COLLABORATION IN THE ABSENCE OF AFFECTIO SOCIETATIS

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Introduction

Collaboration studies tend to presume that potential collaborators share common values and purposes. This is taking the easy route. Under this presumption, collaboration boils down to the simple design of adequate logistic arrangements. Our view is that such presumptions materialize only in exceptional circumstances, and cannot be regarded as the norm under most conditions. This is one of several reasons why such designs tend to be academically pleasing but not very practical. Furthermore, given the rationales for collaboration in the first place, such common values and purposes may not even be desirable as they can severely limit innovation.

In most circumstances, those who might benefit from collaboration live in a world where power, resources and information are widely distributed among many hands and minds, where each potential collaborator harbours different values, and is pursuing different purposes. In such cases, it is naïve and futile to fantasize about *purposive associations* à la Oakeshott (Oakeshott 1975: 205) where members are engaged in the joint pursuit of common purposes. Quite the contrary, one has to accept the daunting challenge of designing effective *civil associations* where members may not have common objectives, but instead pursue their own objectives within the context of their joint action.

Collaboration is a collective action challenge. This entails (1) constructing inquiring systems capable of blending perspectives and reconciling the agonistic tensions among the different groups; (2) making use of agreed-upon principles, rules and conventions to hammer out practical trade-offs among the conflicting values and purposes of the different parties; and (3) distilling information so that a broader and more encompassing appreciative system and macro-rationality can emerge that goes beyond the exiguous instrumental rationalities of participating agents or groups (Paquet 2013; Paquet 2014: 176ff; Paquet and Wilson 2011).

This daunting challenge faces three major hurdles:

- Firstly, most persons involved in such predicaments suffer from a basic willful blindness that leads them to denying this very challenge, such as with teams involved with problems in public health or public safety: complex wicked problems where collaboration is essential but where the participants (be they private firms, local authorities, national agencies, etc.) clearly do not share values or purposes, and often do not trust each other. Yet, they pretend that this collective action problem does not exist, and carry on in a delusional way assuming that collaboration is alive and well. Multiple tragedies on these fronts have shown this delusion to be quite toxic.

- Second, even when the different parties are tempted to concede that the collaborative problem exists, they do not quite know how to tackle the problem of designing civil associations in the absence of common values, common purposes and *affectio societatis* (Cuisinier 2008).[1] As a result, they tend to default to practices of logistics or to appeals to leadership (whatever it may mean) because they are missing the frameworks, skills and practices of collaboration which are not in common currency.

- Third, even if they decide to proceed boldly by trial and error, very quickly, the different parties run into conflicts, and their unease in the face of conflicts – even though the sharing of conflicting perspectives, paradoxes, etc. is a powerful source of social innovation – leads them to recoil from such conflictive situations into aseptic politeness or what Adam Kahane defines as "ways of not talking," (Kahane 2004: 35-70) before abandoning all efforts at finding synthetic and reasonable compromises, and finally pleading for someone to take charge (Block 1998).

This paper can do little in tackling the willful blindness problem directly (except by reiterating that it is toxic), but it can do much to suggest ways in which the collaborative problem might be tackled indirectly by suggesting frameworks, skills and practices of collaboration as a means of reducing the fear of conflict so that whenever the attitude of denial is recognized, it can be overcome.

In the first section, we state as forcefully as possible the seriousness of the willful blindness problem that is flagrantly present in a large number of organizations that require effective collaboration but fail miserably in recognizing it, and therefore in generating it. Secondly, we sketch the contours of a process of inquiry capable of generating useful responses to the collaboration challenge and of identifying some of the frameworks, skills and practices which may be employed to implement it. Finally, we argue for bold exploration in this sort of direction by agencies whose willful blindness may be endangering public health and public safety.

Why this willful blindness?

A nasty statement ascribed to President Harry Truman suggests that experts cannot learn, because if they were to admit to their need to learn, it would prove that they were not experts to begin with. Such a mental prison is responsible for much of the resistance of experts to suggestions that they might have incompletely or incorrectly defined the problems they face and might have to experiment beyond the conventional routines in good currency to cope effectively with the challenges they are facing.

Our experience with groups of officials in the Canadian federal government, for instance, has revealed that while the most senior officials may be conscious of the collaboration problems they face, the cadre of mid-level officials (that would normally be engaged in such cooperation) tends to react quite negatively when these problems are brought forth, and to actively fight against any initiative that maybe proposed to repair them.

It would appear that, for many, admitting that there is a problem is tantamount to saying that they have not done their job well. They therefore deny that any such collaboration problem exists,

even though, in many cases, there may be substantial evidence of tense relations among the parties that need to work together or even open hostility, or evidence of mishaps arising from poor coordination or cooperation.

Since the most senior officials have a mighty diet of daily crises to handle, it is easy for mid-level officials to persuade them that everything is under control, and that any observable symptoms of non-cooperation can be addressed through the simple application of additional controls. Many meetings may be called and attended, giving the casual observer confidence that something is going on. Hence there will be no possibility to say that the issues have not been seriously examined. Consequently, the inevitable conclusion must, in all cases, be that responsible external observers who may have diagnosed problems of collaboration are either misguided or that the problem is insufficiently urgent ("we've been dealing with this for years") to call for immediate action.

In such situations, only a major catastrophe that is clearly ascribable to a lack of cooperation among the different parties might succeed in highlighting the importance of the problem. But even if and when such a catastrophe strikes, damage control strategies that are geared to institutional preservation are likely to kick in, usually in the form of downplaying the systemic failure from a lack of collaboration, and only admitting to minor mishaps that, one is assured, can be fixed instantly. This wallpapering of any major institutional malefits that might ensue from cooperation failures, the referencing to routine audits that have already highlighted the nature of these flaws, and the bland assurances that the needed repairs are already being made are usually sufficient for the issue to be robustly placed on the back burner. Then with senior officials being solicited by the signs of new crises, and the public exhibiting its natural tendency towards amnesia, concerns about coordination failures are systematically buried after a brief moment of concern when the lack of effective cooperation raises its head in discussions after each incident.

So despite the fact that the matter of a lack of effective coordination – among police and public safety organizations; among infrastructure providers; and among the many other crucial actors in Canada's public safety ecosystem – has been repeatedly raised in alarming terms with each new catastrophe over the last few decades, there has been little significant social learning, little follow-up, and few collaborative protocols have been developed, let alone implemented. One can only live in fear and trembling at the potential consequences of this poor state of collaboration in the public safety world when, for instance, it is clear to all that we may suffer mightily on this front in the near future – either from external attack or the relinquishment of civil freedoms. In fact, the Conference Board of Canada, has made it known that the biggest threat to public safety and emergency preparedness is the lack of cooperative governance.

The same may be said about all the major public health crises the country has experienced since the tainted blood crisis of the 1980s, from SARS to the current Ebola and obesity crises. With a multitude of stakeholders in each policy domain, there are just too many ways to say no, and only a few ways to say yes to achieve cooperation. Typically, efforts at collaboration become mired in competitions to see just who's in charge.

One can only hope that current early warnings will trigger a change of heart and mind on this front, but institutional learning disabilities are so profoundly rooted, that we are immensely pessimistic about the plausibility of a more cooperative scenario emerging organically. Both public health and public safety institutions have the expert driven cultures described by Truman. Therefore, in all likelihood, enormous catastrophes will be required before the agencies charged with their responsibilities are sufficiently shaken and destabilized for change to be allowed. It may well be that, only through claims of criminal negligence for not addressing the collaboration issue earlier, will the importance of developing collaborative capacity in a complex and diverse society such as Canada be recognized, and acted upon.

How can the collaboration issue be tackled in the absence of *affectio societatis*?

If collaboration becomes necessary, and yet one cannot rely on sufficient *affectio societatis* to be present, or, for that matter hyper-competition or actual animosity are present, how can one move the collaborative agenda forward? Our approach is based upon a governance process that brings together four key pillars of collaboration:

1. **Can't do it alone:** Collaboration begins with an organization's recognition that a problematic issue can't be dealt with unilaterally, meaning that both the problem definition and any effective solutions require the contribution of several organizations or even sectors. This recognition is a powerful tool to periodically remind partners why they are working together.

Accepting the necessity of a distributed solution implies the need to find ways of engaging potential partners and stakeholders, and bringing them to the table. Who to include is the principal concern at this stage. Typically, successful collaborations include a diversity of stakeholders: those who might obviously be supportive; those who may oppose and have power to stop a collaborative solution; those who have expert knowledge to contribute and those who may be impacted by any decisions or actions the collaborators may take. Successful collaboration takes great pains to avoid homogeneous perspectives around the table and to maximize the participation of potential collaborators with different cosmologies and purposes, and the probability that they will bring the information, resources and power they have to the table.

2. **Collective learning**: Given the assembled diversity of viewpoints – all of which are likely to have some degree of validity – the second collaborative challenge is for the partners to focus entirely and exclusively on trying to persuade all the others of the 'rightness' of their view.

Advocacy at this stage is counterproductive because of the incompleteness of knowledge held by the participants. Rather the potential partners should try to establish some common knowledge base and engage in meaning-making around that shared knowledge in order to generate some frame to reconcile their different perspectives.

Like in the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant,[2] the fundamental question is what bigger reality allows all their individual perspectives to be true in part. This will enable the partners to establish the relevance of varying types and sources of information, to define the common problem accordingly, and to set priorities in the inquiry about what should be done.

Figure 1: The Blind Men and the Elephant

3. **Designing the problem definition**, **collective decision taking and action**: While the notion of taking action to mitigate a problem is central to participation in collaboration, especially with regard to issues of public safety and public health, potential partners need to be wary of rushing to action before a comprehensive understanding of the issue has evolved. However, when decision taking time finally arrives, the potential partners should be fully conscious of any power imbalances among them, and put in place mechanisms to mitigate any gross inequalities in order to ensure that commitments made collectively are lived up to.

There is no such thing as "almost equal" or "more equal than others" in collaboration. Each of the partners is there because he/she has a necessary contribution to make towards addressing a complex problem. In this context, they are peers. Therefore, the partners need to establish mechanisms of decision taking; identify specific partner commitments; and address the potential for free-rider behaviour. It also needs to be recognized that the participants have multiple accountabilities – to each other, to their home organizations, to specific stakeholder groups, or to the public. The partners need to determine how best to resolve these accountabilities if they conflict.

4. **Monitoring and evaluation**. Partners need to identify assessment and evaluation mechanisms, such as developmental evaluation, to support an ongoing process of learning while doing. Collaboration is most likely to be a process of experimentation, of trial and error, of exploration. Therefore, ongoing feedback is essential both to gauge performance, and to evaluate the continued need for collective action – is the project still needed, can it be done by others, should it be done by others, can we afford it, can it be spun off?

Stewardship as ongoing design of an automatic pilot

In the complex turbulent world in which collaboration becomes necessary, no one actor or group has all the relevant information, power and resources to effectively produce their desired results top-down, except in very unusual circumstances. Moreover, even those whose fates may be correlated as a result of their association in a particular issue domain are unlikely to share the same values and purposes. Therefore, the task of guiding a collection of partners in this environment becomes one of *stewardship not leadership.* In contrast to visionary or romanticized leadership, such partner coordination involves the design of an assemblage of principles,

protocols, norms, behaviours, rules and mechanisms, that make up something similar to an 'automatic pilot' (to use an imperfect metaphor) capable of steering the group in ways likely to generate wayfinding, meaningful self-organization, social learning, resilience, and innovativeness.

This 'automatic pilot' has to perform four intermingled but separate tasks**:**

- gathering all the relevant information necessary to generate effective wayfinding;
- ensuring that collaboration jells by creating effective schemes or spaces that permit frame reconciliation among the different stakeholder perspectives;
- assembling and applying a mix of incentives, mechanisms, practices and moral contracts likely to fuel a dynamic and continuous probing by the collaborators, that translates into the requisite social learning, and results in effective coordination and collective resilience sufficient to generate creative innovation; and
- creating the conditions to ensure *negative capability* – the sort of feedback and engagement practices that support the contingent cooperation of partners and their robust commitment to the collaboration even through rough times.

Such stewardship is generally lacking, due to the reasons cited above, and due to decades of indoctrination around the concepts of leadership and management science. That is not to say that there is no history of effective collaboration or stewardship within government, or even within the particular domains of public safety and public health. Indeed, we have observed many examples of effective collaboration over the years, although their lessons have been largely so compartmentalized as to have had limited, if any, impact on the practice of governance. In fact, one of us recently reported on two cases involving public health, the *Canadian Partnership Against Cancer* and BC's *Public Health Services Authority*, where stewardship and the capacity to catalyze effective collaboration were seen as essential core competencies for the organizations (Foster and Wilson 2014). Unfortunately, such experience continues to be viewed as being on the margin, and its lessons rarely disseminated broadly or incorporated into organizations.

Blueprint for a transitional ethnographic inquiry

Despite the reluctance to engage in the design of collaborative governance, the need to stave off disaster and to develop some collaborative capacity to withstand some future catastrophe has triggered an appetite for transitional devices – some potential ethnographic research that could be easily undertaken to underscore an organization's existing experience with successful collaboration and highlight its use of specific practices, tools, mechanisms, heuristics and affordances in facilitating cooperation.

Having identified the elements of successful collaboration in a single organization, one may imagine the possibility of creating a training program and a field manual or checklist which aspiring collaborators could use to support their work as agents of cooperation. Lastly, such an inquiry could identify lessons or suggest mechanisms and frameworks which may be generalized for broader organizational consumption.

We believe this sort of inquiry could proceed in three consecutive stages: explore the target organization's context for collaboration; identify how best to encourage effective social learning; and then the codification of tools that may subsequently be used to encourage successful collaboration even in conditions where there is a lack of sufficient *affectio societatis* among the participating parties.

Part I: Background and setting

First, such research would have to clarify a few key notions about the nature of collaboration when the challenge is 'wicked' – i.e., when the issue domain is opaque, its dynamics only approximately understood, when the actions needed to respond to such diffuse discomfort are neither well-defined nor agreed upon, and when the means-ends relationships are neither well-known nor stable.

Second, it would need to examine the key assumptions in good currency about the contours of the four basic collaborative sub-processes (inquiring systems, blending of perspectives, effective coordination, negative capability) and elicit the necessary minimal basis for collaboration to succeed and to yield resilience and innovation for the organization.

Third, it would need to quickly review, on the basis of both the existing literature and the heuristics developed by practitioners, a checklist of relevant dimensions that have to be taken into account, and the skills needed for the construction of effective collaborative governance in the face of situations where there are no shared values or purposes, and no one is in charge.

Part II: Developing a social learning approach

First, it would be necessary to prepare an outline of the social learning approach. This is critical to synthesizing the observations about the four sub-processes, with an emphasis on the particular features of the particular domain of interest (public health, public safety, etc.):

- in many issue domains like public health or public safety, a "no failure is allowed" mentality prevails, because the potential economic, social and economic costs of system failure are perceived as too high, yet this omnipresent possibility of failure should not be allowed to paralyze action and should permit space and time for experimentation and social learning;
- when stakeholders are not like minded, and do not share perspectives or values, they need to explore the centrality of *fail-safes* (when failure is a limited possibility) and *safe-failing* (when failure is highly probable) – mechanisms that are designed to ensure that the collective inquiry is kept on track;

- the need to address the critical trade-offs between pursuing decisions with undue haste and having the courage **not** to act prematurely. The former presumes that one has a good grasp of a situation while the latter presumes that such is not the case. The frequent undue rush to decision making, leads not only to premature and ineffective action, but it also does not allow sufficient attention to be given to the nurturing and maintenance of partner

commitments, thus encouraging their unreliability and cold feet if the organization falls prey to reductive and myopic outlooks; and

- the requirement of constructing the foundations of negative capability – the capability to keep going when things are going wrong – instead of naïvely presuming that commitment is deeply grounded when it is not. This shifts the assumption that 'failure cannot occur' to a *fail fast: learn quickly* mind set.

Second, a synthetic representation of the results of both the event analysis and the interviews would help flesh out the extent to which the present experience (as revealed by the studies and interviews) reveal (1) strengths and weaknesses on the fronts defined by the four sub-processes; (2) the blockages and pathologies that have materialized on these different fronts that would call for a diversity of repairs; and (3) the action plan that would appear to be called for in the particular issue domain and context at the moment.

Part III: Modest general propositions

First, an effort must be made to distill some modest general propositions that transcend the particular issue domain (public health, public safety, etc.) and the particular context (eg., federal Canada) in order to provide a preliminary sketch of what might be called a *field manual*,of the sort that some world leading engineering firms use to define the reference points in the conduct of the major projects. Such an instrument would be of use for a much broader set of issues and in a much wider array of contexts.

Second, a need to outline in a preliminary way the contours of a training package that is both *generic* and *specific* to public health, public safety, etc. that is capable of helping those involved in collaborative governance to improve their performance. This might constitute the main components of an effective training program in support of collaborative governance.

Methodology

- Conducting exploratory work drawing from the knowledge base of each partner;
- Ethnographic study of key events by examining issue files, and conducting key informant interviews;
- Analysis of the relevant dimensions suggested by the four sub-processes of collaboration for each of the major events examined;
- Preparation of summary papers on the four components of the 'automatic pilot' or inquiring system: wayfinding, frame reconciliation, incentives and moral contracting, negative capability;
- Identifying the most critical blockages, pathologies, sources of concern, and purported sources and causes of success and failure;
- Developing the skeleton of both a field manual and of a training program.

Anticipated Results

- A synthesis report distilling the learning from the analysis of the complex cases where common purposes and shared values are not present, and yet collaborative governance is required;
- A first prototype of a collaboration field manual;
- A first prototype of a related training program.

The case for bold explorations

This sort of probing is no panacea. It is only one approach to a problem that is both crucial and yet persistently denied and occluded for all the wrong reasons – mainly a stolid reluctance among pseudo-experts to concede that they have not resolved the collaboration conundrum.

On the road to such a bold exploration in search of irregular forms of governance that are capable of generating the requisite trust among those who lack it, yet are still required to work together, two stumbling blocks stand out that must be overcome: conservatorship and design incapacities (Hubbard and Paquet 2015).

On the first front, one has to attack the mental prison of administrative conservatorship that suggests that the primary function of the bureaucracy is to protect, maintain and preserve the administrative institutions in place and has come to lead senior executives to privilege the need to preserve over their need to serve through adaptation, and to elevate, behind the cloak of conservatorship ideals, the welfare of the bureaucratic tribe to the level of first priority over the welfare of the citizenry.

On the second front, one has to increase dramatically the attention devoted to the development of new prototypes of irregular governance through the cultivation of design thinking to replace the former focus on decision making (Boland and Collopy 2004; Martin and Christensen 2013). This should prove helpful in developing requisite inquiring systems and designing the requisite stewardship for progressivity and antifragility,[3] and to resolve the various conflicts and collisions by means of agreed-upon principles, rules or conventions (Spicer 2001: 22).

Whatever the dangers of exploration with these new prototypes – for they may prove inadequate – it would appear preferable to embracing mindlessly old conceptual frameworks and antiquated organizational forms that have proved grossly ineffective.

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Notes:

[1] This is a French legal concept that means that two or more people personally and jointly commit themselves to achieving the purpose(s) of their association. French courts have added to objective partnership criteria an indispensable subjective one: the presence of a "spirit of cooperation" among the partners or *affectio societatis*, which defines their willingness to pursue their goals together. Lack of *affectio societatis* is a sufficient condition for the partnership to be dissolved (Cuisinier 2008).

[2] One feels the elephant's tail and believes the animal is a **pig**. Another feels the leg and believes it is a **tree.** The third feels the elephant's side and believes it's a **wall**. The fourth feels the trunk and believes it's a **snake**. The fifth feels the elephant's ear and thinks it's a **fan**. The last feels the tusk and believes it's a **spear**. Who is correct? The obvious answer is none, but that answer is only possible from the perspective of seeing the whole picture. From the perspectives of the blind men, whose senses are providing them with incomplete information, they are all correct at least partially. If under this condition of incomplete information they are all partially right, then what picture is possible if we consider all the different interpretations together, ie. "What can be a pig, a tree, a wall, a fan, a spear and a snake all at the same time?" One can imagine them exchanging stories until eventually the notion of an elephant comes out. This parable depicts the age-old challenge presented by many complex business, health and social issues under conditions of incomplete information. The only reasonable approach is to foster a dialogue with different perspectives, where not only information is shared but also the information's validity can be tested as well as the reliability of each contributor in order to construct a synthetic view.

[3] On the notions of inquiring system and stewardship, see Paquet and Wilson, 2011. *Progressivity* connotes **not** the popular notion of progressiveness (which has an income-and wealth redistributive and social-democratic flavour, and is in good currency in social-democratic circles), but the notion of a capacity to transform to allow innovation to spread at optimal speed (Paquet 2013). Similarly, the notion of *antifragility* does **not** connote the notion that resilience (springing back to the *status quo ante* after a shock), but rather the more ambitious aim to ensure that organizations and social systems get stronger, more robust and innovative as a result of increased disorder and shocks in a turbulent environment (Taleb 2012).

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