Picture Collaboration

An Illustrated Guide for Working Together to Solve Problems

Ben Ziegler
With illustrations by Tanya Gadsby

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Introduction

People work together, collaborate, to solve problems.

When the collaboration is good, ideas and solutions flow.

Unfortunately, there is a flipside to that positive scenario. The collaborative habit may not come easy to us. And, even when we think we have that collaboration thing down, it's easy to regress, from we to me. A roomful of high capacity individuals does not guarantee team success.

We get better at collaboration, or anything else for that matter, through daily practice. Make it a habit and success seems to follow. One way I've been working on my collaborative habit over the last few years is to visualize the collaborative process. That journey brings me to this Guide book.

In our attention-deficit world, words alone never seem to cut it. We revel in images, photographs, sketches, videos… Our brain is a visual processing dynamo. We draw meaning through the visual; whether it's the face of a potential mate, or the marketing of a product.

The core idea of this e-book is that we can habituate ourselves to good collaboration through visual literacy. This e-book gives you 23 collaborative signs for the journey ahead.

Imagine driving along a winding, mountain highway. There are road signs everywhere. They signal what's ahead; a curvy road, a steep descent, falling rocks… Sometimes, the road sign is only a picture. No words. We get the message, though. Driver, beware! We've learned and internalized the message. It's a habit, second nature. We see the sign. We act accordingly.

The genesis of this guide is my work as a mediator and facilitator. In those roles, I help people and organizations work together, to bridge differences. I wanted a quick visual reference guide of the techniques I

use. So, I started to build a list of icons; adapting others, and creating some from scratch.

This Guide contains 23 collaborative practices; grouped by collaborative relationships, spaces, and problem-solving techniques.   Each practice is described through: 1) an icon, 2) an illustration, and 3) explanatory text. The illustrations serve as a bridge between the icons and text. Given my illustrative skills are rudimentary, that led me to Tanya Gadsby.

In addition to her talents as a graphic recorder, Tanya knows collaboration, and is a facilitator in her own right.   Her illustrations are unique, emotive and connective. They have influenced my thoughts and truly capture the collaborative spirit.   Pictures are worth a lot of words.

The target audience for this Guide is facilitators, both those who facilitate full-time, and those for whom facilitation is just part of what they do; project managers, coaches, trainers, mediators, consultants, leaders, teachers...

We hope the visuals and explanations in this Guide act as a catalyst for you; to creatively learn and apply, your way. Please. The world needs more people fluent in the art and practice of collaboration.

Tanya and I enjoyed collaborating on this Guide. If you liked this Guide, spread the word, and visual. :)

Ben
November 2013

On Using This Guide

This guide looks at collaborative practices from three perspectives:
- Relationships - how we, as individuals, interact with others
- Spaces - creating a healthy environment for collaboration
- Problem-solving techniques - specific practices, how-to's, for getting it done

Pick and choose what you need.

The relationship practices apply to everyone.

Spaces will be of particular interest to leaders, responsible for collective, collaborative action.

The problem-solving techniques, in this guide, are not unique to collaboration. However, they are viewed from a collaboration mindset.

A few words about the icons...

What if collaborative practices were core to every primary school curriculum? With that goal in mind, the icons are intentionally designed to be easy to draw, without sacrificing the concept behind them. Drawing the icons should be as easy as child's play.

We understand things by putting words to them; that's why keeping a journal is so powerful. The new language of collaboration has a visual component. Learning to collaborate through visual communication should start early in life. The paradox of that is not lost on us. After all, it's young people, assisted by social technologies, who are becoming tomorrow's collaboration superheroes.

I encourage you to make sense of, and adapt, the icons in your contexts. The ones presented in this Guide are a start. Carry on!

Collaborative Relationships

Bid for connection
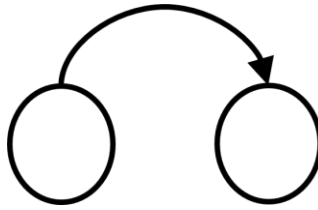
Each of our daily interactions with another person is what relationship expert John Gottman calls a "bid for connection".

By choosing to turn toward, to turn away, or turn against each other's bid for connection – no matter how ordinary or small – we establish a foundation that could determine the future success or failure of our relationship.

Good relationships usually develop slowly over time, growing out of the many mundane interactions we share each day.   Building trust in a relationship doesn't require gut-wrenching conversations that plumb the depths of our souls.

"Daily life is foreplay for relationships." (Kate Feldman)

What is the optimal ratio of positive bids versus negative bids?

Gottman says 5:1 is the "magic relationship ratio" to sustain a marriage. Social media pundits advocate for more, closer to 10:1, when it comes to promoting others, versus self-promotion. As a parent, I recall 3:1 as the suggested ratio for praising versus disciplining young children.

The bottom line is that negative has more power. It takes many positive interactions to make up for a roll of the eyes, an ignored email, a customer bent out of shape…

Pay it forward. Bid positively and strengthen your relationships.

Me and We
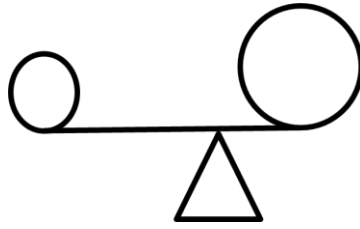
In every conversation and negotiation we participate, there exists the opportunity to think of what I want and need, and what they want and need.
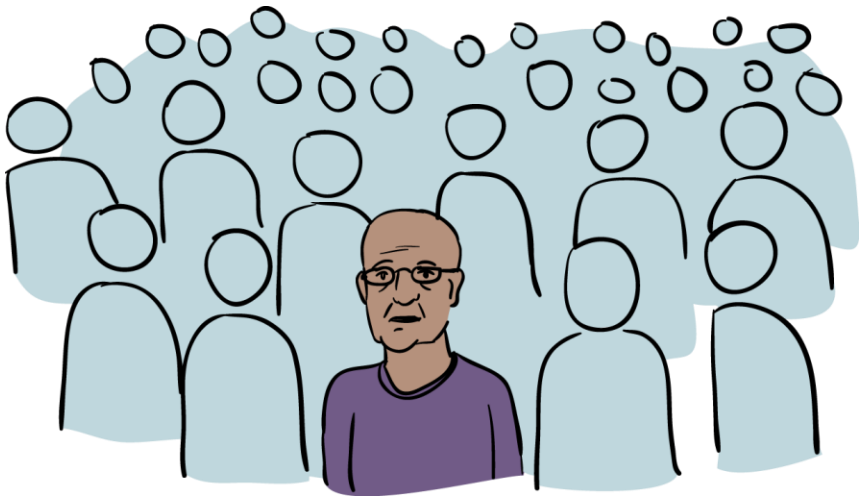
Balancing advocacy with inquiry is entering into collaborative conversation. I assertively let the other party know my interests and needs, and I appreciatively inquire into their interests and needs. Our shared interests and needs lead us to common ground.

The collaborative way is to be "unconditionally constructive" (a term coined by Roger Fisher & William Ury in *Getting to Yes*); to do only those things that both are good for me, and the relationship, whether or not the other party reciprocates. Reciprocity is voluntary.

Asserting our own interests is facilitated through self-awareness and fluency with "I" language.

Discovering the underlying interests of others flows from our curiosity, open questions, probing, appreciation, empathy, clarifying, paraphrasing… Negotiating common ground calls on skills in reframing, fractionalizing, summarizing, creative problem-solving, power dynamics, solutions definition…
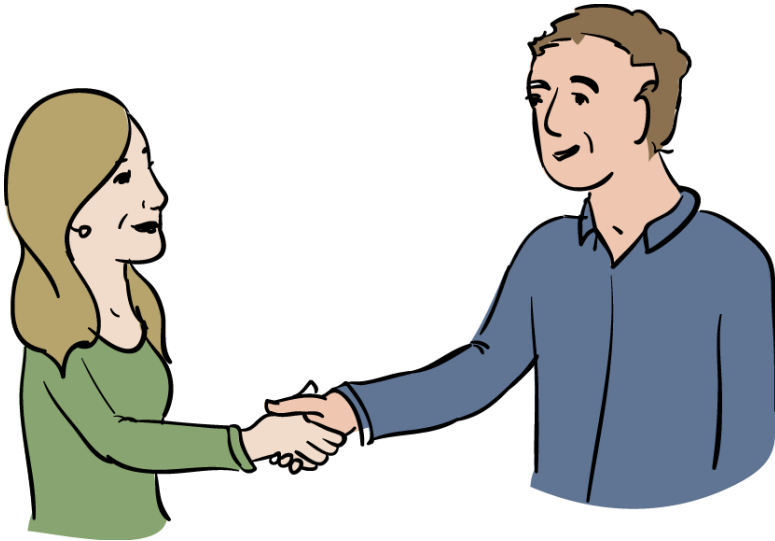
True collaboration is more than compromise. Through our work together, we create something more than we could create alone. $1 + 1 > 2$.

Being both me and we is the collaborative way.

Link sustainability to long-term relationships
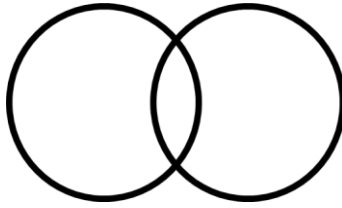
The essence of sustainability is long-term relationships.

A long-term view makes it easier to deal with the ebb and flow common to relationships, knowing we'll each be here tomorrow, for each other!

Knowing we are in a long-term relationship gives us a measure of security. It frees us to interact in sustainable ways; no need to grab and run!

Building long-term relationships requires up-front due diligence, asking difficult questions; e.g., Do we share the same values? Is there business market demand for our product? Are we committed to this partnership?

Fair Trade partnerships build on the 'long-term relationships for sustainability' model. Stacey Toews of Level Ground Trading summarized that business' model smartly for me, in this (2 min) video interview.

Long-term relationships are built on trust, and flow from consensus building processes: participants are involved in the process design, all interests are represented and respected, direct interactions are possible, and each participant has an effective voice.

Long-term relationships work across communication channels. The medium may change. The message stays relationship.

The long-term speaks to sustainable communities, communities that aim for generosity, a well-distributed and safeguarded abundance.

"Long-term is the only perspective for judging innovation."

Collaborative Spaces

Structure for behaviour

If we want people to collaborate better, then create workspaces that say "yes" to collaboration.

Put yourself in the shoes of a parent-to-be. In anticipation of your new baby, you've readied the baby's room; brightly painted the walls, purchased a comfy crib, and set-up an appealing mobile. You want your baby to feel welcome.

The concept remains the same, for work. Design spaces that make you feel "you are welcome here and that you came to the right place" (Peter Block in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*); hospitable reception areas, meeting rooms designed with person-to-person interaction in mind,

communal spaces that have an intimate feel, walls that have life, lots of light and windows...

Design offices that encourage connectedness; people in close proximity, tables that allow people to sit in circles, chairs that promote mobility and relatedness with others in the room… Design offices that accommodates different work styles and meeting needs; visitor stations, teaming rooms, "mixer" coffee stations, situation rooms, all-hands meetings, cubicles…

Design influences our ability to connect and engage with others, to manage projects, to retain and transfer knowledge, and to solve problems.

Fit the design to the context; e.g., virtual spaces that normalize the challenges of online communications, and make it easy to collaborate, from a distance. Find the right level of technology; one that facilitates warmth, sensitivity, and personal connection.

Less is more, online. Illustrative of the less is more approach, in user experience design, is 37 Signals, a web-based collaboration apps company for small business. 37 Signals co-founder Jason Fried's excellent book, *ReWork*, communicates the 37 Signals work culture.

Design for people. On a recent stay in Manhattan, NYC, I purposely routed my walks to take me through Bryant Park, a place that makes superb use of the edges as a social magnet, inviting and inclusive, a reason to enter, in the most culturally diverse city in the world. Local to me, Lorne Daniel of Rethink Urban conducted a series of urban walks, and conversations, highlighting what makes shared public paces work, or not.

When your culture and spaces enable people to create, innovation flourishes.

Transform through conversations

Conversations are the building blocks of change.

Conversations bring us together. And when we are together, we are much more comfortable with change – personal change, community and organizational change. We can handle anything, as long as we are together.

Conversations help us get from here to there. Conversations help us see what was, help us reflect on where we are now and what might be, and help us embody the new.

Conversations help us build trust. And, when we trust the group we're in, something special happens. We are freed to be ourselves, to act, knowing that if we falter, the group will pull us through. Count on it!

It doesn't surprise me when participants arrive for mediation without having discussed their dispute with the other party. And, it comes as no surprise to me, too, when after conversation, their issues get resolved.

Through conversation we discover shared meaning, and when that meaning changes, we are changed.   Nowhere is this more important than community conversations, where the big challenges of our day hit home, as Paul Born and the Canadian-leading [Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement](#) know all too well.

Conversations connect the organization to more of itself, a sign of a healthy living system.

There are so many ways to have a conversation; peer to peer meetings, with consensus building techniques such as conversation cafés or Open Space Technology, over food, through photo sharing, while watching a movie at someone's home…
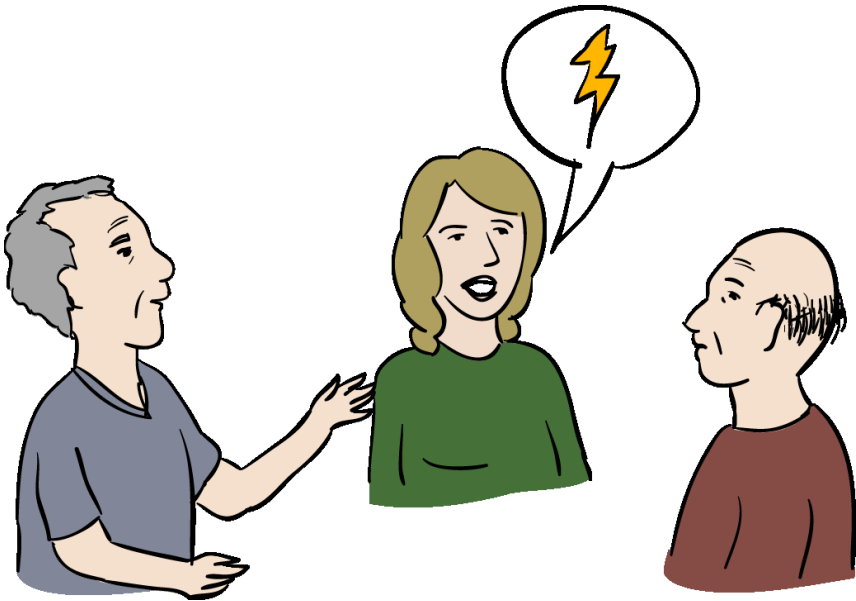
With the social web, the new "town squares", the conversation is everywhere.

Join the conversation. Lead the change. Solve the problem.

Make it safe to fail
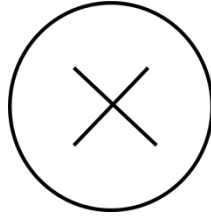
People are more willing give of themselves when their safety is assured.

Create workplace environments that are inviting, that allow people to take risk; to fully engage others in authentic conversation, "to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine thinking together". (Peter Senge in The Fifth Discipline)

Collaborative leaders know that safety comes first. Safety is a basic human need. People with a sense of security and belonging are stabilized for difficult conversations, learning, creating, and innovating. "A group of wonderfully cared for, confident individuals will generate great ideas." (John Sweeney, author & creativity consultant)

Make it safe to talk. In mediation, confidentiality is always a concern. Up front, I get everyone to agree on the rules of engagement. It sets positive expectations for the difficult conversations that follow.

Safety respects time; the time it takes to master anything, using 10,000 hours; a benchmark popularized by [Malcolm Gladwell](#).

The roots of innovation typically involve experimentation, failure, and time. It takes 2 years for bamboo to build its' roots and break ground, and then it can grow 100 feet in the next 2 years! – treat people this way.

The virtual medium offers us new frontiers to navigate, and make safe for people, to be their best.   Andrea Weckerle (founder of [CiviliNation](#)) authored *Civility in the Digital Age*, a highly accessible and practical guide, on that front.

Help people open up to discovery, and a way forward.

Welcome paradox
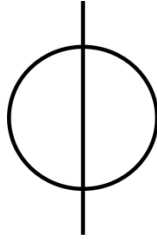
Together, we work with positive intention and action. Yet, the future is uncertain.
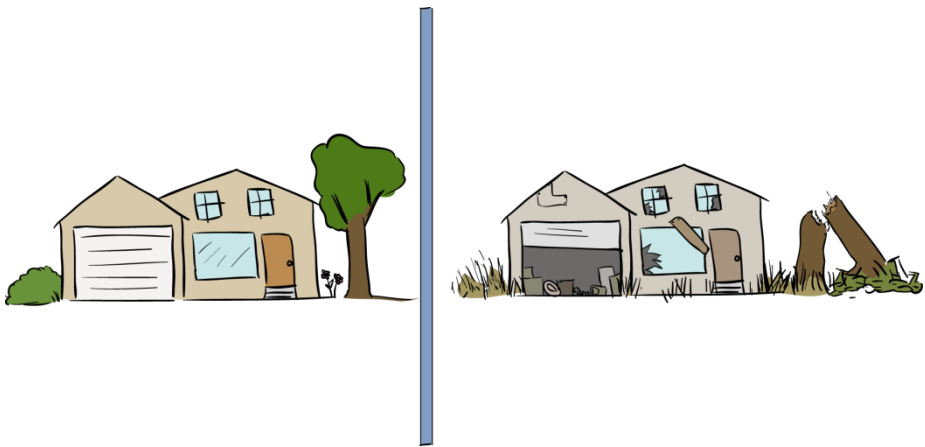
We live in two worlds - order and chaos. In the world of order, we plan, reflect, and think about what to do next. In the world of chaos, things happen, we get things done, yet unpredictability persists.

In one world, we like to think we are in control. In the other, we mingle with increasing complexity, conflict, and uncertainty. One person: two worlds.

Social innovation leader Tonya Surman created the Constellation Collaboration Model as a way to reconcile those two worlds.

Great relationships, and collaborations, often arise from "the tension of the opposites". We need collaborative workspaces; spaces where our views can be challenged, where different perspectives than our own are accessed, and our certitudes given a healthy reality test.

On the flipside, we gravitate to those like us, and those who like us, says Kare Anderson, an expert on connective behaviors.

The 'open source' software development approach, pioneered by Brian Behlendorf and others, includes "the right to fork" rule. That rule allows each participant in the collaborative to divert, go their own way, and leave with a complete copy of the product design in their hands… a collaboration paradox!

As in the Chinese concept of yin-yang, opposites, complementary and interdependent, are welcomed in collaborative spaces.

Collaborative Problem-Solving Techniques

Break bread together
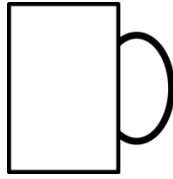
Social routines help us connect, and bond into a collaborative whole.

It doesn't matter what it is that you do, you need something to bring the team together — something that says we're special, we value each other, and we're in this together. Ritual matters.

Food, dress, ceremony, celebration… rituals are developed around these types of things. When we carry out these rituals, we are behaving as expected. We are acknowledging that we belong to this group.

Rituals give us a way to appreciate the things we share in common; a way to bridge our differences, come together as a team, renew our spirits, and refocus our energy on the challenge ahead. And, when the going gets tough, we'll separate the people from the problem.

In some cultures, rituals are the bedrock of relationships, and collaboration; nothing happens without first eating together. I experienced this, firsthand, working as a project advisor with a Canadian NGO in the Philippines. I identified 27 ways that Filipinos ran successful collaborative projects. [Food was number one, when it comes to creating a successful collaboration](#).

Social rituals help us connect, get to know each other, and become comfortable, together. It's a path to trust. Without trust, creative collaboration and problem-solving is tenuous.

Today, virtual spaces and social networks are where we increasingly connect with, and earn the trust of others; aka "social capital". Pressed for social time? "Public transportation options are the best for digital socializing." (US study on Millennials & Mobility)

Build virtual camaraderie. If possible, bring your virtual team together, in person, at the start of your project. Some early-on In Real Life will sustain your team for the long (virtual) run.

Tight-knit communities learn, survive, and prosper by working and playing together.

Sit in a circle
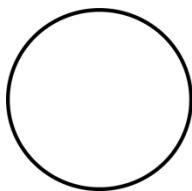
Sitting in a circle is a process.

Our ancestors gathered around a fire in a circle. Families gather around the kitchen table in a circle. To gather in a circle is a community way to solve problems, to support, and connect, to one another.

When we are in a circle, we see everyone present. There is no "head" of the table. We are equal distance from the centre, aligned, for listening... The egalitarian nature of circles suggests everyone has something valuable to contribute; their idea, story, solution...

At the heart of the North American aboriginal circle process is the use of a talking piece, an object passed from person to person in the circle, and which grants the holder sole permission to speak. This tradition speaks to the need for inclusiveness, listening, and taking time to hear everyone's story. Circles are a way to build and restore relationships, and community.

"When the tribe first sat down in a circle and agreed to allow one person to speak at a time - that was the longest step forward in the history of law" (American trial judge, Curtis Bok).

Circles can be used almost anywhere; e.g., in the workplace, in schools, in neighbourhoods, churches, courts…

"We gathered in concentric circles, like the rings on a tree that show its age, in a small community hall this week, to sing songs that celebrated our friend, who had just died." That's how I started a blog post, Circles: In Life and Death.

One can arrange people (or their avatars) around a virtual circle. The Google+ platform uses the circle, as basis for visualizing and organizing connections. I picture my 'virtual posse' as a circle, a small group of people I turn to, and whom I have a reciprocal relationship with.

To maximize circle power In Real Life, sit in a circle without chairs or tables in front of you. If you do use tables, the smaller the better. Make it easy to gather close together.

The solution is within the circle.

Tell stories
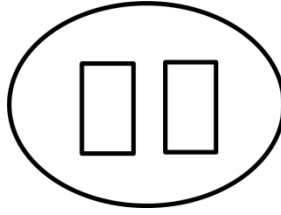
Stories connect.   Stories help us connect the dots, the discrete events in our life, into some sort of whole.

We each connect events in our life, in different ways. We choose how, and what, to connect. Some things we leave in. Some we leave out.   We each have our own narrative on what happened, what's going on...

Scott McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics* talks about the "gutter" in a comic strip, the place between the panels, where you, the reader, are invited to participate, with your imagination. You combine the individual panels with your imagination to create a story.

The story we tell ourselves may not be true. "Who would you be without your story?" asks [Byron Katie](#), known for her tough love approach to dealing with inner confusion.

In mediation, a form of problem-solving, I usually ask the participants to tell their story. Though people's stories are different, they usually contain shared moments that can be used as building blocks to connection, trust, and shared resolution.   You can't hate someone whose story you know.

Lee LeFever, founder of the successful [Common Craft](#) videos, shares his default, simple story format, In *The Art of Explanation:*   "1) Meet Bob; he's like you. 2) Bob has a problem that makes him feel bad. 3) Now Bob found a solution, and he feels good! 4) Don't you want to feel like Bob?"

Stories help move people from compliance to commitment.   Those static measures of an organization; participation rates, reports produced, product cycle times… they only become useful in the context of stories that explain the causal links between them.   A well-told story communicates vision, authenticates our experiences, and makes it easy for people to feel good about the organization, and what it stands for.

Visualize your story, as a problem solved. That's what golfer Bubba Watson did; the 'shot of the year', to win the 2012 Masters tourney. [shot]. "I hit a crazy shot that I saw in my head."

We're all artists when we tell stories. Social media is a modern day playground for storytelling.

Find common ground
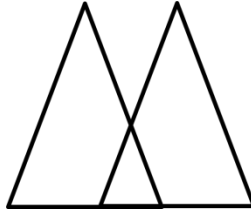
Common ground connects us.   It's our shared base, and on which we build trust, and our capacity to work together.
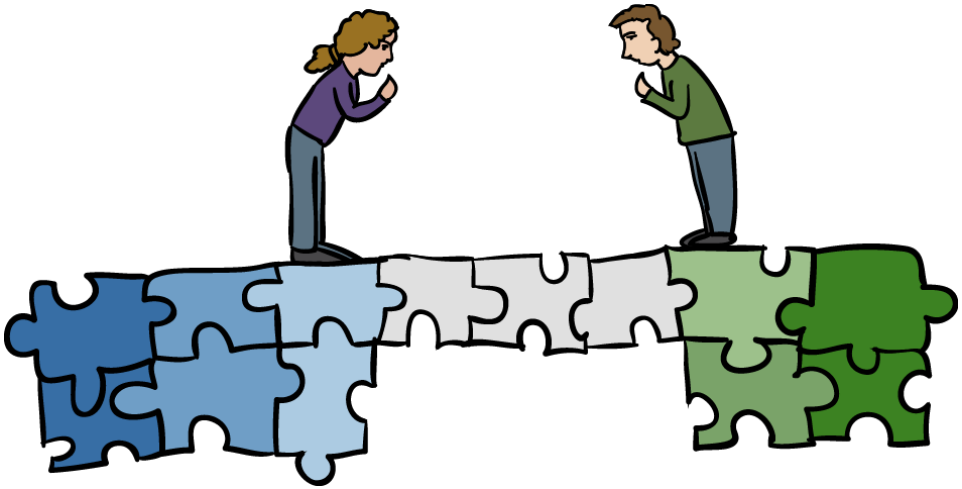
How do we find common ground?

Acknowledge our common DNA. In the 1940s, Abraham Maslow developed a 'hierarchy of needs', as a way of explaining human motivation.   The hierarchy suggests a relationship between needs, with basic human needs, food, security… as the foundation on which other more complex needs, belonging, achievement… are built.   What does it look like as we climb the hierarchy? Welcome our differences and note the sameness.

Expand the value pie. Offer more choice.   Re-combine elements. Reframe. Create a spectrum of options. It increases the likelihood of finding items of mutual value, and common ground.

Expert negotiations know the value of more choice.   "When one is negotiating under conditions of terrible uncertainty, it is wiser to bet on

two horses, if possible, than one." (Harvard's [Robert Mnookin](#), in *Bargaining With The Devil*)

Draw on metaphor and analogy. Peter Lloyd's creative [Animal Crackers](#) help you "crack your toughest business problems with the genius of Natural Selection".

Connect and integrate. What can we learn from a cross-disciplinary approach to solving the problem? "Great innovators are great integrators."

Simulate common ground. Run through different scenarios using virtual immersive environments.

Triangulate. My first professional stop was as a land surveyor. Triangulation is a principle technique in the surveyor's toolkit. From two known locations, one can locate, triangulate, a third unknown location. We locate our future common ground the same way. First, we locate ourselves, our interests. Then, we locate our collaboration sweet spot, our goal of mutual benefit. Better to orient ourselves before gleefully marching off, together.

Stake out common ground, and build on it.

Yes, and

"Yes, and…" (YES/AND) is a way of thinking. YES/AND is about accepting someone else's offer, and building on it.

More likely, though, we are used to saying "Yes, but…".   YES/AND almost feels unnatural.

In the theatre world, YES/AND is used an improvisatory exercise to maximize creative potential. The word BUT is a creativity killer. YES/AND activities are an excellent way to build individual and group and collaboration skills, as I learned, from Sharon Sutherland, of the Vancouver-based CoRe Conflict Resolution Clinic.

To say YES is to say you matter, and aligns with our need to be acknowledged and respected.

YES/AND is inclusive; opening us up to the larger possibilities, of what both you and I have to offer.

AND implies abundance, additional new options, without taking existing options off the table (think BUT). An abundance mentality drives the creative resolution of tensions, building on other's ideas, and innovation.

The comma after YES (in "Yes, and …") suggests flow; taking a breath, pausing, without bringing the conversation to a dead stop (pox on BUT), and then channeling the flow elsewhere – e.g., to your interests.

An improvisation class can jumpstart your YES/AND capacities, and tell you a few things about yourself, in the process! I took one this year; a series of weekend classes with my local improv guru, Dave Morris. His 10-minute The Way of Improvisation' TEDx talk will inform and delight you, and yes… it includes YES/AND!

For the problem solver, is there two more powerful words than YES/AND?

YES/AND lubricates our collaboration engine.

Reframe conflict
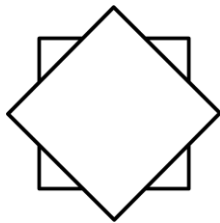
Reframing is about shifting perspective. It changes the game.
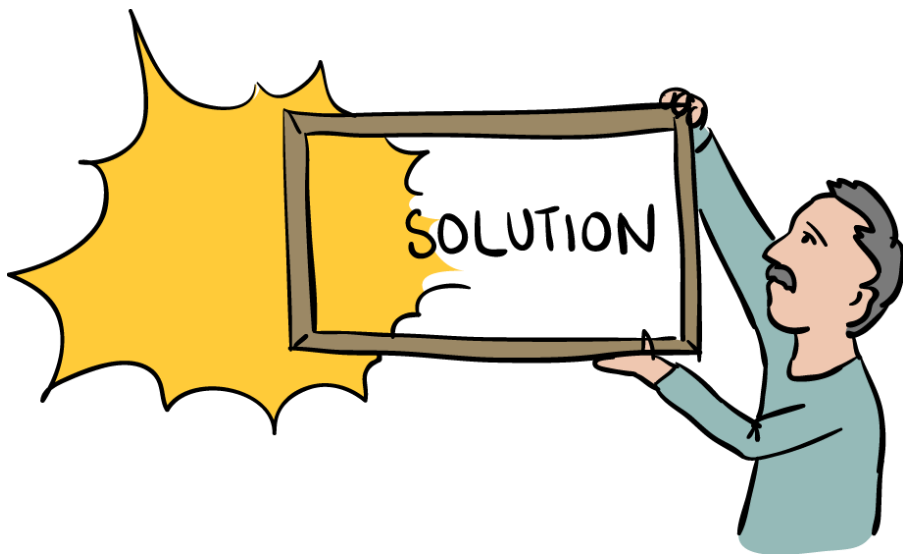
Where, before I saw a problem, now I see an opportunity, a way forward.

Our human wiring seems to be a paradox. We hold the capacity to be both: caring and uncaring, self-interested and appreciative of others, resistant to change and open to absorbing new ideas.

Some ways of framing the problem lead to an adversarial climate and negative outcomes, others lead to a collaborative climate.

When I sit with people in conflict, I often tell them, "It's natural for us to have two thoughts running through our mind; one that says, 'I'm right, you're wrong', and the other that says, 'Let's find a way to resolve this so we can both move forward, and get on with more important things'.

Which hat will you wear, today?" It matters which thought you choose to run with. What'll it be - judgment or opportunity?

When he aggressively says: "You're out of your mind! That idea will never fly here"; your assertive, reframed response can be: "Tell me specifically how my idea doesn't meet your interests."

When her narrow thinking is "The issue is that we need to get rid of Bill so we can do our work"; your broader thinking, reframed response can be: "I wonder how we can address team chemistry so that everyone is more productive?"

When the other person presents an idea foreign to us, our gut response is often to reject it, yet the idea may help us solve the problem. Incorporate it. "Yes, and..."

Don't reject: Reframe.   Move from problem focus to goal focus.

Present the problem in a different light, and the solution will shine through.

Learn your way
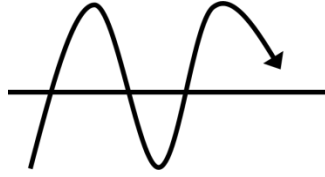
"The aim of learning is to integrate thinking and doing… to alternate between the sunlight of thought and the sea of activity."(Roger Fisher & Alan Sharp in *Getting it Done*)

Our journey starts with a destination in mind. Yet, the route is uncertain. With a learning mindset, we find our way.

Integrating thinking and doing is part of a collaborative package for getting things done; along with being purposeful and results-oriented, thinking systematically, engaging others, and giving and getting feedback.

Iterate.   Repeatedly, think and do; Q&A, experiment, prototype, pilot… Use context-appropriate checklists to aid with the routine stuff.

Learn from the edge. "It's frequently at the edges of things that we learn most about the middle… ice and steam can reveal more about the nature of water than water alone ever could." (Walter Murch, Oscar-winning film editor)

Learn online. Tap community knowledge, best practices, how-top's, data analytics… Like our attention wandering to unusual videos on YouTube, we are wired for novelty.   Work with that. Seek out collaborative learning experiences that are "fun". Facilitator and trainers such as Thiagi and Izzy Gessel show us how.

Great navigators learn their way.   In *The Wayfinders*, Wade Davis, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence, tells the amazing story of the ancient Polynesians, whose role was to navigate by canoe across the largest expanse of water in the world.   They did it using memories handed down, direct experience and the testing of hypotheses, with information drawn from many disciplines… pre-GPS!

Organizations intent on 'learning your way' are fostering adaptation. In uncertain times, is there any other way?

Ready. Fire. Aim.

Bust silos

To break down the thick walls between silos, build on the things all silos have in common: the sky above and the ground below, vision and values.
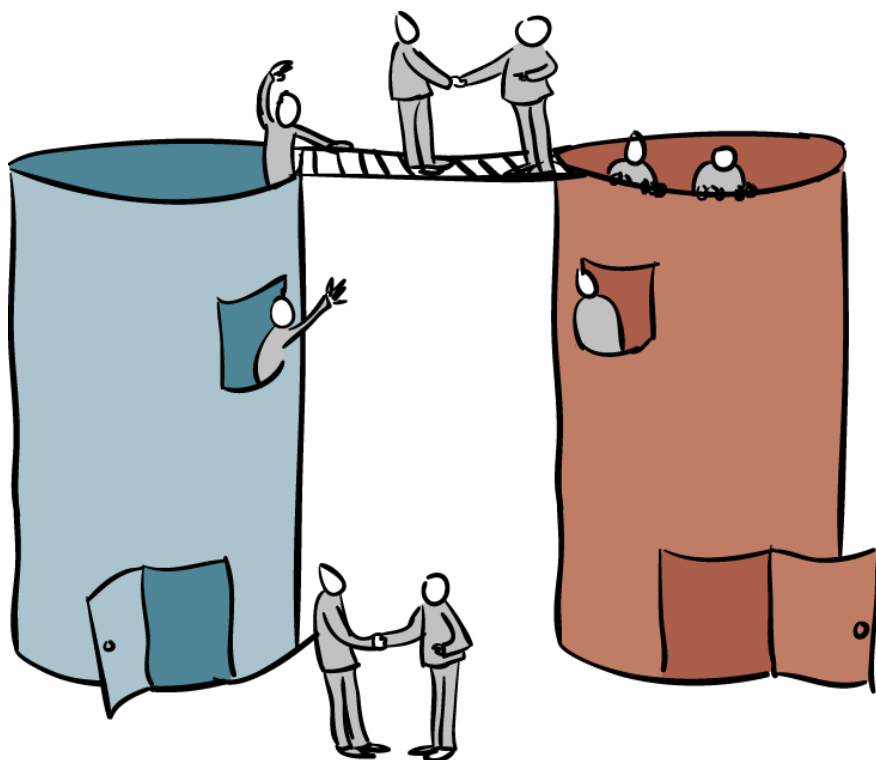
I first came across the vision and values application, of the silos metaphor, in psychiatrist Mark Goulston's *Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone*.

We need the sky; the big picture, the world of possibilities, of all we might be, a future to dream and shoot for!

"Ask the right ask the right question and you'll find your eyes moving up, a clear sign that your mind is opening up to new possibilities. Cause people to look up and reflect on what you've asked them, and when they look back down at you, the conversation will never be the same again. It'll be better."

We also need to be grounded. The ground holds our roots, our core values and beliefs, and its' from there that we grow.

Both values and vision are needed when times get tough. We need to be able to draw sustenance from our roots. At the same time, we need a beacon ahead of us, a reminder of what our shared compass is set on.

Busting silos doesn't mean capitulation. We can still be different. Tethered to our shared vision and values, we are free to create our unique home, to tackle the problems our way. Think "inside the box".

The problem can't be solved, collaboratively, if everyone stays in their own little world.

Get everyone on the same page. Show people the way out of their silos.

Add diversity
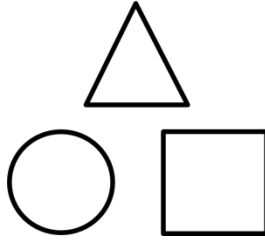
Adding diversity increases the future value of collaboration.

Looking at a problem from multiple perspectives is a way to discover new meaning. When collaborating, intentionally add diversity, early on. You are making a 'future value' calculation.

There are many dimensions of diversity, from those wired into us; race, gender, ethnicity… to external dimensions; income, relational status, personal habits, organizational…

Diversity of people increases the diversity of ideas. Intentionally design workspaces to facilitate the cross-pollination of those ideas.

Diversity is a hallmark of innovation.

Adding some diversity to my own work, I recently began facilitating problem-solving teams working on innovation challenges. These virtual teams are assembled, by IdeaConnection, with diversity in mind; adhering

to the principles of "teams no bigger than a jazz band", and bringing together people with diverse expertise.

Diversity is a pathway to shared connection and understanding.

The [Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria](#) led the Inter-Faith Bridging Project. As a participant, I saw first-hand how shared social experiences creates bridges between peoples, faiths and cultures.

Diversity is sustaining.   Whether its' the diversity of your personal financial portfolio, or the diversity of a business conglomerate (as chronicled by [Tim Wu](#), in *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*), banking on diversity has a successful track record.

Bank on diversity for future success.

Offer a continuum
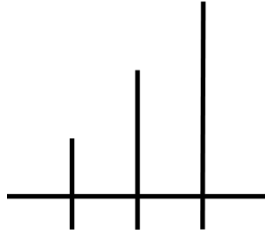
When our lizard brain takes over, the alternatives lean to either/or. When we articulate the spaces in-between, new possibilities emerge.
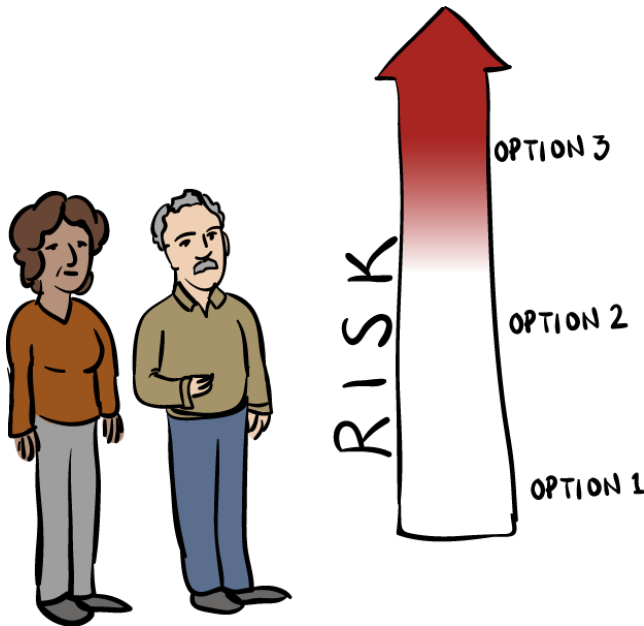
I work as a contract court mediator with Mediate BC. Lawsuits are filed. The disputants arrive for the mediation. They come in with win/lose in mind. "I'm right, you're wrong". Their world is black and white. Together, we identify other colours, options on the continuum.   Better to diverge on the problem, before converging on "the answer".

A continuum offers more choices.

A continuum expands the value pie. More choice is reflected in more ideas, options, and possibilities.   It gives us more to negotiate with.

A continuum offers a roadmap, in the form of If Then Else; "If A doesn't work, then let's try B. If B doesn't pan out, we'll do C".   Having worked as a computer programmer in an earlier career, I still value the logic of an If Then Else flowchart, as an aid to understanding and visualizing the way forward.

In health care, a 'continuum of care' recognizes five stages of senior wellness, ranging from the well elderly to the ill elderly who require intensive medical care.   A continuum provides a framework for decision-making, as [Lyndsay Green](#) elaborates on, in her books about the choices the elderly have to make.

It's easy to get distracted, and overwhelmed, by content and choice.   So, when others' attention is distributed, how much choice should we provide? Three choices are optimal, according to psychologist Barry Schwartz, in *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*.   Walt Disney always looked at a new idea from three different perspectives; the dreamer, the realist, and the critic.

Less is more works especially well in virtual contexts, where real estate is limited…. think mobile phone screen.

A well-crafted continuum facilitates making the appropriate choice.

Diverge Converge
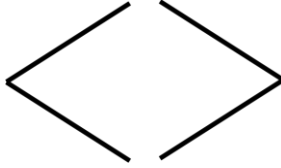
To solve a difficult challenge, come up with as many solution ideas as possible. Then "murder your darlings". Converge on the best ideas.
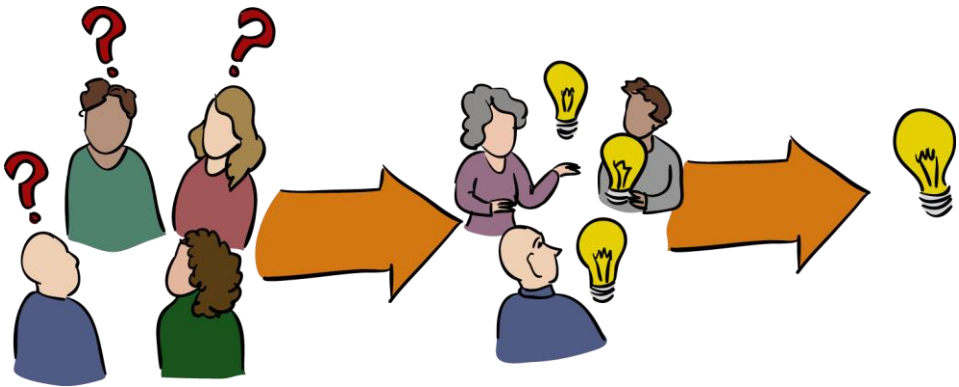
Where do good ideas come from?

"Good ideas normally come from the collision of smaller hunches, so that they form something bigger than themselves." (Steven Johnson, author of *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation*)

Ask questions to generate ideas. Use the answers to generate more ideas. Generate many ideas. Seek a variety and richness of ideas; multiple, diverse perspectives.

After the ideas, murder your darlings.

If you're like me, murder doesn't come easy.   We tend to see ourselves as owner of our ideas. Letting go of them gets personal.   When I get too big-headed about my ideas, I remember that, "Alone, I have seen many marvelous things, none of which were true". (African proverb)

As an alternative to idea murder, sleep on the idea. Ideas incubate. They are like perennials. Sleep on them, and the answer, convergence, comes. Forced brainstorming rarely works.

Our brain is wired to connect. It's a great pattern recognition tool. It can see the relationship between objects; their common essence. Disparate ideas emerge into a pattern.

Innovation expert [Michael Michalko](#) speaks of "conceptual blending"; the ability to make connections and associations between dissimilar concepts. It's what the great thinkers have done; da Vinci, Newton, Einstein…

Look to the intersection of ideas. As a "formula for fixing the hardest problems", Frank Weil chairs the US-based InterSector Project, promoting tri-sector (business, government, not-for-profit) leadership and collaborative governance.

"Creative thinkers are born through intention and desire, positive approaches, and daily habits." Make a habit of diverge converge.

Pattern interrupt
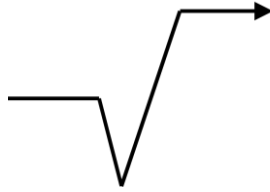
We are creatures of habit.   Sometimes, though, we need to part from our habit, and change course, in order to get to where we want to go.
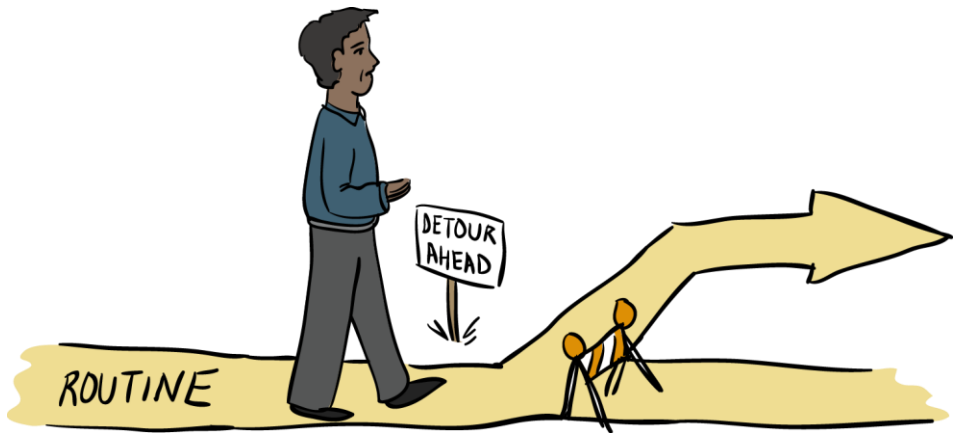
Routine and ritual are good. Yet, when we the conversation seems to be going around in circles, when we are stuck, locked onto negativity… interrupting the pattern can help us move forward.

What happens when the abrasive executive volunteers at a soup kitchen, when we introduce a game into our serious meeting, add a young person to our aged board of directors...?

The "truth" may appear ambiguous.

Mixing things up is the way of successful facilitators, and problem solvers of all types; silent reflection, adding a new voice, a fresh perspective, graphics, food break, seating change, a nap...

Contrast keeps our attention.   The power of contrast is insightfully visualized by Nancy Duarte in *Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences*.

As a species we are wired to pay attention to what's new; the predator who just moved into our sight, over there, by the trees.

Today, however, instant gratification has become our new routine. YouTube distracts and pacifies. Locked into that new, we buffer ourselves from bigger changes happening on the edges; changes in our relationship, health, business, community, environment...

Break that dangerous cycle. When we intentionally seek new observation and experience, out of the ordinary, we are forced to be fully present, with our surroundings and ourselves. Years ago, on returning from backpack travels in the "less developed" world, I felt that I had returned to the moon; so foreign did the familiar seem. Things were never the same, again.

In an uncertain world, big stuff happens; you get fired from your job, your partner dies, nature wreaks havoc... The routine is broken.

More often, though, the routine is more insidious. If the problem seems too challenging on our own, we move on to something else, rather than collaborate. When they push our hot buttons, we are quick to "tit for tat". When business success eludes us, we look externally for the reasons why.

When the routine weighs you down, pattern interrupt.

Think systems
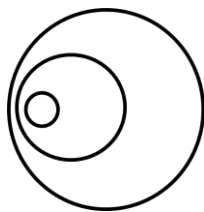
Complex problems require systems thinking; a belief that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of relationships with each other, and with other systems, rather than in isolation.
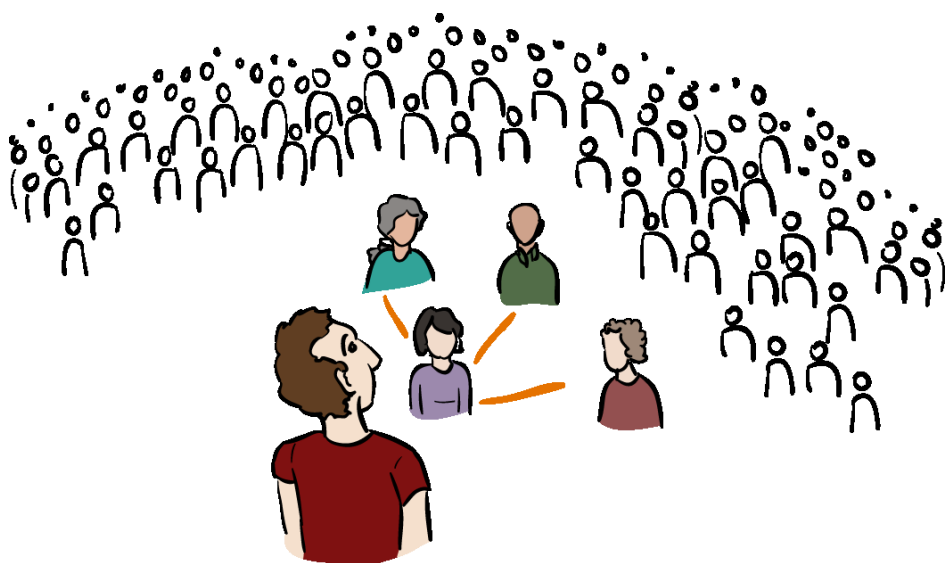
Systems thinkers bring the vertical and the horizontal into play, the forest and the trees, welcome paradox and uncertainty, and above all, value relationships with others.

I see relationships with others, as a system, rippling outwards. It starts with me (get your act together, Ben), then to relations with the people I working with or for (e.g., my team, clients), and finally, to relations in the larger community (typically people I don't know personally, or normally interact with, yet who are impacted, even in a small way, by what I'm doing).

Baking a cake is simple. Raising a child is complex. "It takes a community to raise a child." It starts with you, and involves others.

"It takes a system to change a system", says Stu Webb, the godfather of collaborative law, a team-oriented/holistic approach to service delivery.

Big problems require big time collaboration. And, the virtual world offers us that carrot; co-creation and "massively multiple points of view" (Jane McGonigal, in *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*).

Margaret Wheatley in *Finding Our Way* asks us to think of organizations as living system, "Independence is a political concept, not a biological concept." And, she asks us to think of organization more as a process, less as a structure. In living systems, everything is connected.

Taking on a new initiative from a systems perspective is to: involve everybody who cares, rely on and encourage diversity, engage stakeholder creativity, and welcome, and be surprised by, people's contributions.

Command and Control: Exit stage right.

Ask your community
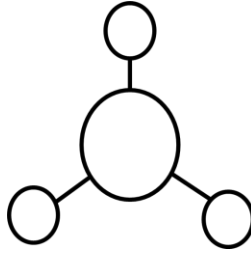
Tap your community's knowledge.
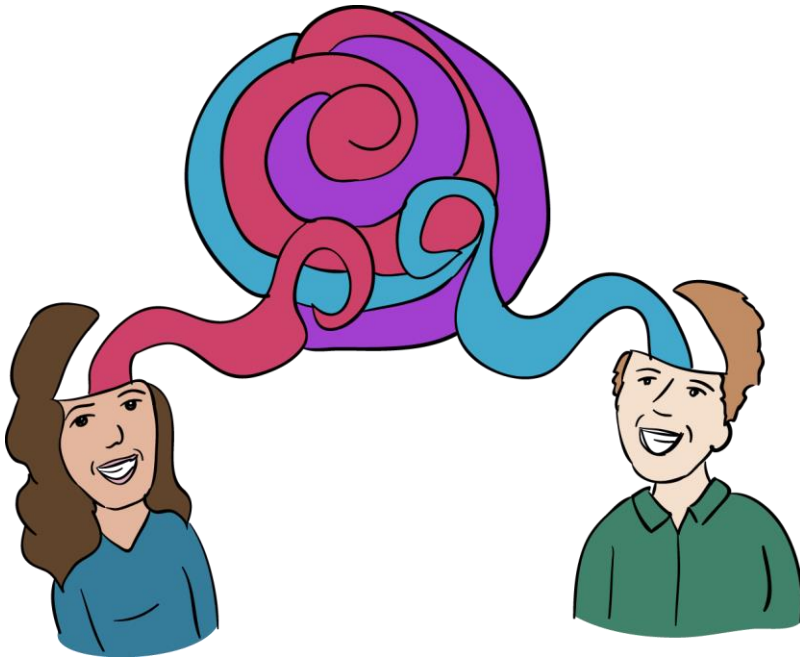
You belong to many communities, groups of people outside systems and institutions. Each community likely has its' "experts". Those experts can help you solve your problem.

Etienne Wenger describes the knowledge of experts as "an accumulation of experience - a kind of residue of their actions, thinking, and conversations." Knowledge can be static or tacit.

Leaders take the knowledge of those community experts, and make it available to those who need it. They enable their 'communities of practice' to bank the community's knowledge, systematically, one deposit

at a time. Wenger defines communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis".

Positive interactions are the food of healthy communities.

"If community members don't interact with each other, haven't developed relationships with each other, or don't share a strong common interest, they're not a community." (online community expert, [Rich Millington)](Rich Millington) Successful online communities happen through intention; strategy, building social density, an encouraging curator…

When the answers aren't in your immediate community, widen the arc. Crowdsourcing and open innovation are two ways how.

The answers are out there.

Timebox
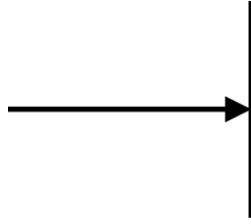
Time is our cue to act; the baby is due in one month, the project deadline is tomorrow, Dad just entered palliative care... Better focus your attention on what matters most, at this time.
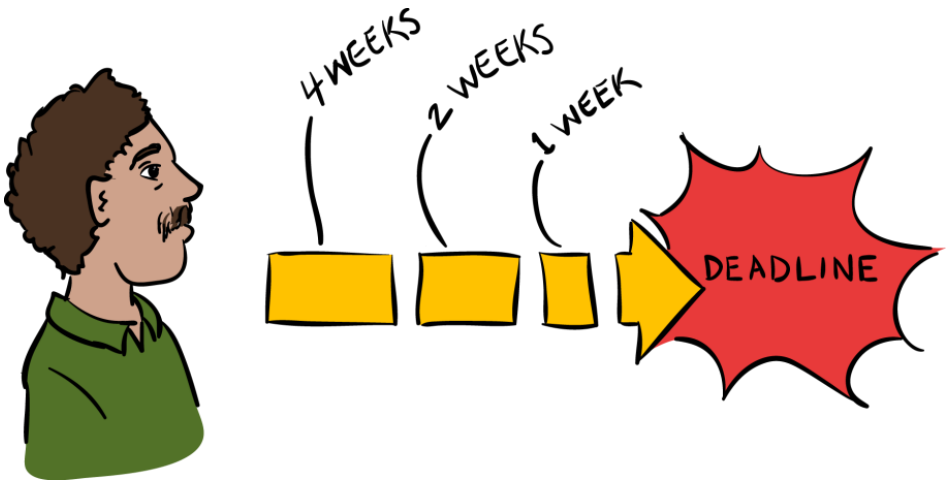
Timeboxing is a distinctive feature of project management. A time box allots a fixed period of time for getting something done; e.g., completing an activity or deliverable.

Timeboxing feels as natural as putting socks on. It's the way things get done. At least, that's my experience over the years; as a construction project manager ("you have 1 week to complete that concrete work, before the road contractor shows up"), as an IT consultant ("the deliverable is due in a month"), as a court mediator ("we have 2 hours to resolve this matter"), community volunteer ("we're only available to meet this Thursday")…

Done right, timeboxing is a blend of ['clock time' and 'event time'](), efficiency and effectiveness. In collaborative problem-solving, it's fair to aspire to elements of both; efficiency and effectiveness.

"The #1 way to get a group to be more creative is to give them less time." (Ben Chestnut, MailChimp software co-founder, CEO)

Timeboxing is an attitude. When marketer Seth Godin tells us to "ship" our product or service, Nike says "just do it", "perfect is the enemy of good"… we are being asked to timebox delivery. Then, move on to the next thing, learning as we go.

Chunking down the big problem into a number of smaller, more manageable problems aligns with success through timeboxing. Timeboxing is an antidote to "the work increases with the time allotted".

Set timebox reminders. "I will work for 25 minutes, then rest for 5″, "I will respond to client emails within 24 hours", "I will do the most important things first, each day"… Personal time management and timeboxing are bedfellows.

Still, not all cultures think timebox. "What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes! Man has forever." (Robert Browning)

Bottom line: Enlist time to get it done.

Go with the flow
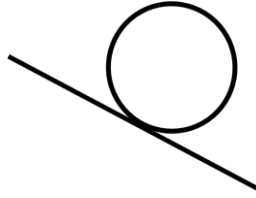
In business, momentum is everything.
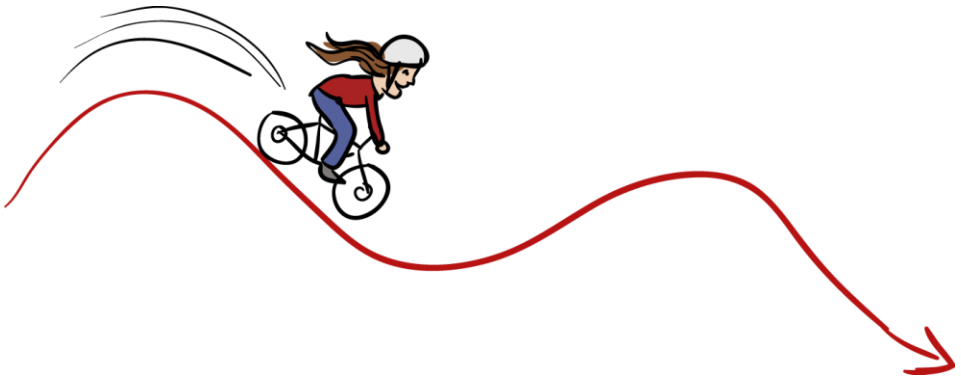
Just around the corner from where I live is a Chinese health and medicine shop. In the store window are diagrams illustrating the meridians in our bodies, along which the rivers of energy, Chi (pronounced "chee"), flow.

Keeping your Chi flowing obstruction-free and balanced, your yin yang in harmony, is a good thing.

We gain momentum when we are "in the flow". We are fully immersed in what we are doing.

Psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, proposes three conditions for workplace flow: clear goals, immediate feedback, and a balance between opportunity and capacity. I'd say that also makes a nice formula for successful collaborative problem-solving!
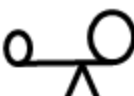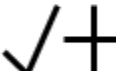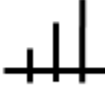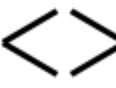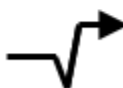
It can be hard to maintain flow. We are put in unfamiliar situations. Obstacles pop up. Through self-talk, acknowledge your feelings in the moment, then let go of those thoughts, and say "hello" to what's before you. Go with the flow.

Mastering Chi flow is a journey.   It starts with awareness; what's stopping me?   Next, develop your flow capacity; "no flow - no grow".   Finally, apply your new flow state; to benefit yourself and others.

Look for opportunity to nurture your Chi flow. Social media is one such opportunity; a place to explore internal balance, renewal and adaptation, within the digital maelstrom. Learn your way to flow.

Flow will help you get from problem state to solution state.

Appendix – Collaboration Icons

1	2	3	
4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23

Collaborative Relationships

1. Bid for connection
2. Me and We
3. Link sustainability to long-term relationships

Collaborative Spaces

4. Structure for behaviour
5. Transform through conversations
6. Make it safe to fail
7. Welcome paradox

Collaborative problem-solving techniques

8. Break bread together
9. Sit in a circle
10. Tell stories
11. Find common ground
12. Yes, and
13. Reframe conflict
14. Learn your way
15. Bust silos
16. Add diversity
17. Offer a continuum
18. Diverge converge
19. Pattern interrupt
20. Think systems
21. Ask your community
22. Timebox
23. Go with the flow

About the Authors

Ben Ziegler is a conflict management and collaboration specialist.

He currently works as a mediator, in- and out-of-court, mediating business and community disputes, mentors other mediators, and has worked as an online mediator since 2003. He also delivers conflict resolution and collaboration training and coaching. In a consulting capacity, he facilitates project teams, In Real Life and virtually.

His earlier work was as a construction surveyor and project manager in the civil engineering field. He then spent 15 years with international systems consulting firms (Accenture, Sierra Systems), as an IT project manager, business analyst, and computer programmer.

Ben is active in various non-profit community and arts organizations. He is big fan of vibrant neighbourhoods, including the one where he lives with his wife and family, in Victoria, on Canada's West coast.

You can reach Ben via email, ben@collaborativejourneys.com, or through his website, www.collaborativejourneys.com.

Tanya Gadsby is a graphic recorder and visual specialist based in Victoria, British Columbia. She works locally and across Canada.

[Graphic recording is the translation of conversations into images and text on large sheets of paper on the wall. This is done live during meetings, conferences, and events, and helps visualize complex conversations for the entire group to see. Done well, the recordings facilitate participant engagement, reflective conversations, and inspire new ideas.]

Tanya's graphics skills have been used in strategic planning sessions, community workshops, patient journey mapping, and other multi-stakeholder gatherings. She also specializes in whiteboard videos and custom illustrated Prezi presentations. Check out her website for samples of her recent work!

Tanya was born in Kawakawa, New Zealand, and grew up in Canada's most northern Canadian communities, Nunavut and the Yukon. She has a Fine Arts degree from the University of Victoria. Prior to her graphic recording work, she worked 5 years with the Vancouver Island Health Authority.

You can reach Tanya through her website, www.drawingoutideas.ca.