

# Can Collaboration Occur Among Disparate Groups? A New Look at what “Interdisciplinary” Means in Practical Terms

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**Abstract.** What is required for science and industry to work together, speak a similar language, and find common ground? Leverage the real-world interdependencies that occur within the context of business/labor/science/academics/NGOs and government. Successful information and knowledge transfer among scientists, academics, and their business partners requires collaboration, establishing common goals, and cultural/organizational understanding. A forecast for the future of the partnership/collaboration model for private/public cooperative efforts involving technology, proprietary information and “necessary” sharing for results in the marketplace will be shown to support “industry driven models that are scientifically informed.”

**Keywords:** collaboration, partnership, industry-driven, alliance, strategic, communications

## WHAT ARE COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS, AND WHY CREATE AND MAINTAIN THEM?

Collaborations, like organizations, when healthy, are functional, adaptive to change, and self-organizing. This sounds a little like an organism or an ecosystem.

So collaborations are complex, and best when partners are induced rather than compelled to perform in accordance with the true purposes of the partnership. That’s important – you’ll have a difficult time if one party is forcing the others to perform – it may be efficient for awhile, but will ultimately fail the test. Like an evolving organism, partnerships become useful because there is an advantage to each organization in being something larger than it was alone.

Collaborations are also a result of mental models – each person in a collaborative partnership holds his or her own mental model -- and that is extremely important. Einstein said that “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them.” For productive collaborations to form and do what they need to do, all parties need to look at partnerships in a different way, and at the problem they were formed to address in a different way from how it was seen when acting as a solo organization.

Regulations, collapse of fisheries, and the complexity of science and the political landscape mean that organizations dealing with fisheries, private and public, must find partners if they are to accomplish their objectives. To manage, we must reconceive our organizations. And to do this, there must be an advantage for each partner – a reason to become interdependent.

There are many reasons to collaborate. For fisheries, education, government, industry, and NGOs need to collaborate because of the decline in fish stocks - the obvious. Fisheries collapses including oysters in Chesapeake Bay and salmon runs on the West Coast have led fishermen to say that the collapse was the reason for getting together with people they thought they’d never work with like environmental attorneys and policy makers.

The decline has spawned a host of specific reasons that require groups to work together that traditionally have not chosen to do so:

--In order to comply with the 1996 Sustainable Fisheries Act, fisheries management councils must describe and identify EFH (essential fish habitats) - to succeed they must collaborate.

--To respond to pressure to improve after catch utilization of species.

--To access industry subsidies and research uses of commercial vessels for development of under-utilized species, conservation, engineering and other uses.

--To include processors, wholesalers, retail and fishers -- all the way to consumers have an economic relationship – in addressing consumer demand that essentially drives the seafood industry.

Since fisheries vary so much (size of fleet, vessel sizes, biological, sociological and economic characteristics), broad-based policy is often impractical – and management decisions must deal with multiple stakeholders, cultures, attitudes and abilities. This requires new mental models translated into new actions that come from the involved individuals from the representative groups.

**An Example:**

NW Atlantic Marine Alliance – founder and Fisherman Craig Pendleton cites the Gulf of Maine as an example at a conference of *The Coastal Society* in July, 2000 in Portland, Oregon: 5 million dollars was available from NMFS as “welfare” for fishermen who decided they didn’t want welfare. The fishermen approached NAMA for a collaborative solution that gave something back to NMFS for the money. The outcome was that for every day fishermen were compensated, the government got one day of research.

**What’s in it for you?**

Organizations collaborate to share resources and risks. There are two types of partnerships; financial and non-financial. Joining with a government agency, educational institution or NGO may allow an industry partner to receive financial grants or advantages not possible to the for-profit organization alone, and the public partner may be able to access “real-world” data and experiences that could not be recreated in a simulation or classroom. Political presence is magnified through partnerships that leverage different constituencies; even without direct financial benefit, these partnerships can be among the most powerful for an industry under siege.

Industry, Education and Government: each has several “sub-species” and they cross over. One example of this is extension services which are often housed in Universities, but exist as separately funded and administered government entities.

Each group has particular reasons for participating in partnerships. They also have certain characteristics they bring into the partnerships. So often, one group forgets or fails to see the driving forces other group; in those cases it is only by accident that good collaborations occur. So too, one of the groups “drives” the partnership model. In better cases, the more dominant organization acts as a catalyst through which the partnership selects how to function and what to accomplish.

**Industry**

These words typify industry’s focus: profit, regulatory relief, real-time access to dollars and expertise, tightly focused. Quarterly earnings statements drive public companies.

Some suggest that other parts of the fishing industry – suppliers, retailers, wholesalers - can all be included in a collaborative model, even sharing in ITQs and other “holdings” to keep the corporate buyouts from destroying small fishermen. Whether or not one agrees with ITQs in

principle, there is strength in multiple entities coming together for politics and profit. Otherwise a “win” for industry may be merely vessel buyouts or subsidies to keep fishing.

An example of an industry-driven collaboration model between science and industry for marine issues is BBSR – Bermuda Biological Station for Research. BBSR went into a partnership with the reinsurance industry through Frank Nutter, President of the Reinsurance Association of America, and Michael Butt CEO of Mid Ocean Ltd. and on European insurance boards to form the RPI (Risk Protection Initiative.) The benefits to industry included:

- ◆ Quantifiable deliverables to the insurance industry. Added integrity to catastrophe computer modeling, relied upon by industry in assessing exposure to natural catastrophes with rating organizations and submitting insurance rates to regulators, such as in Florida.
- ◆ Direct access to research and development. BBSR says they believe there is inadequate outreach by business, especially insurers, to the scientific community, but believe RPI is a good model.

**Education**

Education is characterized by viewing industry as a place to do research. Industry, along with government, is a source of money for programs and for applied research. Sometimes this relationship is mandated, and sometimes voluntary.

Sometimes educational institutions and individuals do not approach the collaborative effort from the point of view of advantage to all. A marine resource educator recently addressed a group on collaborative efforts in the fishing industry beginning with the statement “unlike government, we have no charge to engage community groups or constituencies. We happened to, and this is the story of how it worked.” Make no mistake: he let the audience know he didn’t have to collaborate.

A variation of education is training offered to special groups like government agencies, a company or industry trade association. Some of these are highly successful, particularly when financial and content partners are defined independently.

**Government**

Government agencies rarely tend to talk in terms of “partnership” except as collaborations with the other agencies, yet they say they need to bring industry to the table– as well as NGOs, Native Americans, universities, recreational fishing industry, environmental groups and international organizations. When specifically asked, agency personnel don’t know what’s in it for them.

Why do government agencies collaborate at all? Their reasons include; its mandated, it may fulfill requirements of service, and it might make a job easier (i.e. by focusing on the next higher up level of government – local to state, state to Federal). Some agency personnel say they like doing good works, they need “good science” from education and industry to make regulations work – to have teeth - and to get continued program funding.

Agencies tend to talk about compliance as their notion of collaboration; they tend to see that as an enlightened view from their “enforcement” platform of old. Its difficult for them to consider coming up with goals and methods together with the rest of the partners, rather than rendering rules to be administered.

An example of this comes from a recent gathering of The Coastal Society Conference on marine policy. When asked by the author what keeps them up at night...why they come to collaboration other than being mandated... 30 people from different agencies couldn't give a reason, but admitted they talk about it a lot and would really like to know. There is no compelling need to collaborate to get their tasks accomplished, but many said they want to do the right thing.

A similar situation exists in workforce models; government is often there because they are mandated by Congress to be there.

Variations of government agencies are extension services and other legislatively funded special agencies like US Institute for Environmental Conflict, established by Congress in 1998 to assist in disputes with Natural Resource, environmental or public lands where the Federal government is involved. Their current challenge? Getting industry to the table. They also have some resistance from the scientific community. One of their senior program managers says that many scientists are “process averse.”

### What are Partnerships?

What they are:

Lets go back to the earlier point that partnerships are mental models. As with organizations, collaborative partnerships exist in the 49 ounce sponge we have on top of our shoulders. Even more clearly than an organization with a legal structure, collaborations don't “exist” in the tangible sense; yet their effects and power are felt by all members, and by the markets and external environments.

Partnerships are:

- ◆ Mutually compatible; interdependent.
- ◆ Where the initial apparent similarities/differences in agendas, time frames, and expectations meet – what overlaps? These are the missions of the partnership – in

these areas you can have success. As the collaboration grows, the overlaps may enlarge and even grow new business lines.

- ◆ Consistent in form with their objectives.
- ◆ Given adequate time to achieve their objectives. Don't create a 6-month partnership to save salmon.
- ◆ Entities that create value by helping to do what would be difficult to achieve alone by a single partner.
- ◆ Often given a formal structure, and need to be public in some form, even if by Letter or proclamation..
- ◆ Designed with change in mind.

Partnerships are not:

- ◆ A legal entity.
- ◆ Getting your agenda on someone else's agenda.

### What Makes a Collaborative Partnership Enduring?

The first quality of enduring partnerships is trust and commitment of people involved. All parties interests and goals must continue to be served – even as the interests change. Risk taking, fair dealings and open communication lead to trust.

The second quality of good collaborations is overlapping and complimentary capabilities – interdependence.

Structured to accommodate change, the flexibility to evolve in response to changes in market, policy, funding, interests, new skills, losing old skills, business conditions (i.e. mergers) or other factors is key to keeping a partnership working.

Remember the fisheries group that didn't want a handout, told NMFS how they'd use the Federal money, and offered research days in return? The same group also teamed with CAIA (Community Alliances of Interdependent Agriculture) whose mission it is to link with members throughout the supply chain including growers, laborers, marketers, consumers, environmentalists, professionals in health and social and economic justice, government officials, suppliers, researchers and educators and farm organization members. NAMA sees folding seafood into the same model along with its own driving principles of integrity and passion.

Other factors keeping a partnership going are:

- ◆ Consistent and diversified funding streams.
- ◆ Leadership – heads or executives must be there as “peers” - all decision makers.
- ◆ Being responsive and positive about current politics – taking “negative” controlling regulation and turn it into a new opportunity.
- ◆ Access by all parties to a government affairs person who is an advocate, not an activist. Representatives need to be bold, and hold a collaborative viewpoint.

- ◆ Appropriately distributed power and control.
- ◆ Have an open architecture – allow membership by any who embrace the mission – and allow them to leave at any time.
- ◆ Long term focus – with short term benchmarks – accountability piece.
- ◆ Organizational culture compatibility.
- ◆ Know when the partnership is over.

### Guidelines for Good Partners

Regardless of whether one is a representative from industry, education or government, collaborations work best when all parties conduct themselves according to these guidelines. Show up consistently. Expand your vision and see things positively. Identify and articulate the problem; be willing to name fears.

Build relationships with each partner outside of the meetings, understand each agenda and imagine how you could work together instead of apart. Work out a collective purpose for the meeting and blend information models. Establish a common vocabulary. Expect conflict and expect to resolve conflict. Bridge gaps for the common goal. Once results have been achieved, congratulate each other on the teamwork. Define and designate the best person/method for carrying the message among the constituencies. Temper skepticism with an open mind. Do not assume anything. Don't come to a meeting with a defensive posture, and work out differences between meetings. Avoid empire-building.

### Summary and Conclusion

Collaborative partnerships can create contexts that encourage the best rather than the worst of human behavior. They offer a focus, a greater power than any one partner can bring alone, and the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

Help each partner through incentives to participate and work together: it's in "your" best interest. How?

For education and government: raise the cost of "doing nothing," so all are induced to contribute willingly.

For all parties: communicate well and regularly. Lack of good communication is the reason why people don't show up, and if people don't show up, nothing happens.

And for industry: make public agency and education actions actually directly support industry's real interests now and for the future so that industry's acting in the public good is also acting in their own best interests. Just because fishers can take juveniles, why would they when they know it's in their best interest to protect the species being fished?

Remember, you don't have to ask anyone's permission to do the right thing.

### Appendix A.

#### The Shift from Negotiation to Collaboration

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The feasibility of a collaboration is affected by the extent to which there is a common understanding of the content of the alliance – that is, the task they will perform jointly, or to which they will lend support. **Stakeholders must become "professional partners". Collaborative efforts to create an alliance will revolve around this concept.**

#### Assumptions

1. **Information Gap** - Supplying information implies trust – trust in the other partner's judgement. Trust must be reciprocal – information asymmetry creates a gap at the outset of the alliance. Partners need to share research and knowledge resources as part of closing that gap.
2. **Time Gap** - Partners' senses of timing is different due to the organization type, size, objectives and positioning. Tradeoffs must appeal to government, industry, education and NGO sense of time: what are short, medium and long term outcomes for all organizations?
3. **Framework Gap** – Differences in organizational cultures, expectations of outcomes and how they perceive reality
4. **Partners Current Service, Ethics, and Standing** – All partners need to provide similar service levels, hold similar ethics, and be seen as compatible in their standing.
5. **Future Positioning and Perspective** – All partners should use the partnership to increase that level of service based on a long term perspective that takes into account the advantages of the partnership to realize new and more expansive goals.

### The Process

#### What does each partner bring?

Prioritize what each organization has in common and determine where the gaps exist. Both organizations need to

communicate with each other as to why collaboration is needed and is possible. Talk about skills, attitudes, and intentions

Discuss how to bridge the gap and make a new framework for alliance:

- 1- See the venture through the eyes of one's partner: Government should see it through industry's glasses, education through government's and so on. Doing this as a formal exercise helps to clarify where the true areas of compatibility exist and what is beyond the expected reach of the collaboration.
- 2- See the value creation logic(s), the priorities to reach that creation, and the strategic intent that could motivate the change for each partner.
- 3- Explore past collaborations and discuss how they might color future ones: have any alliances been tried, and how successful or unsuccessful were they? Why?

#### **Establish a definition of a professional partner.**

Some ideas might include:

1. Both parties should practice regular written documentation and communication as determined by the partnership.
2. Develop a conflict management process among agencies and industry and educators. Reach mutual agreement to use the process so all parties get what is needed to serve the process and the desirable outcomes.
3. Determine what each partner expects of the other.

#### **Set Alliance Priorities**

Discuss and build on ideas from research about the other partners and stakeholders that will be creating or benefiting from the alliance.

Determine and identify the mutual expectations and expectation gaps while building the plans and results for each idea. Make these as specific as possible.

Some ideas might include:

1. Developing a short and informal training program for all new hires in partners' organizations, and for others who want to keep current on the up to date services, issues and positions of the partnership. Supervisors and administrators should be encouraged to attend as well.

2. Encourage leadership development among all partners to keep symmetry in the alliance by having any one partner be able to terminate the staff services of any person in the partnership staff, but require the consensus of all the partners to elevate the status of any staff on partner related projects.
3. Establish clear and consistent communications formally, and with no excuses through open meetings and forums as well as the usual methods.

#### **Determine specific actions to be taken to ensure a successful alliance to include:**

1. Identification of organizational liaisons such as a government affairs person.
2. Determine a process to monitor progress that addresses the time frames of all partners.
3. Evenly distribute power and control explicitly in the duties and benefits of the partnership.
4. Build and retain trust of all parties involved, individually as well as organizations, by continuing to ensure that their interests are served, even when conditions change.
5. Be committed to building and enhancing the skills and knowledge of all partners.
6. Design the collaboration with flexibility in mind so that it evolves as market conditions, funding, politics, and other external conditions change.