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# Collaborating to build community



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Collaboration is often loosely defined as working together toward a common goal. On the surface, it may appear as such, but it’s not that superficial. Collaboration is a process – a process in which we learn how to lead ourselves, be seen, and be heard. It is not consensus or advocating, and it isn’t a collective of diverse agendas or a team defaulting to the unnamed leader. Collaboration doesn’t even require you to like one another. You can work really well with people you don’t like – even people you don’t respect!

## Leaving Egos and Personal Agendas at the Door

Productivity, creativity, and sustainability are reliant upon human beings and the relationships between them. Collaboration is about acknowledging what each person brings to the collective process. It’s about leaving your agenda and ego at the door. It’s important now more than ever that leaders demonstrate true collaboration that is a shared experience, raising the individual and collective consciousness and moving us forward together.

As community leaders, where many conversations and decisions are public-facing, it’s critical to maintain awareness of personal motivations. Collaborative conversations must consciously bear in mind the best interest of service to the community.

Collaboration can easily go sideways and is ineffective when one of the participants has a hidden agenda. This can make things particularly tricky if individuals refuse to acknowledge an agenda, or are unaware they have one.

Creating this awareness allows us to be more authentic in the conversation and process. The best approach in scenarios where known agendas exist is to be upfront about the fact they exist. Doing so normalizes the process of our own thinking and creates transparency. Having an open conversation upfront allows everyone to be held accountable, maintain authenticity, shift as needed, and stay grounded in a collaborative energy.

## Four Elements of True Collaboration

In its purest form, collaboration is the unconditional coming together of mind, spirit, and energy to create something better together than we ever could alone. It’s a necessary skill in today’s complex world, but it is often misconstrued. True collaboration consists of four elements: decide, commit, listen, and support.

### 1. Decide

The decision to be involved in a collaboration needs to be an intentional one, whether you are assigned to it or you choose it. Decide how you

are going to be – show up and be real, present, vulnerable, and willing to learn and contribute.

Taking the time to gain clarity before jumping in will provide a reference point to check-in with if (when) things go off course. What are your reasons for participating? What skills or learning do you want to take away from this collaboration? What skills and experiences are you bringing to the table?

The only wrong decision is to keep crossing your own boundaries, losing sight of who you are until you are all but invisible. Just make a decision, any decision, and it will give you some clarity; then take action, no matter how small.

There are times when we just don't care enough to engage and still make the decision we know we must. That's when it's time to look inside and collaborate with ourselves, to be curious and ask: "Why don't I care?"

Once a decision is made, it's time to commit and follow through.

## 2. Commit

Personal growth and learning deepens when we commit to seeing a collaboration through to completion.

There are times when we're committed to the outcome and willing to endure whatever it takes to make it work. When all is said and done, we need to commit to ourselves to reflect on whether we'd ever do it again. And if the answer is yes, what we would do differently.

Here's a personal example:

While working with a non-profit organization to put on an important fundraising event, I encountered a situation with a volunteer who was becoming increasingly frustrated and demanding. The situation escalated to the point where a staff member was threatened.

The organization's primary goal was to provide a safe work environment for the staff member, even if that meant forfeiting the event – risking serious repercussions for the organization and its community reputation. We needed to figure out how to create a safe work environment, meet the needs of all parties involved, and deliver a stellar event. At stake was a full year of organizing, relationships, sponsorships, and impact on thousands of attendees, as well as losing thousands of dollars in fundraising.

For all the right reasons, I agreed to put myself in the middle of the storm. The volunteer genuinely wanted to contribute and give it their all, and the staff member excelled at creating connections, securing sponsorships, and seeing the big picture and beyond.

This truth helped me stay focused and committed while being yelled at in public, argued with, given ultimatums, and having my inbox flooded with aggressive emails and frustrated voicemails. The situation eventually escalated all the way up to the president and CEO of the national office – I was drained and hitting my own wall.

In the end, we came together and stayed together for the greater good and were successful. My learning from this was my ability to work with people I didn't like or, in some cases, respect. I discovered my ability to lean into my desire to be of service and work with anyone, regardless of how I feel about them personally.

I consciously decided the greater good would be served by overlooking the personal differences and that provided me the motivation. If a similar situation were to arise again, I'd decide to move forward based on the ability to maintain boundaries that allow me to remain authentic to my values. Your primary commitment is to yourself and maintaining your integrity. This comes first – before any commitment you make to others.

Committing to the process is only part of what is necessary to navigate a challenging collaboration. Adequate support for the process is equally important.

## 3. Listen

It's easy to collaborate when everyone agrees, but it's by pushing through our discomfort, overcoming obstacles, and considering different points of view that we discover new insights and a deeper understanding of ourselves and the situation.

We need contrast and discomfort to create solutions. Period.

Humans are hardwired to avoid pain. The avoidance mechanism is individual, but the struggle, challenge, problem, issue, or resistance we face is always a catalyst for clarity.

Some of what we learn will be retrospective. Be patient and don't panic. Collaborating with our intuition, listening, and paying attention to what's being shown to us through situations, experiences, and the people around us is collaboration with our highest self. Be curious, not judgmental. Take a 20,000-foot view of the situation and recognize the context.

Focusing only on the destination or outcome will change the experience and can cause you to lose sight of what's being learned and any strengths you're developing. To truly collaborate, we need to be our own observers and be willing to be real, to ask questions, and to listen.

## 4. Support

The ability to actively listen and hear not only what is being expressed, but also what isn't being said is critical to effective communication.

For us to support each other, it is crucial that we listen – even to things we don't want to hear. This is why it's so important to find your people – those who reflect who you are and support where you want to be. People you can trust and rely on for course correction.

While it may be nice to surround yourself with only like-minded people who lift you up, that's not reality. For most, the committee, board, or project we're part of is something we're doing out of obligation or commitment. There's no picking up our ball and going home when we don't like how things are going.

How do we deal with conflict? Show up, use your voice, leave the work and discussions at the office, and find great friends who let you vent and help you maintain perspective. Surround yourself, personally and professionally, with people who are full of light and positivity, who accept that some days suck and other days shine, and who focus on what is working rather than what is not.

Having a group of like-minded people is not required for successful collaboration. They will, however, keep you sane, champion your ideas, and give you energy to go back to the table to carry on. The community you surround yourself with is incredibly powerful in all aspects of your life. It affects your mood, motivation, and your overall health.

## Achieving True Collaboration and Building Trust

Most collaboration doesn't meet the true definition of the word and that's completely okay. What matters is that the sum of the parts – the connection, energy, and experience that arise from the process to create something bigger. If things go wrong, ask what you can learn – about yourself, others, and the

process. True collaboration occurs when we swallow our pride and we show up naked – real, raw, and vulnerable, and lead with curiosity, not judgment; when we commit to fully participating and learning as we go, while being open to new possibilities.

When you decide, commit, support, and listen, then you are truly collaborating.

Lean into continually showing up with intention, doing your best, and having open conversations. No one votes for you to agree with them all the time; they want you to think for yourself. Own your decisions, support them, and be accountable. This will lead to true collaboration and building trust with your colleagues and the public. [MW](#)

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