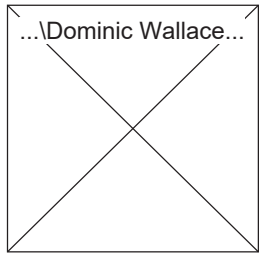


EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS: THE GLUE OF DEVOLUTION



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Tim Smith, SS(PRAC) and I have developed a 'Collaborative Communications' toolkit and supporting seminar, to help Comms and Project Managers who are new to Devolution and similar multi-partner, multi-culture, collaborative projects. The starting point, was a review some of the basic principles that need to underpin a Comms Manager's journey.

What is the Comms Manager's challenge?

The Chancellor continues to champion austerity in the UK public sector with an ambition to save £20bn by 2020.

A key outcome is the collaborative transformation of the silos, both within and between public sectors. For example:

- police, fire and ambulances sharing buildings, vehicles, vehicle maintenance centres, contact centres and staff
- health and social care re-designing the way they work to share budgets and clients
- GP practices huddling together to procure the newest patient technology and services, which they cannot afford on their own
- local government sharing services and saving almost £500m in the process!

Added into this mix is the devolution agenda. An example is the DevoManc devolution, including £6bn of health budget, given to councils in the North West in return for adopting a mayoral system.

Collaborative working is 75% about the relationships and only 25% about the deal...

SSA's seven toolkits are now in use in over 500 public sector organisations. From the MOD to the PSTN, from CCGs to FE colleges, Police & Fire to Housing and Social Care, and in over 200 unitary, county and district councils.

¹ LGA (2015) Shared Services Map



The message is clear from the practitioners applying the toolkits: *collaborative working is about relationships, not the deal on the table.*

It is very simple. If there is no relationship between the partners, there is no deal.

This message is evidenced in the academic papers that have been written by students on the Postgraduate Certificate in Collaborative Transformation² that are underpinned by the 200 plus SSA tools, templates and techniques.

...and effective relationships depend on good communications

Building these effective relationships to deliver "the deal" depends on effective collaborative communications. Communications form the glue that will hold the relationships together in good and bad times.

SSA has reviewed a set of NAO³ and other reports on why UK public sector collaborative working has failed to deliver on the promise of the business cases so many times. One of the key reasons was the lack of communications at leadership and governance levels.

For example:

- 'Far too many public service systems 'assess rather than understand; transact rather than build relationships;'⁴
- 'The project board did not create a clear early view of what sharing services would look like...'⁵

² Canterbury Christ Church University

³ National Audit Office

⁴ Steve Wyler (2014) Chief Executive, Locality

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Tracking back to how these relationship problems came about, it is clear that there was a lack of, or even the absence of, well-resourced communications teams to support the leadership and key stakeholders.

- 'What became clear is that partnership depends on the partners having similar incentives and an understanding of each partner's requirements.'⁶

Tracking back to how these relationship problems came about, it is clear that there was a lack of, or even the absence of, well-resourced communication teams to support the leadership and key stakeholders.

A properly resourced comms team will help leaders to develop the vision, constantly remind all involved of the ambitions of the project and sustain high levels of motivation to deliver the deal.

In the reports on the failed collaborations, the default appears to have been that the leadership continued to spend almost all their time focusing on their silo operations. They only focused on the collaboration when something went wrong, or there was a formal meeting to discuss the project.

A staggering statistic is that, 'Research suggests that in the private sector between 50-75% of mergers [so read collaborations too] will not achieve expected benefits for shareholders in terms of increased value and efficiency gains. Up to fifty per cent of alliances and joint ventures in the private sector also fail.'⁷

The need to address the problem of failure of leadership in collaborative working was flagged up many years ago, but is still to happen on the frontline.

In their seminal research into the leadership of mergers, collaborations and joint ventures, Feldman & Spratt (1999) write that in merger and shared service working: *Executives... have a*

⁵ NAO RCUK review

⁶ Somerset County Council (2014) *Update on Lessons Learnt from the Experience of the South West One Contract*

⁷ HEFCE, NAO, Audit Commission, AoC

*knack for falling prey to their own hype and promotion. Implementation is simply a detail and shareholder value is just around the corner. This is quite simply delusional thinking.'*⁸

The point being that there is a lack of communication between the executives, staff and stakeholders. It is just assumed because leaders 'say it's so' then it will happen.

Why bother communicating in multi-partner, multi-culture, multi-million-pound change management programmes?

For the £20bn to be saved by the Chancellor, the public sector shared services, collaborative transformations and mergers required, are multi-partner, multi-culture, multi-million pound change management programmes.

Collaborative transformations need to be properly resourced and led, not by the desire to escape from burning platforms, but by the **burning desire** by the leadership, stakeholders and staff to deliver a new, better, lower-cost service to the recipients of the transformed services.

That burning desire is nurtured and sustained as the driver of the project by effective communications across all beneficiaries.

Cameron & Green's book *Making Sense of Change Management*⁹ is a key MBA text in many universities.

It offers five learning points for mergers and collaborations:

1. Communicate constantly
2. Get the structure right
3. Tackle the cultural issues

⁸ Feldman, ML. & Spratt, MF (1999) *Five Frogs On A Log*.

⁹ Cameron, E. & Green M. (2012) *Making Sense of Change Management*.

Collaborative working requires a plan and resources, yet in many projects there are neither. There may be a few “state of the project” reports, but that is only one element of the comms story.

4. Keep customers on board
5. Use a clear overall process

Each of those has its foundations in effective communications gluing the project together.

A clearly structured communications plan is very important to deliver a collaborative transformation. Erratic, or “fire fighting” communications are ineffective. ‘Tell them, tell them again and tell them till they’re fed up’ is the mantra in collaborative working.

The vision needs to be cast, and then continuously recast in the different languages and cultures of the organisations in the partnership.

Get the structure right - and cement it in place with effective communications to keep it upright. The alternative is that people forget that there is a structure, or don’t buy into it, and create alternative structures. Then the collaboration finds itself having the ‘battle of the structures’ where ‘mine is better than yours’.

Tackling the cultural issues is overcome by communication of the “burning desire” that will be the outcome of the collaboration.

For example, in Canada they inspired the delivery of a major project on reducing suicide in men under the age of 25, across the different culture of various public centre agencies with a simple vision:

“If reducing the number of suicides in men under the age of 25 to zero is not your shared ambition, then how many deaths are acceptable to you?”

Communicating the burning desire continuously helped to cement and circumnavigate many of the cultural and turf-war issues, that existed between the organisations in the mental health, police and housing services.

Keeping the customers on board comes back to effective communications too.

In the word *effective* is buried the intimation that the communications have to be pro-active, not re-active and have a positive impact.

That requires a plan and resources, yet in many projects there are neither. There may be a few “state of the project” reports, but that is only one element of the communications story.

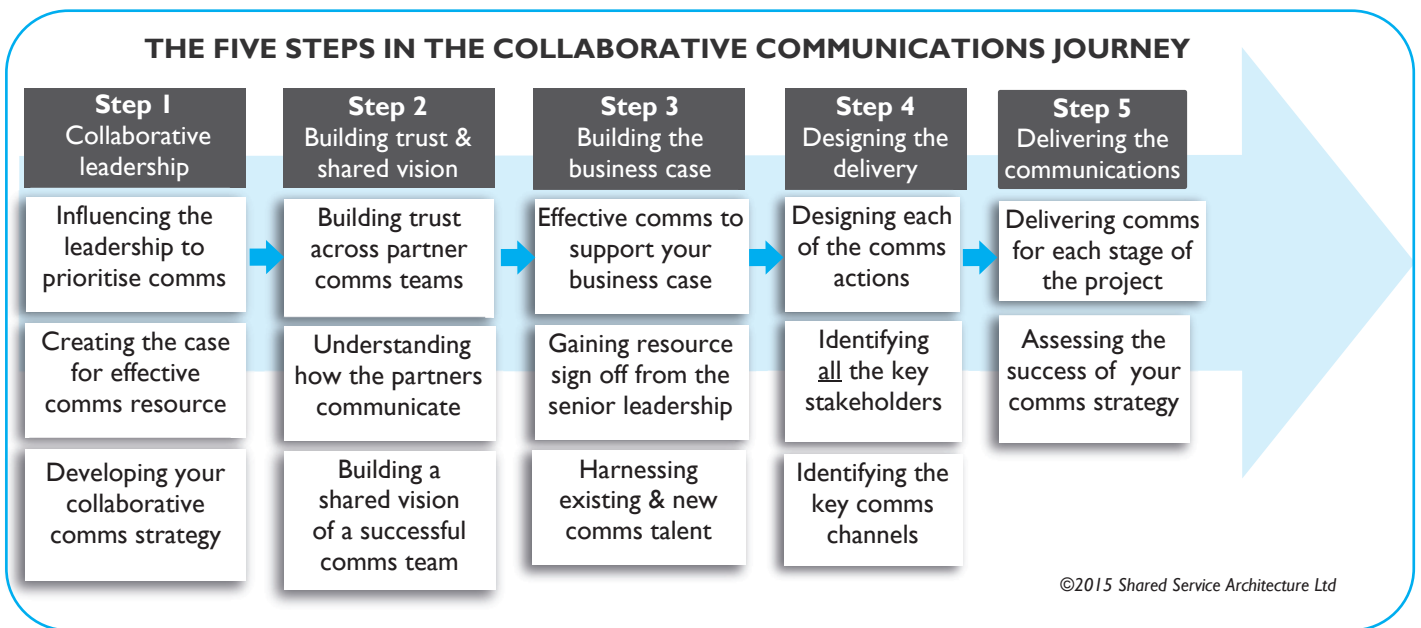
For example, it may be an old-fashioned, non-technology-led idea, but getting the key leaders in a room *face-to-face* to design and work on solutions to deliver the collaborative transformation is still one of the most effective ways of gluing the relationships together.

If the leadership have “skin in the game” then they will focus more regularly on the project.

Effective, technology-powered communications can be used to fill the gap between those face-to-face encounters and engage other stakeholders, sustaining the relationship and the pace of change.



If the leadership have “skin in the game” then they will focus more regularly on the project.



Your role is to create and deliver a very clear set of communications that keeps the eyes of the leadership and project managers clearly on the prize of a new, better, lower-cost way of delivering for the benefit of the citizen, resident, business, student, or patient.

You can read more about the key methodologies for engaging the other stakeholders across communities in the *SSA Collaborative Leadership Across Communities Toolkit*¹⁰.

Using a clear overall process for delivering the change is very important.

This is a key role for the communications team - to create and deliver a very clear set of communications that keeps the eyes of the leadership and project managers clearly on the prize of a new, better, lower-cost way of delivering for the benefit of the citizen, resident, business, student, or patient.

The role of the comms team is to endlessly articulate the burning desire, even for back office systems such as ICT and payments, because the public sector is in the people business.

For example, working with a large central government department who make payment of invoices to thousands of small business suppliers, an SSA tutor helped them paint a picture of the damage to employees and their families if payment was delayed and businesses went bust.

Up until then the focus had been on the creation of new ICT systems and discussion had drawn to a halt because of disputes between partners over their current ways of working. Avoiding hurting the employees of the businesses being paid, became one of a number of “burning desire” messages that cut through the dispute.

¹⁰ Part of the Collaborative Leadership seminar programme

What is the role of a comms manager and comms team in public sector collaborative working?

The role is simple to state, but complex to deliver without resource and leadership support.

- To get involved in the project as early as possible and put in place a comms programme to support each stage of the collaboration journey shown above.
- To help the leadership articulate the benefits of the project in terms of the burning desire of the partners to build a new, better, lower-cost way of delivering the service to the end users - whether staff in the partner organisations, or citizens, residents, patients, students, businesses and others.
- To inspire the leadership to fund and keep the comms activity well-resourced and support the project until the new way of working is embedded, the cultural issues are resolved, measurable benefits have been identified and the new, better, lower-cost service has become business as usual.

The *SSA Collaborative Communications Seminar* will support you in that complex journey. It will provide a map and a set of steps that will enable you to support the leadership and project leads in their work.