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*Collaboration for Survival and Success:
Organizational Coaching Strategies to Meet
Unique Opportunities and Challenges*

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Collaboration for Survival and Success: Organizational Coaching Strategies to Meet Unique Opportunities and Challenges

BY WILLIAM BERGQUIST, PH.D.

Organizational boundaries as we knew them in the 20th Century are becoming sources of “troubling ambiguity.”¹ Boundaries that once steadfastly defined economies, societies, industries, companies, and employees are being redrawn, reconceived and redesigned. Boundaries were once drawn by others; now we speak about boundaries as arbitrary “social constructions” that can be reconstructed once we know what we want to achieve. This blurring of boundaries parlays with another trend in recent organizational life: the gradual erosion of hierarchies. While the basic pyramid of power--albeit in a flatter, more fluid form--is unlikely to erode, leaders are creating new structures that are more collaborative, more egalitarian, and more flexible in nature—and organizations coaches can help them understand this new perspective and create these new structures. The author identifies ways in which coaches might assist in these collaborative ventures and relates these modes of coaching to the case study (Pelchat) and case study commentary (Taylor) just presented in this issue of IJCO.

Confronted with growing pressure to “do more with less,” responding to the quickening pace of change, and taking advantage of new opportunities in foreign markets, leaders in all sectors have looked at their often tired, lumbering hierarchies with fresh, critical eyes. Their response has frequently been to review, rethink, and reorganize themselves. And they have adopted—or invented—a wide array of new collaboration-based structures: cross-licensing agreements, strategic alliances, hollow organizations, virtual organizations, vertically integrated partnerships, consortia and joint powers agreements. We see one of these forms of collaboration vividly exemplified in the case study presented by Brian Pelchat. The collaboration, in this case, consisted of the complex interactions between the territorial government and Aboriginal (First Nation) people of the Yukon.

I think it is important to note that, while the basic structure of collaboration has been around for many years, contemporary collaborations are redefining some of its most basic elements. For starters, power relationships are being conceived in a different manner. To be competitive in our 21st Century world, collaborative ventures need to be connected in another way, so that power between the people and the organizations involved is roughly balanced. Collaborations that move beyond form and structure—those, like the government/aboriginal peoples agreements, that demand deeper changes - recognize the interdependence of multiple parties and replace control with influence. This shift in the balance of power both requires and creates a greater demand for equity in our interpersonal and institutional relationships.

COLLABORATIVE BENEFITS AND COACHING

While collaborative arrangements can—and often do—take a toll on people and organizations, they continue to be born at ever increasing rates. Despite great risks, they have increasingly become an irresistible force in the workplace. As we watch new partnerships and alliances being born, the question becomes: why? Why, at this time in our history, have people and organizations all around the world found collaboration so attractive? The reasons vary, of course, according to whoever supplies them. Through my years of working with various collaborative ventures, I would suggest that six reasons are prevalent.² In each case, an organizational coach can be of great value in the realization of benefits inherent in each of these six reasons.

1. *In an age of limited and diminishing resources, collaborative ventures offer expanded capabilities, allowing organizations to do more with less or do something entirely different than their existing resource base permits.* Increasingly, professional people have found hierarchical structures too inefficient to achieve their goals. In order to survive, organizations found ways to get more accomplished with fewer employees. As a result they are learning to share their capital, people, and time with unlikely entities. Vendors partner with suppliers, competitors with competitors, businesses with customers, for-profit organizations with nonprofit organizations. For this sharing and partnering to occur, a leader must access appropriate networks (other people, resources, organizations) and a coach can be of value if she is network-knowledgeable. She can help her client identify, evaluate, establish and manage connections, without taking on the responsibility of establishing this network connection herself. In her commentary on Pelchat's case study, Marilyn Taylor offers several suggestions concerning ways in which a coach might assist Brian Pelchat in his identification of and engagement with networks outside the Yukon Territory.

2. *In an age of intense and turbulent change and shifting boundaries, collaborative ventures enable companies to be more flexible, to share resources and to create new ventures that would have been inconceivable on their own.* Today, the pace and direction of change is often unpredictable and inconsistent. We often see rapid change existing beside stability and stagnation. Increasingly, realities such as these require contingency-based structures that are fundamentally incompatible with hierarchies. To survive in these turbulent times, organizations must be nimble, adaptable, and often subservient to some higher purpose.

For this nimbleness to be present, leaders of a collaborative venture—such as Brian Pelchat—and leaders of collaborating organizations must be able to act quickly and be flexible. An organizational coach can help her client identify nimbleness in their existing work life experience (using an appreciative perspective)³ or can help her client acquire an attitude of nimbleness and accompanying competencies (through additional training, mentoring, performance coaching).⁴

This flexibility and nimbleness is a particularly difficult challenge for Brian Pelchat, who is constantly faced with the grindingly slow processes of territorial governance and with the often very thoughtful, but slow, processes of tribal governance. An organizational coach could help Brian either identify times and spaces where there currently is flexibility and responsiveness in either of the collaborating systems (an appreciative perspective) or create new structures or processes for fast and flexible responses when short-term solutions are needed to address critical wildlife management challenges.

3. *In an age of growing unpredictability and complexity, collaborative ventures offer easy and convenient access to specialized resources.* We are increasingly finding that many small businesses have an informal or even a formal partnership with a CPA firm, a payroll service, or a marketing agency that provides specialized services they can't afford or don't need on a full-time or even an extended part-time basis. Organizations also avail themselves of such contracted services as a means of reducing costs. Organizations of all kinds are increasingly moving into collaborative relationships with other organizations in order to share medical, dental, and disability plans or to share administrative staff, professional development services, libraries, computers, or other expensive resources and technologies. In the case of the Yukon government and Aboriginal tribes, the sharing of resources concerns expertise regarding wildlife management. Brian Pelchat is

facing the challenging opportunity to bring diverse expertise from both scientific and traditional sources.

The sharing of resources or assignment of specific organizational functions to an outside source or partner will only be successful if the core business of each partner and of the overall collaborative venture is identified. It is essential that the distinctive strengths and core mission, values and purposes of the overall venture and each organization be clarified. An organizational coach can provide invaluable assistance to the leaders of the collaborative venture and each participating organization in this clarification process. Certainly one of the major challenges facing Brian Pelchat in his attempt to bring together the Yukon government and Aboriginal tribes concerns the identification of a core mission and set of shared values that can drive the collaborative wildlife management venture. An organizational coach could help Brian strategize about how common agreement can be reached—as well as ways in which his own organization (the Yukon government) can become clearly about its mission, vision, values and purposes regarding wildlife management

We are living in an age of expanding territories and shifting boundaries on the one hand, and a growing need to affiliate or establish identities based on special interests, on the other hand.

4. In an age of growing globalization, collaborative ventures can offer a wider geographic reach into diverse markets, allowing for approaches that are customized for local markets and individual consumers. Businesses are being forced to respond to a growing diversity of marketplace interests. We are living in an age of expanding territories and shifting boundaries on the one hand, and a growing need to affiliate or establish identities based on special interests, on the other hand. Increasingly, organizational leaders have come to realize that to enter new markets they will have to look outside their organizational walls, and seek people and organizations that can help them break into—and succeed in—these new markets. An organizational coach can assist with this cross-cultural bridging by offering support and critical reflection when their client prepares for or debriefs these bridging initiatives.

Brian Pelchat could certainly use some cross-cultural coaching as he prepares to engage the Aboriginal people of the Yukon—though as Marilyn Taylor noted, this coach should probably be someone who is deeply knowledgeable about and aligned with the perspectives and values of the First Nation people of the Yukon. There is yet another way in which coaching can be beneficial in terms of a wider geographic reach. An organizational coach could help Brian identify a network consisting not only of other people in Canada who are addressing wildlife management issues, but also consisting of people around the world who are confronted with similar challenges. The primary higher education institution in the Yukon (Yukon College), for instance, has played a major role in setting up the University of the Arctic—which is a distinctive collaborative venture involving colleges, universities and research institutes in all of the countries with land above the Arctic Circle. This university focuses on both Aboriginal studies and environmental issues (global warming in particular). An organizational coach might help Brian identify ways in which to link with the University of the Arctic in order to add wildlife management to its core mission.

5. Fifth, as technology gives rise to independent and often impersonal work, collaborative ventures satisfy a human need for community. In contrast to hierarchical organizations, collaborative ventures typically concentrate on joining rather than differentiating. People come together as peers for mutual benefit. They look for

shared interests, goals, and benefits—often reinforced by a shared sense of a higher purpose. They recognize the need to take common risks, and they are pleased to receive common rewards. They are not partitioned into the leaders and the led. They are each a part of the whole, working together for an intrinsically better life. These ventures can have a humanizing, harmonizing, even spiritually-satisfying effect that is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve within a traditional and isolated organization.

An organizational coach can be particularly beneficial for leaders who have learned to “go-it-alone” as individualistic, highly competitive organizational game players or as members of a group that has traditionally been isolated from the “main stream” (such as the First Nation people of the Yukon). An organizational coach can help her client identify and appreciate those places in their heart where a yearning for community (or, in the case of those who have been isolated, a yearning for a broader community) still exists. These places can provide a client with guidance for transitioning to a more collaborative mode of leadership, as well as providing a framework for increased trust in those who are different in some way from oneself. In her case study commentary, Marilyn Taylor specifically suggests that a coach could help Brian design and enact community-building activities. It would not be easy, given the great cultural gaps and accumulated years of distrust—that is why a coach might be of great value as both a co-strategist and source of support during the inevitable times when the community doesn’t want to get built!

6. In an age of growing egalitarianism, collaborations offer the chance for increased personal involvement, control, and professional fulfillment. In the 1976 American film, *Network*, Peter Finch plays Howard Beale, a long time TV network news anchorman who tells his audience of millions: “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!” One of the reasons for this line’s enduring popularity is how deeply it resonates with people throughout the world who are frustrated with the hierarchical model, particularly if they are working in large organizations. Often, they see themselves as being at the mercy of limited superiors, left out of the decision-making process, stifled creatively and hamstrung by bureaucratic regulations. In a growing number of cases, people are willing to work harder and to forfeit traditional job benefits in order to take greater control over their destiny.

In the case of the Native people in the Yukon, empowerment takes on a somewhat different tone. It is not a matter of inequitable distribution of power inside an organization; rather, it is a matter of long-term inequitable power distribution among the largely Non-Native leaders of the Yukon government and the First Nation people who first settled this land and “managed” the wildlife of this territory. The collaborative venture that Brian Pelchat has described concerns not only the more effective management of wildlife, but also the tangible redistribution of power. Aboriginal people need to be involved in decisions regarding wildlife management in the Yukon because they have valid, “traditional” knowledge about this management process, but also because they have every right (empowerment) to be involved in the formulation of policy regarding this management process. An organizational coach could help Brian identify ways in which to enhance this empowerment effort and, in doing so, can facilitate Brian’s personal move toward greater empowerment. Ironically, to the extent that Brian feels empowered, his ability to empower other members of this collaborative venture is also increased.⁵

KINDS OF COLLABORATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

What do collaborative arrangements look like and how can coaches assist in form-

ing and managing them? I can begin by noting that collaborative arrangements (and partnerships in particular)—unlike other organizational forms—involve the formation of relationships between entities (individuals or organizations) that retain substantial independence. The complex system that is formed includes a nonhierarchical structure, a collaboration-based culture, and a relatively equitable distribution of power and authority among the partnership's chief participants. Collaborative ventures also differ from many other organizational forms in that they are often established in order to produce a specific product or service rather than to affect the overall operations of an organization. While there are many communalities among collaborative ventures, there are also significant differences—and, in particular, collaborations of three kinds.

Agreement-Based Collaboration

Because of legal constraints or precedence in a particular field, a formal partnership of agreement has been formed among certain organizations. The legal entities that are commonly formed between lawyers and physicians typify this type of collaboration. This type of venture exists primarily in form, not function. Typically, partnerships of agreement are intended to preserve traditional ways of operating a business. They usually are motivated primarily by legal compliance.

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Formal agreements lie at the heart of these enterprises. Professional partnerships involving lawyers, accountants, physicians, architects, and psychologists are usually based on complex, formal contracts and often include some sharing of administrative resources (secretarial, accounting, and so forth) as well as leases, equipment, or library resources. These collaborative agreements are likely to be common in the near future, but they are clearly not likely to be dominant given the acquisition of many of these collaborative ventures by much larger companies and the movement in many professions to a more business-oriented or corporate mentality.

Function-Based Collaboration

Another collaborative structure has emerged more recently. This type of collaborative venture is established when it makes sense for two organizations to work together for the sort of pragmatic reasons I identified above, or because they share interests. A majority of the collaborative ventures formed today are functional in nature—and this certainly is the case with regard to Brian Pelchat's wildlife management agreement. At their best, function-based collaborative ventures are characterized not just by compliance and legal agreements, but also by complementary and compensatory relationships and expansion. Brian certainly would like this to be the case with reference to the agreement between his government and the Aboriginal people of the Yukon. In her commentary on Brian's case study, Marilyn Taylor seems to be describing this second level of collaboration when she recommends establishment of a "third position" by Brian in his working relationship with both the Yukon Government and Native population.

Cross-licensing agreements are among the most popular of these functional arrangements—particularly among organizations where research and development plays a large role. This kind of arrangement enables organizations to share specific information or expertise for mutual benefit. Strategic alliance is another very popular form of collaboration that is function-based. This too is a formal pact between two or more organizations to achieve a mutual goal or set of goals. It is

distinguished from a cross-licensing arrangement in at least two important ways. First, the sharing can involve any number of assets, from product expertise to knowledge of specific markets. Second, the degree of sharing is often much greater.

At their best, function-based collaborative ventures are characterized not just by compliance and legal agreements, but also by complementary and compensatory relationships and expansion.

Joint-powers agreements, a species of strategic alliance, have become popular with public agencies in the United States. Independent government agencies that share a common purpose, are faced with a similar problem, or have overlapping or adjacent jurisdictions form an alliance to accomplish specific goals (such as development of a specific urban area), solve common problems (such as cleaning up an adjoining river) or coordinate interagency activities (such as collaboration between two agencies that assist the same foreign governments). Increasing privatization of public services is spawning a growing number of these joint powers agreements. We have also seen the birth of a whole new set of agreements between regions on a global level—EC, OPEC, NAFTA—as the world rearranges its economic power base.

Commitment-Based Collaboration

A third structure, identified as a commitment-based collaboration, is less common today, but may become more common in the future, as an increasing number of organizations come to recognize the inherent value of extensive cooperation and joint development. Many different arrangements have recently been explored to make this extensive sharing of resources, relationships, and values possible. Two such structures have received considerable attention in recent years: the hollow organization and the virtual organization, describe in much greater detail elsewhere.⁶

In many respects both are extensions of the strategic alliance. They dramatically reshape the way organizations develop deliver their products and services. They both imply real-time interactive, highly adaptive responses to an ever-changing environment. These two models of collaboration represent a dramatic rejection of hierarchical organizations that are vertically integrated. Traditionally, most (if not all) of the elements that went into the finished products, from circuit boards to plugs, were developed and manufactured in-house. The aim was to provide cost-efficiency and quality assurance by controlling the development, manufacturing, and marketing process. In many respects the hollow corporation and the virtual corporation represent near opposites of this vertical-integrative process. In a hollow organization, many, if not all, components of a process are made outside the company. A virtual organization is a somewhat different concept. Essentially it is a network of companies that can quickly be brought together to seize fast-changing and often short-lived opportunities.

THE NATURE OF COLLABORATION AND THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL COACHING

While collaborative ventures encompass a myriad of forms, they all follow similar patterns in how they come together, define their relationships, and manage transitions. Furthermore, they can all benefit from the services offered by organizational coaches.

Coaching as a Venue for Clarifying Shared Directions

Traditional, autonomous organizations are, by definition, company-focused. For-profit organizations are successful to the extent that they remain financially viable; nonprofit organizations are successful to the extent that they continue to

be supported by the constituencies they serve (in the case of the Yukon, this includes both the Non-Native and Aboriginal constituencies). In many sectors of the business community, a company is considered successful primarily if it is able to crowd out its competition and command a larger share of its market. Collaborative ventures, on the other hand, are by definition not company-focused. They frequently involve several different organizations which may (in other settings) actually compete against one another in a specific market. Collaborative ventures are industry or market focused.

With the help of an organizational coach, a leader (as member of a collaborative venture) can begin to shift his primary concern from one of market share to one of improving the quality of the product or service both he and his partners provide, better serving their mutual customers, and finding ways in which they together can gain a greater share in their mutual market or broaden the scope of the market for which they sometimes compete. In other words, collaborative ventures concentrate on expanding the size of the pie rather than on competing (against collaborative partners) for the biggest piece of the existing pie. While this concept is easy to understand on the surface, leaders often balk at the notion of collaborating with “the enemy” and value the support of an organizational coach who can sustain this perspective when the leader loses it in the midst of his daily struggles to keep his business viable.

What about in the case of the Yukon wildlife management venture? Certainly, in the past the Non-Native and Aboriginal people often saw one another as enemies – and competitors for the “pie” called land. Today, Brian Pelchat is faced with the task of forging a new perspective. While the “pie” called land in the Yukon can't be expanded, the “pie” called knowledge-about-wildlife-management can be expanded through cooperation and a coach can help Brian frame a strategy to make this collaborative perspective more pronounced and acceptable to all of the involved parties.

Coaching as a Venue for Systems-Oriented Analysis

In traditional organizations, information typically flows from the top to the bottom. Authority is typically set at the top of the organization, and primary leadership roles are played by those who manage people working under them and control various operations. System theorists speak of the critical role played by the “leading part” in a system—that component of any traditional system that monitors, controls, and integrates other disparate and often highly specialized components of the system.⁷ When it comes to collaborative ventures, these traditional functions are called into question as both unnecessary and inappropriate. With the help of a coach, leaders operating in new collaborative models can come to recognize (and adjust to) a major change: information in a collaborative venture tends to flow from side to side rather than from top to bottom. This certainly is the case with regard to the wildlife management process in which Brian Pelchat is engaged. Instead of information (and decision-making) flowing down from the government to the tribal leaders, there is now a sharing of information from side to side.

There is an additional dimension. An organizational coach can help her client recognize (and adjust to) a related change in collaborative relationships: authority tends to be distributed (more) evenly or in a changing (and sometimes even ambiguous) manner among the partners. There is either no leading part in a collaborative relationship, or there are multiple leading parts and the collaboration itself provides the primary guiding, leadership function. A coach can help her cli-

ent reflect on these shifting leadership dynamics and recognize when and where to be influential and a “leading part.” Brian Pelchat has certainly experienced this shifting and ambiguous authority in his collaborative venture and could use a coach as a second set of eyes, ears and as a second source of insight regarding the dynamic nature of authority in this collaboration.

Brian Pelcat, like all leaders of collaboration, can take counsel from Rosabeth Kanter who concluded that successful collaborative ventures “cannot be controlled by normal systems but require a dense web of interpersonal connections

and internal infrastructures that enhance learning.”⁸ This dense web (in turn) requires frequent and clear communication, a respect for differences, and flexibility--ingredients that are not always present in the repertoire of a leader and ingredients that a coach can help reinforce and exemplify. Because there are fluid lines and bases of authority, collaborators can't rely on written agreements or memoranda when

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communicating with one another. Authority shifts in subtle ways that often require at least brief in-person interactions among the partners. These interactions can be rehearsed and critically reviewed after the fact by a coach and client. Successful collaborations clearly require moving beyond the safety net of legal contracts (agreement-based collaboration) to a shifting, dynamic relationship based on trust and communication (commitment-based collaboration) and coaches can provide invaluable guidance and insight in helping clients like Brian Pelchat engage this shift from agreement to commitment.

Coaching as a Venue for Operational Improvement

Successful collaborations require extensive and skillful interaction among the involved parties—and performance coaching increases the chances that this interaction will be successful.⁹ Given that these ventures require the crossing of traditional institutional boundaries, communication between participants is particularly likely to be distorted and intentions are particularly likely to be misunderstood. This potential for miscommunication is even more likely to occur in the case of cross-cultural collaboration (as we find in Brian Pelchat's case study). A coach provides a second set of eyes and ears that can reduce the chance that this distortion or misunderstanding occurs or remains unchallenged. Collaborative ventures of all kinds add stress to existing relationships, for they invariably bring up issues of control and authority. With the help of an organizational coach, collaborators can learn how to clearly, constructively and frequently talk about their relationships with one another regarding these sensitive and complex issues-- for control and authority issues are never permanently resolved in a dynamic collaboration.

It is very tempting, when faced with the complexity inherent in many collaborative ventures, to remain ignorant of the regular details and problems of the organization. One can always assume (or at least hope) that problems will be taken care of by someone else (other partners or employees who are actually running the venture). I have often found in coaching to and consulting with collaborators that no one is in charge. Each party assumes that the other participating organizations have taken care of particular operations or specific problems. This abdication of responsibility is often an even more serious problem than conflict over authority and control. It is very tempting for a busy business leader to forget for a while about that visionary (but marginal) partnership she set up six months ago. A coach-for-collaboration is there to remind her of this commitment.

Perhaps even more important than the quantity and timing of communication among collaborators is the skill required to make decisions and solve problems in a collaborative manner. This is another place where a performance coach can be of great assistance—particularly in a setting such as Brian Pelchat faces where people come to the table from very different backgrounds. Given that many leaders are accustomed to giving orders or at least to managing within a clearly defined, hierarchical structure, collaboration offers a new challenge. Senge speaks of the value of dialogue, as opposed to just discussion, in contemporary organizations.¹⁰ Marilyn Taylor similarly recommends that Brian Pelchat's coach take this approach (creating "dialogic space") in helping Brian address the complex issues associated with cross-cultural communication. When someone like Brian communicates through dialogue, he seeks out common understandings and shared values and visions, rather than trying to win over the other party or make his point (as one does in a discussion). Collaborations in particular need more dialogue and less discussion. Many organizational coaches today are aware of (and may have even received training in the use of) dialogue. Expertise in this domain of interpersonal relationships is of particular importance if one is to be a collaboration coach.

Coaching as a Venue for Achieving Competence

Collaborative ventures typically require new structures, new systems, new operations, and even new cultures. Each of these changes, in turn, necessitates the acquisition of new competencies by those who participate in these collaborative efforts. Any extended collaboration will inevitably involve learning for all parties involved. One can only imagine the amount that can be learned by Brian Pelchat and his colleagues (both Non-Native and Aboriginal) who are engaged in this remarkable collaboration.

Kanter focuses considerable attention on this element of learning in her study of successful collaboration:¹¹

Productive relationships usually require and often stimulate changes within the partners, changes that they may not anticipate at the outset of the collaboration. When two companies place themselves in intimate contact with each other through an alliance, it is almost inevitable that each will compare itself with the other: How do we measure up to our partner in systems sophistication or operational efficiency? What lessons can we learn from our partner? In fact, learning and borrowing ideas from partners is part of realizing the full value of the relationship.

Inevitably, new learning experiences will include the uncomfortable experience of making mistakes. In my own coaching and consulting experience I have rarely found mistake-free collaborative ventures. I would certainly not expect Brian Pelchat to avoid all mistakes in leading his collaborative venture. It is not critical that collaborators avoid making mistakes—it is only important that they learn from their mistakes and don't continue to make the same mistake.¹² The first time an American business leader misinterprets the laughter of a Chinese businessman with whom she is collaborating as a sign of overconfidence, or even indifference, she can be excused; however, if she is to be successful in this international collaborative venture she must soon learn that this laughter may actually be a sign of embarrassment or resistance. She can only come to this realization by actively reflecting

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(with her coach) on her own interactions with her Chinese partner and by asking for feedback on her performance by colleagues who are more knowledgeable of Chinese culture. These two factors—critical reflection on one’s own performance and solicitation of feedback—are central to active learning in any organizational setting.¹³ They are particularly important in complex alliance, such as Brian Pelchat is forming, and are best facilitated with the assistance of a skillful organizational coach.

Critical Thinking: When we enter into a collaborative relationship, we must begin not only to learn about the operations and culture of the other participants in the partnership, but must also at some level come to appreciate and even anticipate the implications of the perspectives held by members of these other organizations. Leaders of collaborative ventures, like Brian Pelchat, must begin to think like each member of their collaborative venture thinks, even if they (as overall leaders of the collaboration) want to plan, manage, or solve problems in a somewhat different manner. This, in turn, requires that leaders like Brian Pelchat reason and analyze from a relativistic frame of reference.¹⁴ They must be able to take several different perspectives into account, while also being clear about (and critical of) their own perspectives. This is not easy to do and it certainly doesn’t hurt to have two heads (client and coach) thinking and dialoguing about the same complex issue at the same time. This sharing of perspectives is essential to critical thinking.

In the case of a formal collaboration that is founded on a strong mutual commitment, one must think systemically not only about one’s own organization, but also about the partnership and all the other organizations participating in it. The famous family therapist Virginia Satir often commented on the complexity of family systems, noting that as soon as you add a third or fourth element (for example, a first or second child) to the family equation, the level of complexity of the family—its dyadic, triadic, and quadratic relationships—begins to expand exponentially.¹⁵ Similarly, the complexity of any collaborative venture increases exponentially with the addition of each party to the organizational equation. Even when there are only two parties, as in the case of wildlife management in the Yukon, the collaboration becomes quite complex: there are multiple dynamics operating within each of the participating organizations (in the case of the Aboriginal people, there are multiple tribes, each with its own unique perspective and internal politics). Once again, “two heads are better than one”—especially if one of the heads belongs to a trained organizational coach.

Clarification of Values: With unclear boundaries—both personal and organizational—it is particularly important that those participating in a collaborative venture be clear about their mission and, in particular, about their own personal aspirations and the institutional values of the organizations involved. A participant in the collaborative venture who has reflected on her values with a coach and who looks beyond the immediate benefits of the collaborative venture to deeper and more abiding values and purposes will be well-served by this venture and by her coach. Certainly, Brian Pelchat would be well-served by a coach who helps him reflect repeatedly on his own values and the purposes of the collaborative venture. It is quite tempting to set up collaborative ventures on a short-term basis for expediency’s sake. But these collaborations often backfire. All participants in a collaboration must be clear about the reasons for setting up the venture—and I have repeatedly seen that this clarity is much more likely to be found among participants who each has an organizational coach to support their clarification of values, purpose, and mission.¹⁶

This clarity not only increases the chances that all participants are involved in the collaborative venture for the right reasons, but also helps to contain the organizational anxiety that is generated inevitably by boundary-defying collaborations. Can you imagine the amount of anxiety that is engendered in Brian Pelchat's efforts to bring Non-Native and Aboriginal people together in managing wildlife in the Yukon? Big stakes. Major differences in values and perspectives. Multiple constituencies to please. If we indiscriminately set up collaborative ventures, we are likely to lose any sense of our own personal identity and integrity. We are likely to be whipsawed from one promising venture to the next, and lose our sense of personal purpose and value while "fitting in" with the diverse cultures of many other partnering organizations. We end up losing our organizational "soul" while pursuing the potential benefits of collaboration with other organizations that offer tempting resources and strategic advantages. An organizational coach can help keep someone like Brian Pelchat both clear and honest in confronting these temptations—and confronting the underlying anxiety involved in an ambitious project like wildlife management in the Yukon.

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Coaching as a Venue for Leadership Development

The primary role of leaders in a traditional, hierarchical organization is to monitor and control the ongoing operations of the organization. By contrast, leaders in a collaborative venture must influence (but can not control) the functions and operations of this venture—a difficult role that one is not automatically prepared to assume without the support (and challenge) of an organizational coach. Rosabeth Kanter provides us with some valuable insights regarding collaboration that we can apply to our understanding of leadership and the coaching of leaders.¹⁷ She identifies five integrative functions that must operate in any successful collaborative relationship: strategic, tactical, operational, interpersonal, and cultural. I believe that each of these integrative functions requires effective leadership and that coaches can exemplify these functions in their own collaborative relationship with a client.

The strategic integrative function is served when the various leaders of companies participating in a collaborative venture keep in touch with one another. This way they not only share information about their individual companies, they also solve their mutual problems within the collaborative venture. The leadership function that addresses the need for tactical integration is provided, typically, not by those at the top of the participating companies, but rather by mid-level managers who develop plans for specific projects or joint activities of the venture. This means that Brian Pelchat should not be the only person being coached. Other mid-level leaders in both the Yukon government and the Aboriginal tribes who are directly involved in the wildlife management project should have access to a coach. Fortunately, peer-coaching services are widely available in both the Yukon government and among the Aboriginal tribes.¹⁸ It is important for a collaboration coach to frequently remind her client of this distinction. Mid-managers may even suggest changes in the structures of their own organizations—or the collaborative venture—to ensure that the cooperative efforts of each company are being employed in an effective and efficient manner. I have found that when leadership is only provided at the top of participating companies, the collaboration is likely to be nothing more than a novelty or pet project of the CEOs.

A third leadership function in collaborative ventures addresses the need for operational integration. This involves the provision of adequate resources (information, time, money, expertise) so that people doing the collaborative projects and activities can actually carry out the day-to-day work. A collaboration coach can often help her client identify these essential resources, and may have to remind her client of the need for these resources on frequent occasions. In the case of Brian Pelchat, this might mean the hiring of an organizational coach who is politically astute, for resources are not easily procured in many public, tax-supported organizations and might require some subtle persuasion and maneuvering.

The fourth leadership function, interpersonal integration, is provided by collaborative leaders at all levels of an organization. In strategizing with their collaboration coaches, the formal leaders in a collaborative venture will often bring together people from different levels of all the participating organizations to get to know each other on a personal basis (much as the formal leaders typically got to know each other when forging the collaboration). This is certainly one of the strategies that Marilyn Taylor proposed in her case study commentary. In the future, we may find that the highly successful team-building and community-building strategies employed by organization development consultants may be used or at least suggested more frequently by organizational coaches. This is certainly an area where coaching and consulting overlap.

Leadership in these informal gatherings is ultimately exhibited in spontaneous and often unpredictable ways by many different members of the participating organizations. Expressions of concern for the welfare of employees from other partner organizations; genuine curiosity about the ways things are done in a partner company; a tangible expression of interest in learning from the new collaborative enterprise—these are all forms of interpersonal leadership that make a collaborative venture successful for everyone. The formal leaders of the participating organizations can help set the tone for these interactions (often with the assistance of a collaboration coach) by establishing the culture and appropriate structures and systems for the collaboration. The rest is inevitably up to the individual employees.

Finally, I suggest, along with Kanter, that effective leaders of collaborative ventures typically provide cultural integration—and organizational coaches often assist in helping their clients become and remain attuned to these subtle dynamics. Those who actually administer the enterprise play a central role, according to Kanter, in creating this form of integration. Those who are managing the collaboration must share some basic common values, as well as be open to differences in values that exist among the participating organizations. This is particularly important if the collaborative venture involves men and women from different countries, ethnic groups, socioeconomic levels, or even geographic locations in the same country. We need only point to the leadership challenges being faced by Brian Pelchat to illustrate the importance of cultural integration and the benefits to be derived from the support of coaches in bringing about this integration.

I believe that leadership is central to each of these five integrative functions, for there is not likely to be much real action when an organization is faced with profound change unless leadership manifest at all levels of the organization. Kanter speaks of the central risk in collaboration that is at the heart of each of these five integrative functions: the risk of change. I have witnessed many organizations through my coaching and consulting that were poised on the brink of collaboration, in response to shifting conditions within and surrounding the organization.

Yet this change never occurred, in large part because there was neither the courage nor the commitment of leaders in the organization (at all levels) to the necessity of change or to the learning that inevitably accompanies any change process. Fortunately or unfortunately, collaborative ventures inevitably involve change; for when we enter such a relationship we open ourselves to alternative perspectives and needs, which we must somehow integrate with the dominant perspectives and needs within our own organization. We should not encourage our clients to enter into any collaborative venture if they are unwilling to be influenced by their fellow collaborators.

Collaborative ventures inevitably create ambiguous boundaries and often elicit turbulence and unpredictability. The conditions are ripe for debilitating anxiety and a resulting attempt to reassert control and domination. However, if the anxiety can be bounded and contained, often with the assistance of a skilled organizational coach, then participants in a collaborative venture will be willing to take risks and to dream—both of which are essential to successful collaboration. One of the critical roles of leaders in any institution is to create a culture within their own organization that is supportive and safe. While it is clear that most of our organizations dwell in highly competitive environments and are in need of a competitive edge, it is also clear that the culture within these organizations must serve as a container for organization anxiety and a source of collaborative enthusiasm. Where is the container for organizational anxiety in the Yukon government and in the Aboriginal tribes with whom Brian Pelchat works? As I noted above, cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration is inevitably anxiety-provoking. An organizational coach can be of great assistance to Brian if this coach can help him identify and appreciate the containers of anxiety that already exist in each organization and help him turn to these containers as sources of support to balance off the challenges associated with this collaborative venture.

In helping our clients to create a culture that promotes cooperation and perhaps even co-creation, we must help them beat at least some of their institutional swords (for example, competition for career advancement and rewards based on individual rather than group achievements) into plowshares. As collaboration coaches, we must encourage our clients to acknowledge not only the competitive edge but also the cooperative agreement. This shift to a “plowshare” or at least a blended sword-plowshare model of business typically calls for a shift in the basic values, beliefs, and patterns of leadership in an organization—in other words, a change in the organizational culture. The wildlife management process that has been described by Brian Pelchat certainly holds the promise (if successful) of bringing about cultural change in both the territorial government and Aboriginal tribes of the Yukon. Brian and his coach, as well as anyone serving as the leader of (or coach to the leader of) a collaborative venture, has an extraordinary opportunity to find commonality and community inside and outside the collaborating organizations—despite living in a world of competing interests. In serving this broader societal function as collaborative leaders and organizational coaches, we act as servants to a greater cause and can assist in our own small way to make this 21st Century world a safer and more gratifying place in which to live and work.

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