

*Managing by the Book . . .\**

**Plays Well with Others?\*\*\***

Jean M. Holcomb\*\*\*

*From our earliest school days, we have been evaluated on our ability to play well with others. Now, more than ever, the prosperity of our careers and our institutions rests on our ability to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate.*

¶1 To ensure our own and our libraries' competitive viability in today's economically challenged marketplace, we need to reassess the criteria we have used in the past for creating and sustaining relationships. From our earliest school days, we have been evaluated on our ability to play well with others. Now, more than ever, the likelihood that our careers and our institutions will prosper rests on our ability to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate.

¶2 These three activities require different levels of commitment and rest on a continuum going from the least formal—cooperation—to the most intense—collaboration. By definition, cooperation implies a shorter term informal relationship without a clearly defined mission, structure, or planning effort. Coordination involves a more formal understanding of mission, with a more defined timeline centered on a specific project or program. Collaboration steps up the involvement level, as participants bring separate groups or entities into a new structure with a commitment to a common mission with shared resources, risk, and reputation.

¶3 While all of these abilities are part of the arsenal of tools available for individual career advancement and institutional prosperity, the intensity and commitment required for a successful collaboration hold out the greatest promise of accelerating learning, generating innovation, and building capabilities. Successful collaborations foster the development of new skills, new mind-sets, new allies, and new audiences. Successful collaborations provide opportunities to demonstrate value as a team member, to find a mentor, and to secure a partner institution to serve as a benchmark, helping to identify best practices to emulate.

¶4 If the benefits of a successful collaboration are widely understood, why are so many employees and their managers reluctant to engage in such an activity? In the current operating climate of pared-down resources and heightened service expectations, many fear that the risk of failure, defined in terms of financial insta-

---

\* *Editor's Note:* "Managing by the Book" is a regular feature of *Law Library Journal*. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

\*\* © Jean M. Holcomb, 2009.

\*\*\* Retired Law Librarian and Director, King County Law Library, Seattle, Washington.

bility and lost reputation, outweighs any perceived benefits. Already stretched to the limit, an employee's or manager's fear of the unknown and of any change to the status quo underscore her unwillingness to enter into a new relationship.

¶5 Awareness of previous unsuccessful collaborative efforts raises red flags, and conflicts that occurred in the past can color perspectives. Common collaborative process problems, such as power struggles, lack of trust, insufficient skills and expertise among participants, poorly defined or unobtainable objectives, absence of agreement on the mission or vision of the project, unclear timelines, inadequate financing, lack of administrative support, poor communication, failures of technology, and weak meeting-management skills all contribute to giving collaboration a bad name.

¶6 To overcome hesitancy about the value of engaging in a collaborative effort, librarians can first take a refresher course in the basic tools needed for successful collaboration. David Straus, in *How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems, and Make Decisions*,<sup>1</sup> offers a good starting place for exploring the challenges facing collaborative efforts and the principles that will help overcome any hurdles in this process. The author's background as the founder of a management consulting firm focused on building organizational capacity and leadership development programs provides the basis for his advice.<sup>2</sup>

¶7 Straus organizes his advice about the process of collaborative problem solving around five central principles. These core principles rest on his simple definition of collaboration: "[I]f you have to get the support and agreement of others before you can take action of some kind, then you are collaborating."<sup>3</sup> Under this expansive definition, much of the work of a library can already be recast as collaborative effort.

¶8 Although the book focuses on how to make collaborative strategies work within an organization, the practices he identifies also translate effectively to efforts between organizations. The author states that the collaborative process, largely independent of content, rests on specific heart- and mind-sets.<sup>4</sup> The process of working together in a group to plan, create, solve problems, and make decisions works best if participants respect and value the individual dignity of all involved. And all affected by the collaborative activity should have a voice in the decision making. Straus believes groups that agree about where and how to go forward function more creatively and productively than anyone working alone.<sup>5</sup>

¶9 For Straus, the development of strong collaborative skills starts with an understanding of the problem-solving process. He doesn't see a problem as something inherently negative. Rather, in his view, a problem is simply a situation that someone wants to change or that requires action.<sup>6</sup> He believes there is no one right way to solve problems. A group must recognize the moment at which it needs to

---

1. DAVID STRAUS, *HOW TO MAKE COLLABORATION WORK: POWERFUL WAYS TO BUILD CONSENSUS, SOLVE PROBLEMS, AND MAKE DECISIONS* (2002).

2. *Id.* at 230.

3. *Id.* at 2.

4. *Id.* at xvi.

5. *Id.* at 3–4.

6. *Id.* at 19.

make a conscious decision to try a different problem-solving tactic. For success, groups must develop a shared language to describe their problem-solving strategies.

¶10 Straus's first collaborative principle states that all relevant stakeholders in a problem must be involved. He identifies four types of stakeholder subgroups: (1) decision makers, (2) those with the power to block action, (3) those affected by the group's decision, and (4) those who possess relevant information and expertise. This idea of inclusion does not, however, require that all types of stakeholders be involved at every step in the process. To keep the membership in the collaborative teams to a manageable size, the author envisions four rings of involvement, with the size of the ring expanding as the amount of involvement in the project decreases. The most involved is the "core problem solving group"; task forces, input and feedback meetings, and communications and outreach make up the ever-larger rings completing the model.<sup>7</sup>

¶11 Because collaborative action rests on building consensus, Straus's second principle stresses that a series of consensus points must be built into the decision-making process. All involved must understand the nature of the problem to be addressed, why it is important, the variety of options available to address the problem, and the criteria to be used to identify a good solution.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a specific fallback rule must be established at the beginning of the process to deal with the eventuality that consensus cannot be reached at one of the decision-making points. Such an acknowledgment actually increases the odds that consensus will occur by eliminating a group's fear of losing control or of reverting to win-lose positional bargaining.<sup>9</sup>

¶12 The author's early training as an architect comes into play with the emphasis in his third principle on creating a visual representation of the problem-solving process. This visualization can take several forms—from posting brainstorming suggestions on large sheets of paper around the room to complex "process maps" that encapsulate the myriad decision-making points of a long project over an expanse of time. Benefits of this approach include keeping everyone on the same page and on target, alerting key decision makers about project flow, documenting progress, and creating an historical record.<sup>10</sup>

¶13 Straus's fourth principle describes his vision of the project leader as a neutral process guide called the facilitator. The facilitator has responsibility for the project results, processes, and relationships. In fulfilling this role, the facilitator counteracts the impact of the team participant with the most positional power in the organization, enables everyone to have a voice, and educates the group about available problem-solving tools.<sup>11</sup>

¶14 Finally, the author's fifth principle calls attention to the importance of creating tools to capture group memory throughout the course of the collaboration.

---

7. *Id.* at 48–50.

8. *See id.* at 61.

9. *Id.* at 78.

10. *Id.* at 97–98.

11. *Id.* at 127–28.

By creating a record of actions taken and circulating the record to stakeholders, chances decrease that group time will be wasted in repetitive actions, that energy will be dissipated, and that assignment deadlines will be missed.<sup>12</sup>

¶15 Michael Winer and Karen Ray provide a no-nonsense, jargon-free overview of the process from the perspective of collaboration between organizations in their *Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey*.<sup>13</sup> Designed to be used as a workbook, the authors detail the process—from how to identify the signature idea that will shape the endeavor to finding the right partner to how to plan the celebration at the end of the successful collaboration. They offer suggestions about how to balance power differences while preserving a strong working relationship.<sup>14</sup>

¶16 The storyline of the book rests on case studies of successful collaborations. The authors stress the importance of being honest about the commitment of time and resources required. The projected benefits must be clear. Self-interest must be openly acknowledged. A decision-making protocol<sup>15</sup> must be established at the onset to assure participants that their ideas, efforts, and values will be respected.

¶17 *Collaboration Handbook* provides a step-by-step process guide for managing the work of the project. Important elements include the creation of accountability standards, the development of collaborative work habits, the establishment of methods to evaluate results, and the articulation of protocols to deal with setbacks or failures. The text includes suggestions about creating visibility for the project and promoting the results.<sup>16</sup> The forty-page final chapter contains models of documents for every step of the process—from vision statements to an outline for the elements of the project's "ending ritual."<sup>17</sup>

¶18 With the advice from these two books in mind, a law librarian considering a collaborative project needs to address challenges that might impede progress during the planning stage. In choosing the core work group, remember that size matters.<sup>18</sup> Preparing in advance to deal with friction increases the potential for innovative solutions.<sup>19</sup> When the leader creates a climate that fosters confidentiality for deliberation, the odds increase that the group will be able to reach consensus. Savvy leaders also provide clear guidelines about the timelines involved.<sup>20</sup> If the group is large or has members participating via virtual meetings, the facilitator may need additional specialized training.<sup>21</sup>

12. *Id.* at 142.

13. MICHAEL WINER & KAREN RAY, *COLLABORATION HANDBOOK: CREATING, SUSTAINING, AND ENJOYING THE JOURNEY* (1994).

14. *Id.* at 25.

15. *Id.* at 88–89.

16. *Id.* at 119–23.

17. *Id.* at 195.

18. Kevin P. Coyne, Patricia Gorman Clifford & Renée Dye, *Breakthrough Thinking from Inside the Box*, HARV. BUS. REV., Dec. 2007, at 71, 78.

19. John Hagel III & John Seely Brown, *Productive Friction: How Difficult Business Partnerships Can Accelerate Innovation*, HARV. BUS. REV., Feb. 2005, at 83, 87.

20. See Bob Frisch, *When Teams Can't Decide*, HARV. BUS. REV., Nov. 2008, at 121, 126.

21. Lynda Gratton & Tamara J. Erickson, *Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams*, HARV. BUS. REV., Nov. 2007, at 101, 104.

¶19 For the most part, however, the skills needed to manage a collaborative process are not unique to collaboration. Techniques used in idea spotting, meeting management, performance monitoring, budget development, time management, conflict resolution, and public relations throughout the library's ordinary course of business do not have to be relearned. Although some of these skills may need refreshing, a project leader need not fear a steep learning curve.<sup>22</sup>

¶20 Brainstorming, a cornerstone skill used throughout a collaborative effort, deserves a second look. Remembering that unstructured abstract questioning often produces discomfort and uncertainty, effective project facilitators pose concrete questions.<sup>23</sup>

¶21 Effective facilitators also:

- Create a structured environment for discussion by setting scope boundaries for acceptable ideas in advance.<sup>24</sup>
- Lead the group to generate ground rules for their interactions that set both work habit and social norms.
- Choose participants known for producing original insights.
- Ensure engagement by offering incentives.
- Prepare and share questions in advance to avoid wasted effort.
- Make sure that procedures exist to address failures to reach deadlines or consensus points, avoiding any whiff of "dictator by default"<sup>25</sup> overtones.
- Use rounds of weighted preferencing to narrow decision making.<sup>26</sup>
- Manage the clock to respect individual tolerances for abstract thinking.
- Select a recorder to capture and disseminate group work product.

¶22 Following a review of skills needed for collaborative action, a library's staff and management will be ready to examine existing relationships looking for new opportunities. This is also a good time to consider identifying other potential internal and external collaborative partners. Consider recasting the library's annual report as a collaborative effort engaging staff across function and department lines. Identify methods such as focus groups or user surveys to involve the library's community of users in strategic planning exercises. Involve other elements of the larger parent organization in the library's budget planning processes. Create collaborative purchasing agreements with other institutions to maximize collection resources. Implement technology initiatives with funding or support from outside partners. Explore participation in community-wide service and technology initiatives. Initiate collaborative training opportunities across agency and geographic bound-

---

22. For help with specific skills, see generally CHIP HEATH & DAN HEATH, *MADE TO STICK: WHY SOME IDEAS SURVIVE AND OTHERS DIE* (2007); SHARON M. LIPPINCOTT, *MEETINGS: DO'S, DON'TS, AND DONUTS* (2d. ed. 1999); GARY MCCLAIN & DEBORAH S. ROMAINE, *THE EVERYTHING MANAGING PEOPLE BOOK* (2d ed. 2007); GLENN SHEPARD, *HOW TO MAKE PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS REALLY WORK* (2005); DOUGLAS STONE, ET AL., *DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST* (1999).

23. See Coyne, Clifford & Dye, *supra* note 18, at 72–73.

24. *Id.* at 76.

25. Frisch, *supra* note 20, at 123.

26. *Id.* at 124.

aries. Join collaborative ventures initiated by others. Share the results of outreach efforts with internal and external audiences.

¶23 Get in the game! Join the action! The time is ripe for law libraries to reap the benefits of collaborative project participation. Once staff overcome their natural reluctance and resistance by renewing awareness of core strategies and skills, they stand ready to enjoy the creative burst of energy that powers collaborative effort. Renewed comfort with problem-solving skills supports accelerated learning, innovation, increased capacity, and pride in accomplishment. Playing well with others never goes out of style.