
Advances in Project Management Series¹

The essence of collaboration: Extending our reach and potential

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It is sometimes said that competition makes us faster, but collaboration makes us better.

The Oxford Dictionary defines collaboration as “the action of working with someone to produce something”.

While collaboration enables two or more parties to work together on a shared purpose in order to attain a particular benefit, implying a good fit with project practice, the various project management bodies of knowledge and IPMA’s newly released Individual Competence Baseline say little about what it is and how it may apply to projects.

Major initiatives and projects often require collaboration across a team, or between different teams and organisations, in order to enhance competitiveness or performance. Collaborating teams are often large, virtual, diverse, specialised and distributed. Collaboration can therefore take place in one of two forms:

- Synchronous, where the team interacts in real time (often as a co-located team housed to facilitate physical collaborative and joint working in close proximity, or electronically, via online meetings, instant messaging, Skype or other joint working platform)
- Asynchronous, where interactions are time-shifted, geographically dispersed, or are simply designed to allow a group to collaborate at times that suit individual participants. Shared documents, workspaces and Wiki pages allow such teams to work together. More recent examples include crowdsourcing efforts, combining the best of crowd participation and outsourcing to tackle complex, detailed and demanding assignments by groups of interested participants who are able to divide the work and focus on achieving the wider purpose through this division of labour and expertise

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books previously published by Gower in the UK and now by Routledge. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To learn more about the book series, go to <https://www.routledge.com/Advances-in-Project-Management/book-series/APM>. Prof Dalcher’s article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

Standardising collaboration

The British Standards Institute has an established standard on Collaborative Business Relationships. BS 11000, which forms the basis of the forthcoming international ISO 11000 standard, notes that in business, as in other walks of life, teamwork can pay real dividends and companies that work together can often achieve much more than they can achieve alone.

The standard advises that collaborative business relationships can take many forms, including: (private or public) strategic business partnerships, supplier relationships, consortia and alliance partnering, shared services, collaborative procurement, divisional relationships and client or customer relationships. In short, many of the arrangements utilised in complex or large projects would qualify as collaboration initiatives.

BS 11000 provides the strategic framework required to establish a successful collaboration and enables organisations to focus their effort through an eight-stage approach covering the following steps:

1. Awareness: Identifying a clearly defined rationale for proceeding in accordance with the organisational business objectives
2. Knowledge: Establishing a platform of knowledge as the basis for building the relationships
3. Internal assessment: Understanding own capabilities and recognising strengths and weaknesses, before looking to define what is expected of others
4. Partner selection: Identifying and selecting suitable partners by assessing the performance of each partner organisation as well as the potential match and the ways on which the partners could work together. This phase can also be used to identify internal groups that could work more closely together
5. Working together: Establishing the protocols and formal foundation for working together to mutual benefit, including contractual frameworks, agreements, roles and responsibilities
6. Value creation: maximising the value derived from the partnership by creating an environment that encourages the consideration of new ideas and alternative approaches
7. Staying together: Implementing mutually agreed measures to help maximise the effectiveness of the partnership. Maintaining the partnership should be cultivated through fostering continuous improvement and the development of dispute resolution processes
8. Exit strategy: Defining an exit strategy at the outset of the collaborative relationship. While this is useful in reinforcing the roles during the collaboration, it also ensures that the ultimate disengagement at the end of the collaboration is mutually respectful

The first three stages focus on strategic aspects of the relationship, while the next two address the phases of engagement, and the remaining three are concerned with the management of the relationship.

Collaborative working

The Institute for Collaborative Working, established in 1990 as a not-for-profit joint initiative by UK government and industry, aims to have collaborative working recognised as a fundamental business discipline. The Institute's role is to help organisations of all sizes, in all sectors, to build and develop effective competitive business relationships based upon a collaborative approach. It aims to promote the use of the BSI standard as a consistent framework, which can be scaled and adapted to meet particular business needs through the use of a structured methodology to underpin successful business relationships.

The advantages of formalising the standard process enable better engagement, stronger processes, improved risk management, while offering a platform for skills enhancement, and sustainable relationships and a neutral starting point that underpins effectiveness and value. The framework can thus be used as a collaborative benchmark, a basis for structuring relationships, a pan industry perspective and indeed, as a public and private sector foundation for collaborative process and systems.

Collaboration in practice

In practice, there are many challenges to effective collaboration. For example, as the number of participants increases, the tendency to collaborate and share diminishes leading to poor communication and loss of interest and focus. Larger projects also bring multiple participants with different cultures, different groups of stakeholders, conflicting expectations and shifting priorities. However, some projects are delivered under far more extreme and demanding conditions.

This month's article by Alejandro Arroyo and Thomas Grisham focuses attention on some of the projects conducted in more exacting settings. As if collaboration between organisations weren't difficult enough, the authors remind us that some undertakings are far more perilous, volatile, and uncertain, thereby requiring an enormous concentration on the mechanisms and structures required in order to make collaboration happen.

The article draws on the authors' forthcoming book, *Leading Extreme Projects: Strategy, Risk and Resilience in Practice* published by Routledge/Gower. The work explores the challenges, obstacles and techniques associated with delivering large projects in some of the most challenging environments and economies in the world. The authors draw on 19 case examples of projects conducted under extremely demanding conditions, highlighting the strategic challenges they faced, including cultural, social, political and security risks, fraud, corruption, extreme climates, fragile supply chains and fears of terrorism and insurgency. The cases also highlight the need to strengthen partnerships and collaborations under such conditions, and the requirement to engage with indigenous concerns and communities, and develop partnerships that can withstand the raft of challenges.

Leading collaborations

Arroyo and Grisham's key contribution is in mapping out the importance of clear leadership under such extreme conditions. Their article develops the concept of a Collaborative Project Enterprise (CEP), whose leader is responsible to the customer, or the public for the successful planning, delivery and operation of the required assets. Such leaders may have limited control over all participating partners, and hence the importance of the partnership and collaboration agreements, and the structures and intentions which can be tested to the extreme in demanding settings. Leaders are normally considered essential for successful collaborations, and indeed for most successful enterprises. When collaborations entail specially demanding and challenging conditions, the role of leaders in securing and delivering sustainable and acceptable solutions becomes even more critical.

Equally important is the publication of the cases that underpin the discussion in the book. Opportunities for engagement with cases of actual project practice are rare and the authors have enabled project practitioners, students, researchers and educators a glimpse into some of the challenges and difficulties encountered during such undertakings.

Alexander Dumas asserted that "he who has a partner has a master". Recent experiences in crowdsourcing initiatives and major research partnerships suggest that many of the great discoveries and achievements require working in collaboration with others, without having a master as participants can self-govern and co-lead. Completing projects under challenging conditions requires even greater levels of engagement, trust, and support between partners. Maintaining relationships under challenging conditions is not so much a question of how you see your partners, but of if you can see your partners and understand their concerns. Developing effective structures and governance for collaborations, recognising the value of relationships as opposed to identification of masters, recognising the shared needs and purpose, and developing leaders that can guide and support, consult and direct will remain essential to delivering meaningful projects under both normal, and extreme conditions. These measures are also required to ensure the legacy and benefits of projects can be delivered through co-operation with the relevant communities of users, stakeholders and participants, to ensure sustainable and meaningful transformations. Ultimately, by recognising the necessity to collaborate and the pertinent needs and expectations of all participants, we can begin to build stronger and better collaborative partnerships, thereby extending our reach into more demanding terrains, environments and contexts.

References

Arroyo, A. and Grisham T. (2017) *Leading Extreme Projects: Strategy, Risk and Resilience in Practice*, New York: Routledge

BS 11000 (2010) *Collaborative Business Relationship*, Chiswick, London: British Standards Institute

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