FACTFILE 4

Key elements of collaboration

Collaborations bring people, organisations and knowledge together. Something is jointly created, often something entirely new. Yet there is no one-size-fits-all model. Success is achieved when members and administrators focus on the main elements of a collaboration: interactions, governance structures, systems and processes[1].

Interactions are helped by our connections and relationships. Collaborators need to nurture existing relationships, as well as seek links with new participants, organisations and resources. Participants can tend to focus on established links more than potential new contributors. Both need nurturing. To maintain quality relationships, trust, reciprocity and mutuality are needed.

☞ **Trust** is pivotal and can reduce complexity and cost. Parties must show willingness to share power, and trust others not to take advantage of that. This allows a stepping back, letting go and accepting that control rests with the collective. Greater trust leads to information and resource sharing; increasing risks, efforts and rewards. This kind of trust comes from shared values, language and vision. It builds commitment to the collaboration* and its goals.

☞ **Reciprocity** is give and take, a broad expectation of contributions and returns of similar value. Effective collaboration sees self-interest shift to longer-term collective reciprocity. This can come from one partner contributing or taking a risk, and others following.

> "In our benchmarking project, small and large producers from potentially competing regions had to trust each other. We shared highly confidential and commercially sensitive data between group members and we freely discussed important negotiations and processes. We were open with other growers and also with external consultants. That level of trust meant that we could cross-reference our data and undertake a much more comprehensive analysis of on-farm activities and variables. We gained more as individuals *and* as an industry. It was scary but the benefits by far outweighed the perceived risks."
>
> **Farming Together beef producer**

Check your TRUST levels.
To develop trust in our collaboration we (the participants) have:

☐ Made fairly equal commitments of time and investment – both up front and during the project

☐ Kept regular and personal contact with other group members[2]

☐ Made specific efforts to nurture and monitor trust[2]

Trust and reciprocity link to reputation, an estimation of character. The cautionary and self-interested "I will if you do" is not enough. Rather, individuals lead by example. A positive collaborating reputation can develop from: using agreed practices, helping to define problems and possible solutions, promoting outcomes with mutual interest.

☞ **Mutuality** stems from interdependence and relying on others for group goals. It grows from participants' shared beliefs and purpose. Sustaining a collaboration needs participants to share a vision, change work practices and commit to meeting collective and individual goals.

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Governance & internal systems – key in a collaboration

Governance refers to decision-making groups; the types of decisions they can make; and the processes they use.

Governance structures help collaborators negotiate how to solve collective problems. They jointly set rules and procedures for involvement. These structures can be formal (boards and committees), or informal. How they operate is usually determined by written articles of association or model rules (such as in a Co-operative's or Association's constitution). These structures need to strike a balance between 'minimal' (to encourage participation and initiative) on the one hand, and 'overbearing or unnecessary'. Processes cannot be so loose that obligations can be overlooked, but nor should requirements be unreasonably demanding. For example, farmers have a social license to farm, but industry or regional groups may develop extra voluntary codes of conduct to help farmers meet both legislative compliance and ethical duties.

Systems and processes are ever-present, even though we tend to think of collaborative efforts as being creative in nature. Adjustments to fit collaborative networks, because of the broader system you work in, are important. Collaborating can, for participating groups, mean big changes such as: building relationships for joint work, encouraging shared decision making, or altering operations and structures to reflect collaboration. You could invite collaborators on to your board.

System-wide changes may be needed for legitimising or sustaining individual worker efforts and organisations will need to consider broader, collaborative network operations.

Has your group:

❏ re-examined the culture of your participant organisations to support collaboration?
❏ included collaborative behavior in job descriptions, acknowledged collaborative behaviours, and set goals related to cross-boundary work?
❏ recruited and hired flexibly, encouraging cross-boundary hiring?
❏ adopted measures such as open access to data, funding and resources?
❏ developed accountability and reporting regimes with shared responsibility, common reporting criteria, shared revenue streams and performance indicators that include collaborative measures?

'Farming Together' aims to:

• generate knowledge and skills about collaboration, co-operatives and collective strategies for farm businesses
• provide support to collaborative and co-operative approaches and demonstrate the economic benefits
• facilitate resource sharing and build regional networks

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1. Ostrom, E. (1990). Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action. Uni. of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, UK; Keast, R., Brown, K., Mandell, M. Woolcock, G. (2004). Network Structures: Working differently. Public Admin. Review 64 (3): 363–371; Thompson, A., Perry, J. and Miller, T. (2009). Conceptualising and measuring collaboration. Jnl of Public Admin. Research & Theory 19 (1): 23–56.
2. Powell, W. (1996). Trust based forms of governance. In R. Kramer & T. Tyler (eds). Trust in orgs. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA: pp.51–67.
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