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Collaboration Failures and Their Potential Mitigation

Insights from the Podcasts

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Breakdown in Collaboration

To gain insight into how collaboration breaks down, we asked each participant in the podcast interviews[1] to describe specific situations where collaboration is disrupted and factors that may have contributed to this outcome. As in the other podcast chapters (Chapters 6, 10, and 15, this volume), the context in which a collaboration was embedded was cited as fundamental.

In non-Western communities, for instance, Heidi Keller described how formal schooling can disrupt collaborative processes when it conflicts with the reality and practices of people's everyday lives, especially in communities where formal education is a recent phenomenon. She observed that it can lead to a breakdown in family relationships, causing a rift between the wiser, older generations and formally schooled younger generations. This can have disastrous results; children who attend formal schools may end up worse off than unschooled children. Similar effects have been observed in a Western context among migrant families. This does not mean that schooling itself is "bad" but that it needs to be situated in the local context.

Furthering the idea of contextual conflict, Eva Wiecko described her work in the merger of companies. When the local cultures of each firm are mismatched (e.g., different views of the role of technology), effective collaboration becomes difficult, and a merger may not come to fruition.

Margaret Levi identified the challenge of creating a process whereby people share common views about reality and truth to form a "community of fate."

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[1]   Podcasts are available at https://esforum.de/forums/ESF32_Collaboration.html ?opm=1_3. Here, key positions are attributed to individual interviewees; block quotes are cited using the timestamp from the podcasts (minute:second).

This view was shared by Connie Hedegaard and Susan Fitzpatrick, who further discussed the trade-off between common vision and individual goals. Challenges include the proliferation of multiple sources of information and the creation of echo chambers (i.e., an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own), both of which make it difficult to maintain collaboration. Levi views the rise of social media as a fatal threat to human collaboration: "If we don't solve that one, it's going to eat us" (Levi, 52:00), a view shared by Martin McKee.

Expanding on this perspective, Rafael Malpica-Padilla used an example of the challenges faced by religious organizations that hold very different assumptions about the world. Collaboration becomes very difficult, if not impossible, when there is no common ground upon which action can be based, either due to dogmatism or irreconcilable, principled differences. Similarly, Rob Van der Laarse posited that attempts to engineer cultural convergence by connecting nation-states are clearly doomed to fail. Pan-European collaboration requires shifting the focus toward common goals that European citizens share, such as making Europe safe and sustainable (e.g., politically, economically, and environmentally).

Levi introduced the notion that people who collaborate need to get a sense of the efficacy of the collaboration for it to be sustained; failing this, the process becomes fragile. Annie Sparrow described this failure mode as the fragmentation of the goal structure: when the emphasis shifts, collaborative systems may end up in opposition to each other and require different approaches (e.g., diplomacy or economic incentives). Shantamritananda Puri casts this failure mode in terms of disempowerment; this occurs particularly when leadership is too dominant as it may discourage commitment and demotivate participants. This can be further amplified when the collaboration becomes myopic and driven by short-term success without considering long-term impacts on the growth and sustainability of the collaborative process. Levi identified the risk associated with a change in leadership, which can lead to more authoritarian and less participatory governance and an erosion of participatory norms.

From the financial services perspective, Alexander Nuyken confirmed that collaboration breaks down when goals and intentions diverge, aggravated by miscommunication and a lack of recognition and value. This can occur when participants no longer see value in working together or when personal agendas take precedence over a joint agenda. As an example, Nuyken points to the fall of Lehman Brothers as being primarily a leadership failure: they did not recognize that the firm could not survive by standing alone. Nuyken posited there should have been better visibility of the factors being managed at the leadership level. Leadership failures were also cited by Sijbrand de Jong as the inability to recognize one's own responsibility, and to interpret failure as "human weakness" of team members instead of taking responsibility and leading the team. He rejects the notion of humility but believes in staying grounded in reality and having a balance of optimists and pessimists in a team.

Luke Sciulli pointed out that inferiority complexes can play a role in the breakdown of collaboration. When individuals not in leadership roles struggle with that reality, or when their ideas, for instance, are not adopted, they may become bitter and unwilling to contribute to the chosen course of action; this will lead to a breakdown in teamwork. In addition, when "domination" is an issue in collaboration, Theo Mulder highlights the reservations that participants might have when sharing resources: people may be unwilling to give up something unless they can derive a profit from the transaction. Lack of trust can amplify such situations, prevent open communication, and hinder the sense of sharing in the collaborative effort. This was echoed by Eva Wiecko, who pointed to the emergence of competition and fear during company mergers: some individuals may feel that their job will be threatened by the merger. Competition threatens collaboration, especially when it is fueled by economic coercion, which places cost-cutting and downsizing at the center of the process. Naina Agrawal-Hardin linked this to a scarcity mindset, which fuels competition for recognition, success, and credit thereby disrupting collaboration. Deepa Narayan gave an example, drawing on her work with domestic water supplies in rural villages: when goodwill, social capital, and trust are lacking, people furthest removed from critical resources (water) inevitably lose. Collaboration becomes very difficult to maintain, especially when a resource becomes scarce. In such cases, the strongest (i.e., those with the most resources) tend to dominate, leading to a scarcity mindset and a winner-and-loser framework that is counterproductive to a collaborative, horizontal framework.

Ron Poropatich identified integrity breaches as a primary cause of failure. Collaboration breaks down when people lose their integrity, such as by lying or engaging in unethical behavior. Poropatich asserts that one's word, both spoken and written, is crucial. When people act unethically or immorally for various reasons (e.g., vindictiveness, sabotage), their behavior can cause the collaborative effort to fail. He also noted that collaboration breaks down when people lose their moral compass, even in settings such as the battlefield, hospital surgical units, or research labs.

Collectively, these observations highlight the importance of aligned goals, effective communication, recognition of individual contributions, adaptive leadership, cultural adaptability, and ethical integrity as pillars for successful collaborative endeavors. Failure often arises from resistance to change, ego clashes, misalignment of intentions, and communication breakdowns. To maintain effective collaboration, there must be a shared understanding of the issues at hand, a recognition of individual contributions, and a collective commitment to the group's objectives. The critical factors that underpin the failure of collaboration can be summarized as

- lack of common purpose and divergent goals,
- miscommunication,
- institutional inertia,

- culture clash,
- lack of trust and recognition of value,
- echo chambers,
- ethical differences and integrity breaches,
- scarcity mindset and coercion,
- leadership dominance and authoritarian governance,
- ego and personal agendas.

Mitigating the Disruption of Collaboration

Several strategies can be employed to ensure that collaborative efforts remain resilient and effective. A shared understanding of reality was a common theme advanced by Margaret Levi, Connie Hildegard, Robert Axelrod, Edward Slingerland, and Alexander Nuyken. For Levi, creating a process, whereby people share common views about reality, involves addressing challenges posed by multiple sources of information and echo chambers. To prevent the breakdown of collaboration, it is crucial to establish a shared understanding of truth and facts; that is, forming a community of fate (Levi) or a common narrative (Slingerland). Sten Grillner emphasized team composition and proposed that having a fully formed collaboration with a diversity of talent is the main mitigation mechanism against the risks of failure in collaboration. He suggests that a collaboration made up of many different perspectives and skills is robust, such that it can either prevent failure or quickly address and fix issues as they arise. Grillner also highlights the role of competition within collaboration: competing parties can, for instance, enhance the quality of the overall results by identifying flaws in each other's work, leading to improvements and a higher chance of success. This view was also echoed by S. Puri.

> I think the basic principles hold: trust and communication…shared interest, shared value…The point is you have to have certain altruistic ideas, but you have to be grounded in the realization…on how you think strategic, tactical, operational.…having that ability to think strategically but act operationally, that's the tip of the spear, and the transcendent vision to actual work. A lot of people can't do that. Some people are great thinkers, but they don't know how to make it happen. Other people can make it happen, but they're focused on that little thing, and they don't see how it fits into the big picture and how that little thing is related to this other unrelated thing…together [the team] comes up with a higher vision. (Ron Poropatich, 59:58)

Theo Mulder spoke about the importance of creating a collaborative environment that includes senior participants (e.g., principal investigators) as well as junior members. Organizing symposia, creating junior groups, and fostering social–scientific community interactions offer the opportunity to build an inclusive, engaging, collaborative space. Meg Jones advocates for balancing individual and collaborative efforts, recognizing that each collaboration member

has their own terms of reference. Balancing the need to "run fast individually" with the need to "run further together" is key. This perspective was further elaborated on by Rafael Malpica-Padilla, who emphasized that to promote collaboration between different groups, it is essential to create spaces for conversation that allow common denominators to be identified. Such a process helps people find complementarity and identify shared goals. If commonality cannot be found due to strong differences or dogmatism, it may be necessary to move on and seek other opportunities for collaboration that focus on commonalities rather than engage in counterproductive resistance.

> [A]s I have been saying, you need to come together and create the space for that conversation; this will permit the identification of a common denominator and allow for collaboration.…There is a management theory…called the "Blue Ocean Strategy."[2] The principle of that theory is that you never engage your competition because this would result in a red ocean, where you feed on each other; you need to move away from this and create a blue ocean. So, if I cannot find a common space for collaboration, I do not engage the resistance because this will consume time and energy. I just move on to create that blue ocean. And for that, I need to find the meeting of minds, people that are willing to build not on their specificity, but on their commonality. It is hard work. You have to be very selective about who are or will be your strategic allies. But also, in that conversation, you need to have very clear in your mind what your non-negotiables are. I am willing to negotiate, but you need to understand what are your non-negotiables, because I cannot cross that line. To identify that line is very important. (R. Malpica-Padilla, 56:20)

Nuyken, Levi, and Hedegaard converge on the response to the divergence of goals or intentions: maintaining a shared perception of the value derived from working together will ensure that personal agendas do not overshadow the joint agenda. This includes recognizing and valuing each participant's contribution, preventing miscommunication, and avoiding personal conflicts. The collaboration must remain efficacious so that individuals recognize the shared value in working together toward the joint agenda. Levi further adds the importance of managing brittle breaking points, such as changes in leadership or governance and difficulties encountered when trying to create shared understandings of reality and truth. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial to establish and maintain participatory governance, facilitate processes for shared understanding, and ensure that participants feel their engagement can lead to effective action that makes a difference. Susan Fitzpatrick states that processes for recognizing collaborative intentions and noncollaborative behavior must be implemented. Sometimes, individuals may not be interested in a truly collaborative process but rather in what they can gain from others (i.e., freeloading; for further discussion, see Chapters 2 and 11, this volume). Recognizing such behavior early on may help mitigate the risk of failure. This requires knowing the field and actors well

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2   See Kim and Mauborgne (2005).

enough to identify who is genuinely interested in collaboration versus those who are not and carefully selecting the right people for the collaboration (see Chapter 12, this volume).

Larry Kramer and Connie Hedegaard offered concrete heuristics for fostering effective collaboration, each from their unique perspectives in funding and politics, respectively:

1. *Common ground, listening, flexibility, and understanding*. Kramer underscored the importance of listening and being flexible to the needs and circumstances of collaborating individuals, a sentiment echoed by Hedegaard, who stressed the necessity of deeply understanding counterparts' interests. Both emphasized that a successful collaboration requires genuine understanding and the integration of everyone's diverse perspectives and motivations to create a community of fate, in the terminology of Levi.

2. *Need for stability and long-term commitment to build trust*. Kramer suggests that providing general operating support and securing multiyear commitments cultivate stable and trusting relationships, which is key to a long-term investment in collaborative success. Similarly, Hedegaard's approach to presenting a strong economic case for environmental actions aims to secure long-term stakeholder engagement by aligning economic and environmental interests in the case of sustainability-oriented collaborations.

3. *Defining common purpose by establishing shared goals and success metrics*. Kramer and Hedegaard highlight the need for inclusivity to define and measure success. Kramer advocates for a collaborative approach in setting success metrics, whereas Hedegaard recommends inclusive stakeholder engagement to develop and mature core ideas, ensuring that all voices contribute to shaping the collaboration's direction.

4. *Creating confidence through balanced narratives and positive solutions*. Hedegaard points out that balance is required between presenting urgent narratives and positive solutions. Strategic approaches can foster hope and willingness to participate in collaborative efforts. Balance is crucial to maintaining engagement and motivating action toward common goals.

5. *Effective and adaptive resource allocation*. Kramer reflects on the learning process involved in collaboration, suggesting that being adaptable based on past experiences is vital. Hedegaard also implies adaptability in the strategic allocation of resources to mobilize collaboration, demonstrating that resource distribution should respond to the collaborative environment's evolving dynamics.

6. *Acknowledging limits, limitations, and contributions*. Recognizing the limitations of one's role in a global issue, such as climate change, is a principle that Kramer brought to the fore; he advocates that an

organization should focus specifically on how it can contribute within given constraints. Hedegaard's strategies for mobilizing collaboration also involve awareness of each participant's unique position and capacity to contribute to the overarching objectives.

In summary, the critical factors that underpin the mitigation of risks in collaboration can be summarized as

- shared understanding, common narrative, knowledge, and problem contribution,
- effective communication,
- trust and added value,
- diverse team composition, balancing individual and group efforts with competition within the collaboration,
- inclusive environment, civility, and institutional protection,
- alignment of goals and intentions,
- collaborative spaces and a Blue Ocean Strategy,
- emotional benefit, efficacy, recognition, and value,
- strategic allies selection,
- identification of non-negotiables.

Lessons from COVID-19

All of the podcast interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the interviewees drew on confinement to test ideas and models of collaboration. All confirmed that the pandemic was a profound learning experience—one that exposed critical insights into the dynamics of global health crises, the importance of global collaboration, and how this succeeded or failed.

Alexander Nuyken reflected on the unpredictability of crises and the challenges of managing them without a clear roadmap, which often equated to a trial-and-error approach. While hindsight might offer insights into how things could have been done better, he suggests that the democratic space allows for divergent approaches and that discussion and the acceptance of error are essential in the unfolding of a crisis. Shantamritananda Puri contemplated the pandemic's humbling power, underscoring the importance of humility in our approach to understanding and tackling global challenges. Annie Sparrow emphasized the importance of recognizing pandemics, climate change, and antimicrobial resistance as pressing global narratives that test our collective foresight and capacity for action.

The significance of cross-disciplinary collaboration in the rapid development of vaccines was emphasized. Theo Mulder suggests that work conducted at the intersection of the social and biological sciences proved to be a pivotal factor in addressing societal challenges, and stands as a testament to the collective human capacity to tackle large societal issues. It also indicates that

political solutions alone are insufficient. Meg Jones stressed the importance of global collaborations, contrasting vaccine nationalism with the imperative of vaccine equity and the role of international platforms, such as the WHO, in sharing scientific advancements and effective strategies. Martin McKee addressed the challenge of bridging the gap between economic and health perspectives during the pandemic and building collaboration across these domains by focusing on the common interest of public health. Historical evidence from the Spanish Flu pandemic showed that cities which implemented and maintained strict health measures during the 1918 pandemic recovered economically more quickly than those that did not. McKee also emphasized the political dimensions of the debate needed to rebalance priorities and the focus on communication to persuade the undecided to get on board rather than expend massive energies on those with fixed extreme views. Rafael Malpica-Padilla observed that the pandemic, once again, brought the issue of health equity to the fore—an issue that requires collaboration between all stakeholders and comprehensive action.

> How do we engage with the United Nations to address the issue of intellectual property and challenge Big Pharma to allow for the generic production of vaccines so that people in Africa, where only 1% of the population is vaccinated, gain access? I can love people, feed them, I can do all that, but if I don't work with the system to effect transformation, nothing will happen. We will get stuck. (R. Malpica-Padilla, 42:00)

Reflecting on societal responses to the pandemic, critique was voiced over the prioritization of individual rights over collective welfare in Germany (H. Keller) and the economic repercussions of decisions made during the pandemic (I. Schmiel). Keller noted the missed opportunity to foster a sense of community. Schmiel stressed the necessity for clear communication and access for everyone, predicting a future where those who effectively communicate the economic implications of health decisions will gain increased relevancy. Similarly, Alexander Nuyken explored the unpredictability of crisis management, recognizing the shift toward virtual collaboration and its potential permanence post-pandemic. He pointed out that the crisis has accelerated the evolution of the digital health ecosystem, with advancements likely to persist post-pandemic, leading to major treatment advancements over the next 5–10 years. However, he warned that losing public trust (e.g., through data leaks) poses a significant risk that could hinder progress in digital healthcare. Ernst Numann and Jônatas Manzolli called for a balance between openness and critical evaluation, underscoring the necessity of collaboration for survival, particularly in the context of vaccination and public health.

Given difficulties in adhering to collective action witnessed during the pandemic, there is reason to doubt society's ability to address more abstract, long-term challenges, such as ecological collapse (R. Poropatich). Other cautionary notes were offered:

[T]he desire for total control destroys. Unaccountable governments, governments and leaders that behave like bullies…are the most dangerous creatures in the world. (D. Narayan, 47:35)

The problem with the global challenges we face is they're happening at a time scale and on a causal scale that I don't think we're evolved to really get….the link between me driving to work and the storm that happened that wiped out Louisiana is so diffuse. We're not good at thinking about that. So we need to figure out some way to make something like climate change feel real to people, much like we would have done in the past if an army threatened to invade our territory. How did we know that the threat was real? Because we looked over the wall and saw the actual army. People are not rational. You've got to get their guts on board. (E. Slingerland, 01:02:43)

Existential global threats *must be made* cognitively and emotionally graspable to people: "Maybe you'd be able to get collaboration and cooperation in the face of common enemies" (E. Slingerland). Our societies were not very successful in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that debates were held on the efficacy of vaccines shows irrational tribalization, which fractionates societies. Being anti-vaccine was a way for people to create an identity (R. Van de Laarse).

The most comprehensive analysis of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic was provided by Annie Sparrow, who profiled the handling of the crisis by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). She notes that there was a distinct reluctance to collaborate with key stakeholders (e.g., experts and athletes' associations), which was needed for an effective response. Sparrow critiqued the IOC for not implementing a science- and risk-based approach; instead, the IOC relied entirely on vaccines as its sole strategy, which was insufficient to halt virus transmission. The lack of transparency concerning the IOC's actions, particularly regarding athletes' mental health, was another concern she raised. In addition, Sparrow addressed a pervasive mediocrity and complacency within organizations, which she believes leads to undermining the significance and credibility of public health and pandemic preparedness. The lack of clear communication and the failure to apply precautionary measures from the outset where distinct failures. Sparrow's critique extends to the erosion of trust in public health guidance, as those in authority often disregarded evidence-based recommendations. She advocates for adherence to scientific rigor to inform public health measures and future events, contrasting this with an overreliance on ineffective technological solutions, such as contact tracing apps. Concluding her observations, Sparrow calls for substantial investment in public health initiatives, prioritizing human well-being over seeking quick fixes through technology, and insisting on a collaborative public health approach that genuinely serves the populace.

I hoped that during the pandemic, a community of fate would develop. Here's why I emphasize leadership…because if you have leadership that undermines

that [community of fate], as we did in the United States and as happened in Britain and some other countries, not so much in Germany, it really undermines the community of fate, and creates divisions, not commonalities. So we weren't all in it together. Different groups were in it in different ways; differences and interests were emphasized rather than the difference in a common and entwined destiny. Leadership matters. And it was very disappointing. We're still suffering the consequences of a series of very problematic actions, not just by our president [Trump], but by other political leaders in U.S. and in other countries. (M. Levi, 59:53)