

The Collaboration Paradox:

Why So Many Leaders Sabotage Their Own Collaborations— and Some Tactics for Getting Things Right

By John Abele

Collaboration is one of those things everyone thinks they understand, but very few actually do. True, some types of collaboration are natural or easy to learn, but the highest, most valuable kind, where everybody in the group is thinking creatively and sharing openly is extremely rare. Now, in the era of Web 2.0, a wave of new collaboration tools are being unleashed so that even more and bigger collaborations are being announced daily. But most people won't get much value out of these exciting new tools if they don't pay attention to the crucial soft ingredients -- the behaviors and mindset -- needed to make collaboration really work.

My goal in *The Collaboration Paradox* is to help readers in any field understand what stands in the way of real collaboration. From the time we start school and throughout our careers, we are taught and rewarded for the very traits that make it difficult for us to collaborate effectively. This situation is compounded by the way we teach leaders to rigorously assert control as often as possible so their authority is constantly being reinforced. Controlling people is the opposite of collaborating with them. As a result, most leaders of collaborations are doing exactly the wrong things when they bring people together to collaborate, and the other people involved in those projects are essentially programmed to derail or resist collaboration. After describing that, the central paradox of collaboration, I'll analyze several intriguing projects that have achieved the highest level of collaboration-- the "Holy Grail" that many organizations strive for because of the phenomenal results that can be achieved.

At this crucial juncture in history, where the world economy is seeking to rebuild itself, efficiency is more crucial than ever. Getting maximum value out of collaborations will help rebuild our economies more quickly. In addition, many of the most exciting new fields require collaboration on multiple levels and across several areas of expertise: These fields include nanotechnology, bioengineering, and alternative fuel development.

One of the most exciting things about this book will be the "insider" examples I will include from my career at Boston Scientific, my experience as a philanthropist, and as someone who cares deeply about family and community. My colleagues, the causes I support, and I have applied these particular tactics in all of these arenas and I think it's fair to say that the results are remarkable. Most notably: Boston Scientific helped to pioneer minimally invasive surgery, FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) has evolved into a hugely popular competition that teaches children how to collaborate naturally, and finally, against

tremendous odds, my brothers and I, with an intriguing team of collaborators, discovered the submarine that our father and his crew perished on during WWII.

I hope this book will inspire and guide people in many settings, whether corporate, community, educational, or governmental, to build stronger and more effective collaborations that will unleash better solutions to the world's problems, in the form of new technologies, institutions, and processes.

What are the Different Types of Collaborations?

A look at the vast literature on collaboration shows that most people still think mainly about this process as "working together" and there is a great deal of focus on how to integrate ideas. But the challenge for any collaboration really begins long before you bring people together; and it involves much more than just finding a way to fuse their ideas.

Because I think it highlights the most important distinctions, I have chosen to categorize collaborations based on their goals and complexity. (See Chart)

Chart 1: The Six Types of Collaboration

Natural

Rules-Based

Skills-based

Creative

Creative and complex

Creative and massively complex

Some types of collaboration come very naturally: When you walk on a sidewalk you instinctively coordinate with the other walkers to avoid collisions. These are the basic forms of "natural," or "go along to get along," collaborations that are necessary for survival, and most of us do them without even thinking.

Next, there are "rules-based" collaborations with slightly more formal codes of behavior, such as driving a car or respecting the property of others. Moving up the ladder, "skills-based collaborations" have more complicated rules, but require a collection of differing skills that need to be integrated in order to produce the desired group goal. Sports teams, symphony orchestras, and surgical teams are examples of this type of collaboration.

Some collaborations within the "skilled" category are built around the goal of group success, while others are really supporting some key individual: For example, a surgical team is working entirely in support, and under the orders of, the surgeon. The group goal may be to make sure the patient gets the best care possible, but the other members of the team, such as the nurses, are largely supporting the surgeon.

The next categories involve higher, more complex types of collaboration that are much less intuitive: The goal is for a group of diverse-thinking individuals to come together to create something new. This topic is so compelling that many books discuss some aspect of it, such as *Group Genius* by Keith Sawyer, *Here Comes Everybody* by Clay Shirky, *Wikinomics*, by Dan Tapscott and Anthony Williams, and *We are Smarter than Me* by Barry Libert, Jon Spector, and Don Tapscott . But no one has yet clearly described the special interpersonal dynamics that create optimal creative collaborations.

'In these "creative" collaborations, it is not just a matter of people pitching in what they know; the goal is to extrapolate beyond the group's collective knowledge. I separate these into three subsets of collaboration types: "creative," "creative and complex," and "creative and massively complex."

Creative projects can involve few or very many people, cut across multiple specialty areas, involve hundreds of components, and take as long as several years to complete. I have created the fifth category because "complex" collaborations involve more integration and synthesis than smaller ones. The sixth category -- very large scale collaborations -- also have some unique features because of the amount of detail involved and the exponential effects of having so many interconnected people and elements working together.

What's critical to any creative collaboration, however, is that it begins with a goal but no blueprint to follow, because much will be discovered during the process. Each individual is expected to share any of his or her knowledge, opinions, and discoveries that will help to achieve the group's common goal. Drawing up a mission statement is an example of a simple "creative" collaboration. Meanwhile, a relief operation is an example of a "creative and complex" collaboration that involves technical, social, political, financial, and time elements that are rapidly changing, making collaboration exponentially more complicated than it is for simpler projects. Solving the 2008 global financial crisis is a current example of a "creative and massively complex" issue.

How Can We Solve the Problems of Creative Collaboration?

Too often, creative collaborations become a sham. With so many parts, players, and egos involved, simply managing the political aspects of such projects is challenging enough, let alone integrating the results into anything actionable. In the end, the organizers may make glowing reference to the long list of divas they assembled, but often they have little to show for that effort and almost certainly nothing really new has come from it.

What's most surprising about this lack of success is that we have an ever-expanding array of tools that can enhance collaboration, such as Wikis, search engines, smart phones, and social networks. The reasons that collaborations fail, however, involve those crucial soft ingredients mentioned earlier—behaviors and mindset.

As mentioned earlier, the skills we are taught are the most important for success are actually collaboration busters. In school, at work, and everywhere we are shown that success comes through self promotion and devotion to our own "kind," whether it is a department, professional field, or political viewpoint. Young athletes are taught to win at all costs and to celebrate "crushing" their opponents. There are precious few role models who celebrate victory without also celebrating "defeat of the enemy." When these same traits are allowed to dominate a collaboration, it becomes a very negative experience. Only a few participants have any real say. The rest feel intimidated or exploited, and as if their time is being wasted. This type of "hollow" collaboration happens so much, that many people are very skeptical about collaborating. In particular, they may have the following fears, which inhibit them from really contributing:

- Their best ideas will be stolen.
- Their weaknesses will be highlighted.
- There will be a hidden agenda.
- The participants will have such different ideas that they'll never agree on anything.
- Certain individuals or camps will dominate.

What Attitudes and Steps are Needed to Achieve Real, Creative Collaboration?

This book will focus on creative collaborations and explore the behaviors and mindsets needed to make such collaborations successful. I will also discuss specific tactics that may help readers create this mindset within their own groups. Many of these tactics are counter-intuitive, and they are seldom, if ever, taught. While there is a wealth of literature describing team building, the power of crowd-sourcing, using emotional intelligence to improve team dynamics, and innovative collaboration, no one has yet properly investigated the "soft ingredients" needed for successful collaboration and how to encourage their expression.

The most important point is that collaboration is a mindset, not a set of steps. So, while I can recommend steps, and give examples of how they have worked, people will need to shoot for the mindset and try different approaches depending on the situation.

I like to call this mental attitude the "collaborative state." Helping groups reach that state depends on the mix of people involved, the work done to prepare for the collaboration, and the characteristics of whoever is leading the effort.

The first feature that will decide whether a collaboration fails or succeeds is the choice of collaborators. Many people want the most prestigious and intelligent people they can find, but in fact, it's more important to get a diverse mix of people

who represent different perspectives, skills, and mindsets. Diversity reduces groupthink and amplifies the variety of input.

Then, to get that group to truly work together, the leader must create a unique environment of openness, trust, candor, risk taking, astute awareness, and of sensitivity to the various personalities involved. There must be a clear set of rules for how to act so that people feel safe about expressing their views. But the participants shouldn't feel too safe; in fact, it helps to keep them slightly off balance, even a bit uncomfortable, so that they are open to the unexpected and willing to be unorthodox if that's what is necessary to get to the answers the group needs. The participants must be engaged from the beginning, and that requires a lot of preparation and "stage setting."

Most importantly, the leader or moderator must have impresario-like skills, so that he or she can make certain that every voice is heard, that people are comfortable sharing all their ideas, and that the overall process maximizes the likelihood that the very best ideas will get approved— not just those of the most powerful participants. The leader's most important tasks include managing divas and helping less well-known participants to shine.

Getting to the "collaborative state" takes a lot of planning and work behind the scenes, in setting the stage, drawing up the list of participants, grooming them for the process, and then overseeing the collaboration. Many of the tactics that help create that environment are counter-intuitive. For example, leaders need to cede control – not vigorously exert it. They must also carefully manage the personalities in the group and set an example to show that everyone will be treated fairly and given a voice, and that creative ideas are welcomed. Group leaders must also work against "the system" to make it clear that in this particular setting bullying, patronizing, and relentless self-promotion are considered counter-productive. If the right steps are followed, and a group does reach peak collaboration, amazing things can happen, as the examples I give should show.

Why I'm Writing This Book

Early in my career, the success of the firm I co-founded (Boston Scientific) depended on getting experts to reach agreement about the best uses of very complex and potentially disruptive medical technologies -- specifically, the tools for minimally invasive surgery. You might think that doctors welcomed minimally invasive surgery with open arms, since it saves patients discomfort and reduces costs. Quite the contrary, many physicians either didn't understand the field's potential or saw it as a threat to their own specialty, and fought vigorously to impede it.

Despite tremendous opposition, this field was launched and changed the way medicine is practiced worldwide. Collaboration played a key role in this. For example, when we launched one of the first instruments for minimally invasive surgery, some renowned surgeons agreed to use the tool, but then simply kept it on the shelf, leaving us in limbo.

After much frustration, we finally realized that these tools were so different from what already existed, and so “threatening,” that we would have to introduce them by completely new methods. We started collaborating with young, less renowned, but more innovative surgeons who had more to gain by working with us and were less likely to follow the typical academic practice of deferring to the “anointed experts.” We developed a specific way of identifying these optimal collaborators, who we also saw as most likely to become the leaders of tomorrow.

Together, we, our competitors, and those daring physicians pioneered an extremely effective but also controversial collaborative teaching tool -- the live demonstration course. In live demo courses, a team of experts on a panel offers guidance, criticism, and observations to a surgical team as they perform a procedure. The procedure is broadcast in real time, and the audience sees every move the surgical team makes and hears the discussion between that team and the expert panel. Sometimes the audience can even jump into the discussion offering their views of how the team is doing via audience response systems. Many people are astonished when they see one of these live demo courses for the first time, because you see a surgeon actually taking advice from others, albeit other doctors, as he is performing his craft.

That experience was one of many that led to my longstanding interest in figuring out why some collaborations work and some don't. I've studied collaboration throughout my long career and tried to apply what I've learned in the many non-profit and educational endeavors I'm involved in. The tools and techniques of real collaboration have also helped me achieve a very challenging personal goal -- the discovery of the WWII submarine on which my father and his crew lost their lives.

I'm so passionate about this field that I bought a conference center where I conduct research and teach organizations about collaboration. I also write and speak about collaboration to a range of audiences, discussing the false assumptions many people have about the process, giving advice on how to bring a group into a “collaborative state,” and identifying and eliminating the “collaboration busters” that will undermine such efforts.

Real Collaboration: What are Some Success Stories?

One of the stories I will use to explain the steps in real collaboration involves the start of minimally invasive surgery, which is mentioned above. Because of successful collaboration, millions of people are now able to undergo surgical procedures in which only tiny cuts are made so that thin wires and other probes can be snaked through veins and other avenues to trouble spots. These patients are generally half awake during these procedures, and they have much quicker and easier recoveries than were typical of the complicated, expensive, and risky surgeries these methods replaced. Minimally invasive surgery has changed the practice of medicine around the world and helped Boston Scientific to grow to revenues of over \$8 billion.

Getting to this point, however, was extremely difficult. The launch of this field, which involved numerous physicians and their associates from many diverse areas of expertise, was vigorously opposed by the medical establishment. I'll describe the many unique ways we encouraged collaboration and used it to bring tools, such as those used to treat clots or other problems in veins, to the attention of as many physicians as possible and to evolve them. Because we worked with doctors from a range of specialties, we had to overcome not just resistance to "disruptive technology" but turf battles as well.

Another example of real collaboration occurs at FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), a student competition in which teaching collaboration is a specific goal. Participating in FIRST can ingrain collaboration into student behavior.

Many friends and colleagues who have visited a FIRST event remark about how completely different it is from a typical athletic event. At FIRST, if a team's robot breaks down, you'll see kids from other teams rush over and try to help even if the robot belongs to a team they were just competing against.

That's because the competition is organized into a game that is designed so that teams cannot win without collaborating: There are incentives for collaborating even with their competitors. On top of that, the contestants learn "gracious professionalism," which obliges everyone to behave in a fair and polite manner. FIRST brings participants to a collaborative state. But FIRST is also a great deal of fun for all involved. The atmosphere is part rock concert, part basketball game, and part NASCAR; it engages young people at the same time that it teaches them. In addition, they are learning basic engineering skills and to admire engineers -- their mentors in the competition.

The third major example I will cite is the collaboration that my brothers and I launched to recover the Grunion, the submarine our father commanded during WWII, and which was sunk with him and his entire crew in 1942. There seemed to be only the slimmest chance that we would ever come close to finding this sub, which sank off the Aleutian Islands. But through a collaboration of relatives, journalists, genealogical experts, marine biologists, submariners, a Japanese military history buff, and a crab boat captain, we did more than just find the sub. We also identified at least one family member for every single man who perished on it, and had an article published in their local newspaper about each man.

I'm involved a range of other evolving high level collaborations, such as the Bioengineering Department at University of Virginia, the Amherst Community Engagement Project, The National History Club, and Olin college--a university that aims to teach engineering in such a totally different way that it is hoped as many women will enroll as men. From each of these experiences I have anecdotes to share that will help support my argument on how to improve collaborations.

My book will focus on the paradox of real collaboration and show that achieving this state is not about getting the best minds together— it's about creating a new mind set. I will describe a variety of experiences where strong-willed independent thinkers have felt excited about working together and managed to create something new. I'll describe the typical barriers to collaboration and some tactics people have used to overcome them. I will also include quotes from some of the best collaborators I've worked with, all of whom are leaders in their respective fields. Ultimately, I hope to help develop a new framework for understanding collaboration and make more people familiar with a variety of collaboration-management strategies.