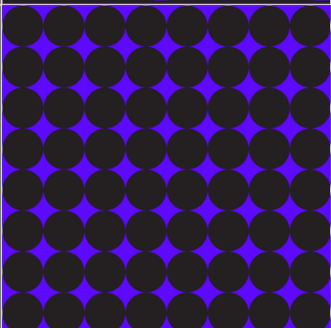
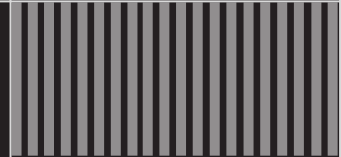
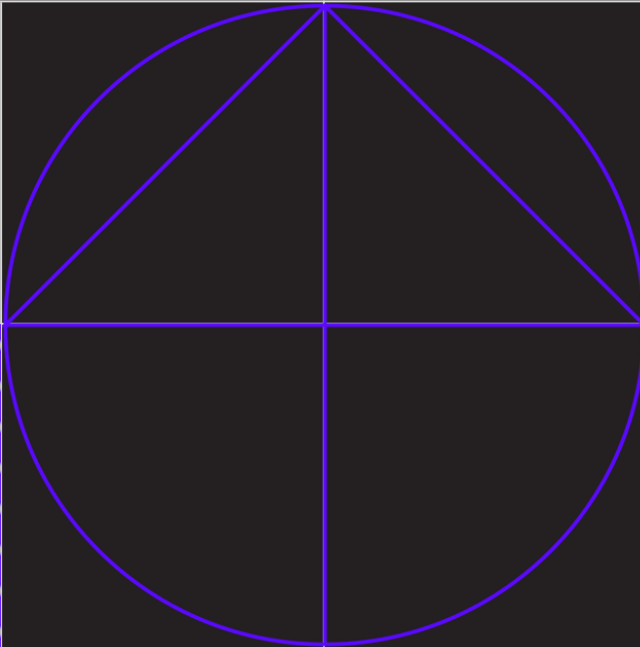
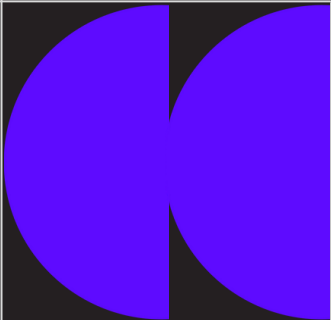


INNOVATION NORTH



Session 18 Briefing Note:

COLLABORATING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE



In this session, we bring the “action space” into focus. Specifically, we will explore how people can collaborate to shape systems.

Session 18 builds directly on Session 17, when we brainstormed solutions for systems problems faced by our practice partners. Together, we generated many promising ideas to nudge the system. As we move toward implementing these ideas, it's crucial to remember that some ideas, especially those with high leverage, require collaboration between multiple organizations. Systems innovation requires collaboration.

Earlier in the Lab, during Session 5, Jorrit de Jong discussed collaborative governance – how one governs a collaborative initiative. He emphasized the need to unlearn the desire to “tame” problems. He explained that defining problems in advance can hinder collaboration; it is better to define problems collectively to open up the problem space, inform decision-making, and get buy-in. He also highlighted that collaboration is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Successful collaboration involves learning and applying lessons from past collaborations.

Building on these lessons, in our upcoming session, Adam Kahane will challenge us to further unlearn old habits and improve our ability to collaborate, even with those we may perceive as antagonistic, to drive systems transformation.

Conventional Collaboration vs. Stretch Collaboration

Typically, we assume that successful collaboration requires two conditions: 1) Everyone is on the same team and agrees on goals; and, 2) We must control the collaboration including its focus, goals, and plans.

This conventional approach to collaboration works for simple problems. However, for complex problems, the pursuit of harmony and certainty becomes unrealistic. It's likely that people won't agree with, like, or trust each other. In such cases, collaboration cannot and should not be tightly controlled. We need to embrace a new approach – what Kahane calls “stretch collaboration” – which broadens our conventional understanding of collaboration.

Challenges of Collaborating on Complex Issues: The Case of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

Palm oil is an ingredient used in many products including food, cosmetics, and biofuels. However, its production creates negative social and environmental impacts, including deforestation, biodiversity loss, and heightened social conflicts, most notably in regions of Southeast Asia and Africa where palm oil is harvested.

Faced with public pressure from their stakeholders, palm oil producers knew they needed to change. In 2004, several firms, together with retailers, environmental NGOs, and movement activists, convened to establish the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). The goal was to make the palm oil industry more sustainable by sharing industry best practices, setting standards, and certifying processes.

Despite these efforts, the RSPO has had a hard time moving the needle. It lacked a strong enforcement mechanism and it was not always clear who was responsible for making sure everything was done correctly. As a consequence, numerous companies were accused of greenwashing, using the RSPO certification to look good without actually walking the talk.

Collaboration among groups with varying interests was also challenging. There were many disagreements around what sustainability means, debates over the right certification processes, and concerns about the effectiveness of RSPO's governance structure.

With all of these challenges, palm oil production practices continue to be hazardous and the production has actually increased, not decreased. The rapid expansion of palm oil plantations has contributed to the perilous decline of the Sumatran orangutan population in Indonesia. Further, satellite data from Global Forest Watch shows that Malaysia lost approximately 5.9 million hectares of its forests between 2001 and 2019.

The Three Stretches in Stretch Collaboration

As people move toward stretch collaboration, they go through a series of steps, or “stretches” as Kahane calls them, to build the skills they need. These include:

1. Embracing Conflict and Connection

Making systems change is messy, so the first stretch is to open up to, embrace, and work with the conflict and connections that exist within and beyond the team. This is important because there usually isn't alignment between everyone's needs and wishes. Focusing on “the good of the whole” might seem like the way to a win-win, but often fails since every person and organization is both a complete whole and part of a bigger one – that of the team, the organization, and so on. This means there is no single “good of the whole,” just different needs for different wholes.

For example, a large company's sustainability team (a smaller whole) may need more time and engagement from other teams to embed sustainability objectives. This in turn may conflict with the need of the organization (a larger whole) for employees to reduce time spent on things outside the core business. Embracing conflict and connection begins with understanding that there is no single common good to work toward.

Navigating this conflict requires you to balance two core drives, self-realization (power) and unity (love), which each play a role in collaboration. Power allows smaller wholes to advocate for their needs and actualize themselves. Love enables smooth and productive engagement. But both have dark sides. Power can propel people to impose their wills, and love can lead to manipulation. When one side gets too strong, switch to the other. When asserting becomes resisting, switch to love. When engaging becomes capitulation, switch to power.

First Stretch Exercise

Observe how you use power and love in collaboration to determine which side is stronger. Try in the following week to strengthen your weaker side.

2. Experimenting a Way Forward

Stretch two involves experimenting with, or trying out, multiple perspectives and possibilities so that we discover, one step at a time, how to advance the team's work.

We cannot control the future, but we can influence it. This includes the future of our collaborations. Even if we start with consensus on the plan, conflicts usually emerge as the collaboration progresses. It's not always possible or even necessary to agree on the problem or solution. Instead, it's better to experiment with multiple different strategies at the same time.

In stretch collaboration, we advance through processes that are primarily emergent rather than deliberate. We do this through "crossing the river by feeling for stones" – moving forward without knowing what lies in the path. Acting is more important than agreeing, and the path emerges by assessing each move as it's made. To do this successfully, we need to maintain our equanimity in a conflictual, uncomfortable situation where we don't know how things will turn out, or when, or even if we will succeed. The poet John Keats called this "negative capability," which he defined as "being capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

More tangibly, we need to listen for possibilities rather than certainty. There are four different ways to listen:

- **Downloading:** Listening from within one's own story to confirm it.
- **Debating:** Listening factually and objectively from outside the situation.
- **Dialoguing:** Listening as if within the other person's story.
- **Presencing:** Listening from within the entire system, looking beyond individual stories.

All four listening methods have their place, but the latter two are key for constructing new realities. They allow us to see beyond our own perspectives to find experiments that go beyond individuals' needs – to instead feel the needs of the system.

Second Stretch Exercise

Pay attention to your default listening style(s) to establish your baseline. Then, spend the next week shifting from downloading and debating toward dialoguing and presencing.

3. Stepping Into The Game

The third stretch involves recognizing that we're in the game and determining how we'd like to participate. It's easy to say, "They need to change!" but in complex, uncontrolled situations, we must shift our focus onto what we ourselves are doing. If we don't acknowledge that we are part of the problem, we can't be part of the solution.

We can ask ourselves: How are we contributing to things being the way they are? What can we do differently to change how things are? This ultimately requires a shift from seeing ourselves as outsiders directing other people to co-creators experimenting with solutions from within.

To do this, we must step outside of our comfort zones. Getting in the game means being willing to face conflict and the unknown. When we find ourselves blaming others for problems, we can use that as a reminder to shift the focus to our own roles in the situation.

Third Stretch Exercise

Think about a collaborative project that is stuck. Describe why it is stuck from two perspectives: outside observer and inside co-creator. List your actions for the project and label whether you're acting as an outsider or insider for each. Pick a few actions from each category and brainstorm how to strengthen your role as a co-creator.

Transformation Facilitation Fosters Stretch Collaborations

We can navigate complex system collaborations through transformative facilitation. It helps us collaborate to create change by removing obstacles to action. These obstacles can prevent contribution, connection, and equity – all important ingredients for successful collaborations.

Transformative facilitation is different than conventional facilitation, which has two opposite modes: vertical and horizontal. Vertical facilitation is highly hierarchical and focuses on one goal for everyone. Horizontal facilitation is highly decentralized and allows everyone within the group to do their own thing. Both have their upsides – vertical enables cohesion and horizontal enables plurality. The trick is to cycle between these upsides without letting either approach devolve into their downsides of repression and fragmentation, respectively.

The transformative facilitator can use a set of moves to get the best out of vertical and horizontal facilitation, as shown in the table below. These moves aren't just for professional facilitators – in this approach, facilitation is for everyone.

The moves answer five questions:

1. How do we see our situation?
2. How do we define success?
3. How do we get from here to there?
4. How do we decide who does what?
5. How do we understand our role?

Vertical and horizontal facilitation approaches have their own tendencies for answering these questions. For example, if the group is focusing too much on the good of the whole (a vertical approach), the facilitator can emphasize the plurality of the group. On the flip side, if the group is focused too much on the needs of each individual or organization (a horizontal approach), the facilitator can emphasize the group's unity to avoid fragmentation. This constant cycling between vertical and horizontal approaches helps break through the gridlock that comes from the two extremes of conventional facilitation.

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	Transformative Facilitation		Horizontal Facilitation
	Vertical Facilitation		
	The typical answer that, when taken too far, indicates the group is getting stuck on the downside of the vertical	The countervailing move that shifts the group toward the upside of the horizontal	The countervailing move that shifts the group toward the upside of the vertical
Overall	The typical answer that, when taken too far, indicates the group is getting stuck on the downside of the vertical	The countervailing move that shifts the group toward the upside of the horizontal	The countervailing move that shifts the group toward the upside of the vertical
1. How do we see our situation?	"We must focus on the good of the whole."	Emphasizing plurality to keep one vision from dominating	Emphasizing unity to avoid fragmentation
2. How do we define success?	"We have the right answer."	Inquiring to explore the many different views in the group	Advocating for their own visions
3. How do we get from here to there?	"We need to agree."	Advancing action, whether together or separately	Concluding a dialogue to make an agreement
4. How do we decide who does what?	"We know the way."	Discovering the route along the way with space for changes	Mapping a clear way forward
5. How do we understand our roles?	"Our leaders decide."	Accompanying the group in their independent actions	Directing the group to coordinate action
	"We must fix this."	Standing inside to make room for personal responsibility	Standing outside to maintain objectivity
			"We must each put our own house in order."