The Journey toward Human Collaboration

A Traveler’s Guide Book

Culminating Paper

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of pioneers in three different organizations on their journey to make decisions in a more collaborative and participative way. The primary focus is to discover the common aids that supported and obstacles that impeded their progress. In understanding their experiences, a second, deeper journey is uncovered that leads beyond an initial vision of collaboration to one more complex, paradoxical and focused on the journey, not the destination. Several models are presented to facilitate understanding of the forces that help and hinder collaboration, the complexity and paradoxical nature of this deeper sense of collaboration, and the necessity of the journey itself.
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Introduction

“The consequences of increasing complexity and rapid change are now amplified through a society characterized by increasing interdependency.” (Jun, 1973, p. 36)

“We are in the midst of an unstoppable historic shift from global competition to cooperation. You can approach it as a war of the workplace to be fought by firing and laying off to cut costs (economics), imposing innovations unilaterally (technology), and manipulating decisions already made to “make people feel involved” (human relations). That’s the old paradigm in action, making things worse every time we invoke it.

The new paradigm, I think, will one day be understood as a revolutionary turning point in human history – from expert problem solving circa 1900 to everybody improving whole systems in 2000 A.D. and beyond.” (Weisbord, 1987, p. 368)

Many individuals and organizations are currently experiencing a growing need to search for alternative ways of working together. The traditional hierarchical model of organization, based upon the principles of vertical control and a single, uniform type of superior-subordinate relationship can no longer cope with the demands of our complex and rapidly-changing society (Herbst, 1976). This model also ties workers to limiting jobs which do not utilize their capabilities, discourages the acceptance of responsibility, encourages passivity, and has eliminated meaning from work (McGregor, 1957).

People who are dissatisfied with working together under these conditions have few alternatives. Those who make the effort on their own to shift their way of organizing to a new cooperative paradigm undertake what turns out to be an uncharted journey that is not easy. It meanders through long periods of confusion and difficult obstacles. However, if Weisbord is correct in saying that we are in the midst of an unstoppable historic shift in the way we work together, many more people will be packing up their cubicle and heading out on their own journey towards the largely-unknown territory of working collaboratively.

The purpose of this paper is to be a useful Traveler’s Guide Book for those who choose to embark upon this journey. It explores and maps the experiences of several pioneers in different organizations who have built work cultures based on collaborative principles. I wanted to better understand the motivation that compelled them to begin, what support and obstacles they encountered along the way, and where they find themselves today.
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I also wanted to write this paper as a way to further my own journey, started as a result of my experience working in large high-tech corporations. As I developed my own participative leadership style, I deepened my respect and value for the valid and diverse viewpoints of others. I also became increasingly irritated and hurt by decisions made by those who held positions above me in the hierarchies in which I was embedded. They seemed to make their decisions without regard for the effect they had on the lives of people like me. I saw many others whose capabilities were not utilized, who were encouraged to be passive and avoid responsibility in jobs where meaning was difficult to find.

So, I packed my cubicle and headed toward my own vision of collaboration. The particular vision I had when I began my journey was a style of decision-making that was not based on a process of agreement or coercion requiring someone to lose. It was based on an assumption that an achieved solution could be a new one that included what was important for everyone involved.

I was surprised during the writing of this guide book that this, or any other decision-making process, turns out not to be the collaborative destination I thought it was. There is a much deeper story to tell than the simple one that goes no further than to include others in our decision-making.

The rest of this paper devotes itself to sharing that deeper story with the reader. It is organized into the following sections:

• **The Making of the Traveler’s Guide Book** – The methodology I used for research includes interviewing several members of three different organizations attempting to establish collaborative work cultures.

• **The Traveler’s Log Book** – Highlights of the interview data are collected from previous travelers and presented as quotations.

• **The Terrain as Seen Through Useful Maps** – In this section I reflect upon the collective journey told to me through the interviews and find several models I found useful in making sense of what I heard.
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• Traveler’s Tips – A list of learnings which are important for anyone considering the journey to collaboration.
The Making of the Traveler’s Guide Book

This paper approaches the question of “how to achieve human collaboration” as a qualitative research pilot study. I am using qualitative methodology because my needs align well with the reasons Creswell (1998) suggests as important considerations in choosing this approach. He suggests that it is appropriate when the purpose is to deeply explore what is going on with a topic, to clarify the research question as the study unfolds, to bring the writer into the study, and to emphasize the researcher’s role as an active learner who can tell the story from the participant’s point of view rather than as an expert. The approach builds a holistic narrative based upon the detailed views of informants, gathered through interviews, who are deeply involved in the issue.

While suitable for understanding the richness and depth of these experiences, one limitation of pilot studies is they are not based upon the data from a large number of cases. Therefore, while the intent of this paper is to thoroughly and deeply understand the experiences of three organizations centered in Northern California, the reader should be careful about making broad general conclusions about organizations in general or in other locations or cultures.

My original research question of how to implement collaborative decision-making in organizations arose when I found it difficult to locate an organization consistently making decisions based on collaborative principles. Wishing to create such an organization myself, I wanted to learn from others who made the attempt before me. What was their approach? What worked, didn’t work, and what got in their way? Did they ultimately succeed?

In order to get as broad a perspective as possible, I found three very different organizations making the attempt to move toward some form of collaborative decision-making. While I have used pseudonyms to disguise the identity of the organizations and individuals who participated in this study to protect their privacy, I can reveal the following important characteristics:
Collab Inc. is a non-profit organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, formed in 2001 with the charter of helping other groups implement new ways of working together. In addition to the service they provide, they also want to become a richly cooperative organization based upon the same specific published principles they advocate. Collab Inc. currently has three employees on staff, and a Board of Trustees with 17 members. I was interested in Collab Inc. because it is in the early stages of creating itself and might provide insight into issues that arise in starting a collaborative decision-making organization.

Consult Inc. is a consulting firm founded in 1969 and now has multiple offices across the country, one of which is located in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is a provider of collaborative consulting and workplace learning solutions that has been practicing the art of collaboration for its entire 35 year history. It has fewer than 100 employees though it is much larger than Collab Inc. I was interested in Consult Inc. because it has practiced collaborative decision-making for an extended period of time. I thought I could get a sense of the experience of maintaining a collaborative style through various stages of organization development.

Tech Inc. is a technology firm that creates solutions by combining software with innovative new technologies. It is a traditionally structured, global corporation that was founded in 1983 and is headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area. It has a work force of more than 3000 employees. I chose Tech Inc. because outwardly it is a traditional hierarchical organization that has been around for awhile and in the early 1990’s attempted to shift its existing culture to a more collaborative style.

I interviewed four people in each of these three organizations. In each case, I interviewed the person whose vision it was to implement collaboration in the organization. I also interviewed two other people who were involved in the initiative as well as one person affected by the initiative. In this way I hoped to explore the motivation for the effort, the experience of implementing the effort, as well as the effects and result of the effort.

I found these organizations through inquiries, networking, and reading about collaboration. I was also formerly employed in a division of Tech Inc. and was originally attracted to work in that division after learning of the collaborative culture they created. I contacted the person
responsible for each initiative and, through conversations with each of them, identified and contacted the rest of the people I interviewed.

Most of the individual participants are located in Northern California, with a few located in Massachusetts, Texas and Oregon. An early draft of this paper was given to all participants so they could review the accuracy of their quotations.

I asked each interviewee to describe their understanding of what they were trying to accomplish by using a collaborative style of decision-making in their organization and to define that style. I also asked what worked in their decision-making process and what didn’t, as well as whether the organization or its environment applied any pressure to change the way they tried to make decisions. *(A complete list of interview questions is included in Appendix A.)* These three questions alone led most of the interviewees to recount a great deal of their experience. I used the other interview questions to either ground their thoughts with specific examples, or to have them assess the outcomes of their effort.

Each of the interviews was recorded, transcribed, and then scanned for representative statements. The statements were organized into themes and the most common themes were extracted for use in this paper and are presented in the next section. The names of the people I interviewed and, in some cases their gender, program details and concept labels in their culture have been disguised to respect the privacy of these pioneers.
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The Traveler’s Log Book

The twelve interviews I conducted generated a list of 249 significant quotes. By grouping these quotes into common themes, I found 25 categories that revealed an underlying story common to all three companies whose members I interviewed. This common story, a journey filled with passion, obstacles, and surprises, serves as the metaphor for this paper. It is the collective journey of these three organizations that I portray in this section. It is divided into six sub-sections, based upon a grouping of the original 25 categories of quotes, which are titled:

• The Longing to Travel
• First Stop: Consensus
• What is Collaboration beyond Consensus?
• Common Obstacles Encountered
• Provisions that Help Along the Way
• The Journey is Worth It

While most of the interviewees spoke to each of the concepts described, I am including only a small subset of the quotes in this paper so they can tell a concise and coherent story.

While the reader may notice some important concepts and models emerging in the interviews such as Tannenbaum and Schmidt’s model of leadership behavior (1958) or Peter Senge’s Advocacy and Inquiry (1990), I will save most of my discussion about models for the next section.

The Longing to Travel

Why did the people in these companies want to work in a more collaborative style? The reasons I heard from members of all of these companies reflected a deep sense of values; that respect, fairness, and the desire to give each individual his or her voice was important to them. Ted Smyth, who was a central figure in forming Collab Inc., the young non-profit organization, gives us an overall view of this in his description of helping other organizations become more collaborative:
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My experience with an increasing number of people is that there is a deep longing to be working in more collaborative and co-creative ways. That deep longing is associated with an intuition that to work collaboratively and co-creatively, while honoring and supporting the integrity and autonomy of each individual, is a vital and essential component of right relationship.

Jack Cummings, who also helped form Collab Inc., gives an additional view of collaboration being deeply important to us as human beings.

*I am convinced that the principles on which collaboration is based are very natural human principles. There is nothing new about them. They are built into our genes that this is the way things work when they work. It's just we are currently socialized and not trained to perceive them as such.*

Karen Daniels, a key person in implementing collaboration and who now heads human resources (HR) in her company, explains why collaboration was used to improve performance at Tech Inc., the large technology firm:

*I think you get the best out of people if you can empower them. We would start to give people who had suddenly been thrown into the role of a manager some professional training around what it really means to be a manager. How do you get away from some of those old models in your head about, ‘Now I’m the manager, I’m the boss, I know more?’ How do you take that role seriously and how do you do it in a way that actually brings out the best in your people?*

Ben Jacobs, the director of training at Consult Inc., the training and consulting firm, describes why collaboration is important to his company in this way:

*If a person is dedicating 40 to 60 hours a week of their life in helping make this organization successful while getting a salary, it is fair that they should have a say in those decisions. While it is fair, it also has the practical benefit of increasing ownership and potentially improving the quality of the decisions. That’s what we tell our clients.*

Members of both Collab Inc. and Consult Inc. who focus on collaboration in their work offerings, also described a need for each individual’s work to be meaningful. Ted Smyth, the former Executive Director of Collab Inc. described his view of work needing to be meaningful in this way:

*In my experience most people who express an interest in these ideas want their work to be meaningful. When they work with others they do so in mutually respectful ways. There is a caring for one another and there is a recognition that while each individual has a right to, and a responsibility for, his or her autonomy, everyone also has a right and a responsibility to engage responsibly with others, wherever others are affected.*
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They also felt that working in an authority-based hierarchy generated pain and a lack of trust. First, Ben Jacobs, the director of training at Consult Inc., the training and consulting firm said:

*A few days ago I saw a small blurb in the [San Francisco] Chronicle saying that the majority of workers in most large corporations don’t believe management communications. They think the management communications are being spun. Interestingly enough, the longer they are in the company, the more they believe they are being spun.*

And again Ted Smyth of the young non-profit, Collab Inc., spoke very clearly on this issue:

*Virtually every group that I can think of has come to us either having experienced or observed the pain that working in more conventional ways is causing. That pain prompts people to start asking about the alternatives. ‘How else might we work together?’ It’s that search for alternatives that makes them responsive to us.*

Even in many of the corporate clients of training and consulting firm Consult Inc. there seems to be recognition of a need for collaboration. George Henderson, a consultant at Consult offers this perspective:

*In company after company, everybody says we have to work better together; we are in silos, and we don’t communicate well. So, I think there is a huge recognition out there that people need to collaborate.*

What has emerged for me in this section is that for many people, the tendency to work together relying mainly on superior-subordinate relationship structures is apt to cause pain and mistrust and often insufficient or slanted communication. This pain and mistrust fosters a deep desire to find alternative ways of working together that are mutually respectful, empowering, co-creative, and meaningful.

How can we work together in a way that supports these values? In what ways can we make decisions that take into account and respect the differing views of people in organizations? What I heard from the people I interviewed was that many first think of using a consensus style of making decisions.
First Stop: Consensus

In a journey that begins with a deep respect for involving those that are affected by decisions, the individuals I spoke with describe an initial attraction for the concept of consensus. Ken Abrams, an HR director for Tech Inc., the technology company, describes this attraction:

If you say decisions are collaborative then that leads you down a path of expecting everything will be like a consensus decision.

But, what is consensus? While everyone agreed that consensus is not the same thing as a unanimous decision, there seemed to be slightly differing ideas of what it does mean. Ted Smyth, one of the founders of Collab Inc., the young non-profit, describes his point of view:

One of the misunderstandings I commonly run into about consensus is that it means unanimous agreement. The definition of consensus that most groups I’ve worked with have ended up adopting is that consensus is the affirmation of those who care and the assent of those who don’t.

George Henderson, a consultant with Consult Inc., the training and consulting company, defines consensus decision-making a little differently:

It is a group decision that everyone in the group understands and is willing to support. Everyone is willing to take action to support the implementation of a decision even if it isn’t necessarily what each individual thinks was the best idea.

Steve Williams, the executive director of Collab Inc., describes how decision-making by consensus can get “sticky” simply because people have differing meanings for the term:

I define consensus as a circle. Because everyone is equal, everyone’s input is valued, everyone’s participation is important. The methodology that is typically used is that every voice has to be heard, consensus has to be reached and it often gets very, very sticky because the definition of consensus itself becomes a point of contention.

However, even though there were slightly differing ideas about the definition of consensus, there was clear agreement among all of the study participants that making all or most decisions by consensus quickly leads to problems, as reported by Mary Dunst, the current CEO of Consult Inc.

Our organization has lots of challenges because we are a high involvement organization. Well, guess what, that means we get lots of opinions. It means, all of a sudden, everybody has a voice. And once you let those floodgates open everybody is going to share their voice.
Ben Jacobs, the director of training at Consult Inc., gives an interesting example of how using only consensus can lead to paralysis.

You know, it’s like we don’t have a couple of administrative assistants in the meeting and we don’t want to move forward until we do. Cut it out. Because one of your administrative assistants has a problem with X, are we going to be three weeks behind on this project? The tail is wagging the dog here. Without the integration of basic management discipline, collaboration gets fuzzy. It kind of means consensus and then it moves to paralysis.

Richard West, a former VP of HR in Tech Inc. shares how consensus gets worse when the size of the organization increases.

When I arrived, it was very unclear to me how decisions were made. If you didn’t know any better you would think that all 3000 people in the company made the decision. If a decision was made and someone wasn’t involved in it, they got pissed off.

Ben Jacobs of Consult Inc. brings up another quagmire of consensus decision-making – not being able to make a decision at all:

I have a client now who is a senior VP of a very large company. Her direct reports are basically saying that she is totally out of control. She doesn’t know how to decide. She is so interested in our reaching consensus that she doesn’t make a decision. It’s dysfunctional.

Richard West, the former VP of Human Resources at Tech Inc., the technology company, also raised the issue about an inability to make decisions.

Part of it is this unwillingness to make a decision. Although we have put a lot of discipline into the decision and we are clearer about the process, more often than not a decision was, in my judgment, abdicated, but in our culture it was called delegated. It went to a task force, they screwed around with it for a period of time, it came back, and still a definitive decision wasn’t made. I consider that a failure.

So jumping to a single simple solution, that of consensus decision-making, turns out not to be completely satisfying as a way of working together in a mutually respectful, co-creative, and meaningful way. As a single solution, it has problems in that people have differing ideas as to what consensus means and using it in all situations leads to paralysis and an inability to make decisions.

Is that it, then? Does that mean that collaboration doesn’t work if consensus decision-making is not the solution as I and so many others first thought? Perhaps my initial vision of collaboration as consensus, win-win decision-making was not enough. What more could collaboration be?
What is Collaboration beyond Consensus?

If the initial perceived destination of seeing consensus decision-making as the total answer actually leads to paralysis and an inability to make decisions, what alternatives are there? Mary Dunst, the president of Consult Inc., gives us a first glimpse of what may lie beyond consensus.

A collaborative model is not a consensus model. A collaborative model for us includes a whole bunch of stuff. Decision-making is just one aspect of it.

George Henderson, a consultant also from Consult Inc., describes collaboration as a range of decision-making styles and reaching clarity about which one to use.

We believe it is collaborative to have a range of different ways of making decisions within an organization. Collaboration is applying in a principled way some objective criteria or objective standards to decide what method to use. There are times when it is appropriate to gather input from the whole group when it’s affected, there are times when it’s appropriate to delegate. If you consider those factors in an objective way instead of habitually going to one way or another, we would say that is collaborative. And then being open and honest about it and willing to take some feedback when people are going to call you on it.

George is describing a range of decision-making options similar to those in the Tannenbaum and Schmidt model of leadership behavior (1958) that I will describe later in the Useful Maps section.

Ken Abrams, an HR executive of Tech Inc., has a similar view of collaboration:

I think labeling of the appropriate decision style was an effective method by which collaboration was achieved. Whether it was a consensus decision or a participative decision or autocratic decision, it was labeled appropriately and the people within the groups knew the kind of decision-making that was going on.

In fact, the participants in this study agreed that consensus decision-making should be used only in a small number of the decisions made in a collaborative organization. In the words of Karen Daniels VP of HR at Tech Inc.:

The leader’s role in decision-making is really important since not every decision is consensus. In fact, very few decisions should probably be consensus. Most of them would be one of the other styles.
Grace Hemmings, executive director of a non-profit that Collab Inc. supports, offers a metaphor for the importance of having conversations about how people engage with each other in collaborative organizations.

On the other hand, too much engagement can exhaust you so much in decision-making that you don’t have time for anything. So, it’s like learning how to deal with your email. You can delete it all and never read it, you can spend your whole life processing email, or you can find a way to engage your engagement in your email.

There were other aspects that entered into their description of collaboration besides clearly communicating the style of decision-making being employed. Keith Rogers, founder of Consult Inc. describes a vision of collaboration that was shared by all three companies.

When an organization moves rather quickly from a hierarchical to a more collaborative style because people don’t trust the process or trust that this is real, they want to be involved in everything. So often the pendulum swings too far and the issue of who should be involved in what decision and what is appropriate is part of facilitative leadership. It’s clear that everybody doesn’t need to be involved with everything, nor do they want to be. To sort out who are the critical stakeholders for each decision and how much involvement is relevant given the nature of the decision is a constant part of leadership any organization has to go through.

Ben Jacobs, the director of training also of Consult Inc., highlights an important learning about decision-making that emerges when an organization has been practicing collaboration for some time.

Employees have said over the years, ‘Listen, we don’t want to participate in the decision. We just want to know who is responsible, what the decision is, and what the impact is on us. We want clarity; we don’t want involvement. There may be some decisions that we want to be involved in, but for the most part you should decide what you think is right and make it clear and consistent.’

I remember in the 80’s we would have meetings on what copiers we should get. People would say, ‘I don’t care. I think it should have this function, but I don’t care what brand it should be.’

Ted Smyth, a central founder of Collab Inc., extends this idea of choosing boundaries, or agreed upon guidelines as to who makes what kinds of decisions in particular circumstances:

So every group that I’ve worked with is faced with the question of how to create meaningful boundaries and at the same time, how to have a dynamic, engaged, informed, informing and informative relationship with the other people or communities that it’s engaged with. That’s a very challenging issue. I would say this issue of boundaries is a big one.
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Also important to the idea of collaboration are the notions of balancing one’s needs with the needs of other individuals and the organization as a whole as well as practicing Inquiry instead of the usual Advocacy. (Senge, 1990) Richard West a former VP of HR in Tech Inc. said:

The notion of people wearing two hats was important; one being the hat that they wore to represent their functional area, the other hat was about what was good for the company. On occasion we would debrief our meetings discussing how much advocacy was there. Was it high advocacy, or was it low advocacy? How much inquiry really occurred, what was the proportion? Did we get into an advocacy loop and just talk at each other and really never move the conversation along?

So instead of being about consensus decision-making, the participants in this study are revealing that collaboration is not about a particular style of making decisions, but rather having clear conversation about which style of decision-making is appropriate from a range of possibilities. Collaboration is having conversations about who needs to be involved in making particular decisions. Collaboration is also talking about how we are making decisions together so we can learn how to make decisions where each member is concerned not only about solutions that are good for him or her, but also for others and for the group as a whole as well. Collaboration is about engaging all aspects of our engagement with each other.

Not only did the participants find collaboration to be deeper than they first expected, they also found achieving this new level of collaboration to be difficult. The next section gives us an idea of the kinds of obstacles they encountered that hindered their progress.
Common Obstacles Encountered

All of the companies in this study said they encountered many obstacles. One common obstacle was that most people think they have more collaboration skills than they really do. As told by Collab Inc.’s Ted Smyth:

My experience in many settings is that people in groups who are interested in collaborative approaches assume that they know more about it and know how to do it better than they actually do. The development of a true capacity for collaboration and deep co-creativity is a capacity that takes time for a group to develop or it takes a very mature group of individuals to accomplish.

Richard West the former VP of HR at Tech Inc., the computer technology company, gives a specific example of people who espoused collaboration while the organization behaved autocratically:

There was an irony in it for me, because culturally there was a perception that everybody had something to say about the decision, when in fact, at least in the engineering side of the business, it was quite autocratic. Only the people at the very top of the engineering organization made the decisions, the fountain of knowledge. Everyone else followed.

Another obstacle that was identified is that we are unfamiliar with collaborative concepts and don’t have many examples to learn from, as told by Grace Hemmings, from the non-profit supported by Collab Inc.:

One of the interesting things is that if everybody in a group is learning this together, it can be rather painful, because you don’t have models to see.

Jack Cummings, an important member of Collab Inc., found that collaboration requires a shift in awareness and the ability to balance different principles and priorities.

In hunting abalone, until you see your first abalone, you can’t see them. As soon as you see your first one, they are everywhere. In some ways I think it’s the same thing around these kinds of new organizational concepts: when you see the first one your perception shifts. It’s really just a perceptual thing of training one’s perception to see something. That just takes time.

Also, balancing the principles is not something we are used to doing. We are used to looking at things like principles as rules and we are just seeing whether or not a decision matches the rules. If we meet a couple of rules, we think we got it right. We are not used to trying to look for the complementary balance points that are required in working collaboratively.
When these companies tried to build collaborative skills in their employees, they ran into another obstacle when they introduced new people into their group as described by Ted Smyth, founder of Collab Inc.

Now a real challenge is when participants who have been through that process of learning to engage in a way that deeply embodies mutual respect, really listening to each other and achieving deep consensus, not superficial agreement, go into groups where others have not had the opportunity to develop those capacities and are carrying on in the same old way, without some support or facilitation. It can be a very awkward, painful, and difficult situation.

Steve Williams, the executive director of the non-profit, Collab Inc., says that when new members are introduced, the group needs to start all over again.

If you have a group of people and they are evolving to a higher level of their ability to work together and then somebody new joins the group, you spiral back down and you start all over again. Every time you add somebody new you have to go back down and start again because that person hasn’t had the experience of working and evolving with that group. I don’t know of any way there is to bypass that.

And adds Mary Dunst, president of Consult Inc.:

For people who join us, who are unaccustomed to having someone just say what they think openly in a meeting, it can be a little shocking.

Yet, with constant turnover, it is very difficult to train everyone. Richard West of Tech Inc. describes what happened there when they made collaboration training a mandatory course for all employees.

The truth of the matter is that we never got above 45% of the company population that had gone through the Collaboration Program, worldwide. What that says is that turnover and just our capacity to do it never got there. So there were always fewer than half of the people in the organization who got the message even though it was a mandatory course.

Another obstacle that was brought up by people in all three companies is an assumption about the huge amount of time it takes to be collaborative. The first quote is from Ted Smyth from Collab Inc:

So, another challenge or difficulty that is often raised by folks is that collaborative approaches are inefficient. They just take too much time.
George Henderson of Consult Inc. has a similar description:

*Often the pressure comes in the reaction of, 'We just don’t have time.' This is particularly true working with clients in the high-tech environments out there. The main reaction is, 'Yeah, it sounds great, but we just don’t have time.'*

Yet there was a distinction made that the process of collaboration isn’t just about making the decision, it’s also about the implementation of the decision. George Henderson of Consult Inc. stated:

*What we are looking at is the continuum between an idea, a decision, and implementation. A decision is just one step along the way and the payoff is in the implementation. So, it might take longer to make the decision, but if people are fully bought in and feel like they helped create whatever it is, the implementation should be a lot less. You have less resistance and if it is a higher quality decision, you don’t have to recycle and solve the problem six times.*

Keith Rogers, the founder of Consult Inc. has a similar view of also considering what happens after making a decision.

*If you are just trying to steamroll something through, the last thing you want to do is to open yourself up to more stakeholder voice, but in the end you are going to have to sell those people.*

To deeply listen to others who have different views can be uncomfortable. Ted Smyth, a founder of Collab Inc., points out how difficult it can be to “stay in the fire” with this process.

*The difficulty is in our being willing to go deep with each other and to stay in the fire when the group dynamic gets really intense and uncomfortable. It is hard to work these issues through in a principled way, trusting that we will come to a creative solution that will be more powerful by virtue of our having worked through all the easy answers and all the compromised approaches that we might otherwise take. It’s wonderful to preach about that, but when you actually try to do it yourself you find out just how difficult it is.*

Ben Jacobs of Consult Inc. shares that it is often easier to play the role of a victim rather than really collaborate:

*Then there is the big issue of employees who often come from a place of feeling victimized and then when they are really given an authentic opportunity for participation, they don’t really know how and it’s more comfortable to play the victim role, or the disempowered role. So collaboration is really difficult to learn how to do.*

We have images of what we think is expected of us as leaders and it is difficult to go against this heroic image explains Karen Daniels, the current VP of HR in Tech Inc.:
...getting managers to let go of always being the boss, always having the answer. Being able to care about other people, being able to hear other opinions, that doesn't come naturally to a number of people... It's really hard and it is really complex.

Keith Rogers of Consult Inc. finds that collaborative leaders are perceived as being weak.

They perceive it as weakness to be consultative and collaborative; it actually takes a much stronger leader to be able to do that. But you have to twist that around to understand maybe you are not strong enough to be collaborative.

Tom Masters, director of training at Tech Inc., says this perception of softness is even more important than the time factor.

Time is the stated excuse, but I think it is the softness. It's hard for people to see that it is really going to help. It is easier to see that data helps.

He also describes the difficulty of balancing a lot of vague factors:

Doing collaboration really well is really, really hard. You have to have your hands on a whole bunch of dials and it's not always in focus what levers you can pull or what dials you can turn.

Even when highly trained in collaboration skills, Jack Cummings indicates it is still hard to do.

The irony is that people who are interacting that way are among the most forward thinking people on the planet, but still have trouble interacting in this new collaborative way.

And when the collaboration skills are there, it is common to revert back to older ways of behaving when under pressure says Ken Abrams of Tech Inc.:

When people are under pressure they return to old ways of working and revert to type so to speak. So, under pressure, people revert to individual performance and move away from the team to some degree.

Jack Cummings of Collab Inc. also observes this tendency to revert to the old familiar ways:

These pressures to revert to more conventional, recognizable forms of interaction, even if they are not the ones you really hoped for, but at least they are familiar. So when you are uncertain, the tendency is to go back to what is familiar.

The list of difficulties in working collaboratively is long, from people thinking they have more collaborative skills than they do, to the difficulty in training everyone in collaborative skills, to
assumptions and expectations of leaders and the time it takes to collaborate, and the difficulty in listening deeply with each other when it gets rough. There are very few role models to look to in learning this difficult style of behavior. I did not hear anyone say they got past these obstacles. Rather they continually lived with the obstacles as part of the collaborative journey. Before embarking upon a journey toward mutually respectful, co-creative, and meaningful work, we need to understand and be willing to face these difficulties.

So, now that we understand the obstacles these pioneering organizations encountered on their journey, what kinds of behaviors and practices did the participants find helpful?

**Provisions that Help Along the Way**

There were several practices that people in all three companies claimed were helpful in supporting collaborative work. Ken Abrams an HR executive from Tech Inc. describes how modeling and reinforcing the desired behavior from the leader of the organization is critical.

> The CEO supported it personally, he supported it verbally and he supported it as a role model visibly. Probably more importantly he supported it in his team to the degree that his team would come out and be enthusiastic supporters of this stuff because they knew that he would challenge any senior VP that had a team that was operating in a very different manner. So, there were implications that you really needed to be on board with the system here.

In fact, on-going modeling of the desired behavior is critical to the long-term success of collaboration. Jack Cummings of Collab Inc. the small non-profit, says it this way:

> The modeling of the process is critical to the continued success of the process. If it wasn’t modeled, or the leader started forgetting about it, it would quickly start falling apart.

The need for training all employees was brought up by Karen Daniels VP of HR at Tech Inc.

> It is reliant on a team having the same vision about leadership the manager has, so it is just solving half of the equation if you only train the managers. Don’t you need to train all of the employees who are part of a collaborative team? That, I thought, was a very powerful concept.

Widespread shared learning of collaborative skills was also important to Collab Inc. as described by Grace Hemmings, Executive Director of a non-profit that Collab Inc. supports.
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It’s really important for people who take these new steps to have ways that they can share them with others because most organizations that would try something like this don’t have the ability to be able to train every individual on how to work collaboratively. I’m not even sure that would work.

Grace also describes another requirement of collaboration, the willingness to accept that people may describe the same thing many different ways:

Accepting that people will have their own words for the feeling that you share in your heart is one of the bases for collaboration.

Being willing to accept many different right answers:

When you start from the top down, you tend to think we need to come up with an answer that is going to work for everyone. When you start from the many up, you have many answers to begin with and it might be easier to recognize that there are many right answers. The idea is that you can pick one that is right for you, but you can’t tell everybody else what theirs is.

As well as holding multiple statements of purpose side by side in your mind:

So what we are doing is asking people to hold these values and the principles and the statement of purpose side by side with what they are using now while we think and work with it for awhile. So instead of saying, you need these, we said, just hold these side-by-side with the ones that you are using. All of a sudden people had to think about what they were using, but they were not having a set imposed on them.

What this section revealed for me was the importance of an organization to make collaboration a visible priority in their operation. It needs to be visible in the behavior of the leadership and visibly supported in the formal and informal training and support available to all employees.

The training and support needs to be focused not only on the skills of decision-making—how to have conversations about decision-making styles and whom to involve in decisions—but also on the interpersonal skills that reveal that not everyone works, thinks or acts in the same way.

A concept of collaboration is emerging for me from the interviews that is mostly about working together in a way in which we can not only get our work done, but also intentionally talk about what works for each of us and all of us together while not imposing our views upon others. If we get close to achieving that, our study participants tell us that the journey is worth the effort.
The Journey is Worth It

Despite all of these obstacles, people in all three of the organizations interviewed felt that the journey they had taken was worth the effort. In the words of Ken Abrams, HR Director at Tech Inc.:

We managed to bring in a lot of new people and still develop a culture such that the company was rated as one of the Fortune 500 best places to work. So, yes, I think overall it was a success. I think the company actually achieved outcomes they hadn’t expected in terms of improved employee satisfaction, improved career development, retention and loyalty and teams being more effective.

Jack Cummings of Collab Inc. recalls how it got easier in his own experience practicing collaboration for several years at a non-profit.

After about two years, decisions started to be made not only the way I hoped, but better than I had hoped. Decisions were just made better than any of us could have made on our own.

In addition to eventually making decisions faster, Jack also saw improved quality of work:

When people were applying the principles, the decisions were made faster, cleaner, and clearer. The policies we generated were simpler and more understandable. It didn’t generate as much procedural overhead and it would enable people to get on with their work.

Keith Rogers of Consult Inc. claims that collaboration produces superior results:

In terms of results, there is a great deal of evidence to say that multiple minds working collaboratively can produce more creative solutions than individuals working alone. In almost every dimension you can think of, collaborative decisions, if done correctly, far outshine individuals competing with each other and trying to throw solutions at each other.

One concrete example given by Keith Rogers, founder of Consult Inc. gives a clear image of how collaboration can produce superior results:

The military has been one of the biggest purchasers of this kind of services and technology. They learned that if everyone in a military team doesn’t understand the mission and each other’s roles, if the leader gets shot or taken out, then the total command and control group falls apart. But if everybody understands each other’s roles and what the objectives are, they are much more resilient.
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Ted Smyth of Collab Inc. claims that collaboration gets more efficient with practice:

> On the whole though, if a group stays with it and develops a more mature capacity for collaboration, in my experience over time, collaborative decisions can be made more effectively and more creatively than decisions that don’t involve input from all parties. This issue of inefficiency doesn’t necessarily pertain as it does earlier in the process.

And finally a look at what Grace Hemmings, executive director of a non-profit supported by Collab Inc. sees as her view of collaboration:

> After initial consensus is achieved on the big ideas of the organization, such as the center, purpose, values, beliefs, it would be good for there to be as few decisions made that required universal agreement and consensus and buy-in as possible. I always know when I start to get off track when I notice I am making too many decisions for everyone.

The sense that I am left with after living with the information shared with me in these interviews is that collaboration has less to do with a particular way of making decisions than I originally thought. It has more to do with a way of thinking, a way of being, that spirals ever deeper into ourselves and opens us up to the possibility of accepting the deep differences we have in the way we see the world. It has more to do with exposing and letting go of our need to make decisions than it does in making decisions at all. It is about stepping outside of ourselves—our viewpoints and our assumptions—and being curious about what we find. It may be difficult work requiring constant learning and re-learning, but it sounds from listening to the participants of this study to be a worthy kind of growth and maturity.

In the next section, I will identify and share with the reader those concepts in the literature that I found useful in making sense of the interview data.
As I reflected upon the interviews, four questions emerged for me as important for further inquiry:

1. From my own experience as well as from many of the people I interviewed, there seems to be something very deep going on that compels people to want to look for alternatives to traditional hierarchical structures of working together. Even though it turns out to be difficult, what leads us to want to undertake this journey?

2. If consensus decision-making is just one of many decision-making styles we can choose from and clearly articulate which one is currently in use in a collaborative organization, how do we go about choosing decision-making styles?

3. It was said in the interviews that it is not just important to clearly identify what decision-making style we are using, we also need skill in clearly talking about all aspects of our engagement with each other, accept multiple right answers, and not impose our views on others. Although this may sound like an easy to do, a long list of difficulties in the attempt was also described. Why is this journey difficult?

4. It was common in this study for people to first think the answer beyond traditional forms of working together was consensus decision-making. Then, after experiencing the quagmire of relying only on consensus, a deeper and more difficult journey is revealed where clear directions and landmarks are absent and a destination is never reached. Why does collaboration continue to be a journey?

The rest of this section will explore each of these questions in turn, describing models and concepts that I found useful along the way.
What Leads Us To Want to Undertake This Journey?

Many of the study participants in the first section of the interviews titled, Longing to Travel, described a deep desire for people to be working in more collaborative, co-creative, and meaningful ways. This description of the desire for collaboration bears a striking resemblance to the words used by Fred and Merrelyn Emery in identifying six psychological requirements for humans to engage in productive activity. (Rehm 1994) The Emerys say that humans need:

1. Adequate elbow room (the sense that they have reasonable control over their work)
2. Opportunity to learn on the job and keep learning
3. An optimal level of variety (variety in the types of work done)
4. Mutual support and respect
5. Meaningfulness (work that is meaningful to the workers)
6. A desirable future (personal growth and increased skills)

The Emerys go on to define two principles of organizational design:

• **Design Principle 1**: a hierarchically-structured relationship between supervisor and subordinate based upon control and coordination by managers. They believe this approach fails to satisfy people’s psychological requirements for work.

• **Design Principle 2**: a self-managing approach based on people’s ability to share and allocate among themselves the requirements of control and coordination of their tasks. They believe this approach directly addresses the human psychological requirements for work.

According to the Emerys, those people who work in hierarchically-structured organizations with supervisor-subordinate relationships based upon managerial control and coordination will experience a competitive structure where supervisors will amplify what makes themselves look good regardless of the impact on those who report to them.

Maslow recognized the pain generated by the competitive structure of working in organizations designed upon Design Principle 1 (1965) when he described self-actualized adults working in traditional hierarchical organizations:
“The more grown people are, the worse authoritarian management will work, the less well people will function in the authoritarian situation, and the more they will hate it.”

Returning to the question of why people want to undertake this journey, Fred and Merrelyn Emery say that it is because organizations built upon Design Principle 1 do not meet basic human psychological needs. People will feel an increasing desire to work in a way that is based on Design Principle 2: a way that is interdependent, shares responsibility, gives mutual support and respect, and allows them to do meaningful work. This rings true from my own experience and sounds almost exactly like the quotes listed in the first section of the interviews titled, Longing to Travel.

As a response to this longing, the participants of this study go on to describe a tendency to focus on relieving the pain as they look for alternative ways of working together. This focus led them to look primarily to consensus as a way of making decisions together. The structure of consensus, when everyone is equal and all viewpoints are honored, directly addresses the human psychological requirements of having reasonable control over work by participating, of mutual support and respect, and of working interdependently. However, as the experience of using consensus as the primary way of making decisions grew, I was told how consensus by itself leads to paralysis and an inability to make decisions.

The participants solved this problem of paralysis by choosing from a range of possible decision-making techniques, of which consensus is just one possibility, and then clearly articulating the style being used. But how to choose the best style?
How Do We Go About Choosing Decision-Making Styles?

Ken Abrams from Tech Inc., as well as several other people I interviewed, described the importance of looking at a range of possible decision-making styles:

> Whether it was a consensus decision or a participative decision or autocratic decision, it was labeled appropriately and the people within the groups knew the kind of decision-making that was going on.

In one of the most widely-read Harvard Business Review articles, Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt offer a model that defines seven distinct styles of decision-making as well as criteria for choosing a style that is appropriate for a given situation. This model is described in the table shown in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum of Leadership Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makes Decision and Announces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Uncertainty Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Confidence Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Time Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Problem Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision with Low Complexity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Continuum of Leadership Behavior (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958)

In the first row of this table, the range of possible decision-making styles is shown, starting with the most boss-centered approaches on the left and the most subordinate-centered approaches on the right. In each of the rows below it are aspects of the environment or the decision that needs to be considered in determining whether the decision-making style is appropriate to the situation. All of these factors need to be balanced and aligned in choosing the appropriate decision-making style for a given situation.
For example, the appropriate use of consensus decision-making, which in this model is labeled “Defines limits, asks group to make decision” would be when the manager has fairly high confidence in his employees to make good decisions, the employees are highly mature and independent, there is low time pressure, the problem is very important and the decision is highly complex. An example of an appropriate authoritarian decision in this model would be one where the environment is stable, the employees are new or dependent on guidance, there is considerable time pressure, the problem is not very important, and is simple to analyze.

Tannenbaum and Schmidt go on to stress the importance of being “honest and clear in describing what authority he is keeping and what role he is asking his subordinates to assume in solving a particular problem.” (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958) This need for clarity for what decision-making style is in use aligns very closely to what our study participants said was an important aspect of collaboration beyond using only consensus. It may well be that their views were actually influenced by this framework, which is widely read and included in other authors' work.

In answering the question of how to choose an appropriate decision-making style, Tannenbaum and Schmidt’s model gives a clear method of looking at the alignment of factors surrounding the decision and choosing the method that best balances the six factors considered. Once chosen, the model has the manager make his choice clear to the affected group, very much like the process described as collaborative in the interviews in the section, What Is Collaboration Beyond Consensus?

The collective story then moves on to describing collaboration as a way of making the intention of collaboration clearly visible throughout the organization and modeled by the leaders, of clearly having an organizational conversation about how work is being done together, and of a long list of skills and difficulties encountered in the attempt. It doesn’t sound so hard on the surface, yet it was clearly described by the group as being very difficult.

Why it is that collaboration is difficult is the next question I want to explore in this paper.
Why is This Journey Difficult?

While I started out thinking that collaboration was mostly about decision-making, it appears from the collective story told to me in the interviews that choosing a decision-making style and clearly articulating that style to the group is not enough to describe collaboration. The study participants also spoke of other, softer skills like wearing two hats, “one being the hat that they wore to represent their functional area, the other hat was about what was good for the company,” as Richard West of Tech Inc. told us. They talked of being able to engage each other in talking about the way work is being done together. They talked about a perception shift, a dawning of awareness of the skills necessary for collaboration. As well as what Ted Smyth of Collab Inc. told us, “being willing to go deep with each other and to stay in the fire when the group dynamic gets really intense and uncomfortable.” There seems to be something very deep, important, and difficult about this level of collaboration. I was intrigued to understand what this deeper level of collaboration was about.

Primary and Secondary Mentality

Herb Shepard offers the concept of Primary and Secondary Mentality that may shed some light on the behavior of wearing two hats.

Primary Mentality is defined by Shepard as individuals having the assumption of being separate from the world and of having to adapt to the environment by satisfying their own individual needs. Primary mentality seeks survival and well-being by controlling the external environment. A person operating under these assumptions would attain his or her own goals only at the expense of others, or would have to sacrifice some of his or her own potential so others might get their share. A person would cultivate a garden for his or her own sake, not for the sake of the garden. (1965)

From this description, Primary Mentality seems to me to be an important assumption underlying the Emerys’ Design Principle 1, based on the concept of placing the responsibility for coordination and control one level above where the work is to be done. This external control reflects the idea of controlling others in an outside environment to achieve goals, a characteristic of Primary Mentality. It seems to me to be the assumptions of Primary Mentality which lead to
the establishment of hierarchical organizational structures using Design Principle 1, which, as shown earlier, do not meet people’s psychological requirements for work.

**Secondary Mentality**, on the other hand, is defined as an individual holding the assumption of being connected and adapting by satisfying the needs of both the individual and the group in which he or she is a member. The individual utilizing Secondary Mentality would assume that personal goals couldn’t be attained without the active collaboration of others and that growth of self is achieved, in part, through the expansion of self to include others, so it would follow that concern for others is also concern for oneself. (Shepard, 1965)

This description of Secondary Mentality sounds like it is exactly describing the behavior of wearing two hats, as described in the interviews. It is the ability to hold both the needs of the individual and the needs of the whole group as concepts in the mind and balance them both at the same time.

Yet these concepts of Primary and Secondary Mentality are very deep psychological assumptions about how a person perceives his or her place in the world. It is therefore no surprise that it has been shown to be very difficult to change from Primary to Secondary Mentality. It requires time and maturation or a deeply powerful training experience such as the laboratory T-group to make this transition. (Shepard, 1965)

**Kegan’s Model of Mental Development**

As for the other behaviors described in the interviews such as the ability to engage each other in talking about the way work is being done together and the dawning of awareness of collaboration skills, I found that Kegan’s model of human mental development to be helpful in understanding what is going on. (1994)

The central concept of his model is a series of stages of mental development with each stage supporting more complex sets of assumptions about the world. Each stage describes a distinct way of thinking that focuses on what kinds of concepts people experience in their thinking and what kinds of concepts they are able to talk about. Kegan refers to this as a Subject/Object developmental model of adult thinking.
Figure 3. describes the essence of Kegan’s model. It is a complex model that took a whole book to describe and yet can also be deceptively simple. The basic underlying concept is that we mentally develop to a next stage by externalizing (objectizing) what we experience at any one stage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Subject (What I experience:)</th>
<th>Object (What I can talk about:)</th>
<th>Perception of the world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Infant - Toddler</td>
<td>• Perceptions • Impulses</td>
<td>• Movement • Sensations</td>
<td>Personal isolated experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>• Myself and my needs.</td>
<td>• Perceptions • Impulses</td>
<td>Isolated self having experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Traditionalism</td>
<td>• My interpersonal relationships • Difference from others</td>
<td>• Myself and my needs.</td>
<td>Self having relationship to other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Modernism</td>
<td>• Balancing multiple types of relationships • Self-Authorship (self-regulation, self-formation)</td>
<td>• My interpersonal relationships • Difference from others</td>
<td>Balancing Multiple Relationships Self-Authorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Post-Modernism</td>
<td>• Myself integrated into a web of relationships • Multiple Ideals (paradox, opposites held at the same time)</td>
<td>• Balancing multiple types of relationships • Self-Authorship (self-regulation, self-formation)</td>
<td>Self defined within Web of Relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This movement from subject to object occurs at each succeeding level. For example, movement from Stage 2 to Stage 3 takes place in the teenage years to the frustration of many parents. This is where teenagers need to move from a place of knowing about their impulses and a concept of

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Figure 3: The Five Stages of Consciousness (Kegan, 1994)
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self to a way of thinking that allows them to talk about relationships with others that have different ways of thinking. The teenage years are full of excitement and heartache as they experience subordinating themselves to the needs of the various relationships they are intent on exploring. It’s no longer about just “me,” it becomes a matter of being about “us”, the relationship, where “me” has moved from being everything to being just one object in relationship to another equally important “you.” It is very hard to learn not to be caught up in only thinking about “me” as so many mothers have chided their children. This movement from subject to object at each stage continues on through the rest of the model.

What Kegan’s model contributes to my understanding of collaboration is that the behaviors the interviews described as being necessary for collaboration turn out to be behaviors that require Stage 5 mental constructs. The ability to talk about how we are engaging with each other requires that we be able to consciously choose from the multiple appropriate ways that we could relate to each other – a Stage 5 mental construct. The ability to consciously talk about choosing what method of decision-making to be used is another example of talking about a process of balancing several ways of how we will relate to each other – also a Stage 5 mental construct. Holding multiple right answers in your mind at the same time--a paradox--is also a Stage 5 mental construction. These are not just straightforward concepts to be grasped as one would facts in a classroom. These are complex constructions of mental assumptions about ourselves and how we are able to talk about the world. They are also developmental, which means that to get to Stage 5, all of the other stages need to be sequentially reached and transcended before being able to operate consistently at Stage 5 thinking.

Kegan (1994) states in his book that most of the adults currently in this culture develop to either Stage 3 or Stage 4 mental constructs, with people at Stage 5 comprising less than 3% of the population. So a desire to move into a deep co-creative, collaborative style of working involving the skill to talk about choosing how we are engaging in relationship with each other would then mean, for most people, taking on a very difficult process of personal development from where they are to Stage 5 mental constructs through any stages in between. As most of us have experienced in ourselves or in raising teenagers who are deeply involved in developing between Stage 2 and Stage 3, each step of this kind of development takes several years to unfold and it is very difficult to experience. One difference with this situation is that with less than 3%
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of the population to serve as role models for the desired behavior the growth to Stage 5 is even more difficult than for previous stages of development.

Whether viewed as moving from Primary to Secondary Mentality or the movement toward Stage 5 mental constructs, (in fact Secondary Mentality is a Stage 5 mental construct,) there is deep personal learning and transformation involved in reaching a state that supports collaborative behavior. Maslow (1968, pp. 180) said,

\[
\text{Self-knowledge and self-improvement is very difficult for most people. It usually needs great courage and long struggle.}
\]

The difficulty involved in this kind of personal growth and the scarcity of people to serve as role models is what I believe is at the heart of why collaboration is difficult and aligns very closely with the journey described in the interviews.

This leads us to the final question to be addressed, why does collaboration itself turn out to be a journey? Why isn’t it something that can be mastered and arrived at as a destination? Why does the journey keep on going beyond any terminus?
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Why is Collaboration a Journey?

When I started this research, I not only thought that collaboration was about the way we went about making decisions together, I also saw it as a place to be. I saw it as a home where I could seek refuge from the pain I felt from working in hierarchical organizations. Yet no one in the interviews described it as a place. Not only did the interviews describe the sequence of first thinking consensus would be the complete solution, then moving to announcing a decision-making style, to a deeper sense of trusting others to make local decisions, they also described a deeper level of journey: Even when collaboration was achieved, there was this continual relearning of collaborative skills as members flowed into and out of the group. It sounded more like cyclical and repetitive learning than a final destination where people could stop and rest.

One aspect of this continual learning can be understood when it is realized that any organization attempting to be collaborative will be a mixture of both Primary and Secondary Mentality. Because of the flow of people into and out of an organization, the length of time it takes to develop collaborative assumptions, and the developmental nature of these assumptions, it is not possible to develop everyone to Shepard’s Secondary Mentality or Kegan’s Stage 5 mental constructs. Richard West of Tech Inc. said they were not able to get more than 45% of their population to go through a four- or five-day training course in these skills even when it was a mandatory course and a priority for the company. There will always be new people in the organization and in every work group who are in the process of developing the assumptions necessary for collaboration. So each group and organization will have the experience of continually relearning how it collaborates.

In addition to this continual relearning, since people who are using Shepard’s Secondary Mentality and Kegan’s Stage 5 assumptions have a connected view of themselves, of satisfying their own needs through others, this constant flow of people will mean there are always new people to learn from. At even another level, Shepard says that, “secondary assumptions facilitate growth, change, and adaptation to new environmental challenges and opportunities.” (1965) So the organization itself will adapt and change from the effects of Secondary Mentality creating new opportunities for learning.
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So there is a constant flow of factors causing collaboration to be a continuous learning process at multiple levels; learning more and more deeply about oneself and learning more deeply about the always different kinds of people to work with. To be willing to collaborate means a willingness to be committed to staying in a place of deep personal learning as a way of being, not as a means to get to a restful location.

Instead of collaboration being mostly about bringing others into my life, it turns out that collaboration is more about reaching and learning deeper inside of myself. This paradox was yet another surprise for me as a result of doing this research.
Traveler’s Tips

When I started this study I, like many of the people described in the data, longed to find an alternative to working in a traditional hierarchical structure. I also was drawn to the notion that my own answer could be found in a specific style of decision-making, one where the best of differences would win. In the process of doing this study I have found:

1. Collaboration is not found in a specific style of decision-making. It is being aware of, and the ability to talk about, the style of decision-making and having that be clear with everyone participating.

2. Collaboration is actually more connected with a set of basic assumptions that guide our decisions as the unseen magnetic forces of the earth pull on the needle of a compass giving us direction during a journey.

3. These basic assumptions are gained through deep personal growth that takes time and courage. This development is difficult and there are very few resources and role models to rely on in support of that development.

4. Many of the difficulties with collaboration are actually symptoms of people at different developmental stages all struggling to see the world in the same way, yet mentally constructing it in different ways.

5. Instead of concentrating on overcoming or fixing the obstacles encountered, which I am now seeing as symptoms, we should be concentrating on supporting the development of people’s underlying assumptions to that of their next stage.

6. What I originally thought was an effort to be undertaken with a group outside of the individual, turns out to be a developmental journey deep within to be taken with others so the individual can uncover and become aware of the structure of his or her hidden assumptions and question them so they can be developed to a new level.
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7. What I first thought was about making decisions together, turned out to be more about a personal letting go of the need to make as many decisions and developing the inner trust necessary to allow others make decisions that affect them.

8. And lastly, my initial concept of collaboration was that of being a place to go to. Instead it turns out to be a continuous journey of learning and discovery of the deepest parts of self and of others.

As a way of creating collaborative organizational behavior, Otto Laske reaches this same point of view and recommends that individual developmental coaching be used for all managers as an important tool for organizations because it uses an on-going developmental relationship that reaches and exposes the underlying thinking structure behind management behavior instead of treating symptoms of the real problem.

> Developmental coaching primarily focuses on why the behavior that is observed occurs in the first place. While changes in behavior may accomplish a specific organizational goal, they may be temporary and of limited effectiveness if not supported by a change in the underlying theory-in-use that generates that behavior. … This gain in self-awareness is supported by the maturation of cognitive abilities. (Laske, 2002, pp. 724, 725)

The conclusion of this paper is that, as practitioners of organization development, we need to be aware of the depth and difficulty of the journey we ask our clients and ourselves to engage in. Much of our work in organization development is in helping client organizations become aware of and demonstrate a wider variety of possible behaviors in order to meet the challenges before them. To do that, our clients need to develop skill in mentally stepping outside of their current situation and talking about their choices with others. Since this behavior requires Kegan’s Stage 5 mental constructs to support it, we, as OD practitioners, need to be aware that effective organization development is asking our clients to do nothing less than enter into a journey as deep and as difficult as the journey towards human collaboration. Are they ready for such a journey? Are we?
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References


Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What were you trying to accomplish?
2. How did you want decisions to be made in the organization?
3. Can you give me an example of a discussion that led to an important group decision and the outcomes of that decision?
4. Have you felt pressure to change the way the organization as a whole makes decisions?
   a. From outside stakeholders? How was that pressure conveyed? Why do you think the pressure was applied?
   b. From internal team-members? How was that pressure conveyed? Why do you think the pressure was applied?
5. Do you think group decisions are now usually made in the way that you hoped?
   a. Why or why not?
6. What about your current group decision-making process works well?
   a. What doesn’t work so well?
7. How good are the group decisions made by your organization?
   a. Can you tell me about how you made a decision that had a really good outcome?
   b. Can you tell me about how you made a decision that had an outcome that could have been better?
8. What about your experience did I not ask about that you feel I should have?