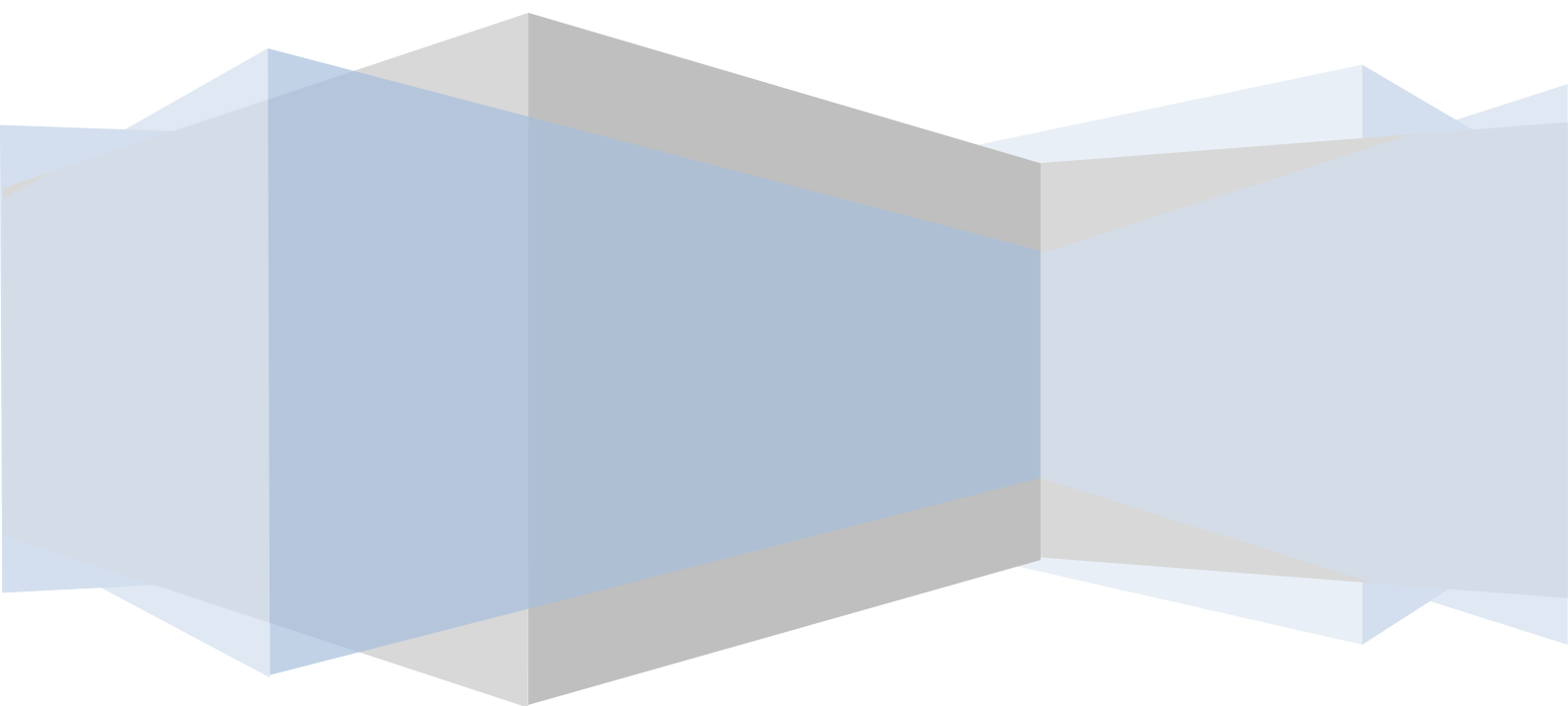


FAN Club 25th February, 2009 - Collaborative Working Seminar

Part of an initiative to inquire into collaboration
in futures work for the Future Analysts Network
and the Horizon Scanning Centre

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Introduction

The Collaborative Working seminar was one of four options available to FAN Club members in the afternoon session. 25 people took part in my seminar and engaged with varying degrees of scepticism, comfort, familiarity and advocacy; a mix that ultimately led me to make some interesting observations.

Collaborative working is a key component of leadership and as such today's meeting focussing on public service leadership challenges represented a great opportunity to address collaboration.

Aim

The aim of the seminar was to provide some exposure to collaborative working ideas, tools and approaches, using a discussion about how collaborative working can support strategy and futures activity as the "fuel" for a number of mini collaborations that I expected to take place in the room.

In addition, I also expected to develop more information to be incorporated into the *Collaborative Working Practice in Futures Work* inquiry.

Seminar process

1. Introduction.

My intentions were to create a sense of collaboration in this session; share my experiences and perspectives on collaboration; share some early insights through the current collaborative working project; to capture key points through our discussion and to create a record of the session via a blog.

To help engender a sense of difference from many seminars and to encourage interaction, we started with chairs in a horse-shoe shape without any tables, which in turn helped to encourage participants to pull their chairs into tight circles during their collaborative working.

My expectations were that we would exchange value through me meeting my intentions and the participants sharing their thoughts and comments.

I shared my perspective on collaboration and why I believe it is so important:

- I believe that given the increasing complexity and uncertainty of the external environment, we are often unable to make sense of signals and develop effective strategy by working alone. But, it can feel 'unsafe' to engage other stakeholders – both internal and external to the organisation – in strategic thinking, futures work, policy and strategy development. Perhaps we feel vulnerable having to admit that we don't have the answer, or we find the situation too complicated.
- Collaborative working, including forming partnerships with robust qualification, assessment and management processes can help to provide the context for 'safe' and effective joint working.
- Many of the problems we try to solve that we label as 'strategic' are wicked problems; that is to say they are dynamic and evolving in nature. Not only is the solution unclear, but the problem itself is unclear too. Resolving these problems requires us to work in non-traditional ways, and collaborative working could be one way to go.

2. Introduction to stimulus materials.

I had prepared a number of posters featuring a selection of slides (see the accompanying slide deck) to act as reference / stimulus materials for work group discussions. They described:

- my definition of partnership and a model to describe different joint working interventions;
- some observations based on my experience as a collaborative working practitioner;
- some ideas about what might be in the collaborative working manager's toolbox; and
- a summary of the *Collaborative Working Practice in Futures Work* inquiry.

3. Establishing break-out groups.

I set up break-out groups with five participants in each, allocating people from across the room into different groups to help establish a need to initially connect when starting the activity.

4. Collaborating.

For the break-out group mini collaborations I asked the participants to address the following questions:

- How can collaborative working support strategy / futures development activity?
- When do you work collaboratively?
- What are the challenges?
- What problems are resolved through collaboration?
- What sort of problems / issues might you collaborate on?
- What has this got to do with leadership?

As a framework to support their collaborative discussion I asked them to use the collaboration cycle (featured on the posters and on additional handouts available), focussing on their *connecting* to develop their relationship, and *contracting* to be explicit about how they wanted to work together.

I interrupted the discussion part way through to focus attention on the *connecting* and *contracting* parts of the collaboration cycle and to gain a sense of how the participants were experiencing the process.

5. Review.

Finally, we shared our observations on collaborative working and how we had experienced the collaboration process during the session.

Observations

Throughout the activity, I had a sense of energy in the conversations taking place within each of the five break-out groups.

The *connecting* and *contracting* conversations featured a number of statements about what people were interested in working on, how they wanted to work together and some of their experiences about collaboration in their own organisations. Of particular note were: "It's easy to say we work collaboratively, just to tick the box" and, "We don't support people to work in partnership very well."

As one might expect, there was a range of perspectives on the process we had adopted: one group had played cursory attention to the *connecting* phase and wanted to move quickly to the task; another group spent a much greater proportion of their time in connecting and felt strongly that they were much better placed to work more effectively together having done so. We then posed the question, what might the impact of been on the effectiveness of their joint working if these two groups had been asked to collaborate together. We hypothesised that were the two groups to work together, the dynamic between them might generate tension that would require careful management.

A third group found that three of the five members had worked together at the morning's workshop and so that accelerated their connecting. This situation set up an interesting dynamic with the two colleagues in the group that were not in the same workshop.

My interruption to the group discussions was also experienced differently by differ break-out groups. Where one was particularly interested in sharing their experience of their *connecting* and *contracting*, the body language of most members of another group suggested (and was corroborated in plenary discussion) tolerance of the process and frustration at the interruption.

A significant point shared by one group concerned the common ground they found through their *connecting*: purely coincidental given that the groups were formed without any regard for potential shared interests.

When participants referred to the stimulus material, it was interesting to note that only one group in its entirety reviewed the content together. That was the same group that collectively decided to get coffee together as well; a small point perhaps, but indicative of collaborative behaviour.

Towards the end of the session people shared their observations in plenary. There was some concern that although the discussion was of interest the outcome was unclear, which led to the question: "What's the point of collaborating?"

One particularly interesting challenge for collaboration was: "How do you know collaboration works?" But equally there was acknowledgement that, "There are good reasons why we would want to collaborate."

Others shared their view that their minimal contracting about how they wanted to work together and what they wanted to achieve had a direct and negative impact on the outcome.

The group also considered a broad range of joint working interventions; from basic networking, through to sharing of resources, information, risks and rewards based on the maturity of the relationship and the degree of trust built. The greater the degree of trust in a particular relationship, the more collaborative it became, leading potentially to the co-development of solutions.

And the point was made – with significant agreement across the room – that many of us work in "government enforced partnerships." The fact that these relationships are forced perhaps suggests that the business relationships are not experienced as 'real' partnership by the participants.

I was struck by the significance of collaboration in the leadership challenges that formed the basis for the morning's workshops. Of the 17 challenges identified, the following five had strong collaborative working components:

- ❑ 3 - More work is needed to decrease bureaucracy and provide a more 'joined-up' approach between different public services.

- ❑ 4 - Public service leaders need to encourage and reward joined-up working, individuals taking responsibility for high performance and practical new ideas for improving the work of government.
- ❑ 6 - Public service leaders must be open to continual feedback from internal and external stakeholders.
- ❑ 12 - Central government will have to trust local actors more and more, devolving real decision-making power to the front line.
- ❑ 15 - Public service leaders must emphasise strategy, collaboration and learning if they are to ensure public service organisations are agile organisations.

My sense – although untested at this stage – was that much of the material and approaches for collaborative working are not common practice for the majority of the participants. Certainly this is consistent with the feedback from the Collaboration Health Check surveys where the overriding sense was one of limited formal collaboration process. In addition, the underpinning collaborative working behaviours required for effective collaboration perhaps remain the exception, rather than the norm.

In the final analysis, we did not get into the part that collaborative working can play in futures and strategic activity, but we did engage in wide ranging discussion – in plenary and in break out groups - that brought some challenging (and new?) thoughts about collaboration into the room and into people’s awareness.

Blogs

I have established two blogs associated with the seminar and the broader work to explore collaboration in futures work:

1. The content, process and my observations from the seminar:
www.leadershipincollaboration.blogspot.com
2. The Collaborative Working Practice in Futures Work to accompany the current inquiry for the Horizon Scanning Centre / FAN Club:
www.collaborativeworkingpracticeinfutures.blogspot.com

Feedback from participants

As regular FAN Club members will know, we actively seek your feedback after each meeting. The feedback sought covers everything about the meeting; from the plenary sessions, workshops, seminars, the venue and even the food!

We are always grateful for the time members take in providing their feedback and personally, I am so please that a number of participants in the Collaboration Seminar took the time to do so too, and supported their feedback with comments.

In the spirit of openness – a critical element in effective collaboration – I wanted to share a number of comments that were made about the seminar session, and to give my perspective on the comments. I considered my decision to do this carefully because I did not want to be perceived as using this blog to defend my approach to the workshop. I did however, find the comments interesting and particularly in the context of the day’s theme; leadership.

Participant Comments

- It wasn't what I expected - the best thing to come out of it was the opportunity to network and "collaborate" with fellow participants.
- A lot of content on the walls, but little opportunity/time to look at it, or engage with it. Quite a lot of confusion about what we were being asked to do. The ambition for the session seemed to vastly outstrip the reality of what happened.
- But trying to cover too much ground; did not get time to see the info on the wall, but made some potentially very useful contacts within my discussion group, and interesting to hear the different perspectives from the other groups in the room.
- It wasn't very clear what we were trying to do in our group, so our discussion didn't seem to go anywhere. Some of the other groups seemed to get more out of it though.
- Not clear how this was specific to leadership or futures. The questions that were posed at the beginning of the session weren't really answered.
- Purpose and outcome of seminar not clear - was hoping for some practical tools rather than a 'general chat'
- Steve tried something difficult - Steve tried to make it experiential - but there was issue of generalising from it to collaborative tools. I would have liked to learn more about collaborative tools and how to use them.

My thoughts

I was very pleased that people found the session “different” and with that in mind there is something to say about how I set the session up. For me, working at the Fan Club is a great opportunity to stretch myself – to try something a little different - and to provide an environment that is out of the ordinary for members that attend the sessions I facilitate.

The questions posed were simply the catalyst for a collaborative conversation, the framework for which was the Collaboration Cycle – the single most important tool for effective collaborative working.

Posters on the walls provided participants with a range of tools and other information about collaboration, for them to engage with as they saw fit. It was interesting to me to note how little most of the participants chose not to engage with the material.

Given the feedback, I am also left wondering what prevented participants from addressing the questions posed.

I was also struck by the sense of ambiguity and complexity expressed in the feedback. Both are common leadership and futures work challenges and can create significant tension in collaborative working. The choices we have are to go with the flow and trust that our skills, knowledge, collaborative working behaviours will allow clarity to emerge, or to seek to put structures in place to create a sense of certainty and simplicity (which may not in reality exist!).

In the morning’s leadership workshops, I was immediately struck by the significance to the challenges identified of collaboration, so for me the link was already made- an observation we did talk about that briefly at the end of the session.

The seminar seemed to leave a number of participants with a number of outstanding questions, particularly about the tools described in the posters on the walls. To date I have received just two follow up calls which have resulted in face to face meetings to engage in further discussion about collaborative working.