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The collaborative push: moving beyond rhetoric and gaining evidence

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Abstract Collaboration has been enacted as a core strategy by both the government and nongovernment sectors to address many of the intractable issues confronting contemporary society. The cult of collaboration has become so pervasive that it is now an elastic term referring generally to any form of 'working together'. The lack of specificity about collaboration and its practice means that it risks being reduced to mere rhetoric without sustained practice or action. Drawing on an extensive data set (qualitative, quantitative) of broadly collaborative endeavours gathered over 10 years in Queensland, Australia, this paper aims to fill out the *black box* of collaboration. Specifically it examines the drivers for collaboration, dominant structures and mechanisms adopted, what has worked and unintended consequences. In particular it investigates the skills and competencies required in an embedded collaborative endeavour within and across organisations. Social network analysis is applied to isolate the structural properties of collaborations over other forms of integration as well as highlighting key roles and tasks. Collaboration is found to be a distinctive form of working together, characterised by intense and interdependent relationships and exchanges, higher levels of cohesion (density) and requiring new ways of behaving, working, managing and leading. These elements are configured into a practice framework. Developing an empirical evidence base for collaboration structure, practice and strategy provides a useful foundation for theory extension.

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The paper concludes that for collaboration, to be successfully employed as a management strategy it must move beyond rhetoric and develop a coherent model for action.

Keywords Collaboration · Networks · Systems · Competencies · Practice framework

1 Introduction

Around the world the public and not-for-profit sectors have been subject to ongoing waves of reform. Several noticeable trends have provided the contextual backdrop for this process of transformation. First, many of the problems confronting contemporary society are too complex or wicked for one person, agency or sector working alone to solve. Increasingly, governments, community based organisations and, increasingly the business sector must work together, share resources, expertise and knowledge to produce public value. Secondly, the nature and scope of public and community sector work has changed substantially due to increased technological advancement, flatter organisational structures and calls for a more innovative and entrepreneurial workforce and demands for improved and more responsive performance. Together, these complex and intersecting trends speak to a changing public sector where relationships and common vision replace traditional hierarchy authority achieving public sector goals and creating public benefit. During this time several trends have emerged, each offering new ways of conceptualising the changes in work and practice. Key among these has been notions of partnership, networks and horizontal governance. While many of these terms remain embedded within the general practice and policy lexicon, few have attained the longevity and sustained popularity as that of collaboration.

Driven initially by western jurisdictions, achieving ‘collaborative advantage’ has now become an international aspiration. Similar to other western nations Australia has long sought to leverage from the perceived benefits of collective action (Tierney 1970; Podger 2000). In reality, however, it has oscillated between processes of centralised control and dispersed horizontal arrangements—‘the centre-periphery mix’ as defined by Brown and Keast (2005). In the 1990s there was a refocus of effort and a range of terms were introduced as metaphors to depict the change in emphasis in governance and service modes. Of this array of terms, which include: co-production, coalitions, networks, partnerships, alliances, and federations, collaboration has been the most persistent across a variety of fields, despite the lack of a strong evidence base. The consistency of this *cult of collaboration* (O’Flynn 2009) was fuelled, in large part, by the imperatives and mandate of central government officials and the stipulations of their funding allocations and in part by strong desire by other sectors to remain central to decision making processes and funding allocations (Keast and Brown 2006).

Some 10 years on from the first push, collaboration remains high on the Australian agenda. This is evident in current policy statements (e.g. Australian Public Service Commission 2009; ACTOSS 2009) and key Prime Ministerial speeches on improved social service delivery provided through collaborative approaches (e.g. 20 April & 15

October, 2009). The not-for-profit sector too has enthusiastically sought to leverage the benefits of collaborative advantage (see for example, Smythe 2008). These issues and their collaborative approach are not unique to the national arena, although it has often taken the lead in setting the collaborative agenda through its use of language and funding regimes. State governments, such as Queensland, have also attempted to address their myriad concerns using the collaborative agenda, albeit with localised variations.

Despite the ensuing popularity of collaboration, as several commentators have highlighted, there remains a gap between theoretical aspirations and effective practice. Failure to bridge this gap and provide a more solid foundation on which to build and assess collaboration makes the concept vulnerable to being little more than rhetoric rather than a constructive alternative practice model (Brown and Keast 2003; Keast et al. 2007a; O'Flynn 2009). Existing evidence has identified that collaboration imposes high resource demand, is hard to achieve and rarely delivers the expected outcomes (Huxham 2003). Since the future is likely to continue as a core operating element, it is timely to interrogate previous collaborative efforts to better and strengthen ongoing and future efforts. Drawing on 10 years of documentation and data this paper unpacks and examines Queensland collaborative endeavours to better understand their composition and core competencies. It also assesses what has worked and why; and distils core collaborative competencies.

The paper proceeds with an overview of collaboration literature and provides a framework for this investigation. A brief history and description of the Queensland integration initiatives, including in particular those defined as collaborative efforts follows to provide the context for the subsequent case studies. The methodology adopts a multi-level multi-modal design to account for the variety of levels of involvement and representation. The key findings distilled from the study are highlighted and discussed, using supporting empirical evidence and literatures. Finally, key collaborative elements are distilled and applied to an extended framework to better guide practitioners and administrators charged with the responsibility of designing, implementing and evaluating collaboration as a mode of service integration.

1.1 Collaboration differentiated

Collaboration has been presented as a new and all encompassing approach to address the myriad of problems and conditions confronting contemporary society. Such a position overlooks both the long history of collaborative practice and existence of a suite of possible integration mechanisms which might equally be applied. Although there is a compendium of terms (Lawson 2002) this review will focus on three most commonly used: cooperation, coordination and collaboration—the 3Cs (Brown and Keast 2003).

1.1.1 Cooperation

The key element of cooperation is the establishment of short term, often informal and largely voluntary relations between people or organisations (Houge 1994; Ciger 2001). In cooperative relations participants may agree to share information, space or referrals, however, organisations remain independent and little effort is made to

establish common goals (Mulford and Rogers 1982; Melaville and Blank 1991). Given that cooperation entails the use or investment of few resources, mainly information sharing, it is also characterised by low levels of relational intensity and risk (Ciger 2001). In this way, cooperative efforts are centred on establishing relationships with others to achieve individual advancement. As Schermerhorn (in Mulford and Rogers 1982: 13) notes, cooperation entails the "deliberate relations between otherwise autonomous organisations for the joint accomplishment of individual operating goals". Thus, it is essentially about taking others into consideration, compromising on some actions without necessarily adjusting individual goals.

1.1.2 Coordination

The term coordination implies the use of mechanisms that more tightly and formally link together different components of a system (Mulford and Rogers 1982; Alter and Hage 1993; Metcalfe 1994). Coordination is argued to involve strategies and tasks that require information sharing as well as joint planning and decision-making, joint policy, projects and funding initiatives (Lawson 2002). Therefore, coordination essentially occurs when there is a need to better align or 'orchestate' people, tasks and systems to achieve a predetermined goal or mission (Litterer 1973; Lawson 2002). As Ovretveit (1993: 40) and others (Litterer 1973; Dunshire 1978) suggest the exercise of coordination places emphasis on bringing together interdependent parts into an ordered relationship to produce a whole. In coordination, organisations remain separate from each other (independent) but jointly contribute to an agreed outcome.

According to this view, coordination is not dependent on the good will of the different actors, but has some force of an objective, a mandate, leading to a more enduring and formalised system of relationships. This may involve adherence to a prearranged plan or formal rules or direction by an independent 'coordinator'. This potential for an external mandate to drive network action locates coordination at the fulcrum between horizontal and vertical integration. Since coordination moves beyond information and sharing to the pooled use of resources and joint planning and operation, it requires a higher level of commitment as well as the agreed loss of some autonomy, increased risk and resources.

1.1.3 Collaboration

Collaboration is usually the most stable and long-term relationship and is characterised by high levels of interdependency and denser relationships (Gray 1989; Ciger 2001). Although all forms of working together require some degree of interdependence, collaborations require reciprocal interdependence. This means that although the actors in a collaboration represent independent entities, they must recognize at the outset that they are dependent on each other in such a way that for the actions of one to be effective they must rely on the actions of another. There is an understanding that "they cannot meet their interests working alone and that they share with others a common problem" (Innes and Booher 1999: 7). This goes beyond just resource

dependence, data needs, common clients or geographic issues, although these may be involved. It involves a need to make a collective commitment to change the way in which they are operating (Mandell 1994).

This means that the members can no longer only make changes at the margins in how they operate. Instead they will be involved in actions requiring major changes in their operations. The risks in collaborative networks are very high. Participants must be willing to develop new ways of thinking and behaving, form new types of relationships and be willing to make changes in existing systems of operation and service delivery.

A key characteristic of a collaborative network is therefore that the purpose is not to develop strategies to solve problems per se but rather to achieve the strategic synergies between participants that will eventually lead to finding innovative solutions. In this way collaborating is not about accomplishing tasks but rather finding new ways for developing new systems and/or designing new institutional arrangements to get tasks accomplished. Tasks are still accomplished in collaborations; however, the focus is on the processes and institutional arrangement as used to accomplish tasks (Keast et al. 2007a, b; Mandell 1994, 2001).

Cooperation, coordination and collaboration are located at different points on a continuum of integrative mechanisms, depending on their level of intensity of the linkages and their degree of formality or informality that governs the integration activities/relationships Keast et al. 2007a, b). Based on this, a proposed integration continuum is presented in Fig. 1 (below).

Thus, while these terms, and others within what Lawson has defined as the compendium of Cs (Lawson 2002), are often used interchangeably (Fine 2001; Szirom et al. 2002) they are increasingly understood to be analytically distinct (Winer and Ray 1994; Himmelman 2002). There has been considerable research directed toward understanding and, therefore, maximising collaboration across a number of industries, sectors and fields of interest: corporate, innovation; education, political and managerial. This paper examines collaboration from a social services perspective.

1.2 The Queensland social services collaboration context

Early Queensland social services provision can best be described as following a pattern of *ad hoc volunteerism* relying on philanthropic bodies and community organisations to provide the necessary social infrastructure. Government played a limited role, funding services to the 'worthy poor'. Commencing in the early twentieth century and culminating in the 1970s, many of the early not-for-profit services came to be anchored more deeply within the state with limited funding directed to the not-for-profit sector (Walsh 1993). While periodic efforts were made by both the government and not-for-profit sectors to coordinate their work and resources; these efforts were largely transitory and superficial (McDonald and Zetlin 2004), with neither having a sufficient relationship to break down barriers and entrenched animosity between sectors (Lyons 2001).

Queensland's social services history is characterised by a shifting mix of voluntary and government sector interaction and integration. Initially the state relied

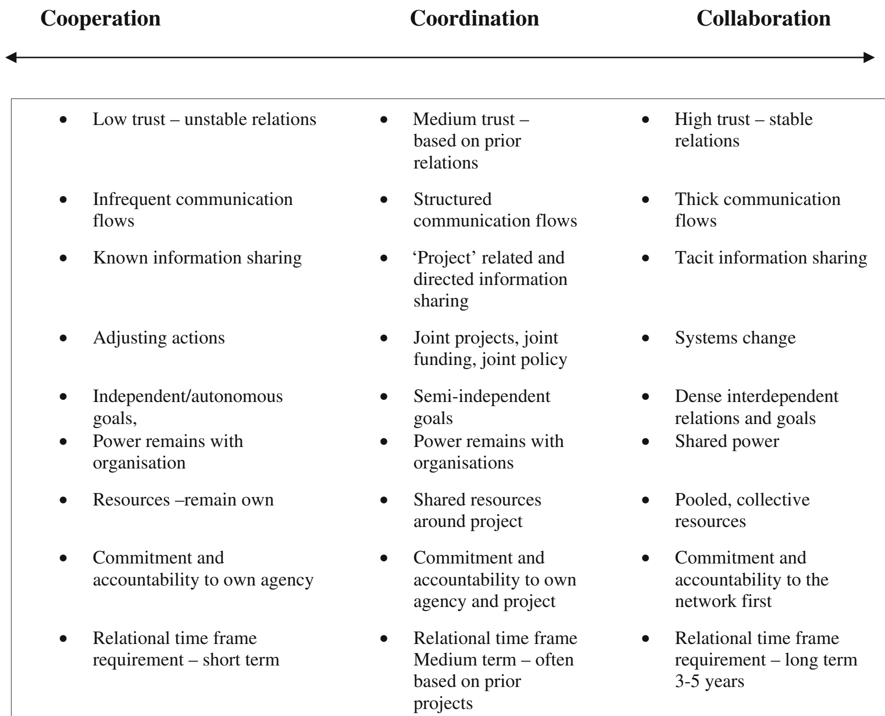

Fig. 1 Relationship continuum

on the voluntary sector to provide the necessary social infrastructure, with government playing a limited, funding role. Over time government assumed a greater responsibility for social services. The not-for-profit sector became a safety-net, supplementing those services government could not or would not deliver. An uneasy pattern of interaction within and across the sectors arose as both tried to meet goals. World-wide fiscal restraints in the 1980s provided an emphasis for a resurgence of interest in integration in this sector, supported in part by commonwealth funding stipulations. The demands for better integrated services were not confined to the social services, with citizen voting patterns signalling an interest in one stop service locations and single points of access for more general information and referrals (Head 1999). As a consequence, Queensland experienced an unprecedented implementation of various whole-of-government policies and strategies. In response, based on international and national developments, the Queensland (Qld) Government initiated the Government Service Delivery (GSD) Project, the major objective of which was to "develop a whole-of-government framework to support more effective, and more integrated service delivery to the government and the community" (GSD 2000: 8). Acknowledging the existence of an array of integration endeavours, the GSD augmented and built on these networks using an overlay of horizontal and vertical connections (GSD 2000). Despite some early successes in advancing its aims of joined-up government through collaborative

processes, the GSD project was dismantled less than 2 years from its commencement, primarily because it had begun to push public sector decision making outside the traditional domain, coinciding with a need for centralised control at election time (Keast and Brown 2002).

Around this time the concepts of networks and collaborations became key terms and preferred integration forms to bring together the expertise and resources of multiple organisations and sectors to address intractable social problems and provide a range of services across geographically dispersed and isolated locations (Reddel 2002). The shift by government beyond its previous reliance on basic consultation and top down direction via 'coordination' to more inclusive and collaborative models of operating was particularly evident in service initiatives such as the Cape York Partnerships and their negotiation tables; Community Renewal projects, Child Safety Zonal Partnerships programs and the Future Directions project which was described as "… networks of individuals, businesses and communities and tackling problems together". The introduction of Chief Executive Officer Forums to coordinate policy formation and service delivery efforts within domains formed on the mandate of the Premier highlighted the political will for this broadly collaborative agenda (O'Farrell 2002).

As well as demands for more seamless services, citizens also wanted a greater voice in the way in which public policies and services were provided. In responding to demands for a more participatory style of government a range of new initiatives including Community Cabinet meetings, Regional Communities Program were instituted aimed at 'giving people who live in Queensland… input into State Government policy development and decision making". Further, a Community Engagement Division (CED) was established within the Department of Premier and Cabinet with the express purpose of building "… productive and trusting relationships between government, business, community and industries" (CED 2001; 3). The formation of the CED also provided a location for the amalgamation of other regional based integration projects such as Community Renewal, Multi-Cultural Affairs and Crime Prevention (CED 2001).

This Queensland experimentation provides many examples from which to examine the context, processes and outcomes of collaborative approaches.

2 Methodology

This paper draws on data generated from a suite of eight initiatives conducted within and across the Queensland government and nongovernment sectors between 2000 and 2010. These initiatives, which were all broadly defined as having a collaborative emphasis, include: The Government Service Delivery Project; Service Integration Project; Chief Executive Officers' Forum; Reconnect Network; Child-Safety Partnerships; and Homelessness Service Systems integration Part 1 (2008). These cases were located at different levels of operation: strategic, administrative/managerial and practice, allowing for variation in perspectives and experiences.

A variety of data collection instruments including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and network linkage surveys were used to construct the

cases. The focus and type of questions remained uniform across all cases, enabling comparative consistency to identify both similarities and differences between programs. The semi-structured interviews tapped into the respondents' experiences and expectations of integration, perceptions of successes and failures, as well as core collaboration competencies. The dynamic interaction made possible through the focus groups extended the insights, allowing for greater disclosure by respondents around key issues and for opinions to be challenged. All interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed, coded separately by two people working independently and categorised to distil key thematic areas. Leximancer was also used as a supplementary textual analysis tool to confirm the manual thematic analysis.

Questionnaires soliciting additional background information on the demographics of the participating organisations, the specific operational characteristics of the initiatives and relationships as well and the perceived barriers and successes were also administered. Embedded within the questionnaire was a network linkage survey which asked respondents to identify those agencies with which they exchanged the following integration variables: information, resources, planning and referrals as well as the level of frequency of exchange and perceived value (Milward and Provan 1998). Social Network Analysis (SNA) methodology was used to measure and statistically analyse the connections between entities. The structural properties of the networks were derived using three core SNA measures: density (level of connectivity); centrality (level of concentration of resources) average path distance (efficiency in navigating the system). These measures are all accepted as feasible proxies to determine integration levels, and thus collaboration. SNA data was analysed using UCINET6. Finally, a comprehensive array of grey documentation (public policy and service reports and evaluations) was examined.

This mix of data gathering instruments and sources allowed for results to be triangulated, with the findings from one tool and respondent group testing and confirming the results of others (Denzin 2006). In total 181 interviews, 17 focus groups and over 200 questionnaires were completed over the 10 year period.

The resulting rich data set provides the basis for the findings and discussions which follow.

3 Findings and discussion

The Queensland context has generated a broad array of initiatives clustered under the 'collaboration' agenda. Table 1 provides a summary of the elements of the main cases under study; their level of operation, drivers and purpose, composition and primary integration mechanisms/level. From this it can be seen that the initiatives range in size, shape and scope from narrow localised service programs, to a wider focus of regional and whole-of-state and whole-of-government initiatives that include community services as well as increasingly for-profit providers. Furthermore, they encompass a range of activities including policy development, program management and shared service delivery.

Table 1 Case study elements

Case	Level of government engagement	Membership
CEO Forum	Strategic	CEOs of State Government human services departments
Government Service Delivery Project	Operational	State Government departments and peak bodies
3 Regional Homelessness Networks	Strategic, operational and service	State and Local government departments and Community Sector
Service Integration Project Goodna	Operational and service	State and Local Government and Community Sector
Child Safety Zonal Partnerships	Strategic	State and Local Government and Community Sector
Reconnect Project	Strategic and service	Federal, State and Local Government and Community Sector

3.1 Collaboration differentiated

There was consensus across cases that either or both an injection of funds or dedicated, purposeful attention resulted in an increased level of interaction and connection between participating agencies, and, further that this increased connection led to improved outcomes. Such a positive view was supported by official evaluations (see for example Woolcock and Boorman 2003; Ryan 2003; Keast et al. 2007b; O'Connell 2008). Descriptive statistics supported respondents' perception of a link between enhanced connections and improved outcomes, with 73 % of respondents across all cases reporting that their initiative resulted in *some* or a *substantial* positive impact, especially for their own organisation's gain and to a slightly lesser degree (67 %) a collective benefit for the community. There were, however, some dissenting voices, with one respondent in particular noting that the "… so called collaborative programs…" had mostly delivered '… feel good' results for participants without noticeable client value (Government: Strategic Level).

However, when the qualitative and SNA data was subjected to deeper interrogation and assessed against the Relationship Continuum (Fig. 1) it was apparent that although all case studies were actively engaged in joined-up, horizontal working at different levels, most were functioning at either the cooperative or coordinative levels. Only three met the specific relational intensity and density required for collaboration: Service Integration Project; Gold Coast Homelessness Network and Child Safety Partnership Network (Central). The SNA data (density and average path distance) identified a significant statistical separation between these three initiatives as compared to the other initiatives measured.[1] A core-periphery structural pattern, characterised by a smaller number of well

[1] SIP: 0.3015; GCHN: 0.1968; CSZPC: 0.2120, where 1 = fully integrated system; remainder varied from 0.17; average path distance measure of between 1. 78 and 2.6 was also indicative the level of disconnection between agencies.

connected agencies, surrounded by a larger, more loosely connected outer-group (Anklam 2007).

As well as being characterised by tighter connections between member agencies across the range of integration variables; the three collaborative network cases also demonstrated a stronger alignment with the collaborative ideal in that they openly acknowledged their interdependency on others to address issues and demonstrated high levels of trust and reciprocity. Further, all three emphasised the desire to reconfigure the service delivery systems in which they operate. As one respondent noted: "At the end of the day if we have not demonstrably changed the way the system operates we will have failed" (SIP, Government Representative: Strategic Level). They also drew upon a mix of structured integration mechanisms that included clarity of goals, regular meetings with clear agenda items, mutually developed and agreed ways of working and procedures as well as strong formal and informal communication processes. On this a GCHN respondent noted:

> We have monthly protocol meetings, multiple communication channels, agreed funding allocations and set procedures…. We don't get it perfect but everyone has the same idea and everyone does the best that they can (Community: Strategic Level).

A similar experience was offered by a SIP Focus Group respondent who noted that through the shared setting of protocols they were able to sustain their collaborative practices (SIP Government Representative: Managerial Level). The coupling of these formalised integration mechanisms with a high level of interpersonal relationships became the 'connective tissue' moulding previously dispersed organisations into a collective whole (Mandell 1988, 1994). When clustered together, these characteristics place the three initiatives at the higher, collaborative end of the integration continuum.

3.1.1 Unpacking terms

Despite the apparent elasticity of the collaboration term, particularly in policy, this review demonstrates that in practice respondents understood it to represent a particular type of 'working together' distinct from, for example, cooperation and coordination:

> I definitely see a difference between the terms. The way I see it, collaboration is that if you and I, or the two people sitting in these chairs, are collaborating, then we are sharing goals and pooling resources. We have a shared understanding of what we are all about and what we are doing together. It is a long term commitment (SIP, Community: Strategic Level).

As the following quotes highlight, the differentiated view of collaboration and collaborative practice was also apparent across sectors and levels of functioning.

> In my mind collaboration is a more active and intensive form of cooperation or coordination. More open, more sharing and more collegiate. I guess you can cooperate and adjust behaviour, coordinate and comply, but collaboration to

> me means more whole hearted activity, involving system change (SIP, Government: Management Level)

> Collaboration is beyond the norm of what we generally do. It is about genuinely pulling people and resources together to work for a common cause. It is out of the box work, not coordination (GHN: Community: Practitioner Level).

Thus, respondents were able to articulate each of the differences between each of the terms, and, in so doing, set out certain expectations of behaviour and process. This differentiation notwithstanding, there remain problems associated with the mix of expectations brought about by a loose application of the term and, in particular, the resulting different sets of expectations.

> As I see it, when government uses the term collaboration what they really mean is coordination and control, not sharing and negotiation (CSZPN, Government: Practitioner Level).

The indiscriminate use of the terms, particularly by government, and the different expectations were seen by respondents as limiting collaboration potential. Worse, it was stated as perpetuating the conflict that has been endemic between the two sectors (Lyons 2001). In this regard the continuing 'cult of collaboration' evident particularly in government documentation and rhetoric has proven to be most problematic.

> It is apparent that when government talks about collaboration they really mean coordination; that they want to work with us but they remain in charge. When we talk about collaboration we are thinking about sharing the power and the decision making. This misuse of language and expectations make us reluctant to become involved. (GCHN, Community: Strategic Level).

3.1.2 The importance of relationships

For all respondents, at the heart of collaboration, indeed, its defining element, are the strong and dense relationships that have evolved and/or been fostered to facilitate the changes required. This shift was articulated as follows:

> We knew from the out start that if we wanted to affect change stronger and better relationships were key. We had to move from distrust and competition and even contention, to build the type of relationship that would lead to improvements in our service outcomes (SIP, Government: Practitioner Level).

> The stronger relationships—the trust and commitment and willingness to push past barriers—have been central to the way we work now (GCHN, Community: Managerial Level).

It is apparent that the relationships went beyond what was facetiously described by a government representative as 'self-serving' and "just cups of tea and a bit of a chat" (Government: Strategic Level). The respondents indicated that they actively worked to secure stronger relationships and build trust and commitment. Furthermore, they

sought to leverage from the relationships to create the critical mass and collaborative strength necessary to make inroads into the presenting problems:

> For me the relationship building has been the main thing. Talking about practical outcomes—we have created a process that allows for, and continues to encourage, that process and those changes to the way we work. We are here to produce improved outcomes and to do that we must work better together (SIP Government: Strategic Level).

Thus, the relationships built were not perceived to be just for social benefit (although many acknowledged this was an outcome), they were seen in fairly instrumental ways as something that could be leveraged to produce more outcomes:

> It's the extra things you do because of these relationships that makes the difference. Once you have established that you can be trusted and that you are contributing and there for the long haul, you can start to use that relationship capital to get outcomes you would have struggled alone with (GCHN, Community: Managerial Level).

Effective relationships are central to successful collaboration. A relationship is a bond or a sense of connectedness between people that enables interactions to take place and work to be completed. Relationships take time and effort to establish, nurture and sustain. There are a number of informal and formal processes that can be drawn upon to strengthen and deepen the essential bonds of trust and confidence necessary for collaborative action. Some useful informal relationship building methods that can impact on members' perceptions about one another include shared meals, organised social events, team and trust building retreats and other activities that focus less on the business of the collaboration and member interests and more on helping members to set power and perception differences aside and see one another as real people. Site visits to other members' organisations can further enhance members' perceptions and understandings of issues confronting them and the limitations of their action/contributions. As well as establishing formal rules, roles and routines to guide collaborative action, other formalised mechanisms such as effective meeting procedures and decision-making processes, including the appointment of skilled facilitators and training programs, have been found to be effective for building relationships.

3.1.3 Drivers and strategic focus

The analysis revealed an array of drivers for integrative effort and the form created. The three identified cases identified that they were motivated more by 'doing the right thing' (SIP, GCHN) rather than for the instrumental reasons of efficiency and economy. A further defining feature of collaborative working, is that those initiatives defined now as 'collaborative' also displayed a more strategic and deliberate approach to their formation and functioning, matching the nature of the problem or intent with the correct level of connection and the right integration mechanisms. On this fit-for-purpose approach it was noted:

> We have learnt over time that not everything needs to be fully joined up and collaborative. Some problems only require some adjustments in the way we work, or a better alignment of our resources. Genuinely collaborative efforts are more risky and require more effort and commitment; so they are best suited to the big ticket social change goals (Community: Strategic Level).

> … it is not either/or, but rather the appropriate match or mix…" (Community Sector) and the "… tools need to change depending on the nature of the issue or problems you are dealing with (Government: Managerial).

Thus, decisions made about adopting a collaborative approach were more considered; moving beyond improvised efforts at working together to a stronger alignment of structures and processes with the purpose. As has frequently been pointed out, there exists an array of possible ways of working together and each one is meritorious for specific purposes. If all that is required is a sharing of information or expertise, then cooperation will be fruitful and sufficient. Likewise, if all that is needed is an alignment of activities across departments or programs so that they will continue to operate as they currently do but in a more systematic fashion, then coordination will be appropriate. If the problems are so difficult to resolve that working "as usual" is not effective, then collaboration may be needed.

3.2 Unpacking collaboration organisational elements

In addition to the above considerations, the in-depth interrogation into the operation of the collaboration initiatives distilled a core set of agreed elements that are different to conventional networked organisational modes. These have been clustered into the following two groups: governance; management and leadership and collective systems and processes.

3.2.1 Governance, management and leadership

Because they must accommodate a disparate membership mix, often across multiple layers of government and community representation and various goals, collaborations (indeed most multi-party arrangements) often generate complex governance processes and organisational structures. Aware of the dangers that such complexity could bring to their operations, two of the collaborative initiatives (SIP and GCHN) negotiated strongly with their membership to develop agreed governance models that clearly set out how the parts related to each other, including the transparency of the decision-making processes that would be used. Gaining "some control over the complexity of their arrangements' and "… enabling government and nongovernment representation" were reported to be important elements in the ongoing strength of the project" (GCHN Community: Managerial Level). The third collaborative (CSZPC) was required to work with the highly multiplex governance structure that arose out of its regional history. However, it did manage to contain some of the relational intricacy by establishing a central working group, representative of each of the member groups that provided oversight and direction. The practical conclusion then is that collaboration governance arrangements should

reflect their operating context. Further, the structures should be loose enough for interaction, but not too loose so that outcomes will be impeded (Swan et al. 2002).

The twin issues of management and leadership as tools to actualise collaboration processes and outcomes were also presented by respondents as highly relevant. The need to "*drive collective action*" forward was a frequently reported management strategy, with respondents indicating the need for this type of management. The SIP project provides an example of such forceful intervention: "driving the project forward, shaping and reshaping to keep it on track and moving toward our goal" (Government: Managerial Level). In all three collaboration cases the importance of having "dedicated and paid managers to run the 'business" (CSZPCS Community: Managerial). It was agreed that these people did more than arrange things; they made sure the right people were at the table and that the right issues were addressed to move the project forward.

Thus, in terms of processes, collaboration management has much to do with stimulating interactions, removing blockages and, where necessary, assuming the role of neutral mediator. This said, there was also evidence of what Huxham (2003: 69) described as collaborative thuggery forcing or manoeuvring people toward the action required, which was justified at least in one case, as being 'pragmatic' (CSZP: Government: Managerial Level).

The overlap between the driving (management) and the facilitating (leadership) roles was also identified.

> It is not just a driver role, it is perhaps more facilitative, and at least initially, nurturing. We have to make sure that these agencies are on board and participating and working together. That might require work at mending some of the bruises [of past interactions] (GCHN, Community: Managerial Level).

Although not applied to the same level, it appears that many existing management skills are readily transferable to collaborations. McGuire (2006) for example, argues that creating structure and rules, managing finances and conflict management practices are required in both conventional and collaborative operating environments. The management challenge in collaborative settings is made more difficult because of the spread of members and the limited degree of control. Members acknowledged this additional management test and stated that it required them to become adept at 'adjusting their behaviours' (Keast and Brown 2006) and to become more strategic in their approach. In SIP, for instance, member participation in a Graduate Certificate in Social Sciences (Inter-Professional Development) a course in inter-professional leadership provided an innovative vehicle for improved relations (Keast 2004).

Leadership, however, was a different factor: requiring an expanded set of skills. The importance of facilitating interaction and building of relations was described as follows: "Relationship building and maintenance have been very important to this network project. It helped us to break down barriers and see points of commonality; this allowed us to go forward" (SIP Government: Managerial Level). The focus of leadership in the three cases cited in this paper was on bringing together and mobilising the full set of actors to a common point for collective action. This role, and the others identified from the case studies, point to a movement beyond

influencing to focusing on the facilitation of relational processes that engender commitment and capacity to change (Vangen and Huxham 2006).

In collaborations the leadership focus is not on individuals per se but rather on the process by which new learning occurs and new ways of behaving emerges. Although there may be one or more influential participants in a collaboration, it is the ability to find and develop a pool of shared meaning through a process of creating "a new collective value" (Innes and Booher 1999, p. 15) or a new whole that gets at the meaning of leadership in collaborations. In this context the concept of leadership is the ability to be a "process catalyst" (Mandell and Keast 2009) and the focus is not on leadership skills per se but rather on understanding the critical importance of focusing on and valuing the processes that lead to building a new whole. Leadership in collaborations thus "produces rather than a solution to a known problem, a new way of framing the situation and developing unanticipated combinations of actions that are qualitatively different from the options on the table at the outset" (Innes and Booher 1999: 12).

3.2.2 Systems and processes

Strategies and mechanisms to clarify expectations and gain common understanding about the collaborative process were employed by each of the collaborations. This was particularly evident in the both SIP and GCHN cases where it was frequently reported that time and effort was invested in establishing a shared language and using this to model the behaviour required as well as regularly checking to see that people were still engaged and committed to the program. An example of this deliberative use of language can be seen in the GCHN where terms of reference were replaced by terms of engagement to set the tone for how people and organisations were expected to work together (Lauring 2008; Bracken 2007). This points, as Taylor (2000: 2) has noted, to the need for a more sophisticated vocabulary language to be developed that guides and re-enforces collaboration behaviour.

The emphasis in these collaborative case examples was on 'doing things differently' and challenging and changing current systems of service delivery. This requires that members move beyond business as usual and adjust or change many of their current systems and processes. The respondents identified a suite of different mechanisms which have been applied to establish and embed different ways of working into their organisational ethos. These include:

- Establishing flexible recruiting and hiring processes that encourage cross-boundary working;
- Require that collaboration behaviour be included in job descriptions, setting goals related to cross-boundary working, and acknowledging those who are engaged in genuine collaborative efforts;
- Changing organisational norms and culture to support collaboration, in particular 'gearing reward systems to collaboration;"
- Introducing arrangements that facilitate the work of the collaboration, for example, open access to funding and resource supports;

- Developing accountability and reporting regimes that reflect shared effort and responsibility, including performance indicators for collaborative behaviour and actions, and the formation of shared revenue streams.

It should be remembered that any collaboration is as complex as the issues it deals with; there are no one-size-fits all model. Successful collaborations rest of the ability of members and administrators to be aware of the key elements of the collaboration and be strategic in their planning and implementation.

Based on these results, it might be argued that collaboration draws on a similar set of processes and practices as do other forms of horizontal working, including cooperation and coordination (for example, 6 2004; Fine 2001; Ling 2002; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Keast 2011). However, the level of intensity of the relationships, coupled with the degree of organisational and operational adjustment demanded, presents as a key point of difference between collaborative endeavours and other integrative endeavours. Further differentiation is found in the higher order personal competencies identified as practiced by collaboration members and especially leaders.

3.2.3 Individual competencies: foundations for change

Alongside the structural or systemic factors identified, respondents stressed that individual competencies were core to successful collaborative practice. Working outside organisational boundaries was argued to "call for some very specific skills and personal attributes" (SIP, Community: Managerial Level). Respondents readily identified a list of these perceived 'out of the box' collaboration skills, including the ability to see and build connections between people and resources, build coalitions, negotiate, energise others, work to multiple goals and political savvy. The following expand on some of these competencies.

> *What comes with collaboration is in fact compromise and the ability to actually negotiate an agreed end point* (SIP, Community: Strategic Level).

Personal attributes were also identified below:

> It's all about getting them all on board—all working to the same page—but yet, acknowledging that they are their own players… You have to be tactful, but firm, flexible but persistent, to keep it all together. You have to make sure that everyone is participating—at least at the level possible and there are occasional 'runs n the board—win/win (GCHN, Community: Practitioner Level).

Goldsmith and Eggers (2004: 165) agree stating that "working across boundaries requires attitudes and behaviours not commonly developed as part of the typical manager's experience". These authors and others (Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Chrislip and Larson 1994; Huxham 2003) went on to distil a list of collaboration skills, including big picture thinking, coaching, mediation, negotiation, risk management, strategic thinking, interpersonal communication and team building.

Despite the perceived importance of these competencies, there was a belief that they are not always highly valued.

3.2.4 Pulling it all together: extended collaboration competencies framework

Based on the findings an expanded competency model for collaboration based on the three inter-related elements: governance, management and leadership; changed systems and processes and individual collaborative competencies is needed. This meshing of elements is depicted below (Table 2). Collectively the three elements serve as a foundation for collaborative practice but must be enacted and fully engaged to transform into effective collaborative outcomes.

4 Conclusion

This study has distilled some distinctive characteristics that differentiate collaboration from other integrative approaches and, by identifying key operating principles, points to ways forward for administrators and network architects. Collaboration has been found to operate at a higher relational orientation and to be focused on reforming or changing service systems. It is therefore argued that an expanded set of relational competencies focused on facilitating and guarding the interaction process is required to allow synergies to be leveraged and collaborative advantage to be gained. The paper notes that although public and not-for-profit managers and administrators can draw upon an extensive literature set, the challenge is in knowing which skills and processes readily transfer from everyday and lower order integration and which require ramping up or refinement to fit the collaborative context. The findings from this study provide some additional insights to assist with this process of refinement.

In addition to the relational focus, other organisational aspects were isolated as important to the achievement of effective and sustained collaborative models. Specifically, collaboration appears to be benefited by altruistic motivations as well as governance arrangements that facilitate membership engagement. Requisite changes to supporting systems and processes, including funding, accountability and

Table 2 Collaboration transformative elements

Organisational	Systems & processes	Personal competencies
Governance	Adjusted	Nurturing
Fit-for-purpose	Performance measurement & evaluation	Group work skills
Management	Accountability process	Negotiation skills (interest based)
Across boundaries	HR approaches	
Driving	Culture of working together	Political savvy
Leadership		Process analysis
Dispersed & process catalyst		Listening, learning & linking

HR regimes, were also highlighted as necessary for collaboration to be sustained. Finally, there is a need for management and leadership styles that both build on and extend conventional practices.

Unquestionably, collaboration is a valuable tool to deliver public and social benefit. However, to meet its potential, we argue that it must be used with greater strategic intent. Collaboration is just one of a suite of ways of working together and it should not be applied to all conditions. Instead, it must be designed and implemented fit-for-purpose. Collaboration demands a comprehensive and deliberate consideration of the problem space and the range of potential solutions available as well as the expanded resources and commitments required.

The paper has demonstrated that collaboration is far from business as usual. Indeed it requires that three transformational elements: organisational, systems and individual competencies come together to provide its foundation. Although providing some useful preliminary insights into collaborative practice and process, the paper's contribution is limited by the small number of cases for comparison. It would be highly instructive to extend the number of cases under review and make use of emergent methodologies such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis to maximize the number of comparisons that can be made across the cases under investigation.

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