and could yet be.

Actions to recreate the possibilities of collaboration.

Together we have noted – provisionally – some actions that seem to cultivate and recreate the possibilities of collaboration, and therefore perhaps are worth including in our unavoidably distinctive and contextualised journeys towards better collaboration.

1. Remember when it worked, in any sphere of your life.

Notice what helped. Good open personal conversations, and connections. The brilliance and magic of openness and reverence for real difference in thinking, feeling and approaches. The gift of diversity to be stronger and better together. Compatibility found in groups, and organisations. Informal meetings between people from organisations, and supporters. Meals shared; drinks shared. Human connectedness at many levels.

2. Reckon with the push and opportunity that crises offer to work together.

Crises – covid, war, natural disasters, funding – appear to allow us tap into more collaborative instincts. Maybe they face us with our inability to survive alone, our need to attend to what is essential, the relative pettiness of much that we allow to prevent us working together. And maybe we can transfer the wisdom of our human capability to co-operate at times of crisis to ordinary times. Perhaps by sharpening the awareness of the gravity of the hidden silent and deadly crises (war, inequality, climate destruction) destroying our futures on a daily basis.

3. Resource what can unblock stuckness.

Give time and space to restoring, and deepening relationships and to allowing them to grow in wild ways. Not just through tasks, projects, and strictly controlled appointment slots. Allow people to breathe, pause, reflect and meet in less pressured spaces, to connect as human beings. Push back against planning the work, and thereafter only working the plan and its KPIs. Consider whether and when external facilitation can help. Or whether you can risk not having facilitation. Budget to invest in what it takes to build and support connections and trust. Not just IT, offices, legal and finance. Why do orchestras have conductors, great sports teams have coaches?

4. Refocus with conversations that unlock futures.

Name possibilities, purposes, needs, concerns. Avoid drifting, deferring, and delaying necessary conversations.

5. Rate the degree to which collaboration is a real priority.

Is it more talked of than acted on? Are meaningful steps taken? Ask honest questions of what people are willing to commit to together.

6. Realise what is possible, and when that is possible.

Real attentiveness to each other, and appreciation for each other's context. Understand what this collaborative step means for each of us in our contexts. Continuing to meet and being realistic about the rhythm of meetings. Waiting with patience for the time to be right.

7. Renew and rededicate and infect your organisation with contagious collaborative intent.

Let it break out in our strategies, our plans, our evaluations. Make it part of the way we do things around here. Make what we could do with others the first not the last consideration.

8. Relativise, don't absolutise collaboration.

For all collaboration's potential, stay open to the reality that maybe, there are times not to try, not to continue, and to walk away. Without some minimum openness, without some mutuality, without some awareness of limitations of our own perspective, analysis or solutions, maybe we are not now or yet ready for collaboration.

9. Ready! Give it a go. Put it top of the agenda.

If we are our only hope, let's begin open, honest, equal, new and constructive conversations about what is important to us, and what it is important that we try and do together so that we are failing and learning together.

Conclusion

The 9Rs set out above seek to strike some notes that might spark our desire to step into collaboration. Part two looks at exploring a framework that helps us address the conditions for more effective collaboration and the resources we can bring to that.

To read Part two, click [here!](#)

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ⁱ I find Adam Kahane’s writing consistently inspiring to explore how we get beyond where we get ‘stuck’.

ⁱⁱ As mentioned above I find what people manage to create through shared, disciplined and ‘conducted’ effort in music an inspirational and moving evocation of what we might do together in others spheres of life. What would it be like if we set our standards to reach for the brilliance expressed in something like the [Som Sabadell Flash mob](#) version of Beethoven’s 9th symphony?

ⁱⁱⁱ I learned the amazing potential of the power to pause from John Sharry when trying to learn parenting on the job. John Sharry, “The Power of Positive Parenting”.