

How on Earth Can We Work Together? Five Propositions about Collaborating Across Differences

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an updated general theory and practice for system-transforming collaborations among diverse persons and groups, with five propositions: (1) We face a dangerously widening gap between the collaborations we need to undertake and those we are willing and able to undertake. (2) To bridge this gap, we must grow our individual and collective capacities to collaborate across differences. (3) This bridging requires discerning when, on what, and with whom to collaborate. (4) We can accomplish this bridging by employing three intrinsic human drives. (5) We can put this bridging into practice with five stretches.

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Introduction

To change the world around us, we always need to work with others. This is true whether we are trying to change what is happening in our families or communities or organizations -and even more so when we are trying to change what is happening in larger societal systems. Increasingly we face local and global challenges that demand

that we work together across our differences, and yet increasingly we are too divided to do so. How can we bridge this widening collaboration gap?

For thirty years my colleagues and I have supported teams of diverse leaders to work together to address their most important and intractable challenges. I have synthesized my learnings from these experiences in a series of publications that offer a general theory and practice for such system -transforming collaborative processes (Kahane, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2025). In 2017, I wrote *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust (CwtE)*. Since then, however, the collaboration gap has become more widespread, dangerous, and urgent.

The purpose of this paper is to rearticulate the foundations of this theory and practice to help changemakers in all sectors (the "us" of this paper) more effectively bridge this gap and thereby address the challenges of our time.

1. We face a dangerously widening collaboration gap

We are facing multiple inter-related global challenges that are producing potential "catastrophes of our making-nuclear annihilation, climate change, ecological collapse, pandemics, or misaligned artificial intelligence" (Dixson-Decleve & Rockström, 2024). These challenges make it more necessary for us to collaborate broadly (across places, sectors, ideologies, identities, etc.) and deeply (under the surface, at the common roots of these challenges, to transform the systems that are creating the challenges).

At the same time, in many contexts and exacerbated by these challenges, we are facing increasing polarization, mistrust, fragmentation, dehumanization, and violence, including across political parties, identity groups, and geopolitical rivals. These phenomena arise from and deepen dualistic thinking (black or white, friend or enemy, good or evil, us or them, right or wrong, victim or perpetrator, guilty or innocent) and the feelings of fear, anger, and despair and the flight to simplicity and safety that these feelings produce.

This polarization makes it more difficult to collaborate broadly and deeply.

These two trends are producing a widening gap between our need to collaborate across differences and our willingness and ability to do so -wider than the gap that was apparent to me when I wrote *CwtE*. More precisely, they are producing an intensification of collaboration within certain "like" groups and against other "unlike" ones (sometimes called "tribalism"), which fuels conflict between these groups and impedes progress on cross-group challenges.

2. Bridging this gap requires enlarging our capacity to collaborate across differences

Collaborating across differences is a sword with two edges. This is revealed in the two dictionary definitions of "collaborating." The first is "to work jointly with": when we join up our different positions, perspectives, and powers, we can accomplish more than we can alone. This is a productive and enjoyable prospect, be it in teams, communities, or economies.

The second is "to cooperate traitorously with the enemy": these differences often produce conflict and the risk of dangerous compromise. To be "a collaborator" during a war can be ignominious and even fatal.

So we collaborate when we think we need to, but worry that in doing so we may need to give up things that are dear to us.

Collaborating across differences is not new: we do it every day in our private and public lives and have been doing so forever. But we now need to move beyond familiar, simple, conventional collaboration towards stretch, complex, radical collaboration: collaboration that goes further (beyond the comfort of our "tribes" and bubbles), faster (because our context is changing more rapidly), and fairer (because we face increasing demands for justice).

3. Collaborating across differences requires discerning when to collaborate

The collaboration gap is widening because collaboration across differences is increasingly seen to be too difficult and dangerous, and so people are more often choosing not to try it. Collaborating is, after all, not our only option for getting things done. Whenever we face any situation that we find problematic, we have a choice among some or all of four options:

- We can try to *force* the situation to be the way we want it to be, regardless of what others want. Such forcing can be non-violent and legal (a boss dictating to a subordinate) or violent and illegal (a dictator crushing a protest march). It can be motivated by ambition, aggression, autonomy, or indifference. Forcing is a commonly used approach in inter-personal, professional, political, and other interactions.
- If we don't think that we can change the situation to be the way we want it to be, then we can try to live with it as it is: to *adapt*. Adapting is also a common approach, whether it is adapting to rainy weather, a nosy neighbour, traffic laws, or an organizational culture.
- If we do not think that we can change our situation or adapt to it, then we can try to *exit* from it: to quit our job, emigrate, or divorce.
- Or we can try to *collaborate* with others -to work together as equals, in a temporary or ongoing group, team, committee, alliance, network, or partnership- to change our situation.

Most of us use all four of these options at different times in different contexts. Forcing, adapting, and exiting are more straightforward than collaborating in that with the former we decide on and act by ourselves (unilaterally) whereas with the latter we decide and act together with others (multilaterally). Some people enjoy collaboration and reach for it as their first choice, and others find it frustrating and try it only when they think none of the other options are workable.

Our choice among these options also depends on how much power we have. We can only succeed in forcing a situation to change if we have more power than the parties who do not want it to change. By contrast, when others have more power, we may only be able to adapt or exit. Even though we might prefer the collaboration option, we most often exercise it when there is a rough balance of power: when we all need to work together to get what each of us wants.

Collaboration is increasingly often described as a binary choice. On one hand, it is easy to collaborate with close friends -with people whom we agree with and like and trust- and so we might imagine that it is only possible to collaborate with such people. On the other hand, it is impossible to collaborate with real enemies -people whom we think are so dangerous or diabolical that we cannot even coexist with them; who we must flee from or expel or exterminate; that it is them or us- and we often point to such cases when we are talking about the dangers of collaborating. This Manichean polarization - working with "our people" against "those people"- is attractive and comfortable in that it simplifies our complex reality into good and evil.

But when we focus on these black and white extremes, we overlook the large grey area in between that includes many other people with whom we can and often do collaborate (more than I realized when I wrote *CwtE*):

- People whom we do not agree with or like or trust. Examples include such colleagues, family members, and neighbours, with whom we collaborate all the time, albeit cautiously. Contrary to the implication of *CwtE*'s supposedly provocative subtitle, we often *do* "work with people we do not agree with or like or trust."
- People who are further away from us, but whom we live alongside. Examples include fellow city-dwellers with whom we collaborate every day, in delimited ways, in shops, schools, and public spaces.
- People with whom we co-exist even though we insist on living apart from them. Local examples include migrant workers who live in segregated areas, and incarcerated persons who do prison labour; international examples include pragmatic deals among warring parties and U.S.-China cooperation amidst bilateral competition and decoupling.

This grey area, replete with the opportunities and risks created by diversity, difference, disagreement, complexity, contradiction, and conflict, is where we most need to find ways to collaborate to be able to effect systems change.

Of course, it is unnecessary and impossible for us to collaborate on everything with everybody. Collaborating always requires us to decide when, on what, and with whom we will work.

We collaborate in specific domains with specific others when we think we need to and should and can: when we can only achieve what we want through working alongside them, and we are willing and able to do so. For example, some environmental groups collaborate with oil companies to encourage the latter to make their products and processes less polluting.

We do not collaborate in specific domains with specific others when we think we need not or should not or can not: when we are not willing or able to work alongside them, and we can do better working apart from them (i.e. forcing or adapting to them or fleeing or exiting from them). So other environmental groups refuse to collaborate with oil companies because they think the latter cannot be trusted to change voluntarily, and so instead must be forced or defeated.

4. Collaborating across differences works with three intrinsic drives

To discuss, understand, and work with collaboration across social systems, we need a general framework that describes social entities that might collaborate -individuals, groups, organizations, nations- and what drives them.

Social systems are composed of *holons*: wholes that are part of larger wholes (Koestler, 1967, p. 48). For example, I am a whole in myself and part of a family and community and company, and my company is in turn part of various projects and alliances and professional networks. This holonic description is valuable because it enables us to describe collaboration in specific parts and levels of a system.

Living holons have three intrinsic drives: love, power, and justice. There are many definitions of these three words; I use the set given by theologian Paul Tillich in his book *Love, Power, and Justice* (1954) because I find they explain the key dynamics of collaboration that I have observed.

The first is belonging or *love*, which Tillich defined as "the drive towards the unity of the separated" (1954, p. 25). In the above example, love is my drive to connect and unite with members of my family and community and with my colleagues. Collaboration is driven by love in that it involves holons uniting into or belonging within larger holons.

The second is agency or *power*, which Tillich defines as "the drive of everything living to realise itself, with increasing intensity and extensity" (1954, p. 36). Power is the drive that I and my family and community and company each have to grow and develop. As civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., a student of Tillich, said "Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change" (King, 2002, p. 185). Collaboration unites the power of certain holons (allies) against the power of others (adversaries) to bring about change.

The theory and practice outlined in *CwtE* was grounded in the tension between love and power, which arises from the fact that "every part (holon) of a larger whole looks, Janus-like, in two directions: it has a tendency both towards integration and towards autonomy" (Leicester, 2020, p. 30). But the book was deficient in that it did not mention a third drive, *justice*, and so did not adequately address the critical importance of the quality -and especially the reciprocity or fairness- of the relationships among holons.

Philosopher Nancy Fraser defined justice as the drive to reduce injustice: "Justice is never actually encountered directly; by contrast, we do experience injustice and it is through this that we form an idea of justice" (2012, p. 43). Tillich said that justice is "the form in which the power of being activates itself...and through which love performs its work" (1954, pp. 56, 71). Justice is the drive for right (i.e., reciprocal, workable, enduring) relationships within my family, community, and company. Collaboration

employs justice to establish and maintain such relationships, without which love, and therefore also power, are diminished.

This model of the three drives of living holons implies that to advance collaboratively in a social space we need to be able to work with all three of these drives, not just the one or two with which we are most comfortable -just like to advance in physical space we need to be able to move up and down, side to side, and back and forth. And these three drives are in permanent tension: they cannot be balanced statically, but only dynamically, through constant rebalancing (like riding a bicycle).

Collaboration employs love, power, and justice to achieve purpose -to work together with others to address problematic situations.

5. Stretching to collaborate across differences

We can collaborate across differences -among diverse and conflicting holons- through employing practices that both enable specific collaborations and make more enabling the contexts in which these are attempted. Shifting from conventional to radical collaboration (from the Latin *radix* or root) involves stretching beneath the surface of social systems to open up connections (love and justice) among holons and thereby balance these holons' individual power drives (so that the latter do not dominate the dynamics of the system).

Here are five such stretches. They are fractal in that they can be employed at all scales: inter-personally; within and among teams and organizations; and in local, national, and international interactions. These stretches were introduced in *CwtE* but need to be elaborated further, including in terms of how to undertake them at larger scales.

1. *Acting responsibly* given our roles, relationships, positions, powers, and histories. Collaborating requires participants, especially those with more powerful and privileged roles in a system, to act with commensurate responsibility towards others in the system and towards the system as a whole. This involves shifting from focusing only on us and our needs and wants to also focusing on our inter-dependence and inter-relatedness with others -from working only with power to also with love and justice.
2. *Voicing and hearing differences, distinctions, and disagreements.* Collaborating across differences is not possible if differences are ignored or suppressed. To avoid violence, we must embrace plural manifestations of agency, belonging, and reciprocity.

3. *Discovering common ground.* Collaborating requires not only voicing differences but also bridging them sufficiently to enable collective action -employing love and justice to enable collective power.
4. *Attending to belonging and reciprocity.* Structures and relationships that are exclusionary and unfair limit collaboration; collective action cannot be sustained if some parties think they are being treated unjustly. Reciprocity is required to produce belonging and collective agency.
5. *Advancing through acting and learning together.* In collaborating to address complex challenges in the grey area between friends and enemies, we can neither know nor agree in advance what needs to be done. We must instead experiment our way forward one step at a time, dynamically balancing power, love, and justice.

Conclusion

This paper suggests a radical approach to collaborating that enables us to work together more broadly and deeply to address the daunting challenges of our time. Failing to do this will produce more authoritarianism, violence, and suffering.

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