

Give and Take

Understanding attitudes to
learning in the collaborative process

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The Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM) develops UK-based world-class management research. AIM seeks to identify ways to enhance the competitiveness of the UK economy and its infrastructure through research into management and organisational performance in both the private and public sectors.

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- Raise the quality and international standing of UK research on management
- Expand the size and capacity of the active UK research base on management
- Engage with practitioners and other users of research within and beyond the UK as co-producers of knowledge about management

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Current AIM research projects focus on:

UK productivity and performance for the 21st century.

How can UK policymakers evaluate and address concerns surrounding the UK's performance in relation to other countries?

National productivity has been the concern of economists, government policymakers, and corporate decision-makers for some time. Further research by scholars from a range of disciplines is bringing new voices to the debates about how the productivity gap can be measured, and what the UK can do to improve the effectiveness of UK industry and its supporting public services.

Sustaining innovation to achieve competitive advantage and high quality public services.

How can UK managers capture the benefits of innovation while meeting other demands of a competitive and social environment?

Innovation is a key source of competitive advantage and public value through new strategies, products, services and organisational processes. The UK has outstanding exemplars of innovative private and public sector organisations and is investing significantly in its science and skills base to underpin future innovative capacity.



Adapting promising practices to enhance performance across varied organisational contexts.

How can UK managers disseminate their experience whilst learning from others?

Improved management practices are identified as important for enhancing productivity and performance. The main focus is on how evidence behind good or promising practices can be systematically assessed, creatively adapted, successfully implemented and knowledge diffused to other organisations that will benefit.

Collaboration between different organisational partners is a process critical to the success of many organisations. It is also frequently a complex process.

There are many reasons to collaborate. Often partners have specific objectives in mind. Partners may collaborate on the design of a car prototype for example. In such a case the partners might not describe their objective using terms such as knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, knowledge creation, or learning. They would probably say they were working together to design a car. Implicitly, however, their collaboration is concerned with that unspoken subject: learning. And learning underpins many other collaborative relationships.

The process of collaboration is often a messy one, not clearly defined, difficult to manage and often a response to unplanned events or actions. It can lead to very beneficial results – collaborative advantage – but progress is often painfully slow, – collaborative inertia.

By using a theoretical framework which helps the partners involved to understand and explore attitudes to learning in collaborations, the chances of benefiting from a collaborative relationship can be improved.

We have constructed a framework around the attitudes taken towards exchanges of knowledge and learning. Understanding the attitudes and approaches adopted towards learning in collaborative relationships, is an essential tool to help manage the collaborative process towards a beneficial outcome for all partners.

Key issues for practitioners

Companies need to be aware that:

- There are some basic attitudes towards collaborative learning that shape the relationship. Selfish-exploiting. Sharing-exchanging. Sharing-exploring. Sidelineing-excluding.
- The basic attitudes are a good starting point, but they are only a small part of the picture. Perspectives and attitudes are varied.
- The theoretical framework of attitudes included in this briefing can aid understanding during discussions about the collaborative process, both before and during collaboration.

The process of collaboration is often a messy one, not clearly defined, difficult to manage and often a response to unplanned events or actions.

Knowledge of both the attitudes involved, and which apply to which partner, is particularly important because:

- The attitudes adopted by the organisation, both explicitly and implicitly, affect the nature of the relationship and the way knowledge moves between the partners in a collaborative relationship.
- If the attitudes are mismatched or unfavourably shared, then the usefulness of any knowledge obtained may be adversely affected.
- The stances adopted by the parties may indicate more general attitudes held by the partners towards one another.

Attitudes towards learning play a critical role in deciding whether an organisation achieves collaborative advantage, or regresses into collaborative inertia. As a result, the conceptual framework for exploring and understanding attitudes towards knowledge giving, taking and creating, should become an integral part of managing any collaborative process.



Collaboration is a critical competence for organisations. Within the private sector collaboration has been described as an organisational choice linked to the life or death of firms. In public and mixed sector contexts collaboration is regarded as central to the design and delivery of complex services, and important for the resolution of complex social issues.

While it may be of critical importance, collaboration presents something of a challenge. Research into the subject reveals that collaboration is an emergent, complex, social process which often occurs in an unplanned way, as a response to unintended, unforeseen events for example. It is therefore a complex managerial challenge.

Collaboration defined

The term collaboration can mean a variety of things. For the purposes of this briefing the term collaboration includes any arrangement of stakeholders from a number of organisations, coming together to act or decide upon some issues of mutual interest. This would include, for example, alliances, partnerships, joint ventures, networks and a host of other forms of co-operative relationships.

Collaborative advantage

Collaboration between partners can result in a variety of outcomes, some beneficial, some less so.

Collaborative advantage refers to the potential synergistic benefits of collaboration – in particular the notion that it is capable of achieving outcomes beyond the scope of individual organisations. *Collaborative inertia* refers to the more usual outcome – that collaborations make marginal, slow and difficult progress.

It is possible to look at the various factors involved in the act of collaboration including, for example, aims negotiation, trust building, managing power and disparity of culture and language, and see how they relate to collaborative advantage or collaborative inertia.

Collaborative learning, and knowledge transfer and creation

One aim, or potential benefit, sometimes claimed for collaboration is learning; the transfer of knowledge between the various partners or the creation of knowledge by the partners.

Collaboration and learning through collaboration, for example, is at the heart of many government policies. It is also implicit in many collaborative ventures in the private sector.

Our research focuses on attitudes towards learning in the context of collaborative ventures. If it is possible to create a framework for understanding and exploring what happens in a collaborative venture, in relation to knowledge transfer, then organisations can use this framework to help manage collaboration in the direction of collaborative advantage, as opposed to regressing to collaborative inertia.

attitudes to learning in collaboration

Before addressing how attitudes to learning in collaboration are framed and applied in theory and practice, it is necessary to consider some common terms and concepts.

The most commonly used terms to describe learning outcomes are knowledge transfer and knowledge creation.

Learning from and learning with

(i) **Knowledge transfer** in collaborative partnerships may relate to one-way, two-way, or more complex multidirectional flows of information between partners.

One-way knowledge transfer is linked to competitive learning behaviour, where one partner attempts to take knowledge from another, at the same time limiting the amount of knowledge passed back in the opposite direction.

This happens at the *organisational* level, for example through deliberate acquisition of knowledge by one organisation from another, or 'spillover' – the possibility for an organisation to learn from another without either party intending it to happen.



Broader two-way and multidirectional knowledge transfer may occur not only at the *organisational* level but also at the *interorganisational* level. At the interorganisational level these outcomes are of kinds that support the purposes of the collaboration, rather than the individual organisations.

They might include, for example, network participants learning new ways to interact and structure collaborations, the improved performance of the organisations involved in collaboration, and the generation of participative levels of understanding within a particular community.

The different knowledge transfer outcomes discussed above reflect approaches based upon organisations learning *from* each other.

(ii) **Knowledge creation** is, by contrast, about organisations learning with each other.

Knowledge creation can be an important outcome for collaborations. It has been recognised as particularly important in the context of organisational communities, such as industrial clusters like Silicon Valley.

It is important to note that knowledge creation and knowledge transfer are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Instead both may overlap in collaborative situations.

Attitudes towards learning

When practitioners think about and discuss collaborative learning processes, they tend to simplify the attitudes towards learning. They think about them, for example, in black and white, in terms of competitive or collaborative attitudes. They make implicit assumptions.

The research into this area suggests there are four basic attitudes that are usually adopted:

Selfish-exploiting: involves the *selfish* acquisition of knowledge from a partner, exclusively for an organisation's own use, thus *exploiting* the partner; this is knowledge transfer.

Sharing-exchanging: involves the *sharing* of knowledge with specific organisational partners, in a relatively controlled fashion, thus *exchanging* with them; this is also knowledge transfer.

Sharing-exploring: involves the *sharing* of knowledge in a broad, open manner amongst a range of partners, thus *exploring* innovative solutions to problems-at-hand collaboratively; this is knowledge creation.

Sidelining-excluding: relates to situations in which neither form of learning is a consideration for participants. In these cases, the implicit *sidelining* of learning occurs (it is never considered) because the agenda is focused elsewhere, or the explicit sidelining of learning occurs, because it is regarded as unimportant. Either way it is *excluding* learning from the collaborative agenda.

Even though learning may not be considered as a specific aim, it can still take place. Individuals can, for example, gain useful knowledge through relationships in a social network context, or through experience in merger situations.

When practitioners think about and discuss collaborative learning processes, they tend to simplify the attitudes towards learning.

Our research methods

The data we used in our research, and as the basis of our discussion of attitudes towards learning, was gathered during eight collaboration development programmes.

These programmes typically involved a planning phase, focal workshop(s) and follow-up discussions with participants. Our role was to provide facilitation to help participants get to grips with the issues involved in setting up and managing their partnerships and collaborations.

The eight programmes covered a range of situations. These were: an international science network; a national science network; a small business network; a business growth network; an economic development group; a group of local authority partnership managers; a property development alliance; and a local authority division concerned with the delivery of a community service.

Parties involved in the programmes included both large and small businesses, public agencies concerned with health, housing, local government and economic development, voluntary organisations and academic institutions.

Our interventions took place over periods ranging from four months to two years. In all of the cases there was relatively extended dialogue with key people in each of the programmes and single or multiple-day workshop processes involving large numbers of participants.

Our roles included providing support for our key contacts, designing and facilitating workshops, contributing seminar presentations, and developing and enabling exercises and discussions.

The majority of the data collected was 'naturally occurring' – it was not generated in response to questionnaires or interviews. It included participants' experiences and views, issues and actions, mostly captured as notes made during and after phone calls, meetings or workshops.

Following several iterations of analysis of the data, twelve clusters of related issues emerged. We then reviewed the clusters and the links between them focusing on the group of clusters relating to types of attitude.

Finally we created the conceptual framework which is explored in this briefing.

unpacking the attitudes

The basic attitudes towards learning in collaborative situations in no way provide a complete picture. The situation is far more complex. We used the research data (see research methods box) to explore the basic attitudes involved in greater depth to see if a more detailed and useful framework for practitioners could be constructed.

1 Sidelined learning

One of the most striking initial observations was that some practitioners tend not to think of learning as an explicit outcome of collaboration.

In the workshop with the Business Growth Network, where we raised issues of learning and knowledge transfer and creation, responses to the concepts were generally negative. Learning was seen as irrelevant and a time-consuming diversion from the real purpose of collaborating. We received the same response with regard to terms such as knowledge transfer and knowledge creation. For some, these terms are apparently 'not language used in commercial companies'.

This attitude towards collaborative learning, this lack of concern about learning from or with partners, is closest to the *sidelining* attitude.



It is summed up by the statement: *“Learning from or with partners is not something we think about (but unintentional learning does take place)”*. The ‘we’ in this case refers to members of one or more of the organisations involved in the collaboration.

Table 1: Sideline Attitudes – Some Examples

Basic attitude	
Sidelineing	“Learning from or with partners is not something we think about”
Variations on sidelineing of learning	
Using	“Learning from or with partners is not something we think about because our focus is on other objectives”
Evaluating – costs	“Learning from or with partners is not something we do because the opportunity cost is too high”
Evaluating – benefits	“Learning from or with partners is something we think about only if it can be expressed in tangible outcomes”
Enabling	“We don’t need to learn, but we help other partners to learn from each other”

There are several reasons why organisations engage in sidelineing behaviour

■ **Using: Learning from or with partners is not something we think about because our focus is on other objectives.**

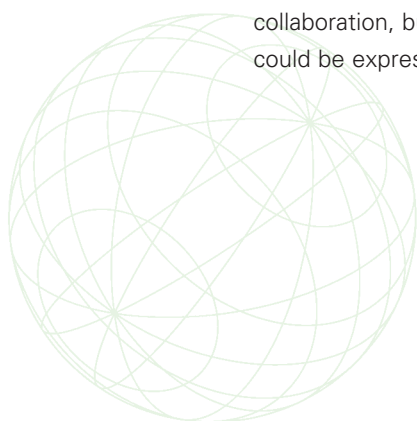
An obvious reason why partners aren’t concerned with learning is that the main reason for collaboration may have a more tangible, often pre-determined, objective. It might, for example, involve service delivery, product development or production, market entry, joint planning and so on. The partners expect to *contribute* different expertise or other resources. So it is seen as *using* partners’ knowledge rather than learning from them.

■ **Cost evaluating: Learning from or with partners is not something we do because the opportunity cost is too high.**

Another practical reason for sidelineing learning that was repeatedly raised by members of the Business Growth Network was that while shared learning might be helpful, it is too time-consuming. One SME director explicitly commented: *“If you are a small company there is no time to learn; you just want to get your product to market.”*

■ **Benefit evaluating: Learning from or with partners is something we think about only if it can be expressed in tangible outcomes.**

There was some acknowledgement that learning could be a central objective for collaboration, but that this should only be when a ‘tangible and commercial focus’ could be expressed. This is a benefits related approach.



- **Enabling: We don't need to learn, but we help other partners to learn from each other.**

A further variation on sidelining was when a partner claimed to be collaborating *"To help [other participants] learn from each other"*.

Sidelining is a common attitude towards learning as an outcome of collaborative partnerships. But this is on an explicit level. In less explicit ways, learning issues are very relevant to the partners.

2 Give and take

The selfish-exploiting attitude towards learning seems a strange position to adopt for an organisation in a collaborative partnership. However, the *"we take from you without giving to you"* attitude is surprisingly common (the 'we' and 'you' refer to collaborating organisations).

"It's hard to get past the selfish box in a commercial setting – but this can act against us," is how one person in the Business Growth Network put it.



Selfish attitudes are not restricted to commercial settings. The following comment, made by a Community Service local authority manager, *“Use information and knowledge to your advantage – controlling what’s shared,”* clearly indicates selfish motivations in the consideration of what should be shared with partners.

The selfish attitude just highlights the way ‘we’ think. To describe the sharing attitude, however, both sides of the equation are needed, because both ‘we’ and ‘you’ need to be active in their relation to each other.

Table 2: Basic Selfish and Sharing Learning Attitudes

Basic attitudes	
Selfish	“We take from you without giving to you”
Sharing – exchanging	“We take from you and we give to you; you take from us and give to us”
Sharing – exploring	“We take from you and we give to you; you take from us and give to us – and we learn together to create knowledge”



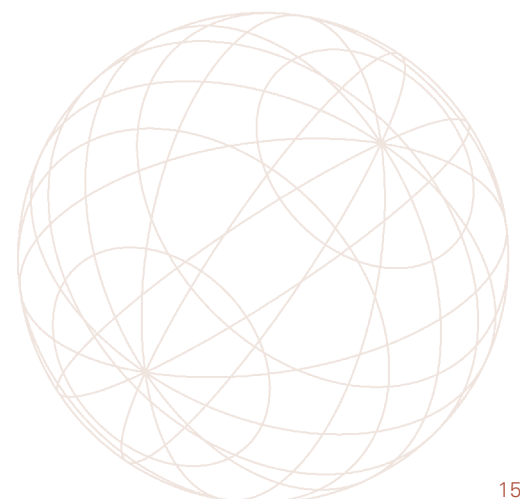
3 The distinctions between selfish and sharing

You might think that a collaborative outlook would necessarily involve a sharing attitude towards knowledge. In practice, however, it is difficult to establish clear distinctions between being selfish and sharing.

Instead there are a number of variations on the theme, different nuances or shades of sharing. These range from a refusal to share knowledge, through to openness and a willingness to share. Equally there may be situations where a partner is reluctant to share, but not from selfish motives. Or alternatively they may be willing to share but selfish motives are at play. The collaborative relationship is not often equally balanced.

Table 3: Stances on Giving Knowledge – Some Examples

Stances on giving knowledge to a partner	
Starving – protective	“We don’t trust you, therefore we don’t give to you”
Starving – legalistic	“We don’t trust you, therefore we bind you not to take from us”
Starving – leasing	“We will let you have the use of our knowledge, but we will not let you replicate it”
Starving – independent	“We want to maintain our independent position, so we don’t give to you”
Starving – unconfident	“We don’t trust our knowledge, so we will not give it to you”
Instrumental	“When it suits us to do so, we give to you”
Instrumental – positioning	“When it helps us to maintain our central position, we give to you”
Instrumental – political	“When it helps us to manipulate a third party, we give to you”
Instrumental – force-feeding	“When we need you to have understanding, we give to you”
Instrumental – parenting	“When we deem it to be good for you, we give to you”
Unilateral sharing	“We enjoy sharing, therefore we give to you (even though we may be unwise to do so)”



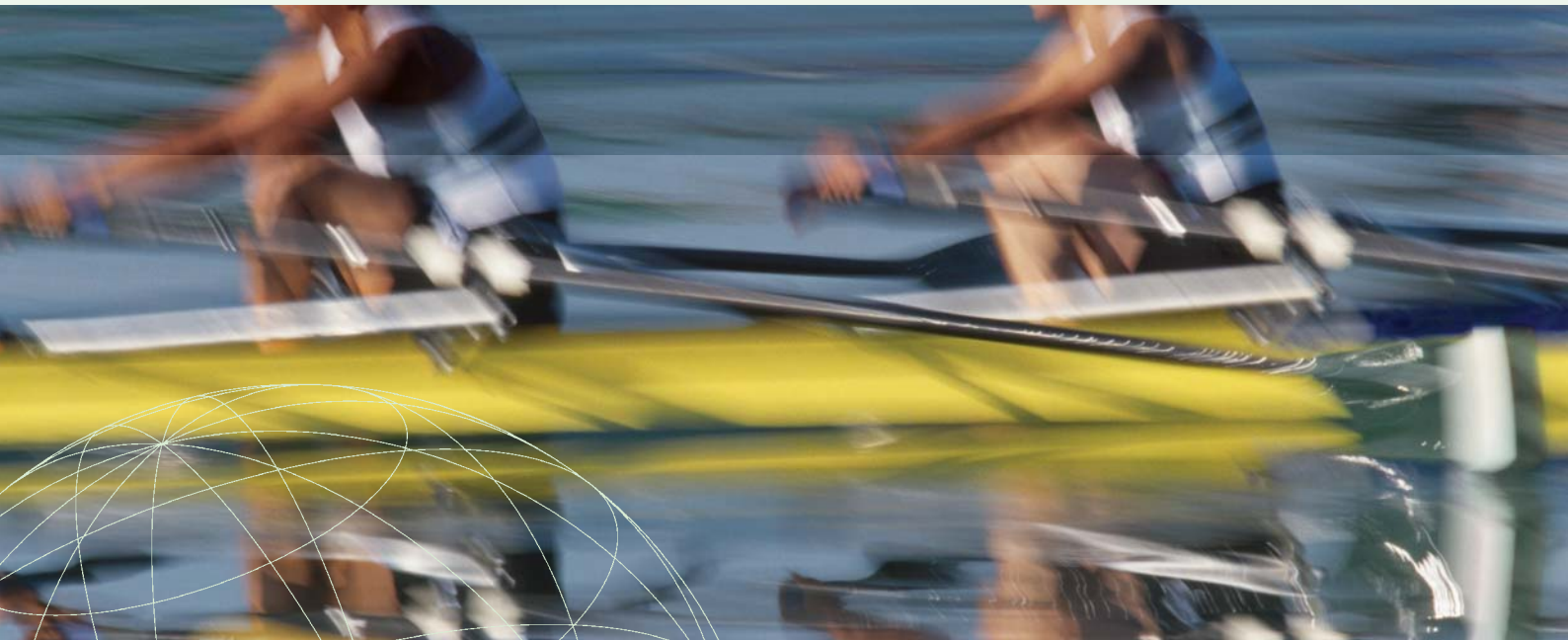
i Stances on giving knowledge to partners

Starvation

There are a large number of variations in the selfish attitude towards collaborative learning. At one end of the scale is the 'we don't give to you' type stance. In these relationships one partner starves the other of knowledge.

There are a variety of reasons to adopt this stance. None of them are suggestive of purely selfish motivations. However, the 'starved' organisation, may only see the lack of giving, rather than the reasons for it.

Some partners may be motivated not to share information for defensive or purely practical reasons. For example, the protection of intellectual property was a particular issue for the owners of very small businesses. When considering market-access collaborations with very much larger companies they often expressed suspicion. In order to safeguard themselves against the possible – perhaps likely – competitive behaviour of partners, they sometimes hold on to their knowledge in a way that appears selfish but might better be described as protective: *"We don't trust you therefore we don't give to you"*.



Other reasons to limit sharing include being happy to provide access to knowledge but not wanting the other party to own it: *"We will let you have the use of our knowledge, but we will not let you replicate it."* Not wanting to transfer knowledge, but to improve competitive position instead: *"We want to maintain our independent position, so we don't give to you"*. Or being uncertain of the value of the knowledge to be transferred: *"We don't trust our knowledge, so we will not give it to you."*

Instrumental

Even where a party was prepared to share knowledge, there was often a degree of selfishness involved.

Statements such as, *“Use information and knowledge to your advantage – controlling what’s shared”*, indicate an instrumental stance on sharing: *“When it suits us to do so, we give to you”*.

One organisation, for example, wanted to demonstrate to other potential partners why it was important for them to collaborate – in other words they were selling the virtues of the potential collaboration – so they force fed the other partners with information: *“When we need you to have understanding, we give to you”*. This is a selfish approach as one party is providing information in order to get something from the other.

In other situations partners control the flow of knowledge to achieve certain aims, such as maintaining a certain position. Or they might provide information when it undermines another party – a political decision. A parenting approach, although involving, is another highly controlling approach, where the knowledge giver uses the act of choosing who gets the knowledge and who is starved, to benefit themselves: *“When we deem it to be good for you, we give to you”*.

In the previous examples, the attitude towards selfish giving is a carefully considered one. It is, however, also possible to take an unguarded careless approach: *“We enjoy sharing, therefore we give to you (even though we may be unwise to do so)”*. Yet even this may be selfish in respect of colleagues if it undermines strategy within the giving organisation.

Table 4: Stances on Taking Knowledge – Some Examples

Stances on taking knowledge from partners	
Limited ability	“We don’t have the requisite skill, therefore we don’t take from you”
Emergently selfish	“We didn’t intend to take from you, but since we now have the knowledge we will use it”
Emergently careless	“We didn’t intend to take from you, but since we now have the knowledge we will use it unthinkingly (i.e. without considering the consequences for you)”
Emergently sharing	“We were happy just to give, but now we realise that there is something in it for both of us”
Discretionary	“We take what you give only if we choose to”
Discretionary – trust	“We don’t trust you, therefore we don’t take what you give”

ii Stances on taking knowledge from partners

One suggestion about taking knowledge is that a “we take from you without giving to you” attitude, involves a degree of slyness and guile. And possibly without that particular ‘skill’ an organisation may not be able to take without giving.

Taking knowledge may also occur in situations where both partners come to realise that sharing knowledge can be beneficial.

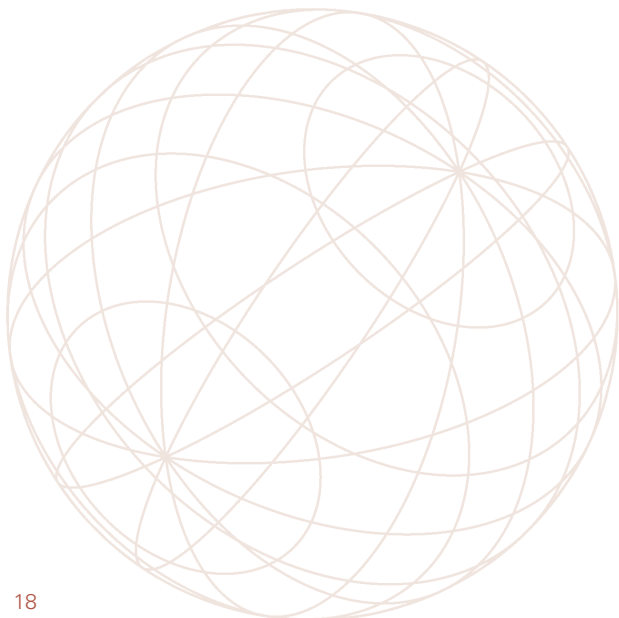
A second point relates to the degree to which a ‘we take from you’ stance is planned, rather than emerging from the interaction. Often attitudes emerge as collaborations first become a possibility, and then occur.

In situations where collaboration is a possibility, there were often clear worries expressed about the use the potential partner might make of the knowledge gained in the event that no collaboration resulted. The implication here is that while the original intent in sharing knowledge may be entirely collaborative, at the end of the episode it is not possible to turn back the clock and wipe out the knowledge gained. “We didn’t intend to take from you, but since we have the knowledge we will use it”.

There was also a more benign explanation for a one sided knowledge transaction which involves carelessness rather than intentionally selfish behaviour. “We didn’t intend to take the knowledge from you, but since we now have the knowledge we will use it unthinkingly (i.e. without considering the consequences for you)”.

Taking knowledge may also occur in situations where both partners come to realise that sharing knowledge can be beneficial. “We were happy just to give, but now we realise that there is something in it for both of us”.

Last of all, it may be that the partner that is offered knowledge as part of a collaborative relationship, doesn’t want that knowledge. “We take what you give only if we choose to”. It also suggests a “Basis for rejection on grounds of lack of trust” stance. “We don’t trust you, therefore we don’t take what you give.”



attitudes – the bigger picture

1 Reassessing basic attitudes

As we have seen the basic learning attitudes – selfish, sharing and sidelined – are far from the only possibilities. There are many more nuances of each. The variations we discovered are not an exhaustive list, merely examples.

It is clear that not all ‘*we don’t give*’ attitudes are motivated by purely selfish, competitive aims. Equally, not all ‘*we give*’ attitudes are motivated by purely selfless, co-operative considerations. The distinction between motivations relating to attitudes to *taking* knowledge is equally fuzzy.

If they are to be of any help in practice, the basic attitudes, must be thought of as complex bundles of possibilities, and the boundaries between them as blurred rather than precise. Situations will exist, for example, where learning between partners is partly intended and partly sidelined. The boundaries between the more detailed stances are equally blurred.

As we have seen the basic learning attitudes – selfish, sharing and sidelined – are far from the only possibilities.



Tables 1-4 provide a useful way of thinking about the dynamics of the relationship between two parties in a collaborative venture between two or more partners. They help to provide a way of considering the various learning attitudes at play in a particular situation.

Complicating attitudes towards collaborative learning

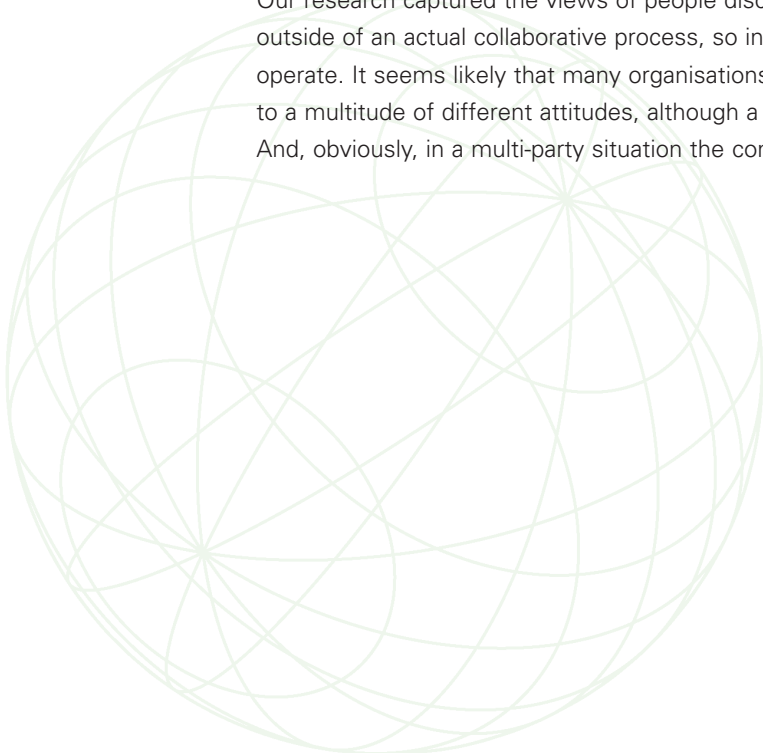
The stances listed in Tables 3-4 are framed from the perspective of 'we'; that is, with 'we' doing the taking of knowledge from one or more partners.

...it seems likely that many organisations would be host to a multitude of different attitudes, although a dominant one might prevail.

However, the basic sharing attitudes are also concerned with what the 'you' does. They assume a symmetrical relationship: "*We take from you and we give to you; you take from us and give to us*". In practical situations, however, asymmetry seems much more likely. This further complicates the situation. It is important to consider the following factors when considering both sides of the collaborative partnering equation:

- They can be made up from combinations of stances. For example, one side may take a *parenting* attitude to giving knowledge and discretionary attitude to taking knowledge, the other may take a protective attitude to giving knowledge and a *limited ability* attitude to taking it.
- The attitudes of the partners may be quite different from each other.
- The perceptions of each party about their own and their partners' stances may differ significantly.
- Within each partnering organisation there may be different attitudes to learning at different levels.
- Attitudes may vary over time on a macro-level as, for example, individuals get to know each other, early successes lead to the build up of trust or changes of personnel destroy trust. They may also vary on a micro-level according to the context of the moment.
- Attitudes to learning operate within the context of other aspects of collaboration practice such as managing trust, aims, power and so on.

Our research captured the views of people discussing attitudes towards collaboration outside of an actual collaborative process, so in 'reality' other attitudes may also operate. It seems likely that many organisations would be host to a multitude of different attitudes, although a dominant one might prevail. And, obviously, in a multi-party situation the complexity is magnified.



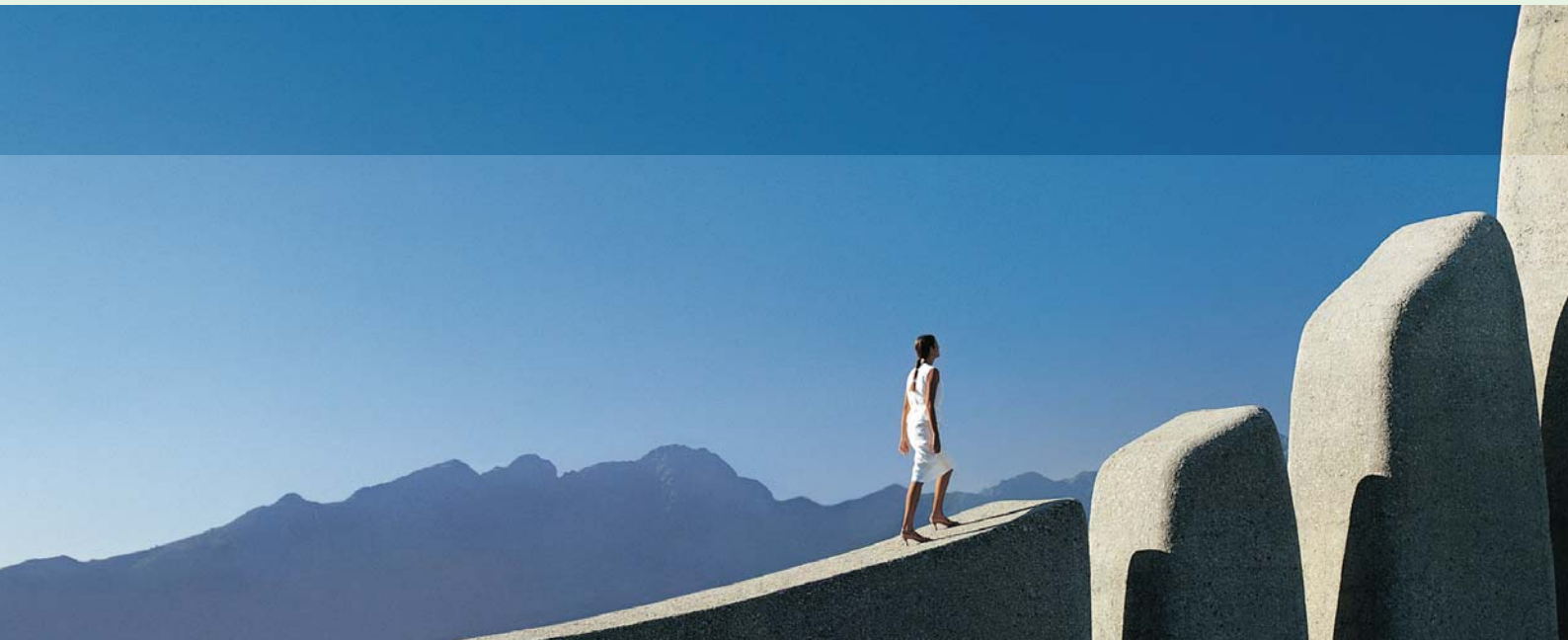
conclusions

Collaboration is a critical competence for organisations. It offers the possibility of very tangible benefits. However collaboration is not an easily managed process.

There are a number of possible outcomes from a collaborative process. These can be polarised under two headings. In collaborative advantage the synergistic benefits of collaboration are realised. In collaborative inertia – the more usual outcome – collaborations make marginal, slow and difficult progress. Any help therefore that can steer a collaborative relationship towards a situation of collaborative advantage is invaluable.

Finally, collaboration is often about exchanges of knowledge and learning. It may not be explicitly so, but it is usually implicit. We have constructed a framework around the attitudes towards exchanges of knowledge and learning.

Understanding the attitudes and approaches adopted towards learning in collaborative relationships, is an essential tool to help manage the collaborative process towards a beneficial outcome for all partners.



Key issues for practitioners

Companies need to be aware that:

- There are some basic attitudes towards collaborative learning that shape the relationship. Selfish-exploiting. Sharing-exchanging. Sharing-exploring. Sidelining-excluding.
- The basic attitudes are a good starting point, but they are only a small part of the picture. Perspectives and attitudes are varied.
- The theoretical framework of attitudes included in this briefing can aid understanding during discussions about the collaborative process, both before and during collaboration.

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- The attitudes adopted by the organisation, both explicitly and implicitly, affect the nature of the relationship and the way knowledge moves between the partners in a collaborative relationship.
- If the attitudes are mismatched or unfavourably shared, then the usefulness of any knowledge obtained may be adversely affected.
- The stances adopted by the parties may indicate more general attitudes held by the partners towards one another.

Attitudes towards learning play a critical role in deciding whether an organisation achieves collaborative advantage, or regresses into collaborative inertia. As a result, the conceptual framework for exploring and understanding attitudes towards knowledge giving, taking and creating, should become an integral part of managing any collaborative process.



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ISBN 0-9551850-3-3