



Collaboration Ecology

The Challenge of the 21st Century

By Mushin J. Schilling

What is collaboration?

Collaboration, as we understand it, is a process whereby two or more parties work together closely to achieve mutual beneficial outcomes.

Collaboration is easily confused with but greatly differs from cooperation. When people, organizations or companies cooperate there is really no need to jointly develop shared understandings and trust; in cooperation it is enough that participants, for instance, simply execute instructions willingly or do what they agreed upon previously. Also in cooperation the desired outcome is relatively clear, whereas in collaboration it is mostly unpredictable although all partners in the collaborative effort are certain that what will be realized far outweighs what could be produced individually or in mere cooperation.

Clearly collaboration is a much more complex and demanding process than cooperation, and this also because it relies heavily on trust and a joint commitment to shared understandings or values.

It is equally important to differentiate what in this article is understood as collaboration from what is seen as such in the Internet. If you google collaboration you will get around 167 million documents to choose from. Skimming the first 100 or so it seems obvious that collaboration is generally regarded as “the sum of all logical and target group oriented workflows in and between companies” to cite one document. The ‘net is full of so called collaboration-software and tools. But it is very clear that what is regarded as collaboration is what we covered above as being cooperation, “working together on something”, where it could simply be enough to execute instructions willingly.

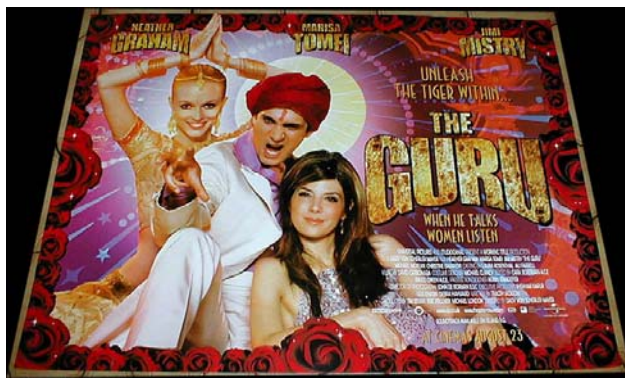
In this article by collaboration we mean a process where two or more people and/or organisations work together by jointly developing shared understandings and building enough trust to share knowledge, processes and activities in alignment with common values, intentions and/or goals or a vision which is typically creative/innovative in nature.

Collaboration and competition

The dominant collective culture in most parts of the world today, and particularly in the United States, is a *star culture* in which “the winner takes it all; the loser has to fall” (Abba). In today’s economic world business leaders, entrepreneurs, CEOs, brokers, financiers etc, are typically portrayed as a star, even though the



accomplishment and profit of any organisation or business is obviously created by everybody engaged in it. Promoting a business leader as a star may produce a momentary marketing advantage, but – as will become obvious in this article – collaboration creates a much greater and most of all sustainable business value, and more than that produces social coherence and community: collaboration produces wealth in *every* respect. The star culture and its incessant competition might create individual fortunes but it does so by creating many losers in its wake, our planetary environment obviously being one of them. The star culture is driven by and drives the sense of isolation and disconnectedness from a larger whole by mythologizing the individual and his or her achievements – which are seen as the result of competing well. This is most likely a major obstacle to be surmounted if we want a sustainable future for a flourishing planet and an open society. Contrary to the myths our star culture perpetuate, people working in collaboration achieve far greater and sustainable successes than individuals, even if we narrow down the meaning of success to be solely economic.



But even so, a collaborative culture doesn't *oppose* competition and the star culture, it just surpasses it in every respect except ego-gratification. Collaboration is a major step beyond egotism, nepotism, feudalism and any vertical leadership structure – not to mention bureaucracy and adolescent's games. All of these are rooted in pyramidal systems where the many carry and enrich those on the next, narrower level and compete to become one of them. People and organisations having chosen

a collaborative culture do recognize, and even honour the fact that competition has its historical mission to play in society and the development of individuals and organisations.

Star culture and competition belongs to an era or developmental stage where humanity is convinced that there is not enough for everybody, where resources, due to a lack of knowledge and know-how, are thought to be limited. In the epoch we are embarking upon – often and appropriately called the knowledge-society¹ – it is obvious that we will be doing more and more with less and less, exponentially so.

In this new century knowledge has become the main resource helping us to achieve the very exponential growth we face today, which could, for instance, very easily lead to a situation where in 10-20 years with the intelligent use of one drop of oil we are doing what we need a whole barrel full for today. We have entered the epoch in which collaborative systems and structures evolve other, far better ways to create excellence and incentives to foster better ideas, policies, workflows and practises then are possible through competition and star cultures. So there is really no need to oppose competition at all; we are surpassing it in every respect.

Collaboration, being based on this and similar insights and more than this: on deep humane qualities and behaviours, will inevitably replace competitive capitalism and its unhealthy – for

¹ Transposing this onto a level of development of an individual or organisation this can also be regarded as the realisation that one is a global citizen in a pluralistic and open system of systems or society.

the planet and social fabric – culture.

It is obvious for instance, that there is much more know-how about important matters *outside* any business or organisation than there can possibly be inside of it. Since in competitive culture knowledge is regarded and treated as power it is made scarce, and is, whatever the market may be, heavily protected against the competition. Therefore it is very difficult to ‘harvest’ this knowledge from other individuals or organisations on the market. One has to spend considerable resources to obtain it. In a collaborative system knowledge is shared freely and whatever the benefits are further down the line all participants trust that these are shared equitably between all contributors. The value of knowledge that is common to collaborators – know-how about processes, resources, practises, for instance – is exponentially higher than the value of the very same knowledge available to competing individuals or organisations. This is the main reason why collaborative enterprises, businesses and organisations have the evolutionary edge in a heavily competitive global system, and this is also a major cause for optimism in spite of the grave dangers humanity is presently facing. The day is not far when the collaborative culture that is emerging presently has gained enough momentum to replace the competitive and authoritarian structures where these are not as effective as the collaborative ones – most probably in relatively open and liberal societies first².

Recently a new term has come to my notice: “coopetition” combining the words cooperation and competition in an attempt to go beyond the antagonism that resides in these two terms. What is expressing itself here is already incorporated in the view on collaboration as it is expressed here particularly since collaboration doesn’t stop us from jostling and struggling for best possible practises and solutions to the challenges we are facing. It is the combination of competition with star culture and stark ambition rooted in the “me first” conviction that is afflicting the planet. The tournament that brings out excellence and can and does motivate individuals and teams seems to be an intermediate developmental stage, though. It reflects a point of view, a very wide spread one that has become ingrained in our global culture, based on the idea that there is not enough for everybody, and therefore the strongest/fittest will take more to stay strongest. This is a much too simplistic view of things – it doesn’t explain growing diversity and complexity on all levels of evolution including the cultural development of our species.

Collaboration incorporates non-exclusionary competition: In any inquiring, deliberating and deciding process many views or propositions are inspected and competes with other views. Likewise individuals and teams/groups with a



² In less developed parts of the world where liberal and democratic societies have not yet developed well there might be a healthy competitive phase necessary – where cooperation plays an important role – before the possibilities of real collaboration can be pursued.

collaborative endeavour can – and often do – pursue diverse lines or processes to add value to the overall effort.

Learning collaboration

Collaboration that creates and applies knowledge for the purpose of social and commercial enterprise is *very sophisticated behaviour*. Apart from subject matter expertise, skills, competence and experience – which are basic to competitive endeavours as well – collaboration requires shared understandings and values, trust among individuals and organizations, and the efficient, full sharing of ideas, information, practises and processes. It rests upon the participants' alignment with common intentions and works towards realizing a common goal or vision which is typically creative or innovative in nature.

As much as it is true that *the process of collaborative innovation and creation – here regarded also as a novel form of entrepreneurship – can be learned **only** through experience*, it is also true that there are environments that greatly enhance the learning of collaboration. As a complex³, and because of the required trust, potentially fragile process it needs a safe surrounding to germinate. And as it is basically embarked upon by people who have matured sufficiently beyond competition and personal stardom (egotism), and who have understood that collaboration requires equal respect of all for all, it is a voluntary, self-managing process that can only be encouraged and facilitated – there will most likely never be standardized practices beyond the creation of an ecology that fosters collaboration.

An ecology of patience also, as collaboration only works when the process adopts a pace of development that is comfortable for all participants – it is important that there is enough space for the necessary behaviours and procedures to be internalized individually and across organizations.



Creating a collaboration ecology starts with rediscovering or creating common ground: shared experiences and/or values, intentions, visions. The environment in which it develops easily is one of being attentive and open-mindedly present to other collaborators, giving authentic feedback and ‘being yourself’ and expecting the others to likewise be; a willingness to accept differences in perspective, perception and opinion. This is relatively easy once a deep mutual understanding of ‘our commonality of intention, vision and value’ has taken root.

³ The process of collaboration is only complex when regarded through analytical and linear lenses. When regarded from within a collaborating entity it is a naturally unfolding emergent dynamic system which is often better regarded as a work of art – ‘practical beauty’ is a term that comes to mind; a beauty that is easily seen in a natural landscape or ecology.

Moreover for an ecology of collaboration to support organizations it is prerequisite that these organisations practise collaboration internally; this being analogue to the aforementioned psychological outlooks and behaviours participants must be fluent in to participate in an effective collaboration.

Collaboration flourishes in an environment of shared core values that are – beknown to all – *practiced* on a day to day basis.

Further qualities that cultivate collaboration are the wish to learn from each other, a stance that could be called ‘mutual apprenticeship’; being respectful and appreciative of all, being responsive to non-verbal communication and emotions; being explicit and clear. There are many further helpful qualities but from this short list it is obvious that all behaviour that makes relationships flourish is advantageous when it comes to creating the right environment for effective collaboration.

From all of this it is evident that *the ability to collaborate requires ongoing investments in intangible assets over extensive periods of time*. The personal and organisational qualities mentioned are important for trust-building which is the major ingredient of effective and successful collaboration.

To develop collaborative capabilities one might also need to learn new values and behaviours and let go of old habits. Only organisations that already engage in a culture of collaboration internally are sufficiently prepared for the challenges this type of investment poses; an investment in people and their creativity and inventiveness involving *unpredictable* outcomes; an investment in building trust from the ground up.

Embarking upon a self-generating and self-managing process, there is no formal means of economically measuring these intangible assets, and that might be something that share- and stakeholders might have a hard time to stick with for the required time to come to fruition. However, the results of collaboration are definitely measurable as they demonstrate reduced risks, faster performance and greater or new sources of revenues. And all the while from the point of view of those who practice collaboration the practical value in the day to day process is very clear.



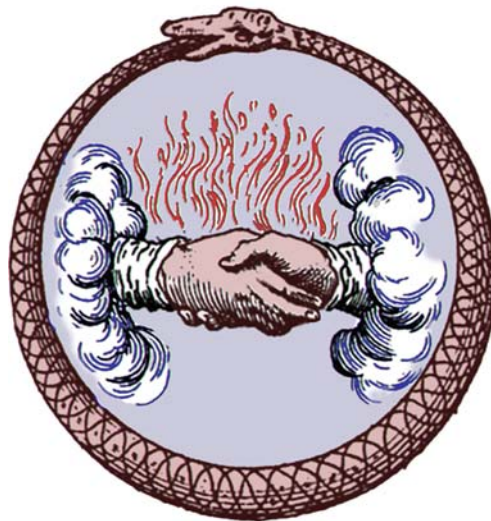
Barriers to collaboration

Optimum collaboration is co-created by caring participants who hold the contributions of their peers in high regard and are concerned with their equitable treatment. A main barrier therefore may be the difficulty between parties having diverse viewpoints in achieving agreement which is an impediment to effective but basically distributed decision-making. Even if collaboration participants manage to agree they might be caught up in a cultural

boundary that is not recognized and are therefore agreeing from a different perspective. Apart from the already mentioned deep mutual understanding a consciously cultivated culture of mutual appreciation can very well steer around this boundary and regard different viewpoints as an enriching experience and helpful tool in embracing a situation as a whole.

Hierarchy as it is usually understood – rank or job title are crucial and power/decision-making flows from the top down – is another major barrier to collaboration. In organizational cultures that emphasize hierarchy, people feel compelled to go through channels. This prevents front-line people from contributing to decisions and makes it difficult or even impossible for leaders to get real-time, unfiltered information from the field. The different levels of the hierarchy are essentially desynchronised and the natural flow of information and social energy is greatly impeded. In these hierarchies knowledge is often privileged and not easily available to everybody; instead of serving a greater whole, or a common goal or vision people are serving their superiors. In these cultures qualifications are person-centred and not issue- and intention-centred thus making it hard for a lower ranked person who may be much more qualified for a task than her or his superior to take a lead where this would be necessary in real collaboration. A culture of mutual apprenticeship can help change this situation. But, as has been said before, real collaboration can only occur between organisations that already collaborate internally in which case the hierarchies will already be flat and decisions are basically made by consent.⁴ Smart organizations encourage collaboration across levels, functions, business units and regions.

These are two major impediments to collaboration. There are minor ones which have to do with what could be called ‘bad habits’ – leftovers from the competitive star culture; for instance the "stranger danger" where people are reluctant to share with others unknown to them, or "information hoarding" where they do not want to share knowledge for fear of losing power; the "needle in a haystack" syndrome where people, believing that they already been solved by and energy looking for it, or invented by us" disorder performed research or originally developed within collaboration develops – for more collaboration a more comprehensive map available that will help collaboration ecologists alike to steer free of these obstacles.



⁴ This doesn't mean that there can't be rank-hierarchical departments or teams in a collaborative organisation. We do acknowledge that people are centred on different developmental levels and might feel most comfortable in a position where they are "simply following instructions". It is important to remember that these are not ideological or doctrinal statements about hierarchy but are oriented towards encouraging people and organisations towards greater collaboration across all possible demarcation lines.

Collaborative Capitalism

Collaborative efforts can have many objectives. In the context of entrepreneurial and business collaborations it means collaboration for the co-creation of financially robust, ethically sound and even-handed market systems; systems that will most likely produce sustainable products and services of high innovative value and great quality. This objective is achieved through jointly generated ideas emerging from the sharing of information and knowledge in an atmosphere of trust and mutual support and apprenticeship, and by co-creating ways and means to turn these ideas into actions that are relevant to all participants.

The role of the new art and science of Collaboration Ecology and Community Gardening is the co-creation of on- and off-line environments that make it very likely and attractive for “the willing” to bravely embark on the journey of collaborative entrepreneurship. It is creating the space for and identifying the knowledge, possibilities, needs and resources that align themselves around values, intentions and understandings, constellating and being constellated by the communities of practise using these spaces; creating a place where dialogue, mutual apprenticeship and trustful enterprises are inevitably emerging to create the collaborative culture of what could be called Sustainable Commerce and Wholesome Economy.

Collaborative capitalism is one of the many forms the sharing culture takes that has taken root amidst the ruins of an overly greedy, individualized and competitive capitalism. Yet it would be a mistake to see this new culture as a hippie-like ‘feel-good’ culture without bite, without an eye for brilliance, performance, efficiency and the strong desire to create, innovate and struggle towards ever improving situations, products, services, procedures and the like.

Collaborative capitalism is all about creating wealth, real wealth for humanity and the planet – and it is not opposed to people becoming rich on the way there! Only is the wealth not solely or even primarily economic; the wealth is related much more to “the good life”, a life worth living in a sustainable surrounding that’s not regarded solely as resource that can be stripped of it’s assets to enrich individuals but as a ‘partner’ whose well-being is important, and who then is more than willing to share.

The game we play in collaborative capitalism is win-win-win-win: I win, you win, society wins and nature wins. It is a game worth playing.



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