GOOD COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IS ABOUT PEOPLE, NOT PAPERWORK

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How many times have you had a team member come into your office, utter the words 'we have a problem' and in seconds, *Project Awesome*, (the new collaborative business improvement project you've personally promoted) becomes *Project Pear Shaped?*

How often have you then had to drop everything, find out what's happened and put contingencies in place to get the project back on track – all of which place unnecessary work pressure on you and the project team? Too many times?

Research[1] indicates that a significant number of collaborative change projects tend to fail to achieve expected benefits. This includes shared service projects across different organisations.

In the collaborative context, you have to bring together different teams who have different cultures, objectives, delivery timetables, staff skillsets, 'shifting views, positions and allegiances' and persuade them to work in harmony.

It's a risky business and helps to illustrate why the NAO has found that, since 2004, many public sector shared services in the UK have not delivered value for money[2].

What are the problems in collaborative change projects?

A key problem, that causes staff to resist change and put all sorts of defence mechanisms in place to keep the status quo, is because they do not have a clear vision of how they will benefit when the change is finished.

Shared services are essentially about duplication of effort and that may mean job losses.

For leadership, there is a different issue. They tend to get really excited about delivering a new project and want to see rapid progress being made.

Often the leadership in partners, distant from the project, lament *'Why are we wasting time putting project plans and risk registers together? We've got to get on!'*.

Then, part way through the project – when it's too late to do anything about things – they are the first to complain about the problems when they hit.

The lesson I have learned is that it is essential to take time out, at the start of a collaborative project, to make the collaborative governance happen in a very human way.

This aptly describes what the governance of a collaborative project is about. It's about people - the staff to be affected and the leadership's appetite for change.

People not paperwork...

Don't get me wrong, it is essential for good goverance that structure and decision-making processes are agreed between the partners, recorded and published.

But, more than that, it requires some very human activity around collaborative goverance and here are my suggestions...

1. I find it is best to initially focus on the partners' leadership, getting them to support your project. Not knowing how they are going to react is one of the biggest risks to be overcome.

2. You can never spend enough time talking to them (either on a 1:1 basis or at a workshop gathering). Ensure they fully understand, identify with, and agree what the project outcome will be.

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[1] The figure of between 50-70% of private sector collaborations, mergers and acquisitions is quoted in a HEFCE 2011 paper.
[2] NAO (2012)

3. It is especially helpful if you understand the problems the leadership are grappling with, and make it clear how the shared service working can help solve these. It does no harm to casually drop into the conversation how they can personally benefit.

4. Ask for their help, listen to their views and demonstrate how they have influenced the project, and make them feel involved.

5. Another key activity, is to keep communicating so everyone is clear on what's happening (to minimise the impact of any inaccurate rumours !!!). Keep repeating what you've communicated in lots of eye catching ways, as everyone picks up information differently.

6. It's also important to make sure the project delivers some quick easy wins early on, so you can publically demonstrate progress and keep on acknowledging the contribution everyone is making. Leadership and staff enjoy being associated with success.

7. The other critical thing is to have proper project management mechanisms in place to capture information in an easy to understand structured way, and to monitor how well the project is being delivered. There are many different PM methodologies available, each with different approaches and templates. This can become very confusing.

You have to have a plan, to have a project...

I tend to find that, in most circumstances, the following basic project management tools do the trick:

- **Project Plan** which sets out what the project is, why we are doing it, tasks to be delivered, by whom and by when

- **Risk Register** which identifies, in advance, the potential problems you might face and how you can overcome them

- **Issues Log** which records the issues which arise as the project progresses, so you can keep tabs that actions agreed to address such issues are being implemented

In this context, you might also want to consider incorporating the following academically evidenced risks and issues into your risk and issues analysis :

1. *Cannot establish & maintain satisfactory partnerships*

2. *Organisations don't want to lose control & don't want to pass critical services over to third parties*

3. *Cannot get consensus on services to be provided*

4. *Organisations operate to different processes & standards*

Listening, influencing, negotiating and trading are all words I would associate with collaborative governance.

5. *Cannot get partnership investment*

6. *Partners reluctant to have data stored elsewhere*

7. *Incur problems when partners are trying to run e-Procurements (who is letting contract?)*

8. *Changes in government policy hinder project delivery*

9. *Members of the public object to any changes being proposed*

10. *Organisations operate different IT systems which are not compatible*

11. *Different legal structure/business operating models prevent creation of single entity*

12. *Proposed changes do not support each organisation's environmental commitments*

13. *Cannot obtain agreement on how TUPE, VAT & Data Protection arrangements should be handled*

14. *Partners have insufficient time to devote to the project*

15. *Senior management within each organisation do not demonstrate commitment to the project*

In resolving these problems, I have found traditional leadership styles, where position power is used to effect change, do not work as you are dealing with staff/leaders who are outside your sphere of management.

A more participative approach, where you act as a facilitator, helping those involved jointly solve problems, works much better.

Behind the scenes diplomatic talking is also needed to better understand individual concerns and find solutions which are acceptable to all parties.

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It's a tricky business best done face to face – email will not do. Try a chat over a coffee.