

THE SOIL OF COLLABORATION: CULTIVATING CONDITIONS FOR WORKING TOGETHER

Britt Yamamoto

In my years working across sectors—from agriculture to academia, nonprofits to corporate partnerships—I’ve seen collaboration take many forms. Sometimes it thrives, while other times, despite good intentions, it falters. The difference often lies not in the people or the vision, but in the conditions we create for collaboration to take root.

We engage in group projects, neighborhood collectives, corporate departments, professional associations, and

boards of directors with the belief that collaboration is beneficial. Yet, we often leave these experiences realizing that collaboration is challenging.

In organizations and groups, collaboration can be surprisingly difficult. From dreaded school group projects to professional partnerships, many of us have more stories of dysfunction than success. There are those who dominate, those who disengage, and those who avoid conflict yet contribute to dysfunction.

The challenge begins with the term itself. Collaboration is widely endorsed, yet its meaning is often vague. It is rarely questioned, much like ideals such as “peace” or “success.” People encourage collaboration with phrases like “Work together!” or “You’re on the same team!”—but rarely provide guidance on how to make it work effectively.

The real struggle lies in creating the right conditions for collaboration to succeed. It’s less about the inevitable weak link and more about misaligned expectations and a lack of shared language for discussing collaboration’s nuances.

We agree that collaboration is good, but what does it actually mean? How do we each define it within a specific context? Where do our intentions align, and where do they differ? Until we clarify these questions, collaboration remains a gamble—brilliant when it works, frustrating when it fails. Without clarity, we limit our ability to connect and collaborate effectively.

From Farming to Leadership: My Journey in Collaboration

My understanding of collaboration didn’t begin in a boardroom or a leadership seminar—it began on the farm and in the soil. Before I ever stepped into the worlds of academia, nonprofits, or corporate partnerships, I spent years working the land, where I witnessed firsthand that success is never just about effort—it’s about conditions.

Farming is a collaborative act at its core. The soil, water, climate, and human effort must align to yield a harvest. No single factor alone—no matter how strong—can override poor conditions. Even the most experienced farmer cannot will crops to grow if the soil is depleted, if rain does not come, or if pests go unchecked. The same holds true for collaboration. A team’s passion, expertise, or shared mission will struggle to bear fruit if the conditions for working together are not intentionally cultivated.

This realization took root when I co-founded an agricultural initiative driven by a shared vision:

to create a working farm that would serve as a hub for education, sustainability, and community engagement. Alongside three partners, I was eager to build something that blended food production with meaningful connection.

But despite our shared enthusiasm, collaboration proved far more complex than we expected. We had the same broad goal—building a farm-based learning space—but we never explicitly defined what success meant to each of us. Over time, differing expectations surfaced:

- Were we primarily educators, farmers, or business owners?
- Was our focus on growing food, teaching others to farm, or creating a sustainable financial model?
- What did each of us truly need—personally and professionally—from this venture?

These were the unspoken questions that should have been addressed early on. Instead, we assumed alignment where there was ambiguity, and over time, small misalignments became major tensions. Without clear structures for decision-making and communication, our partnership—despite our deep respect for each other—became strained.

It wasn’t a failure of effort, passion, or vision. It was a failure of conditions. We had planted the seeds of collaboration without fully preparing the soil.

Lessons from the Field

As I transitioned into nonprofit leadership and corporate partnerships, I saw the same pattern repeat.

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passion, or vision.*

Whether launching large-scale initiatives, designing leadership programs, or working with executive teams, I encountered collaborations that struggled—not because the people weren’t talented or committed, but because the conditions for success had not been established.

In one instance, I worked with a corporate partner that had pledged significant investment in leadership development. On paper, it seemed like the perfect collaboration—our values aligned, our resources complemented one another, and the impact potential was enormous. Yet, as the work unfolded, a familiar tension emerged.

The corporate partner focused on quantifiable outputs—metrics, reports, and training completion rates.

Our nonprofit focused on transformational experiences—leadership development that fostered deep, long-term change.

Both approaches were valid, but they were fundamentally different in how they defined success. Without a shared understanding, we fell into a familiar trap: we assumed we were working toward the same goal, but we were actually operating from different playbooks.

This realization solidified my belief that collaboration—whether on a farm, in a nonprofit, or within a corporate boardroom—is not just about finding the right people or having a great vision. It’s about the conditions we create that allow people to work effectively together.

It was through these experiences—first in farming, then in leadership—that I developed a new perspective on collaboration: if we want partnerships to thrive, we must first cultivate the soil before planting the seeds.

The Collaboration Spectrum: A Model for Effective Partnerships

Over time, I developed a model to clarify different levels of collaboration. Not every partnership needs to be transformational, but every collaboration requires clarity—about purpose, expectations, and the level of commitment required from each participant. Without this clarity, misalignment can lead to frustration, inefficiency, and eventual failure.

Collaboration exists on a spectrum, ranging from basic exchanges of resources to deeply integrated partnerships, as shown in Figure 1. Understanding where a collaboration falls on this spectrum—and

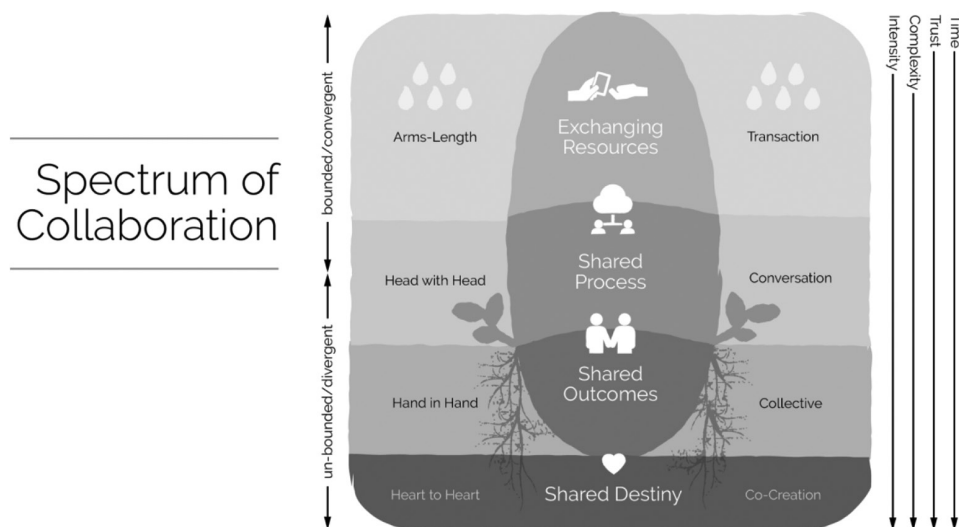


FIGURE 1. SPECTRUM OF COLLABORATION

ensuring that all parties have a shared understanding of that level—is critical to success.

1. Exchanging Resources: The Transactional Level

At its most basic, collaboration functions as an exchange of resources—funding, expertise, services, or materials. This is a transactional partnership where both parties know exactly what they are giving and receiving.

Example: A nonprofit partners with a foundation to receive grant funding in exchange for reporting on specific outcomes. Both parties have clear deliverables, but the relationship is primarily an exchange of resources rather than an integrated collaboration.

Potential Pitfall: If one party assumes deeper engagement while the other expects a simple transaction, tension arises. For instance, if the nonprofit assumes the funder will provide strategic guidance and mentorship—when in reality, the foundation only intended to provide funding—the collaboration may falter.

2. Shared Process: Adaptive Collaboration

At this level, collaboration involves ongoing dialogue, mutual adaptation, and the ability to shift approaches based on emerging needs. Rather than a one-time exchange, partners work together iteratively, refining their approach as they go.

Example: A coalition of community organizations comes together to improve local food access. They share data, refine their programs based on collective feedback, and adjust their strategies in real time to meet changing needs.

Potential Pitfall: If roles and decision-making authority are unclear, frustration can arise. Without a clear structure, one organization may feel like they are adapting more than others, leading to resentment and disengagement.

3. Shared Outcomes: Strategic Alignment

Collaboration moves beyond transactions and adaptation when partners define success collectively.

In this model, outcomes are co-owned, and all participants are accountable for the results—not just their individual contributions.

Example: A university and a technology company co-develop an AI ethics curriculum. Instead of simply funding research (transactional) or adjusting content (adaptive), both organizations are deeply invested in ensuring the program's long-term success. Their reputations and missions are tied to the results.

Potential Pitfall: Without explicit agreements on decision-making authority and accountability, conflicts can arise. If one partner values innovation while the other prioritizes risk management, disagreements on execution can derail progress.

4. Shared Purpose and Destiny: The Deepest Form of Collaboration

At the highest level, collaboration is fully integrated and mission-aligned. Partners are not just working toward a shared goal; they are interdependent, shaping each other's futures in profound ways. Trust, shared leadership, and deep commitment define this kind of partnership.

Example: Two impact-driven companies merge to create a social enterprise, fully integrating their operations, governance, and values. The success of one is directly tied to the success of the other, requiring complete trust and alignment.

Potential Pitfall: This level of collaboration demands long-term commitment. If trust erodes, or if external pressures shift priorities, the breakdown of such deep integration can be catastrophic.

Why This Model Matters

Many collaborations fail because partners assume they are operating at one level when, in reality, they are not. A nonprofit may think they are engaging in Shared Outcomes, while their funder sees it as a transactional arrangement. A startup and a university may believe they have a Shared Purpose, only to realize they never fully defined what success means for each.

The rhetoric of collaboration often didn't align with reality.

Successful collaboration starts with naming where you are on the spectrum and ensuring that all participants agree. When expectations and intentions are aligned from the start, partnerships are more likely to thrive.

Lessons from Experience: When Collaboration Meets Reality

After my time in agriculture, I transitioned into nonprofit and corporate sectors, where I encountered a familiar issue: the rhetoric of collaboration often didn't align with reality.

When the partnership ended abruptly, we were left with financial instability and the deeper realization that we had overlooked the fundamental questions that should have been addressed from the beginning.

Cultivating the Conditions for Successful Collaboration

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that collaboration is not about working harder—it's about working with a clearer purpose and intent. Here are three key principles for cultivating successful collaborations:

Clarify Intentions and Expectations from the Start: What does success look like? What resources will each party contribute? What are the dealbreakers?

Build Structures, Not Just Relationships: Personal alignment is important, but without formal agreements,

roles, and accountability mechanisms, even the best partnerships can unravel.

Recognize When to Walk Away: Not every collaboration is meant to last. If misalignment becomes evident, it's better to exit gracefully than to force a partnership that no longer serves its purpose.

Moving Forward: The Future of Working Together

In my work today—whether guiding leadership teams, designing global gatherings, or fostering multi-sector partnerships—I return to the same agricultural metaphor: collaboration is soil-based work. It requires tending, patience, and an understanding that quick fixes won't yield sustainable growth.

Yet, in a world that prizes speed, efficiency, and short-term gains, collaboration is often treated as an afterthought—assumed to be inherent, rather than cultivated with intention. The result? Partnerships that begin with enthusiasm but end in frustration, misalignment, or burnout. The most successful collaborations don't just happen; they are built with care, designed for resilience, and sustained by trust.

One of the clearest examples of a more generative form of collaboration comes from Alan Mulally, the former Chief Executive Officer/CEO of Ford Motor Company. His Our “Working Together”© Leadership and Management System transformed Ford from a struggling auto giant into one of the most remarkable business turnarounds in modern history. Mulally understood that effective collaboration isn't just about getting people in the same room or assigning tasks—it's about creating the

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conditions for people to contribute meaningfully, with clarity, transparency, and accountability.

Mulally's "Working Together" Principles and Practices may appear simple but are profoundly effective:

- Everyone is included—True collaboration requires broad engagement, ensuring that diverse voices, perspectives, and expertise are valued.
- Compelling vision, comprehensive strategy, and relentless implementation—Collaboration thrives when there is a shared vision that is clearly communicated and consistently reinforced.
- Clear performance goals and single-point accountability—Successful partnerships establish explicit expectations, ensuring that responsibilities are clearly defined and aligned with the broader mission.
- Positive, transparent, and trusting environment—Trust is the foundation of collaboration. Without it, partnerships collapse under the weight of miscommunication and hidden agendas.
- Proactive problem-solving with facts and data—Collaboration is not about avoiding challenges but addressing them with honesty and collective intelligence.

These principles resonate deeply with my own experiences across sectors. Whether working with farming communities, nonprofit leaders, or corporate teams, I've seen time and again that collaboration flourishes when people feel seen, heard, and supported within a structure that fosters accountability.

In my work, we see this dynamic play out in real time through our leadership programs, consulting work, and global gatherings. Whether we are facilitating executive coaching engagements, strengthening cross-sector partnerships, or curating reflective spaces for changemakers, we help leaders build the conditions necessary for collaboration to thrive.

Conclusion

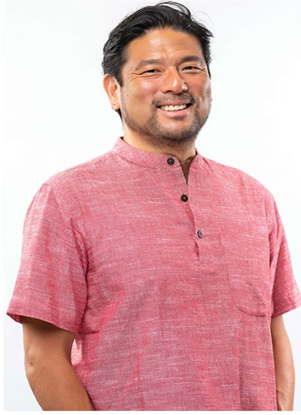
So, how do we move forward? How do we cultivate the soil of collaboration in our own work and partnerships?

- Treat collaboration as a practice, not a given. Like any skill, collaboration requires ongoing refinement. Invest in the structures, rhythms, and tools that enable it to be intentional, rather than accidental.
- Adopt a "Working Together" mindset that is also informed by what I call a "Soil Building Strategy." Collaboration is not about power plays or competing interests—it's about aligning vision, ensuring clarity, and building an environment where everyone is accountable to shared success.
- Remember: soil before plants. Before launching a partnership, take the time to pay attention to and cultivate the right conditions. Define expectations, clarify shared outcomes, and establish the relational trust necessary for long-term success.

Collaboration—when done well—has the power to transform not just projects and partnerships, but entire organizations and communities. If we want to create resilient, high-impact collaborations in business, nonprofits, and beyond, we must cultivate the soil as much as we plant the seeds. Only then can we create partnerships that don't just survive, but truly thrive.

This article is adapted from the book *The Soil of Leadership: Cultivating the Conditions for Transformation*, by Dr. Britt Yamamoto (Amplify, 2024).

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