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Chris Huxham David Macdonald

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**T**here is a fine balance to be struck between gaining the benefits of collaborating and making the situation worse.

# Introducing Collaborative Advantage:

## Achieving Inter-organizational Effectiveness through Meta-strategy

Chris Huxham with David Macdonald

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### Introduction

The complexities of today's organizational environment suggest that effective management must be applied not only within organizations, but also to relationships between organizations. In the world of manufacturing, for example, advances such as just-in-time management (JIT) have emphasized that efficient production may involve more than technical excellence; there is also a need to maintain co-operative relationships between a manufacturer and its suppliers. Some companies have taken this notion further, carrying out large percentages of their activities (95 per cent in the case of Benetton) through co-operative relationships with suppliers, manufacturers, dealers and distributors[1]. And in the United States, many firms are reported to be forming "joint ventures" as a way of structuring innovative economic effort[2].

In the public sector, emphasis on privatization of services has also led to a need to manage inter-organizational relationships; local councils and hospitals must set up

effective working relationships with the companies which produce their catering, cleaning, refuse collection and so on[3]. Limited funding and the development of a variety of external agencies with mandates in areas such as economic development and housing have increased the need for politicians and executives to co-operate across organizations as well as within them[4].

If organizations are to act effectively under these circumstances, it seems important to develop an understanding of the nature of inter-organizational relationships, directed not towards intellectual insight, but towards affecting the way in which people actually handle such situations in practice. From a pragmatic perspective, our own interest in this area stems from a desire by one of the authors to ensure that the newly formed Glasgow Development Agency (GDA) can act as an effective stimulus for collaboration in the city, at least in the areas of its primary remit, economic development and training.

The ideas raised in this article thus stem from a joint project involving Glasgow Action — one of the GDA's predecessors whose remit was concerned with the development of the service sector in Glasgow city centre — and the Strathclyde Business School. This was aimed both at making the most of Glasgow's "collaborative culture" and, at a more general level, at improving our understanding of the nature of effective collaboration. Our focus is therefore on one particular type of inter-organizational relationship, collaboration; specifically it is on collaboration over strategy rather than over individual projects. In the course of our work we have looked at collaboration from a number of perspectives; the purpose of this article, however, is to introduce just two concepts, the notions of *collaborative advantage* and *shared meta-strategy*.

It is not surprising that these terms should have originated in Glasgow because the city has a long history of collaboration between the major public organizations. The terms, and the issues which surround them, stem from pragmatic need and must, by definition, have relevance at least in our own situation. But though the concepts have originated in the context of particular organizations which are, in the main, in the public sector, it seems likely that they have relevance to many other situations. In what follows, we therefore discuss our interpretation of the meaning of the concepts and some of the issues involved in achieving collaborative advantage through shared meta-strategy in practice.

### The Nature of Collaborative Advantage

*Collaborative advantage* is concerned with developing synergy between organizations towards the achievement of common goals. The term originated through a project involving a number of Glasgow's major public organizations, which was aimed at gaining strategic benefit

from Glasgow's year as European City of Culture, 1990[5, 6]. We have found the term itself a powerful driver of the collaborative process. It seems immediately attractive to many public sector managers, because it encapsulates a reason for the collaboration which they recognize is essential if their aims are to be met.

So the term appears to have some intrinsic meaning, and this is probably different for each person who makes use of it. For ourselves, we have spent considerable time exploring our own understanding of the term so that we may better focus on what we are trying to achieve for Glasgow, and on the mechanisms for doing so. Though we expect this to continue to develop as we explore and apply the ideas further, it seems useful to put on record our thoughts to date. This article is intended to give an overview; for a fuller exposition of the ideas, see[7].

The term, *collaborative advantage*, is, of course, deliberately intended to contrast with the more familiar "competitive advantage"[8]. Our experience suggests that people often interpret it in this context; indeed a formulation that we ourselves have used is:

[collaborative advantage is] a form of competitive advantage which stems not from natural or historical endowment but simply from the various elements of the local economic system working together more effectively than their counterparts in competitor cities[9].

Interestingly, the term "co-operative advantage", has recently been used in a private sector context with similar, competitive connotations[1]. This, it is suggested, can be gained through "strategic alliances" of companies in the design, production, marketing or distribution of products. They comment that for co-operation to work:

both companies [must be] much stronger with their partners than they would be on their own. Their competitive advantage is really based on co-operative advantage.

It is our view, however, that pursuit of *collaborative advantage* need not be restricted to situations of competition. The *advantage* need not, of necessity, be an advantage over other organizations; it may simply be an advantage over the situation which would pertain if there were no collaboration. Achieving collaborative advantage thus means meeting an objective which no individual organization could have met alone *and* achieving the objectives of each collaborating organization better than it could alone. In some cases, particularly in the public or voluntary sectors where organizations feel a responsibility to society, it may also be possible to define and achieve some "meta-objectives" which are beyond the remit of any of the participating organizations themselves. In our case, we have been interested in defining such meta-objectives for Glasgow; a quite different activity to — though often mistaken for — defining objectives for the participating organizations themselves.

## Collaborative Advantage as the Management of Pitfalls

One way of thinking about *collaborative advantage* is as managing the balance between the pitfalls that may occur through an organization acting individualistically and those which may occur through the very act of collaborating. Let us look a little further at both sides of this equation.

### Managing the Pitfalls of Individualism

We have identified four pitfalls associated with individual action:

- (1) *Repetition* — is where two or more organizations carry out an action or task which need only be done by one. Until recently, for example, Business Development and Business Location Advice in Glasgow was handled by three organizations, Glasgow District Council, Strathclyde Regional Council and the Glasgow Development Agency, formally working independently. Companies seeking advice could therefore have been forgiven for feeling confused about who to contact.

At its most simple, repetition is just plain inefficient. As the above example suggests, however, it may also be ineffective. And if recent reports of "competing" voluntary mountain rescue teams in the Lake District are to be believed, it can also result in both conflict and danger to life[10].

- (2) *Omission* — is where activities which are (or would be, if recognized) regarded by more than one organization as important to the achievement of their objectives, fail to be carried out. This may occur because they have not been identified as important, or because they come into no organization's remit or, ironically, because they are the responsibility of more than one organization so each assumes the other is doing them.

For example, a UK-wide survey of professional and managerial staff commissioned for Glasgow Action, has suggested that crime rate is the most important factor in affecting where such people wish to live[11]. It is therefore likely to be an important factor affecting inward investment. Yet because the organizations concerned with economic development in Glasgow are not also crime authorities, attention to this aspect of the city's portfolio has largely fallen through the net.

- (3) *Divergence* — occurs if the actions of the various organizations become diluted across a range of activities rather than used towards common goals. In our own context, for example, this may have occurred where organizations have had mutually incompatible goals concerning the future role and scale of peripheral housing estates. Though prioritization of effort is now being addressed collaboratively, it has previously led to a situation

in which development resources were spread thinly across a wide range of locations.

- (4) *Counterproduction* — is perhaps the most catastrophic pitfall of all; this is where organizations working in isolation take actions which conflict with those taken by others. At best this may lead to a “cancelling out” of the benefits of each action; at worst it could leave both worse off than they were before. It is easy to envisage a situation, for example, in which those concerned with enterprise development would be promoting a city as a desirable area for business relocation, while local politicians were highlighting deprivation and funding neglect by central government.

At first sight, it would seem important to *avoid* these four problem areas. A little further consideration, however, suggests that managing the pitfalls may be more complex than just avoidance. For example, there may be good reason for *repetition*, such as a need for backup in the case of individual failure [12] or simply to promote “healthy competition”. In addition, there are many cases where the activities of organizations are partially overlapping and hence create duplication at the boundaries. The GDA and Scottish Homes both have a remit to be concerned with environmental aspects of housing areas, for example. There are also cases where organizations are mandated to work in the same area. For example, in Scotland, both the Local Enterprise Companies and the Local Authorities have a responsibility for economic development.

So managing repetition does not mean eradicating it *per se*. Rather, it means making a judgement about where repetition is valuable or unavoidable and where it is wasteful. In the former cases, it also means managing the way in which the organizations work together, so that they may build on each other’s contributions rather than tread on each other’s toes.

Though it is difficult to think of reasons why organizations might wish deliberately to act *counterproductively*, it is not difficult to identify cases where *omission* or *divergence* might be desirable. An activity which is deemed lower priority than others might deliberately be *omitted* if resources are limited, even though at first sight it seems important. Similarly, we would not want to suggest that all organizations should pursue the same goals; if well co-ordinated, *divergent* policies will often be able to complement each other.

The point is that haphazard repetition, haphazard omission, haphazard divergence and haphazard counterproduction are likely to be problematic; co-ordinated repetition, omission and divergence may not be. So, the best way of managing each of these pitfalls may — depending on the circumstance — either mean *avoiding* the repetition, omission, divergence or counterproduction, or it may mean turning them into deliberate and creative acts. Either way, managing the pitfalls of individualism implies

collaboration between organizations. And this means more than just co-ordinating actions: a minimum requirement is an agreement to individual strategies which do not conflict; a more ambitious aim might be an agreement on joint strategies.

### **Managing the Pitfalls of Collaboration**

So it was a concern about the pitfalls of individualistic action that, in part, led us to explore further the nature of collaborative action. But collaborative action has its own down side too. We have identified four pitfalls associated with collaboration:

- (1) *Loss of control* — is likely to be sensed by participating organizations when a task identified by the collaboration is delegated to another organization. In particular, the reduction in ability to take action when things seem to be going wrong may be particularly frustrating. Potential security leaks arising through the need to share confidences may be another worry, especially in the private sector.
- (2) *Loss of flexibility* — for individual organizations may occur if agreement from collaborators is a prerequisite of taking action. With this, is also lost the ability to act opportunistically, make fast responses or act with discretion and autonomy.
- (3) *Loss of glory* — to individual organizations will occur because collaboration will mean having to share the credit for particular achievements, and even, on some occasions, letting another organization take all of it. But organizations need to be seen to be achieving their objectives both by external stakeholders such as their electorate, shareholders or other funding bodies, and by their internal stakeholders, their staff, whose motivation will be based, in part, on achievement. One outcome may be a tendency among participating organizations to compete for glory.
- (4) *Direct resource costs* — arising from travel, meeting time, telephone calls and so on must necessarily be incurred as part of the collaborative process. Costing the benefits of collaboration will, of course, be difficult, but some kind of weighing up process is necessary to ensure that the costs do not far exceed the benefits — or conversely, that the benefits are recognized as outweighing the costs.

The threat of these four pitfalls, though perhaps not fully articulated, often seems to act as an effective deterrent to individual organizations against involvement in collaborative activities. Despite the obvious benefits of collaboration, individualism may seem the safer option. So it seems to us that the achievement of collaborative advantage involves a fine balancing act. On the one hand, the collaboration must be strong enough to overcome the pitfalls of individualism, otherwise there is little point in

having it. On the other hand, it must be designed in such a way as to be sensitive to the problems of loss of control, flexibility and glory and to the cost of collaboration.

We do not, however, believe that this balancing act represents an insurmountable difficulty, providing the potential problems on both sides are taken into account when collaborative procedures are set up. For example, it ought to be possible to build in to any collaboration, systems — to which all collaborators are party — for monitoring progress and for ensuring that all involved gain credit. Similarly, a level of collaborative action which guides the direction of each collaborator while leaving each a degree of autonomy, is likely to reduce the flexibility problems. All of this would suggest that it is very important to pay attention to the development of *trust* between collaborators: trust in the commitment, understanding and ability of the other organizations; trust that their autonomous actions will be in the spirit of the collaboration; trust in their willingness to share credit; and trust in the benefits of working together[13].

### **Making Collaborative Advantage Happen: Striving for Meta-strategy**

So, if achieving collaborative advantage requires such delicate management, it seems reasonable to ask what kind of substantive ends are worthy of such attention? Experience suggests that collaboration could take place at a number of different levels, ranging from individual projects, through programmes to broad strategies. In our own context, Glasgow has a long and successful history of project-level collaboration, involving both public and private sector organisations. Among the many examples are: the successful bid to become European City of Culture in 1990; the (highly unlikely) successful tender for the 1991 England and Wales Census Processing Office; the stone cleaning scheme; and the City Lights scheme. It has also achieved programme-level collaboration on a number of occasions. The Glasgow East End Renewal (GEAR) programme[14] and the Crown Street programme aimed at regeneration of the notorious Gorbals area[15] are past and current examples of this. One of the aims of our own work, however, is to examine whether and how collaborative advantage can best be achieved through a focus on collaboration at strategy level.

Our exploration of strategy-level collaboration has led to the notion of *shared meta-strategy*. To explain what we mean by this, let us first, for this purpose, define a statement of *strategy* for an organization as consisting of a *mission and objectives*. Then *meta-strategy* is a statement of strategy *for the collaboration*, consisting of a *meta-mission* and *meta-objectives*. Such a statement will presumably be most useful where the collaborating organizations have a commitment to ends which are outside the direct remits of any of them. Though it is by no means impossible that this could occur in the private

sector, it seems much more likely to be the case in the public or voluntary sectors.

In our own case, the meta-strategy we are interested in promoting is a collaborative strategy for the management and development of Glasgow. One could hypothesize about the kinds of meta-strategy which might be relevant in other contexts; for example, the police, health authority, social services, a housing association, Saga and Help the Aged might collaborate to develop a meta-strategy for care of the elderly in a particular area. Or private and public sector organizations might collaborate over a meta-strategy addressing environmentally-friendly manufacturing.

We view the notion of meta-strategy as important because it makes clear the distinction between what can be the responsibility of individual organizations and what must be done through collaboration. Our experience suggests that people do not generally make this distinction and often set strategic objectives for their own organizations which can — either for moral or pragmatic reasons — realistically only be regarded as achievable by involving others. So, highlighting the distinction highlights the need to pay deliberate attention to developing collaborative relationships.

In this context, we have found it useful to define a distinction between collaboration, co-operation and co-ordination, as follows:

- *Collaboration* — we use this to describe the situation when participants work together to pursue a meta-mission while also pursuing their individual missions.
- *Co-operation* — this is used when organizations interact only so that each may achieve its own mission better.
- *Co-ordination* — we use this to describe situations where there may be no direct interaction between organizations, but where an organization aims to ensure that its own activities take into account those of others.

These definitions — which are consistent with (but not the same as) those used by other authors[1,13,16] — emphasise this need to be proactive in the development of collaborative relationships. Though co-operation and co-ordination might also be better achieved by taking a proactive approach, they *will* happen to some extent to default, because they are fundamental to achievement of each organization's aims. But collaboration, in the sense mentioned, is outside the normal remit of all potential participants; so it must be done deliberately if it is to be done at all.

### **The Meta-strategy Balancing Act**

Our previous discussion may have implied that meta-strategy is an unusual thing for organizations to be

concerned about. In practice, however, it seems likely that people who hold anything other than the most junior positions in organizations with a remit which in some way overlaps with another, will have some sense of meta-strategy: a police constable is likely to have some sense of what the criminal justice system is aiming to achieve; a district nurse will have some sense of health strategy; and so on. But each person's understanding of that meta-strategy is likely to be quite different, both in depth and direction. Our interest therefore, is in exploring the circumstances, if any, in which it is valuable to form a statement of meta-strategy both collaboratively and explicitly.

Not surprisingly perhaps, this seems also to depend on managing a balance; the issues are related to those raised earlier in the context of managing pitfalls. In this case the balance is between some advantages and disadvantages of explicit meta-strategy. We have identified four advantages and three disadvantages as being particularly important.

### **Advantages of Explicit Meta-strategy**

- (1) *Makes aims explicit* — each collaborator knows explicitly what is being aimed for so there is less chance of divergent or counterproductive actions.
- (2) *Allows assessment of individual actions* — the programmes or projects of collaborators can be assessed for validity in terms of the meta-strategy and this, in turn, can be assessed for repetition and omission. Tasks can be delegated among collaborators because each knows the basis for delegation.
- (3) *Promotes a collaborative atmosphere* — if handled well, meta-strategy should encourage a collaborative, rather than competitive atmosphere among participants.
- (4) *Provides a sales platform* — the meta-strategy can be used as a coherent and consistent basis for "selling" the object of the collaboration to the rest of the world.

### **Disadvantages of Explicit Meta-strategy**

- (1) *Makes differences explicit* — the process of creating an explicit meta-mission will also highlight and make explicit the differences between participants' perspectives on the collaboration issue. It could therefore promote conflict over differences in viewpoint rather than promoting the intended collaborative atmosphere.
- (2) *Reduces ambiguity* — the advantages of ambiguity are lost; it becomes less easy to present one face to one part of the world and another elsewhere.
- (3) *Upsets the status quo* — if there is already a measure of collaboration — or at least co-operation — taking place, then a move towards a more explicit relationship could upset the status quo.

As with the balance of pitfalls discussed earlier, these disadvantages can seem so significant that they are likely to act as an effective deterrent to initiation of collaborative development of meta-strategy. If this is to be overcome, it is important to be able to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages to get a feel for whether explicit meta-strategy is likely to do more harm than good in any particular case.

### **The How, Who and What of Meta-strategy**

The conclusions of such a weighing-up process will be dependent, in part, on the ease with which it appears possible to create and use the meta-strategy in a way which successfully manages the balance between the advantages and disadvantages. This will be partially dependent, in turn, on *how* the collaboration is managed, *who* will be involved in it and *what* the meta-strategy will consist of. We have identified some of the issues which underlie these questions as follows:

#### **How?**

In our experience, inter-organizational collaborations often develop out of one-to-one collaborations between individuals in each of the organizations concerned. In such cases a degree of trust is likely to exist before more formal collaboration is initiated. In other situations, unless an organization has an agreed external mandate to initiate and manage a collaborative process any initiative may be regarded by the other participants with some suspicion. It is inevitable, however, that any such process must be initiated by a single organization and a sensitive organization ought, at least, to be able to get one off the ground. But to be effective, meta-strategy must surely be monitored — at least at a minimal level — to ensure that actions taken are consistent with it. Any organization taking on the role of monitoring, however, seems likely to be perceived as in a powerful position and, thus, as a threat to the others.

It would seem important then, to develop a monitoring method which is either completely external to all of the participants, or which involves all of them. This might, for example, involve creation of a new organization whose role would be to "manage" the collaboration or it could involve a series of meetings involving members of the existing organizations. Either way, it would seem important that the monitoring mechanism does not itself begin to usurp the functions of the collaborating organizations [17]. Time spent devising a monitoring system which can ensure that the collaboration works without, itself, presenting a threat, would probably be well used.

#### **Who?**

There is a commonly held view that it is important to involve in any collaboration, all organizations which might

have a stake in the issue[18]. This may have the advantage of broadening the range of organizations committed to achieving the strategy and reduce the chances of an organization, deliberately or otherwise, sabotaging it. It is, however, likely to mean involvement of a large number of organizations, which will make managing the collaboration more difficult and, in turn, reduce the chances of achieving agreement to actionable outcomes. As always, there is a fine balance to be struck.

Assuming it is decided not to include all stakeholders, defining criteria for involvement becomes an issue. One important criterion for inclusion must surely be caring about the meta-mission. Other factors such as the ability (resources and power) to make an active contribution to operationalizing the strategy, parity of status, compatible organizational cultures and mutual trust also seem likely to be important.

### What?

Finally, we ask what the meta-strategy should consist of. In particular, what level of detail should it go into? There would seem to be a number of advantages to keeping it quite general — say, a statement of mission and the highest level of objectives outlining very broadly the way the mission is to be achieved. The less detailed the meta-strategy, the less strong the monitoring system need be — and hence the less threatening; the less too, it constrains freedom of interpretation, highlights conflicting aims, constrains flexibility, reduces control and prohibits the gaining of recognition for effort.

As always, there are disadvantages to generality too! The less specific the statement is, the less powerful it is in terms of achieving some of the key elements of collaborative advantage; repetitions, omissions, divergences and counterproductions all become difficult to diagnose. However, even the most general of statements could, in principle, achieve the advantages of promoting a co-operative, rather than a conflicting atmosphere and of providing a basis for selling the object of the meta-strategy. Once again, it would seem to be a matter of weighing up the factors before making a choice about where to pitch the level.

### Summary and Conclusions

In this article we have identified just two concepts concerned with inter-organizational effectiveness — *collaborative advantage* and *shared meta-strategy* — and have discussed some of the issues surrounding them. We have focused on collaboration rather than other forms of interaction such as co-operation or co-ordination, we have focused at strategy rather than project or programme level and we have focused on organizational collaboration rather than collaboration between individuals. Our ideas have

stemmed from work largely based in the public sector, but many of the issues seem likely to have relevance for collaboration across all sectors.

Our general conclusion is that success in gaining collaborative advantage through sharing a statement of meta-strategy is largely dependent on whether or not it is possible to tip the balance of pitfalls, advantages and disadvantages in favour of collaboration rather than individualism. Deciding whether or not to initiate collaboration therefore becomes a matter of weighing up the pros and cons for a particular situation. Once begun, it is important to be conscious, continually, about management of the balance. Our identification of some of the factors involved in the balance is therefore important for our ability to achieve success.

Our understanding of the concepts identified in this article is, however, evolving. We would expect it to change and develop as we explore situations and issues and try to implement more ideas. In particular, we have already begun to explore issues such as the effect of organizational politics, the influence of government and politics, the timing of strategy development and the *intra-organizational* dimension of collaboration[19].

Yet, though these concepts may be, in a sense, transient, we have found them to be meaningful to people across a range of organizations. Their validity, then, stems from their ability to provide a starting point for collaborative processes; they are not intended to be an end in themselves. Perhaps the greatest value of these concepts is in their ability to promote a *proactive* attitude towards collaboration. Such an attitude is likely to reap much more significant benefits than is an ability merely to react to a need to co-operate when other organizations are instrumental to the achievement of one's own goals, or because it is helpful to share the cost of a project.

In Glasgow, one outcome of our exploration is a new thrust towards achieving collaborative advantage *through meta-strategy* while maintaining project and programme level collaborations and co-operations. Perhaps the most concrete evidence of this has been the publication of a statement of strategy for the city's development which focuses on five main strands — people, business, environment, visitors and culture — which are directed towards achievement of its (meta)-mission, "to establish Glasgow as one of the great cities of Europe"[20,21]. This has been endorsed by the major public organizations in the city and was formed largely from the combination of their own strategy statements. This has been launched alongside the new "Glasgow's Alive" slogan and logo which will be the city's herald over the next decade, and which is intended to embody the essence of the strategy.

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Chris Huxham is Senior Lecturer at the Strathclyde Business School and David Macdonald is Director, Projects, Location and Marketing at the Glasgow Development Agency, both in Glasgow, UK.

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## Application Questions

- (1) Is your organization achieving any collaborative advantage? What, if any, kind of collaborative relationships does your organization have already in existence? Who are the collaborating organizations? At what level (e.g. project, programme, strategy) does collaboration take place? Is the collaboration achieving its aims?
- (2) Could your organization achieve further collaborative advantage? Can you identify any potential collaborative relationships which might be of benefit to your organization? Would the pitfalls of individualism outweigh those of collaborations? Would the advantages of a jointly defined statement of meta-strategy outweigh the disadvantages?



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