

Exploring Collaborative Advantage: A Comprehensive Review and Synthesis of Research on Collaboration

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The paper aimed to identify three influential factors that will impact collaborative performance. The first conceptualization of collaboration is discussed to illustrate the nature of collaboration. In the further examination, three factors of collaboration capability, timing of collaboration and relationship structure are discussed that, if manipulated well, contribute to collaborative advantage. In the end of the paper, implications of this research are discussed briefly.

Keywords: collaboration, collaborative advantage, collaborative inertia, collaboration capability

INTRODUCTION

‘Strategic alliance’, ‘joint venture’, ‘public-private partnership’, ‘coordinated service delivery’, ‘community development’ are all terms now in common usage. Examples of collaboration have been emerging in virtually every sector of society—business, government, labor, and communities. A wide review of research articles and case studies shows that three critical issues of collaboration are addressed that are essential for understanding collaborative alliances and particularly important for additional theorizing. First, what are the preconditions that give rise to collaborative alliances? What factors (e.g., motivations of individual organizations or environmental stimulants) cause organizations to participate in some form of collaboration? Second, what exactly is collaboration, and how does it occur? What is the process by which stakeholders interact to accomplish their objectives? Third, what are the expected outcomes when organizations collaborate? Are some special results impossible to achieve through other types of actions? Similarly, what constitutes successful collaboration? Are specific elements associated with the success or failure of a collaborative alliance?

This paper is organized to focus on the third issue by identifying some success factors that may serve as the analytic framework of predictors for potential collaborative relationship, and as the diagnostic tool of estimators for existent collaborative relationship. Based on the review of collaborative relationship from a variety of theoretical perspectives, the paper tries to provide insight into how a comprehensive theory of collaboration might be shaped and the questions such a theory would need to address and thus help establish foundations for recognizing what else need to be done in the near future.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COLLABORATION

Definitions are crucial to theory building. A general theory of collaboration must begin with a definition of the phenomena that encompasses all observable forms and excludes irrelevant issues. It is assumed that a commonly accepted definition of collaboration existed. However, a broad review presents a welter of definitions, each with something to offer and none being entirely satisfactory (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020).

Gray (1989) defines collaboration as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.” Based on this definition, a collaborative alliance can be described as an interorganizational effort to address problems too complex and too protracted to be resolved by unilateral organizational action. Collaboration refers to the process; collaborative alliances are the forms (Gray & Purdy, 2018). Together these concepts provide a foundation for moving toward answering the questions of why, how, and with what consequences organizations participate in multiparty problem solving. Sharfman, Gray and Yan (1991) further develop the definition as “a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain”. Robert and Bradley (1991), borrowing some elements from Gray and adding others, define collaboration as an interactive process with a shared transmutational purpose and characterized by explicit voluntary membership, joint decision-making, agreed-upon rules, and a temporary structure. Selsky (1991) does not define collaboration specifically, but defines the “development” of a collaborative venture as “a medium-to long term systemic capacity for addressing shared problems or for achieving shared goals at the interorganizational and community levels”. Fleisher (1991) defines the specific type of collaborative alliance he addresses, the federation, as “a form of inter-organizational relationship with a unique administrative body or coordinating agency called a federation management organization.” Chris Huxham (1996) addresses collaboration from the perspective of collaborative advantage. She believes that collaborative advantage is concerned with the creation of synergy between collaborating organizations. And the achievement of collaborative advantage is illustrated when something unusually creative say an objective is produced that no one organization could have produced on its own and when each organization, through the collaboration, is able to achieve its own objectives better than it could alone (Geleilate, Parente, & Talay, 2021). The idea captures the synergy argument: to gain real advantage from collaboration, something that could not have been achieved by any of the organizations acting alone has to be achieved. This concept provides a useful “guiding light” for collaboration.

Gray and Wood (1991) points out that at least five elements should be addressed in the definition, and a definition of collaboration is supposed to answer the following: Who is doing what, with what means, toward which ends? One element of shared institutions/rules/norms should be implied across them. Then a revised and thus broadened definition is created: Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain (Gray & Wood, 1991).

Confusion in interpreting ‘collaboration’ arises from two directions. On the one hand, there are multiple interpretations of the term ‘collaboration’ itself. On the other hand, a mass of related terminology is used to describe interorganizational structures that are the same or similar to collaboration. Defining a phenomenon gives us guidelines for recognizing it when it occurs and distinguishing it from other observable phenomena. So based on the definitions, concepts clarification among many related terminologies can be addressed here. We focus on the distinction between collaboration and the most frequently interchangeably used terminologies of co-operation and coordination. According to Chris Huxham (1996), collaboration is often used to describe the situation when participants work together to pursue a meta-mission while also pursuing their individual missions; co-operation is used when organizations interact only so that each may achieve its own mission better; and co-ordination is used to describe situations where there may be no direct interaction between organizations, but where an organization aims to ensure that its own activities take into accounts those of others. What is worth noting is that while such distinctions have value in principle, there seems to be little consensus in the field about how the terms are used either in theory or practice, so they do not provide a consistent framework.

Despite the variety of the definition of collaboration, we still can identify some common elements related to collaboration. Say, collaboration is an interactive process. The participating members must explicitly agree on the rules and norms governing their interactive process. And collaboration requires that the participants orient their processes, decisions, and actions toward issues related to the problem domain that brought them together. Since collaboration is to make different organizations work toward a common end, some issues like match and compatibility become important matters to ensure successful and sustainable collaboration. Hence the comparative analysis about the collaborative members should be conducted to identify whether the collaborative members embrace the abilities or characteristics that are compatible or complementary among one another.

SEARCH FOR COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE

So far, collaboration theory focuses on two counter-posed concepts that relate to the benefits of, and difficulties with collaborative working. The two key concepts are collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia, respectively. Collaborative advantage (Huxham & Vangen, 2004) relates to the desired synergistic outcome of collaborative activity, suggesting that advantage is gained through collaboration when something is achieved that could not have been achieved by any organization acting alone. Collaborative inertia (Huxham & Vangen, 2004) relates to the often-pertaining actual outcome, in which the collaboration makes only hard-fought or negligible progress. The two concepts can be positioned on a continuum anchored at one end by collaborative advantage and at the other by collaborative inertia.

In seeking to understand the reasons for collaborative inertia or identify success factors leading to collaborative advantage, the collaboration theory aims to provide insight into the complexities that must be managed by those aiming for collaborative advantage in practice. So far extensive theoretical research investigates the individual factors that may lead to collaborative inertia or constitute potential threats to collaborative advantage. Different theoretical perspectives are provided on issues such as collaborative aims, trust and power relationships, collaborative structures, leadership, autonomy and accountability and so on (Huxham, 1993a; Eden & Huxham, 2001; Huxham & Vangen, 2000, 2004; Vangen, 2003; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Gray (1985) and Harrigan and Newman (1990) suggest that successful collaboration is more likely to be achieved when some factors are present. Based on the above work, Huxham (1993b) provides a checklist of such factors to address the necessary conditions for effective collaboration.

However, existent collaboration research, case studies or purely theoretical analysis papers, addresses separately only one or two factors that may be related to collaboration performance and fails to integrate all influential factors into one analytic framework to examine the collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia (Fawcett, Fawcett, Knemeyer, Brockhaus, & Webb, 2021). Thus only scattered pictures can be got about what may lead to collaborative advantage or what may serve as potential threat to collaborative performance. In addition, most research about the influence factor analysis centers at the intra-organizational level, which is to analyze, after the collaboration has already been made, how to build trust among members, how to enact leadership within the collaboration, or how to deal with power control, etc.. But what may be more practically significant is identifying factors that can serve as predictors for potential collaborative relationship before the collaboration is virtually made, and estimators for existent collaborative relationship when collaboration has been made.

Collaboration Capability

As mentioned above, match and compatibility are two important characteristics for effective collaboration. Potential collaborative members should be evaluated in advance whether or not they embrace the abilities or characteristics that are compatible or complementary to one another. So detailed studies are needed of what may constitute a collaboration capability for an organization that intends to involve or has already involved in a collaborative relationship. Such study should be directed to put eyes on the respective characteristics of individual organizations, and conduct comparative analysis on the compatibility and matching characteristics of collaborative members. Unfortunately such researches are virtually very few in terms of the topic of collaboration. Here, collaboration capability is coined to refer to a kind of property

that collaborative organizations hold to approach or access collaborative advantage and avoid collaborative inertia. Collaboration capability would rest upon how, effectively the collaborative organizations are able to capture, share, and disseminate the collaboration management know-how associated with individual competitive advantages (Ryan-Charleton, & Galavan, 2024). Gray (1989) gives a list of five capabilities that we as a global society need to develop to collaborate effectively; Huxham (1993a) defines collaboration capability as the capacity and readiness of an organization to collaborate. However, regrettably, both Gray and Huxham fail to explore further specific dimensions or elements that constitute the collaboration capability. While we know that collaboration is important in a sense, we still lack knowledge with regard to what is involved in developing a collaboration capability, what collaborative organizations with collaboration experience should learn to do that allows them to achieve greater success in future collaboration (Ceesay, Rossignoli & Mahto, 2021).

Based on the existing research that attributes collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia to several factors, we integrate the factor impacts as figure 1.

Based on the examination of influential factors in practice mentioned above, and the review of the extensive literature on collaborative relationship, we sort out as figure 2 what may constitute collaboration capability that potential collaborative organizations should hold in advance to ensure the successful collaborative performance, and that can be identified for the purpose of estimation of the existent collaborative relationship.

FIGURE 1
FACTORS IMPACTING COLLABORATION PERFORMANCE

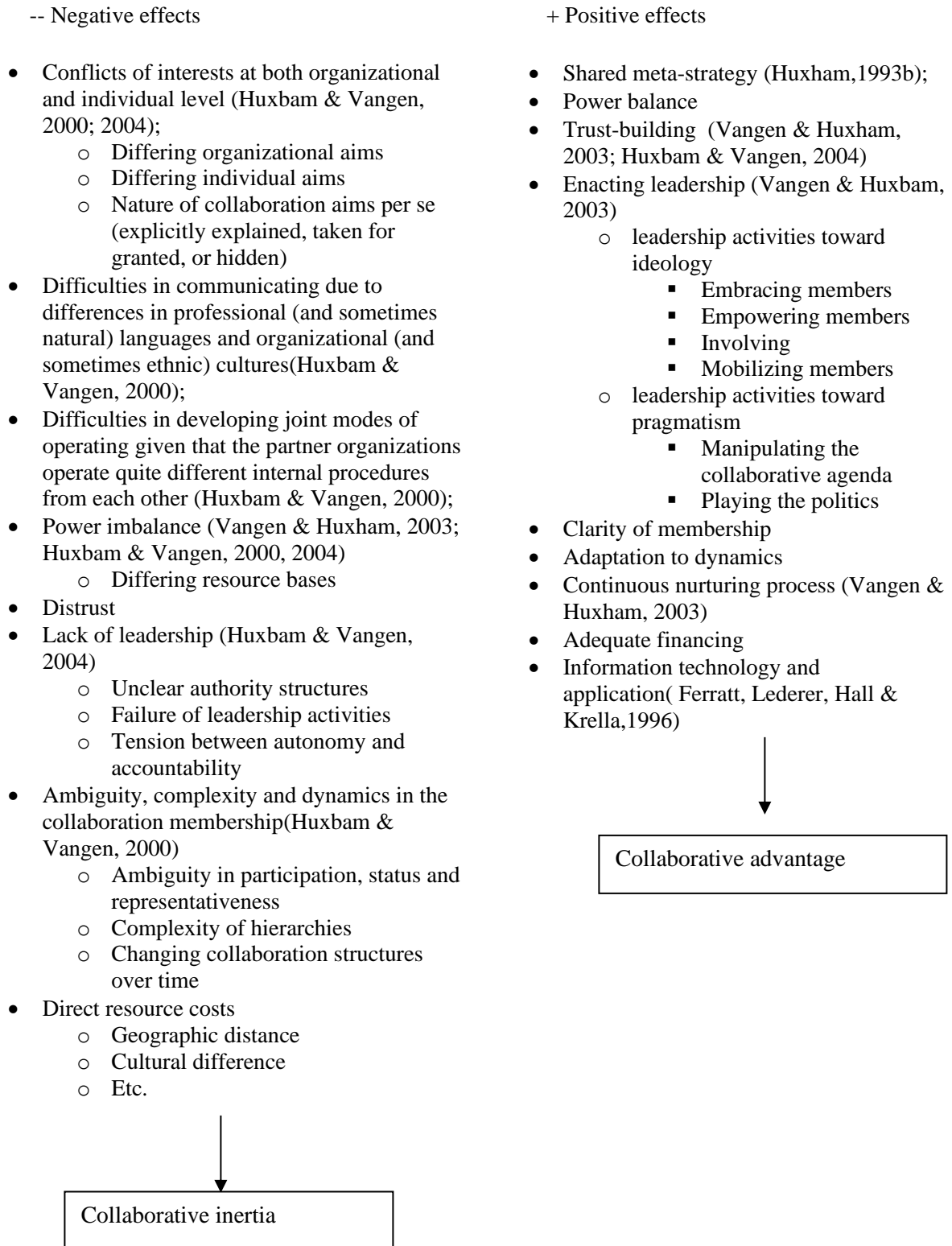
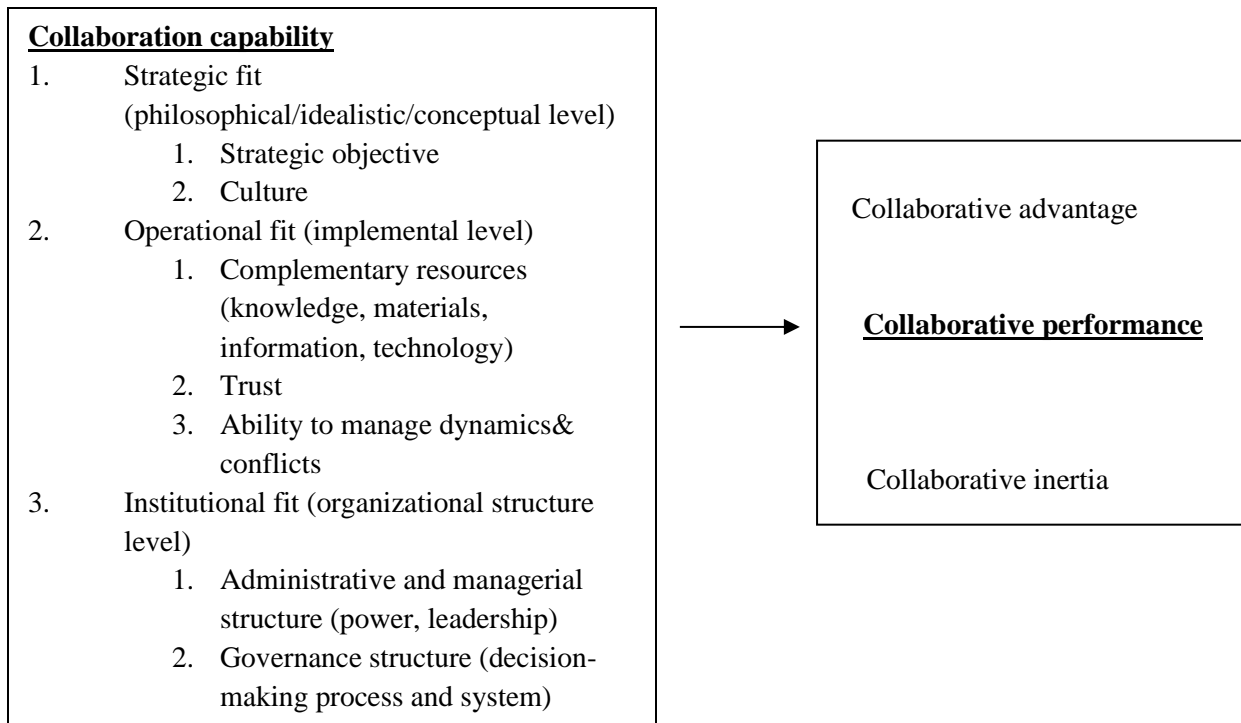


FIGURE 2
CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR COLLABORATION CAPABILITY AND COLLABORATIVE PERFORMANCE



Most approaches to collaboration believe that a shared vision of the collaboration is a necessary prerequisite to success (see, for example, Gray 1985; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). In addressing the pitfalls of individualism, Huxham (1993b) uses the word ‘meta-strategy’ to present the importance of having a joint agreed strategy to provide a framework for collaborative action by organizations. The establishment of the shared strategy is based on the fits of respective strategic objectives, and organizational culture. Matches of major **strategic objectives** of collaborative members can stimulate partners’ efforts and organizational supports to make collaboration work. **Culture** can be defined as “the pattern of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organizational functioning and that provide norms for behavior in the organization” (Deshpande & Webster, 1989, P4). Since culture help shape an organization’s attitude, value perception, cost and risk consideration, harmonious collaboration will smooth the collaborative process, while competing cultures may incur disagreements and even conflicts.

Successful collaboration also calls for the compatibility of operational activities. Three elements constitute the key issues of the implementation process. **Resource** availability and its complementary nature are the basic building blocks of collaboration. By combining these resources in various ways, collaborative members create something new and valuable that transcends what they can accomplish alone. Sufficiency and compatibility in the types of knowledge, materials, information and technology resources is likely to be important for realizing high levels of collaborative synergy. Two dominant conceptualizations of **trust** are evident in the literature: trust as a cognitive expectation or affective sentiment and trust as risk-taking behavior or a willingness to engage in such behavior. The two conceptualizations of trusting behaviors and perceived trustworthiness can be considered as distinct but related facets of trust. Perceived trustworthiness may have direct effect on partners’ satisfaction. From an exchange theory perspective, partners are less likely to be satisfied with a relationship if either believes the other cannot be relied on with confidence. The dissatisfaction will then constitute the threats for collaborative relationship. Trusting behaviors are actions that reflect a willingness to accept vulnerability in the face of uncertainty (Moorman, Zaltman, &

Deshpande, 1992). As is reflected in Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing, trusting behaviors indicate a commitment by the partners to making their relationship work. Suppose trusting behaviors are lacking on the part of one partner. In that case, the other will quickly learn that his or her behaviors are not being rewarded, which results in their termination and a subsequent downward spiral of mistrust, poor performance, and dissatisfaction (Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer 1995). To work closely together, the people and organizations involved in a collaboration need to be confident that other partners will follow through on their responsibilities and obligations and will not take advantage of them. **Managing dynamics & conflicts refers to the ability to adapt** to both internal and external environment complexity, uncertainty, and turbulence. Such ability is to address the dynamic nature of collaboration.

Based on the strategic fit and operational fit, collaboration can be conducted through a certain relationship structure. Institutional fit is relevant in this regard. In terms of **administrative and managerial structure**, power and leadership are regarded as two important issues in this regard. The power's magnitude depends on the resource base of collaborative members. The effect of power on the collaboration has two sides: On the one hand, collaboration is not possible with the exercise of power (Gray, 1989); on the other hand, enough efforts should be made to eliminate the abuse of the power. The concept of shared power is central to the notion of collaboration (Gray, 1989). Power dynamics influence efforts to initiate collaboration, and power shapes the course of implementation of collaboration. Leadership can be regarded as another aspect of power. Leadership is concerned with the mechanisms that lead to the actual outcomes of a collaboration; structures, processes and participants are thought of as different media through which collaborative leadership is, in practice, enacted (Vangen, & Huxham, 2003). Views of leadership in collaboration tend to emphasize relational leadership and processes for inspiring, nurturing, supporting and communicating. Partners do not lead through the exertion of formal positional power. **Governance structure** influences how much an organization's perspectives, resources and skills can be combined. Here, compatible decision-making process and system is emphasized. Various types of decision-making models and degrees of formalization can likely promote collaborative synergy, depending on the circumstances. The extent to which an organization's form of governance fosters collaboration may be reflected in its partners' comfort level with the decision-making process, the degree to which its partners support collaboration related decisions, and the timeliness of the collaboration related decisions (Terman, Feiock, & Youm, 2019).

These components combining together constitute the collaboration capability of collaborative organizations. Strong or weak collaboration capability respectively leads to collaborative advantage or inertia, and collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia greatly impact final collaborative performances.

Timing of Collaboration

The second important factor affecting collaboration is the timing of collaboration. Bresser (1988) points out that, although collaboration may make environments more predictable in some respects, they also cause new dependencies to be created, thus increasing environmental complexity and turbulence and concurrently reducing participating organizations' control over the environment.

Collaboration sometimes increases transaction costs for organizations (Oliveira, Lumineau, & Ariño, 2023), introduces them to new bilateral and multilateral relationships to which they must attend, requires them to develop new skills and abandon or reshape old ones, and makes them more explicitly and perhaps uncomfortably aware of the relationships among stakeholders that do not involve them but may affect them. Collaboration can make markets vulnerable to new entrants, precipitate interorganizational cleavages, and establish public policy priorities that are not the best way to serve a particular organization's interests. Collaboration can open new and untested possibilities for action, interaction, and relations, and close off existing, well-known ones. All of this, even if it reduces environmental complexity and turbulence in some way, adds to an organization's information load and contributes to increasing complexity and turbulence in other ways.

Huxham and Vangen (2004) comment that making collaboration work effectively is highly resource-consuming and often painful. So don't work collaboratively unless you have to. Put rather more formally, the argument is that unless the potential for real collaborative advantage is clear, it is generally best to avoid collaboration if there is a choice.

One way of thinking about collaborative advantage is as managing the balance between the pitfalls that may occur through an organization acting individualistically and those that may occur through collaborating (Huxham & Macdonald, 1992). Huxham(1993 b) identifies four pitfalls associated with individual action: repetition of actions, omission of actions, divergence of actions and counter-production of actions. Managing the pitfalls of individualism does not mean eradicating them per se. Rather, it means judging where they are valuable and where they are wasteful. In the former cases, it also means managing how the organizations work together, so that they may build on each other's contribution rather than tread on each other's toes. Here, the point is that haphazard repetition, haphazard omission, haphazard divergence and haphazard counter-production are likely problematic; coordinated repetition, omission and divergence may not be. So, the best way of managing each of these pitfalls may—depending on the circumstance—either mean avoiding the repetition, omission, divergence or counter-production, or it may mean turning them into deliberate and create acts. Either way, managing the pitfalls of individualism implies collaboration between organizations. At the same time, Huxham (1993 b) identifies four pitfalls associated with collaboration: loss of control, flexibility, glory, and direct resource costs. The threat of these four pitfalls often seems to act as an effective deterrent to individual organizations against involvement in collaborative activities. So the achievement of collaborative advantage involves a fine balancing act. On the one hand, the collaboration must be strong enough to overcome the pitfalls of individualism; otherwise there is little point in having it. On the other hand, it must be designed in such a way as to be sensitive to the problem of loss of control, flexibility and glory and to the cost of collaboration.

So here the proposition is that appropriate timing of collaboration will impact the collaboration performance.

Relationship Structure

The third key to effective collaboration is determining an appropriate relationship structure that best matches collaboration goals and objectives.

A framework for classifying collaboration structure has been suggested by Gray (1989). The framework is conceptualized along two dimensions: the factors that motivate the parties to collaborate and the expected outcome. Typically, collaborative organizations are motivated by a shared vision or a desire to resolve a conflict. The outcomes of a collaboration may be simply an exchange of information or the generation of some kind of agreement among the parties. Figure 3 (Gray, 1989, P59) provides a framework for clarifying four types of collaboration according to these two dimensions. Appreciative planning involves information exchange in the interest of advancing a shared vision. Dialogues create a forum for exploring solutions to a multiparty conflict. Collective strategies involve reaching an agreement about how to implement a shared vision. Negotiated settlements represent solutions to stakeholder conflicts (Kumar, 2020). Since the outcome of each design is different, the criteria for judging each design's success will also vary. However, the process by which the stakeholders engage in collaboration is similar across all four designs.

**FIGURE 3
COLLABORATION STRUCTURE**

EXPECTED OUTCOME

	Exchange of information	joint agreements
Advancing a shared vision	<p>Appreciative planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search conference • Community gatherings 	<p>Collective strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public-private partnerships • Joint ventures • R and D consortia • Labor-management cooperative
MOTIVATING FACTORS		
Resolving conflict	<p>Dialogues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy dialogues • Public meetings 	<p>Negotiated settlements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory negotiations • Site-specific disputes • Mini-trials

Similarly, the criteria for success vary according to the design that the collaboration takes. Figure 4 (Gray, 1989, P61) summarizes the relevant success criteria for each collaborative design. Appreciative planning and dialogues are, by nature, temporary collectivities. Several basic outcomes related to information exchange are important measures of success. For collective strategies, the agreement's duration (or sustainability) is necessary to alleviate the problem. Negotiated settlements have a fairly stringent set of success criteria.

**FIGURE 4
SUCCESS CRITERION FOR COLLABORATION**

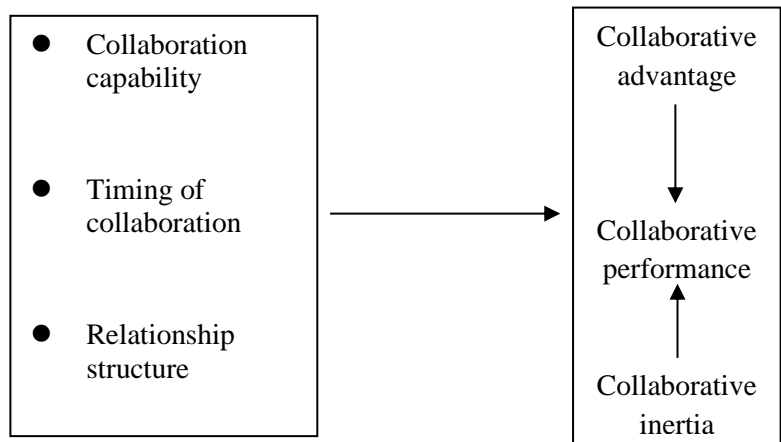
EXPECTED OUTCOME

	Exchange of information	joint agreements
Advancing a shared vision	<p>Appreciative planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange of information about visions and understanding • Understanding of others' visions and expectations • Fuller comprehension of problem by stakeholders • Agreement on problem definition 	<p>Collective strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreement reached • Agreement implemented • Survival of alliance • Partners' goals achieved • Problem alleviated
MOTIVATING FACTORS		

Resolving conflict	Dialogues	Negotiated settlements
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of trust • Recognition of legitimacy of others' interests • Generation of integrative ideas • Ongoing interaction • Recommendations for action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrative agreement reached • Agreement implemented • Reduction in negative reactions from constituents • Extent of compliance with the agreement

Based on the foregoing discussion, an analytic framework is established to identify the success factors that will impact the collaborative performance (Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5
SUCCESS FACTORS FOR COLLABORATIVE PERFORMANCE**



The proposition here is that collaboration capability, timing of collaboration, and relationship structure, working together, will constitute either the collaborative advantage or the collaborative inertia, and thus impact collaborative performance greatly.

The model tries to provide an analytical framework to identify the key factors that may predict whether the proposed collaborative relationship will be successful and sustainable, and help evaluate the existent collaborative relationship. On the one hand, the framework provides a basis for measuring a broad range of potential predictive factors and a perspective to identify these factors that greatly impact the extent to which collaborative members achieve collaborative advantage. The result of the study will facilitate the development of more effective training and technical assistance programs for collaborative members. On the other hand, another practical use of the framework is in the assessment of proximal outcomes for collaborative relationship. Diagnostic tools based on the framework can help leaders and coordinators determine if their collaborative efforts are on the right track. Moreover, such tools can allow them to regulate and coordinate the collaborative process, and stimulate constructive thinking about what steps can be taken to make collaborative advantage happen.

CLOSING

Just as Chris Huxham mentioned in her book, the collaboration is happening, is valuable and is difficult. The formation of collaborative alliances among organizations is a significant strategy that organizations

can use to cope with the turbulence and complexity of their environments. Collaboration shows promise for solving organizational and societal problems and provides some extraordinarily intriguing research settings. This paper tries to address three key influential factors in the collaboration practice, and establishes the relationship model between the influential factors and collaborative performance.

The further work of the paper is to identify and operationalize the subconstructs of the three key factors. The challenge here is to find measurable and operational variables that correspond well to the variables at the conceptual level. In addition, since three key factors serve as the predictors and estimators for the analysis of the potential collaborative relationship and existent collaborative relationship, future research is needed to identify analysis weights of these three factors for the evaluation of the collaborative relationship. If the examined relationship only meets the requirements of one or two examining factors, then what kind of evaluation should be granted to the examined relationship: should the collaborative relationship be regarded as acceptable? Or will the collaborative relationship be successful and sustainable in the future? Hence further efforts should be made to address the issue of to what extent, and which factor from three is dominant in determining successful and sustainable collaborative relationships.

The practical implication of identifying success factors that favorably contribute to collaborative performance is that the model tries to provide an analytic framework for leaders and coordinators of the collaboration to decide whether to involve in a potential collaborative relationship, and examine the existent collaborative relationship. When analyzing the collaborative relationship, at least three issues should be considered: Whether the collaborative members (potential or existent) embrace the capabilities that are compatible in terms of strategy, implementation process, and organizational structure; whether it is the right time to collaborate? That is, does the collaboration bring advantages that will surpass the benefits of individualism and overcome the inertia of itself? The third issue that needs to consider is what kind of relationship structure is appropriate and best match the collaboration goals? The result of the study will facilitate the development of more effective training and technical assistance programs for collaborative members, present a direction collaborative organizations can make efforts on to cultivate conditions contributing to collaborative advantage, and help lead the collaboration onto the right track.

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