

Disciplined Collaboration

An introduction to planning collaborative activity and a digest of key early stage challenges including identification of external expertise

An MMM Guide



Disciplined collaboration

“Good collaboration amplifies strength but poor collaboration is worse than no collaboration at all.”¹

Morten Hansen

Drawing on learning from MMM’s 2008-2010 Collaborative Working Pilots² and including extracts from interviews with participants, this short document shares two simple frameworks to help in the planning and execution of collaborative activity together with a digest of key early stage challenges including the importance of identifying the right kind of external expertise at the right time.

¹ Hansen, M.T. (2009) ‘Collaboration’, Harvard Business School Press

² The Collaborative Working Pilots was one of a series of strands that formed MMM’s fourth cycle of work which ran from 2008-2010

1. Disciplined collaboration

One of the simplest and most powerful frameworks for working out how to achieve successful collaborative working is based on Morten Hansen's idea of 'disciplined collaboration'³ which he sums up as "*the leadership practice of properly assessing when to collaborate (and when not to) and instilling in people both the willingness and the ability to collaborate when required.*" His solution to achieving disciplined collaboration and avoiding what he calls 'collaboration traps' is to pursue three steps:

Step 1: Evaluate opportunities for collaboration

Asking probing questions is key to assessing whether there really are compelling reasons to collaborate. In the not for profit arts and cultural sector these questions can usefully be curated around the three themes of mission, models and money. How will collaborating help better delivery of the organisation's mission or how can it help renew mission? What will be the advantages for our operational model? And what positive impact will it have on our finances? As one pilot participant put it: "*... part of your mind-shift has to be about when it is good to do something and when it is not - whether you can add value, or whether you actually are forcing an issue that is of little consequence.*" As Hansen says, "*collaboration is a means to an end and that end is great performance. This means that often it may be better not to collaborate, because there is simply no compelling reason to do so.*"

Step 2. Spot barriers to collaboration

Hansen proposes four typical barriers:

- The 'not invented here' barrier (people are unwilling to reach out to others)
- The hoarding barrier (people are unwilling to provide help)
- The search barrier (people are not able to find what they are looking for)
- The transfer barrier (people are not able to work with people they do not know well)

³ Ibid

Added to these, for the not for profit arts and cultural sector there is a fifth barrier - that of over-extension and undercapitalisation, “*with too many organisations trying to do more things than they can possibly do well, with both human and financial resources too thinly spread.*”⁴ In common with the wider sector, the pilot group did not have unrestricted funds or reserves which could be assigned to the key costs of collaborative working, such as the specialist and technical expertise required for each of the three stages. Furthermore, the fact that collaboration takes a lot of time – very often over a long period of time – was underlined by all the pilot groups. One participant described their collaborative project as a ‘*luxury*’ which could really only be engaged with after all the hurly burly of the organisation’s day-to-day existence had been ‘*got on top of*’. Collaborative working is a huge challenge for people who are time poor and juggling many roles at once.

Step 3. Tailor solutions to tear down the barriers

Armed with an understanding of the barriers, appropriate solutions can be designed. One of the commonest barriers that emerged across the pilot group was the transfer barrier, where people are not able to work with people they do not know well. Whilst some Chief Executives had worked with each other over long periods of time and knew each other well, team members elsewhere in their organisations often did not know their counterparts in the other organisations involved in the collaboration. Solutions to this were varied, but in three of the pilots, the creation of smaller issue-based groups that met regularly and had multi-organisational membership proved very effective in forging new relationships and enabling trust and understanding to flourish.

⁴ Ellis, A (2004) *New ways of sustaining the arts in the UK*, MMM

2. Ensuring healthy collaboration

“In reality, creativity has always been a highly collaborative, cumulative and social activity in which people with different skills, points of view and insight share and develop ideas together”

Charles Leadbeater

Collaboration amongst not for profits, including those in the arts and cultural sector, tend to have similar structures, are formed for a definable universe of reasons, and tend to go through similar developmental stages⁵ A simple framework, inspired by Hansen⁶ and developed in response to learning from the pilots has been designed by MMM for use as a guide to assess the prospects of healthy collaboration amongst groups of creative practitioners and organisations.

Step 1: Evaluate opportunities for collaboration

Establish levels of experience in collaborative working

- Is there a history of collaboration within the group?
- Has the group undertaken an audit of previous collaboration, which summarises purpose, partners and impact?

Establish assets and Competencies Qualities and Attributes (CQAs)⁷ that will help collaborative working succeed

- Has the group assessed and articulated the levels of collaborative CQAs present within each participating organisation?
- Has the group identifiable assets⁸ that can support collaborative working?

⁵ <http://www.lapiana.org/downloads/RealCollaboration.PDF>

⁶ Hansen, M.T. (2009) ‘Collaboration’, Harvard Business School Publishing

⁷ MMM’s ‘People Theme’ research proposes that the concept of skills is a limited one, and suggests the adoption of a more holistic concept – that of competencies, qualities and attributes. In management theory, ‘competency’ is understood as a capability that goes beyond knowledge skills and abilities into values, motivation and characteristics, and should lead to superior performance in the 21st century environment. Many of those involved in MMM’s research in the early stages had a much more limited understanding of the term and had negative responses to it as a dry impersonal managerial concept. To counter this, MMM included the terms ‘qualities’ and ‘attributes’, which places further emphasis on the holistic breadth of ways of being and doing.

⁸ Senge, P. et al (2008) The Necessary Revolution, Nicholas Brearley Publishing

Create a relevant collaborative working proposition

- Is there a clear articulation of how the proposed collaboration will result in the realisation of collective vision and better delivery of individual mission and strategic goals?
- In what ways will it benefit the communities the group serves?

Step 2. Spot barriers to collaboration

Self-knowledge in relation to collaborative working

- Is the group clear about what they learned from previous collaborations?
- Does the group have evidence of sufficient levels of collaborative CQAs amongst its members, which will enable them to collaborate successfully?
- Has the group identified any behavioural, organisational and/or practical barriers that might prevent successful collaborative working?
- Has the reason for collaborating been rigorously interrogated and are the results of that interrogation unequivocal in advocating collaboration as the best way forward?

Resource needs

- What human and other resources are available within the group to enable collaborative working?
- Has the group identified early stage TA needs and where they could be sourced?

Step 3. Tailor solutions to tear down the barriers

Clarify shared vision

- Has a clear vision with strategic objectives been articulated by the group?

Develop CQAs needed for successful collaborative working

- What proposals does the group have to develop CQAs necessary for successful collaboration?

Resource the proposed collaboration

- What structures are proposed to support the collaboration?
- What methodologies will be used to manage the collaboration?

⁸ See MMM Asset Categories

- Have roles and responsibilities with the group been clarified?
- What strategies are in place to strengthen accountability within the collaboration?
- In the light of self-assessments made in Stage 2, what TA is likely to be needed and at what stage?

Step 4. Review and embed the process

Review progress

- What plans are in place to review the collaboration throughout the first three stages?

Embed learning

- What resources and supporting structures are planned to embed a collaborative mindset in the group and encourage the development of relevant CQAs?

3. Early stage challenges in collaborative working

“Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance”

Confucius

Scant attention is paid to lifecycle issues in any aspect of business model evolution in the not for profit arts and cultural sector, including collaborative working.

Organisations generally pay greater attention and apply more resources to the early or start up stages of the lifecycle and there is often an expectation of immediate success. Paying insufficient attention to early challenges can raise questions about the long-term sustainability of the collaboration. Recent studies from the private sector have identified collaboration failure rates in the 50% - 60% range, and even those ventures that do eventually succeed must frequently overcome serious problems in their early years⁹. Many of the groups in the pilot had never collaborated in any formal way until the MMM offer of participating was made. Then, when their involvement was agreed, they simply ‘got started’, leaving fundamental issues of leadership and discussions about joint aims and understandings until later. They would now concur that spending more time on preparation prior to firing the starter gun would have been valuable.

Crystallising the purpose

This initial stage of a collaboration is a difficult but critical ‘shake out’ period when its purpose has to be decided. As these comments by pilot participants testify, most group members find themselves having to begin by navigating through unfamiliar territory in which they have no clear frame of reference. Agreeing a written collaboration statement is helpful, even if this evolves over time.

“There are so many opportunities and so many things we can do together– and so much benefit we could all get out of it. It is kind of unimaginable and it is too big actually.”

⁹

“I have learnt that it pays to be more uncomfortable at the beginning of the collaboration... and that probably means there is a period of everybody having to feel around in the dark.”

“First and foremost it is important to reach an agreed position about what you are hoping to achieve at the end. It is a description, however inadequate – and subsequently liable to be edited – that describes the outcome. What is the desirable state that you think you are working towards? Unless you are able to describe that, you are not going to get very far. Within that, but in addition, you have got to be able to decide what the benefits are to you and your organisation... And that is not some limited, narrow, selfish perspective. It is perfectly proper to say ‘what benefit is there to me in taking part?’ and then to listen to the benefits the other partners see as emerging from engagement in the process. So you start with the outcome, and agree while you are all there why collaboration is desirable. Are you broadly speaking talking the same language? Are you ‘in the same ballpark?’ And if you are, you can then begin to work out how you are going to go forward.”

Ensuring mission congruence

Organisations tend to muddle up their vision statements with their mission statements, using these terms interchangeably. In preparing for a collaborative project however, distinguishing between them is important. Vision statements relate to the future the organisation wants to create for the community it aims to serve. Mission statements describe what the organisation will do to bring that vision to reality. Mission statements are hugely powerful forces, expressing the fundamental identity of the organisation and the values and beliefs of those who work in them. Ways of seeing the world and ways of operating spring from an organisation’s mission and help shape the ‘corporate’ culture of the organisation. Ensuring right at the beginning that partners understand each other’s mission and where they might overlap either creating competitive friction or co-operative opportunity will help build relationships and prevent misunderstandings emerging further down the line as these pilot participant comments illustrate:

“...we thought we’d sorted it and then it went to the next level and went pear-shaped and we had to pull it back together again. A lot of that wasn’t just the mechanics of whether we thought we had done it at the right time or not... it was around quite a fundamental issue of individual company identity... With quite a dispersed – yet high profile – group like this, that was a key issue...”

“we have always talked about this group as essentially being about collaboration rather than competition. But it is easy to say that when you are not doing any real projects. What has become clear to me is the absolute reality that we are able to work in a way that is aggressive and ambitious about own businesses, but also completely collaborative about these processes.”

“...like a lot of these consortiums I guess, we are different shapes and sizes and compositions, particularly working in different art form areas. Some charge for tickets, whilst at others the consumer experience is free. And I suppose I have been surprised and reassured by how similar are the core challenges we all face, even if the sector looks very different on the face of it. The minute you get a couple of layers down, you find the ordinary business challenges day-to-day are much more similar than I expected actually.”

Recognising the different kinds of value being created

At the early stages it is hard to pin down the kinds of value that the new resources and capabilities created by collaboration can bring to both the partners and the wider public. Very often, the value most prioritised is financial – will the collaboration offer efficiencies by saving money? Will it develop competitive advantage in making the case for maintaining and/or increasing investment from public and private funders? Will it create access to new revenue streams? Understanding of the other kinds of human value that emerge through collaborative working tends to surface only as the collaboration gets into its stride and/or when mutual discovery, sense-making and trust grow. Successful collaborative working builds social capital, releasing new energies and new ways of thinking which as the pilot group testified, produces highly innovative ways at looking at seemingly intractable problems. There were many examples of the recognition of these other forms of value, as these comments

illustrate:

“..it is not so much increased capacity in terms of the talent or ability of staff involved... it is the fact that we are tapping into those talents and abilities. So a number of people who were not previously even involved... have come to the fore. They have blossomed, and are inputting at a more strategic level as well as relating to people in other organisation. They now feel they are part of the strategic direction”

“There have been some very, very interesting spin-off meetings with smaller numbers of organisations sitting around beginning to look each other in the eye and say, okay, so if this is the general climate and the way things are moving, what about our area of endeavour? What can we do? ... some of those encounters have been absolutely fascinating, because they have unpacked some of the layers of anxieties and problems that individual organisations are having to face.”

Communicating

Good communication is essential. Not only does it clarify shared vision and purpose, it builds understanding and trust which then release positive energy, valuable know-how and resources into the collaborative endeavour. Communications of an appropriate quality and frequency can be enabled by setting up the right kind of structures and bringing in the right kind of technical assistance at critical junctures. Festivals Edinburgh provides an example of how this can be achieved¹⁰.

Paying sufficient attention to ‘soft skills’

The single biggest challenge in collaborative working is recognising the importance of relationships and managing the issues that emerge. These may be issues not only of trust, but also relating to organisational culture, differences in organisational size and management styles. Lack of attention to these is the commonest reason for the disbanding of most collaboration¹¹ and time and resources spent at the outset in these areas can avoid significant problems later on. Examples of how these issues played out

¹⁰ See Appendix 3.

¹¹

http://seangallaghersite.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/Business_Alliances_early_stage_problems.6013056.pdf

in the pilot groups is illustrated in the following interviews:

“Another lesson which has been a surprise for me is that collaboration requires leadership. If we look at our organisations, I suspect we all have pretty collaborative environments. We work very hard on this... In this group, nobody has been saying to us ‘you must collaborate’. It has been on our own shoulders to collaborate and I think one of the problems has been that we are all timid about showing leadership, because nobody wants to be perceived as being more knowledgeable, more dominant or more proactive than anybody else. We want to be very respectful and we want to work very well together. I think that has impeded us from actually empowering the right people to lead the group and require the team work to happen...”

“the organisations themselves are extremely diverse, from those that are primarily held together by voluntary effort to quite large professional set ups, and there were cultural differences in how people felt the discipline of the collaboration could or should work.”

“I think the interesting thing about this particular project and the interesting thing about why the cultural organisations struggle with this, is that to be excellent, there is quite a lot of ego involved. There kind of has to be... If we boil this right down to what makes the arts special, it is very special creative people. And if bods like me serve any function, then it is to create the best circumstances for people to engage with very special creative people. And that means the management of audience expectations and the management of artistic expectations. To compromise for the sake of creating combined projects is really dangerous.”

Understanding resourcing needs

With most arts and cultural organisations suffering from overextension and undercapitalisation, resourcing for collaborative working is problematic. This factor alone may be the key reason why there are not more examples of collaboration in the sector. Traditionally, arts and cultural organisations, in common with the wider not for profit sector, do not have a culture of setting aside funds to invest in building individual or organisational capacity. Delivery of mission is dependent on significant

amounts of 'sweat equity' from employees, which results in people being both stressed-out and time-poor.

Time-poverty was the challenge most often referred to by the pilot group. Asking people to invest considerable time at the outset of collaboration in relationship building and in pursuing agreement around shared vision and purpose, timelines and costs is therefore extremely difficult. In addition to time and money, external technical assistance is more than likely to be needed so making a realistic assessment of all the different competencies and skills that will be required, and deciding whether they exist in-house or whether they need to be recruited externally, is an important resourcing issue.

5. The role of Technical Assistance (TA)¹²

“Knowledge is of two kinds: we know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it”

Samuel Johnson

When MMM first started to try and raise funds in order to follow through the recommendations made in its 2007 report, ‘Towards a healthy ecology of Arts and Culture’, it approached one major Foundation well known for its support of the UK arts and cultural sector for a grant towards the costs of the collaborative working pilots strand. It summarised the request for funding thus:

“[MMM] will aim to investigate the challenges and opportunities of developing back office consolidations and new kinds of joint ventures in order to understand how such working practices may be used more widely in the sector in order to free up capacity, enable cost savings and improve delivery and experience of great art.

We will publicise a call nationally, for expressions of interest from arts and cultural organisations who are already thinking about or designing and planning a collaborative working or shared service project within an existing group, or who are in the early delivery stages of a project of this kind or who have a clear and compelling case to share services.

Working with a representative group of MMM’s principal stakeholders, a short listing process based on concept viability, regional spread, sector groupings (e.g. museums, localities, venue based organisations etc) will take place in order to identify a first phase of pilots.

MMM will then offer the pilot group support in two phases:

¹² The American phrase ‘Technical Assistance’ (TA) is used here to describe the expertise and support that arts and cultural organisations need in order to successfully progress their collaborative work.

- *a short planning and costing phase which will identify the planning, operational and evaluation support and technical assistance required for each pilot.*
- *a structured and expert support package over a period of two year, which will assist pilots in the shaping and/or delivery of the collaborative working or shared service project.*

A learning community amongst the pilot group will be formed and the experiences and lessons learned shared widely across the British arts and cultural sector.”

The response from the Foundation’s specialist arts committee was immediate and firm. ‘No’ they said. As far as they were concerned the proposition was all about lining the pockets of ‘a whole bunch of consultants’. Thankfully, that view was not shared by other public and private funders. Had it been, the majority of six pilots that MMM was able to support between 2008 and 2010 would never have got off the ground.

That experience, however, offers an example of a mindset that prevails across the not for profit arts and cultural sector. Identified by MMM during its last phase of work¹³, it is present among arts and cultural organisations as much as funders. This mindset prioritises short-termism and programmatic delivery over and above the long-term development of broader organisational and financial resilience. Expenditure on external expertise to help organisations evolve working and financial practices that enable adaptivity and innovation in the light of, for example new technology or global financial collapse, is seen as an expensive luxury. It is a mindset that has led to the levels of overextension and undercapitalisation referred to earlier and is one that needs to change urgently if the UK’s arts and cultural ecology is to survive and thrive in the face of the challenges ahead.

Nevertheless, in recognition of the prejudice held by many in the arts world against consultants, MMM uses the American phrase, ‘Technical Assistance’ (TA) to describe the kinds of expert support that arts and cultural organisations would need to source in order to successfully progress their collaborative working processes.

¹³ <http://www.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk/papers/towards-a-healthy-ecology/>

Ahn¹⁴ sets the context well: *“While collaborative working processes are used within organisations, there are distinctions unique to collaborations involving multiple organisations. The stabilising factors that are more or less developed within an organisation are missing. There are no clear lines of accountability, communication or performance standards. The organisational context that usually supports activity has to be created anew for a third entity and this requires TA practitioners that are experienced in working with these conditions as well as providing the appropriate skill sets. For instance, negotiation/mediation providers, or collaboration “facilitation” providers specialise in this work. Such TA must be discerned from TA that is centered on helping individual organisations.”*¹⁵

Experience from the pilots bore out three further observations made by Ahn about TA in his study:

“Diagnostics are useful in selecting TA, as one size does not fit all: Collaborations differ based on what they are trying to accomplish, and therefore their TA needs may vary accordingly. For example, a collaboration that brings together similar nonprofits in shared office space may need an outside expert versed in group dynamics, whereas a collaboration involving organisations with large memberships may need a community relations/public relation’s consultant to help explain the collaboration to key stakeholders;

Collaboration often requires multiple consultants: TA is so varied that it is rare for individual TA providers to have all the necessary skills to address the continuum of needs that emerge throughout the phases of collaboration. Multiple consultants are necessary, but the question of how nonprofit organisations can absorb and manage these consultants remains a difficult one;

TA needs to be carefully sequenced: There is a sequence in collaboration—from coming to agreement to collaborate, through implementation and evaluation. TA

¹⁴Ahn, R. (2006) Nonprofit/Nonprofit Collaboration in Boston, Barr Foundation Report, November

¹⁵ http://www.barrfoundation.org/usr_doc/Nonprofit-Nonprofit_Collaboration_in_Boston_-_Barr_Foundation__November_2006_.pdf

must be matched to different “stages” of the collaborative process.”¹⁶

All the MMM pilot groups anticipated the need for some form of TA during the course of their collaboration, preferring to identify their needs one step at a time. Project management was identified as the greatest immediate need, a finding that is perhaps unsurprising given the over-extension and undercapitalisation of many organisations in the sector: *“the biggest single thing is to make sure you have got project management, committing to staff to be able to mediate and support the process. In the end, the rest of it is about chemistry and timing, and the state the particular organisations are in and their perceptiveness”*, observed one participant.

The style and quality of project management needed was very clearly recognised: *“You have to be a driving force, not simply a co-ordinating or administrative function,”* remarked one participant. Indeed, those pilots that worked with individual or group project management expertise at this level were able to progress noticeably faster than those who chose to self-organise using internal resources:

“Fascinating as this project is, it isn’t primarily about artistic drivers. It is about a secondary, hugely important supporting function. Where collaborations have worked most productively, in my experience has been when it has been about the art, because you will all get fired up and you will make sure it happens. So it was easy I think, for us (Chief Executives) to absent ourselves and think ‘well the marketing heads will now take this on’. And they will equally have been respectful of each other, in not wanting to be too pushy and so we kind of had it at two levels Had there been a project manager, someone who is there to make the collaboration work... by beating them with sticks, we might have been able to move more quickly.

“We went through so many meetings which fundamentally had good material in them, but the meeting finished, we all went off and coped with whatever disasters, and then we came back and were almost back to square one when we got together again.”

¹⁶ibid

“we have appointed (x), who is a very clever guy who has brought some great ideas to the table, but the one thing he doesn’t have is any leadership ability whatsoever. And in fact we never made that a criterion... But actually all the slowness, the fact that we haven’t managed to galvanise this thing to happen at the right speed, is partly because he is not driving it.”

A number of other useful points were made by participants in the pilots on the subject of project management:

- External project management can help establish the ‘neutrality’ of the collaboration, and ensure that no one organisation is in charge or dominating the others – especially where there are a variety of sizes and types of organisations involved.
- Whilst establishing the shared aims and objectives of the collaboration and ensuring that everyone feels engaged and involved is the responsibility of the Board and the Executive of the organisations involved, effective project management can help to establish the collective responsibility and accountability needed for successful collaboration and provide the impetus for action.
- Strong project managers can be the drivers of change and central point for communication. However, over reliance on project managers can be a problem, if staff feel disempowered or reluctant to take on responsibilities because they think the project manager will step in.
- Consistently ensuring that there is a range of champions from different organisations to lead and drive tasks also helps to develop the shared responsibility of a network and reduces the pressure on individual organisations to find funding to pay for external project managers.

Ensuring that the briefs commissioning TA providers accurately reflected the need of the group in the field of expertise sought was sometimes difficult, especially if the shared vision of the group was in constant evolution, or the purpose of the collaboration unclear or contested. Recruiting the right kind of TA with experience of collaborative working was not always easy, with word of mouth and previous relationship experience being the preferred route for identifying candidates. Growing the pool of TAs experienced in collaborative working in the arts, for example through

specialised mentoring and/or Action Learning sets, and publicising¹⁷ that pool more widely through a technology-enabled platform, was seen as an important step in encouraging more collaborative projects in the sector.

Sometimes TA is provided in house by staff with particular expertise. Where staff in one of the collaborating organisations have the skills, experience and qualifications to advise others on specific issues, sharing through expert groups can lead to dramatic improvements for organisations seeking help. The sharing of policies and procedures is often simple and effective, simply requiring a discussion and willingness to share documents and approaches. In one pilot, this was particularly effective for risk registers, business continuity planning and employment contracts. Often, staff have contacts within their profession and can draw in other external experts free of charge to discuss issues and options with the group. The payback for those external experts in some cases is the opportunity to present their knowledge and expertise to a significant group of cultural organisations that may take up their services in the future. This has been the case in one pilot, which makes extensive use of the staff's own expert contacts to provide free sessions on everything from pensions and employment law to waste management and energy efficiency, to mobile technology and risk management.

In other cases, specialists need to be bought in to work on collaborative projects where there is not enough in-house expertise and/or capacity to take forward an idea or project. Additional research is sometimes required to provide a common and robust understanding of an issue and provide recommendations or practical support to deliver a project. These are genuine additional costs which organisations must either share and commit to or find resources for externally.

An external and critical eye is an important part of collaboration, as those providing technical assistance may have experience far beyond the immediate project or joint working that they are supporting. Being able to bring outside perspectives can be useful in helping to focus the minds of those collaborating on what they are doing, why and how.

¹⁷ MMM will publicise those TA providers who worked with the pilots as part of the legacy of the programme. Its plans for a peer led knowledge transfer network will also respond to the desire for more peer to peer support structures offering access to expertise in collaborative working.

Two of the pilots chose to set up sub-group structures around key themes such as programming, professional development, environment, innovation, fundraising and public engagement. Scoping exercises were then conducted with TA specialists in the sub-group fields with digital, marketing and environmental expertise in high demand. Facilitation expertise was also used by all the groups in a variety of ways, sometimes for crystallising the purpose of the collaboration, and sometimes to tease out greater understanding of key areas such as digitisation, where the knowledge and experience base differed across the group. In one instance, the project manager also acted as the primary facilitator. However, none of the groups chose to use facilitation to develop the 'soft skills' needed for successful collaborative working, such as building trust and mutual respect, or resolving conflict.