Optimal Collaboration: A Three-Tiered Process

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Executive Summary

Pressing global problems require optimal methods of collaboration to ensure that societies move toward progress and not chaos. At present, however, a breakdown in collaboration has materialized in the form of political polarization, social unrest, governmental impasse, and the fraying of democratic institutions. In this paper, I propose three measures of successful collaboration, highlight major barriers to its achievement, and recommend a three-tiered model to optimize the process.

At this extraordinary time of political, economic, and social transformation, the world's most contentious issues require collaboration—whether to curb climate change, negotiate a trade deal, or revise the social contract between government and civil society. But current efforts to work together on issues of important societal concern have fallen short, as evidenced by the increasing hazards of climate change, the detrimental impact of interstate trade wars, and on-going partisan divides that have led to legislative impasse and, in some cases, protest and violence. On the surface, these divides are nothing new: conflict is intrinsic to the human condition. But advances in the field of negotiation offer innovative approaches to societal collaboration that can help people reach greater levels of integration. Drawing on research in the field of negotiation, I highlight three measures of successful collaboration, describe major barriers to joint work, and offer a three-tiered approach to optimize collaboration.

Measuring Success

Collaboration is a process by which stakeholders cooperate to address a shared challenge, ranging from completing a joint project to negotiating an international treaty. Each party usually has an explicit or implicit motivation to work together—but the process is not

conflict-free; no two individuals' interests and personalities will mesh with full precision. Thus, stakeholders must create maximal value while building good relations.

The success of collaboration can be measured on a few related dimensions:

1. *Process efficiency*: Is the process productive relative to the amount of time and effort exerted, or are parties wasting time, effort, or resources?
2. *Outcome value:* To what degree does the outcome satisfy the interests and concerns of each party?
3. *Relationship quality:* To what extent can parties discuss differences productively now and into the future? Is there a supportive atmosphere conducive to innovation, or do parties fear suggesting good ideas and criticizing bad ones?

These three measures are not equally important in every collaboration; the purpose of the interaction matters. For example, as a couple jointly decides which restaurant to go to for their weekly "date night," the quality of their relationship may take priority over the outcome value (i.e., which eatery they choose). But on the spouse's birthday, the outcome value may gain in importance. In international negotiations, too, the importance of these measures varies. A state leader may care deeply about relations with foreign partners, but when she has only one month left in office, she may prioritize execution of policy objectives (outcome value) over cultivation of affiliations (relationship quality).

Obstacles

Several barriers hinder the success of collaboration. First, stakeholders may lack *political will* to collaborate or to commit to a particular outcome; the incentives for not collaborating outweigh the benefits of working together. Second, parties may lack *negotiation skills* such as the ability to listen to alternative views, to discover shared and diverging interests, and to invent options for mutual gain, leading to an inefficient process and a non-optimal outcome. Third, parties may adopt an *adversarial mindset* that views collaboration as a zero-sum competition, producing an efficient process but a value-inferior outcome and damaged relations.

But even when stakeholders possess political will, are equipped with solid negotiation skills, and adopt a cooperative mindset, why do many collaborations *still* produce results that are inefficient, ineffective, and relationally destructive? Too often, parties suffer from what I call *rational myopia*, focusing exclusively on joint problem solving while neglecting to tend to the deeper emotional and identity-based concerns affecting the parties and the conflict. They get 'right down to business' and discuss how to resolve major substantive issues such as land division or financial allocation—but neglect to attend to relational tensions that can block free-flowing discussion and impede trust, information sharing, camaraderie, and innovation. If we harbor resentment toward a fellow stakeholder, our mind naturally focuses on that sentiment and on how to respond to the perceived injustice. Attention is a limited resource, and grudges and grievances reduce the efficiency of the process, the value of the outcome, and the quality of the relationship.

Reaching Success: The Three Tiers of Collaboration

Optimal collaboration requires us to attend to three levels of human interaction: rationality, emotionality, and identity. By staying aware of these layers, we can address them all to some extent and decide which are most important to focus on during a crisis or other critical moment.

The first tier of collaboration is rationality, in which we draw on logic and systematic analysis to devise solutions to challenges. In short, we rationally problem solve, looking beneath opposing positions for underlying interests from which to invent options for mutual gain (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011; Lax & Sebenius, 1986; Mnookin, Peppet, & Tulumello, 2000). While stakeholders' positions may be at loggerheads, underlying interests typically are much more compatible. Thus, individuals skilled in interest-based negotiation tend to reach better outcomes than negotiators who use adversarial methods (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011; Schneider, 2002). Additionally, by examining the reasons a stakeholder is politically resistant to collaboration, we can reframe the process to highlight benefits of their participation and drawbacks of their absence.

The second tier of collaboration is emotionality, which brings visceral intensity to the interaction. Human beings are in a state of "perpetual emotion" (Shapiro, 2001) – we are always feeling *something*—and those reactions can be particularly vibrant when we are personally invested in the focal issues. Collaboration can be exciting, annoying, frustrating, and aggravating, and our perceived treatment in that process can stimulate personal pride, joy, shame, anger, and disgust. Dealing with emotions is complex. But while there are hundreds of possible shades of emotion with which to contend, Roger Fisher and I propose that negotiators address a smaller set of *core concerns*–basic human motivations—that stimulate many of those sentiments (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006). Our research illuminates five core concerns that tend to arise in negotiation: appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status, and role. If a core concern is met, we feel positive emotions and are more inclined to work together; if it is unmet, we tend to feel distressed and are less prone to cooperate. Thus, stakeholders who address the core concerns can counteract the adversarial mindset and increase the efficacy of collaboration.

The third tier of collaboration involves identity, the spectrum of characteristics that define who we are and for what we stand (Shapiro, 2017). Do we feel cast aside based on gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality? Do other stakeholders' values seem incompatible with ours? While the rational mind responds to reason and the emotional system responds to empathy, identity responds to valued recognition. Without feeling appreciated for who we are and what we bring to the table, the entrepreneurial spirit of collaboration quickly fades.

Dealing with these three tiers of collaboration can help us reach an optimal outcome. These layers are a menu of options from which to decide where we should focus our attention during the interactive process. Consider a metaphor. Firefighters' lives depend on distinguishing between several classes of fires: If they stream water onto a burning wooden house, the fire will extinguish, but should they do the same on a gasoline blaze, the flames will intensify (Mitrokostas, 2018). Collaboration operates under a similar principle. We must consider what level to focus on–rational, emotional, or identity—in order to put out the fires of destructive conflict and boost the efficiency of our dealings. For example,

diplomats who have a constructive working relationship may jump right into rational problem solving, whereas parties who feel offended may be better advised to work through their grievances before doing so. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer specific guidance to address each tier of collaboration, my colleagues and I have written several books with that aim in mind (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011; Fisher & Shapiro, 2006; Shapiro, 2017).

In Sum

Resolving the world's most pressing problems requires collaboration—yet a variety of obstacles stand in the way, including lack of political will, poor negotiation skills, an adversarial mindset, and rational myopia. By attending to the three tiers of collaboration – rationality, emotionality, and identity—stakeholders can overcome these obstacles. At the rational level, we can gain skill in interest-based negotiation and draw on its principles to promote mutual gains and overcome the political will problem. At the emotional level, we can address each other's core concerns to stimulate positive emotions and combat the adversarial mindset. And at the level of identity, we can appreciate each other's defining characteristics to embolden joint work, discover mutual gains, and promote ideas that can improve the state of the world.

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The founder, director, and active mediator in the Harvard International Negotiation Program, Daniel Shapiro teaches a highly evaluated course on negotiation at Harvard College; instructs psychology interns at Harvard Medical School/McLean Hospital; and leads executive education sessions at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, Harvard Kennedy School, and Harvard Medical School/McLean Hospital. He also has served on the faculty at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, and at the Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Named one of the top 15 professors at Harvard University, Shapiro specializes in practice-based research—building theory and testing it in real-world contexts. He has launched successful

conflict resolution initiatives in the Middle East, Europe, and East Asia, and for three years chaired the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Conflict Resolution. Focusing extensively on the emotional and identity-based dimensions of negotiation and conflict resolution, Shapiro led the initiative to create the world's first Global Curriculum on Conflict Management for senior policymakers as well as a conflict management curriculum that now reaches one million youth across more than 20 countries. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the American Psychological Association's Early Career Award and the Cloke-Millen Peacemaker of the Year Award. In May of 2019, Shapiro was named Harvard's *Joseph R. Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching*, the oldest of the teaching awards given out by the Undergraduate Council.

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