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PREFACE

Collaboration is increasingly a necessity. We need partners to create the solutions our complex society requires. However, collaboration, meetings and seminars, cost time, lots of time, and efficiency is therefore crucial. The traditional post-it sessions at retreat centres are a thing of the past, and flip-charts stands have been removed from most meeting rooms. Unfortunately, the alternatives are limited. Good methods and techniques for interactive collaboration are hard to find. You can find an endless supply of platforms, apps and other tools for collaboration online, but many organisations fail to achieve effective online collaboration in their teams. Some organisations have installed high-tech meeting rooms with interactive screens, video-conferencing and various other gadgets. However, little knowledge is available on how to use these effectively in collaboration.

A trend in this decade is therefore to discourage employees from holding meetings. Standing meeting facilities, limited or costly meeting facilities will result in employees abandoning the practice of getting together face-to-face and working together. Other organisations support teams by organising drinks or teambuilding activities, which are nice to get to know each other, but do not offer a structural basis for team collaboration. Overall, this is not the way to ensure that the organisation takes full advantage of the knowledge of their employees, and certainly not the way to achieve harmonious collaboration that inspires and motivates employees to work for the organisation.

More effective and more efficient collaboration with an active involvement of the team and with support for the results is possible. Over thirty years of research into group support systems has provided ample evidence of this. However, the same research has shown that it is not the tools, but rather the process guidance: facilitation and structuration of collaboration that can be indicated as the main factor for success. Many professionals offer their services as facilitator and support groups in various ways and with a wide range of techniques. While many of these facilitators are successful in creating high quality outcomes with groups and teams, their work is almost always based on practical experience and handbooks. Very few facilitators can explain why their techniques and methods are working and it is very difficult to find literature to explain this.

In my research I searched for the essence of the success of facilitation. Many approaches for facilitation are based on experience and best practices. I have been looking for the theory that explains why these tools and methods work, and what their key mechanisms are. This book is a practical overview of the results of this research. In this way I want to offer practical, but also grounded methods and techniques, based on a rigorous theoretical understanding of group dynamics and collaborative information processing. With this approach I hope to remove the magic veil from the facilitation practice, and give insight in how and why it works.

What can you find in this book?
This book is for everyone who supports groups, people who coach, train, manage, lead, chair, facilitate, teach, or in some other way offer guidance to a group that works on a knowledge-intensive task. The book offers insight for everyone who wants to inspire groups to collaborate, and increase their effectiveness.

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Both novices and professionals can benefit from this book. For those new to supporting group work the book offers a clear basis and a set of useful techniques. For experienced professionals and experts in the field of facilitation and management, this book offers insight in why the methods and techniques you use, are actually working, and how you can use them even more effectively.

This book is about collaboration in a knowledge-intensive group process. It is not (or at least less) applicable to collaboration in the context of sports, armies (at operational level), and other types of more physical collaboration and coordination. Nor is this book about collaboration at a corporate level. Mergers, fusions, and other contractual collaboration agreements are not part of the scope of this book. I will however, offer insight for managers who have to pick up the pieces after these transitions, and develop new groups and teams that need to work together based on the best of both (or more) worlds.

Collaboration can take place at different levels of interaction. People work together if they check each other's work, give input, or make a revision. This type of collaboration where people work in a so-called 'relay' passing on deliverables, adding parts, can be very effective in some situations, but is highly insufficient when it comes to integrating different perspectives and stakes in an outcome. Such integration requires more interaction and the development of shared understanding, both on the problem and on the solution for the problem. In this book I focus on a highly interactive and intense type of collaboration in which the group makes optimal use of the knowledge, experience, and insights in the group. This fosters an efficient and productive collaboration process with support for the results created by the group. Such level of interactive collaboration is therefore most useful in the context of complex problem solving when many stakes and perspectives need to be aligned and integrated to create sustainable results. In other words, if you are looking for means to increase the effectiveness of collaboration, this book is for you.

Thank you!

I'm online and I would love to hear what you are up to concerning collaboration! You can find me on www.beter-samenwerken.net
Den Hoorn, summer 2015, Gwendolyn Kolfschoten

1. **INTRODUCTION**

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"We should collaborate more effectively!"
A frequently listed conclusion of evaluations of projects and team collaboration is the need to improve collaboration. However, few education curricula offer training or courses in collaboration. People see collaboration as a personal competence (team player, empathic person) or they summarise collaboration under general skills (leadership, communication skills). However, organising and supporting effective collaboration is fundamentally different from traditional management or leadership, where one person creates a vision and divides tasks. Real collaboration builds upon the strengths of the group and the knowledge and expertise available. Jointly we understand things better, we can work more efficiently, more creative, more precise, and we can count on the support required to make real changes.

If you really want to benefit from the expertise and knowledge available in a group, you are not looking for a leader, but for a facilitator: someone who offers structure to the collaborative process and helps the group to engage in mutual learning. Someone who offers the group tools to divide tasks and coordinate input. Someone who assures a basis of trust and safety, but who does not set the rules. Someone who assures quality, but does not determine the content of the results. In this book you will find the theory to understand the conditions for successful colla-boration, and the essential techniques that help you to realise such collaboration. In addition it offers an approach to design workshops using modern tools and techniques, and an overview of skills required to handle group dynamics. No post-it tsunami in some luxurious retreat, but practical, simple techniques and modern tools that you can apply today, at your next meeting.

1.1 Foundations
For the theoretical basis of this book I used literature from many different disciplines including psychology, management science, systems engineering, and educational science. This theoretical basis helps to understand how group dynamics work and how process support can help to balance the cognitive load of collaboration.

For the practical parts I based the book on my own research into the design and facilitation of workshops and group processes. The methods I gathered from books and from the web, after which I submitted it to a filter of logic and, with the help of experts, unravelled the essence of their working. This exercise created a set of building blocks that enables you to create a specific technique for a specific situation, with the right mix of efficiency, quality, shared understanding, and support of the results.

The techniques and skills that I describe in this book, I have collected over the years, together with colleagues. These belong in the portfolio of every facilitator and trainer who wants to help groups in gaining synergy and focus in a harmonious collaborative endeavour. An overview of important literature sources can be found at the end of this book, sorted by chapter.

1.2 Guidance for the reader

This book is divided in three parts in which I first describe the group, then the content of the collaborative process and finally the linking of these by means of facilitation. Part A is for managers and other leaders who want to challenge their team, group, department or organisation to make optimal use of the knowledge and expertise available in their midst, and want to create a more collaborative culture. Part B offers techniques that can be used to design and facilitate an interactive group process such as for example a workshop or online activity, which supports a group in achieving its joint goal. Part C offers insight in the role of the facilitator, with the aim to align and unite different perspectives and stakes in the group. This book offers the how and why of effective collaboration, but in the right order. First the theory (why) and then the practice (how): first think, then act. Part A and B start with a theoretical chapter. Next they offer a chapter with techniques and methods to help you apply the theory in practice. Finally both offer an approach to work with these techniques and methods in the field. Part C is different. It covers the role of the facilitator, and the skills needed to fulfil this role. This part starts with the core values for facilitation and offers a description of the various tasks of a facilitator, as well as the skills required to execute these tasks.

Part A Group dynamics: creating commitment

To understand group dynamics we focus on the theory of commitment. How do we get a group to align their goals, so they want to collaborate? How do we get a group motivated and keep people in the group actively involved and engaged? How do we establish trust and safety? After the theoretical overview, I present a set of simple techniques and tools to enhance commitment. The techniques make use of social media and simple tools for effective coordination and communication. The final chapter of part A describes an approach to create a transition to establish a collaborative culture, aimed at effective and harmonious collaboration.

Part B Content: creating synergy and focus

To create rigorous results with a group, it is important to structure the group process. Collaborative information processing has three important phases: brainstorming, organising, and choosing. In this process, participants often experience information overload, there is simply too much information to process and understand. Also, the group members often have different perspectives that prevent them from creating shared understanding. Therefore it is important to create synergy and focus. With synergy we ensure that the group creates a shared understanding of the complexity of the task content and assures the quality of the results. With focus we ensure that results gain the support of the group, through an effective and efficient process. As in part A, this part starts with theory and subsequently offers techniques to support and structure each phase of the process in an effective interactive process to create meaningful and rigorous results. Finally we offer an approach to design a workshop with a program and supporting tools.

Part C Facilitation: skills to intertwine the group and the task content

The last part of this book is dedicated to the skills required to facilitate a workshop. We first discuss the core values that form the basis for a harmonious and effective collaborative endeavour. Next I describe the role and task of a facilitator and the skills required to guide, engage and

activate a group in the process. Further I describe how to lead a discussion, how to deal with conflicts and how to maintain a productive and pleasant atmosphere.

1.3 Terminology
I will briefly explain several terms and phrases in this book to avoid confusion.

Group. In this book I will talk about a group and its participants. A group can be a team, department, or any other group that has a joint goal.

Participants. Participants can be employees and their leaders, and can be both internal and external stakeholders. Everyone who is part of the group.

Sponsor. A separate role is defined for the sponsor. The sponsor is a term used for the person who will receive the results of the collaborative endeavour and who carries the final responsibility for the results. The sponsor can be a problem owner, an (internal) client, a supervisor or manager who has a question for his team, anyone who is ultimately responsible for the results.

Task. Everything that is part of the project, mission, or the work package of the group I call the task. We can find collaborative tasks in projects and project management, but also departments or consortia that continuously work together on one or more joint goals perform collaborative tasks. Both can use the techniques described here. Each step or deliverable in this joint goal can then be seen as a task.

Techniques, methods, skills and approaches. To avoid confusion, I use the term techniques for the solutions in part A, the term methods in part B and in part C we talk about skills. All three offer practical recipes that can be used to support collaboration. The different terms are applied mainly to help you to distinguish the three sets. Part A and B offer an overall approach to use the techniques and methods in a systematic way.

Workshop. The term workshop is also a concept that can be interpreted in different ways. The workshops that we design in part B are knowledge-intensive group processes in which knowledge and effort of all participants is combined to create joint results. The results of this workshop should have the support of the group and should be based on consensus to create sustainable outcomes that leads to action and change. A workshop in this book is therefore not a practical hands-on training session, with knowledge transfer or learning as its main goal. It is instead an interactive process in which the group itself creates joint results.

Facilitator. A facilitator is a process guide. Someone who can support the group in achieving its goals. A facilitator is not the leader of the group, and neither the chair or the person responsible for the results. The facilitator helps the group to collaborate and to create commitment, synergy and focus.

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2. COLLABORATION WHY AND WHEN

To anchor your understanding of collaboration, I find it important to define what I mean by collaboration first. Next, it is good to realise at this point what the reasons are to collaborate, and consequently, what the reasons are not to collaborate. Collaboration is valuable in many, but not all circumstances. In this chapter I will outline the scope and conditions that I use for collaboration as a concept.

2.1 Defining collaboration

I define collaboration as a joint effort of a group, aimed at achieving a goal. Often, the group works on a joint goal, but it is possible that participants collaborate while having different goals, that they somehow align or combine. In a group process participants have their own goals and incentives, which are often related, sometimes intertwined, and on occasion even partly in competition with each other. One participant might for example hope to gain promotion by performing well during the project, while another participant might want to learn from participation in the project. Both can be committed to work together, sometimes even without having a real stake or even an interest in the end product.

With a group I assume that more than a handful of participants are involved. Seven people (depending on the complexity of the task as well) form the so called 'span of control': the number of people that are 'manageable', that can be coordinated effectively by one person. If you have a smaller group, then many of the techniques and methods in this book are not necessary. That does not mean they are not useful or effective in such context, but small groups can do without. Research shows that when the size of the group increases and the content of its task becomes more complex, it gets harder for groups to organise themselves. In these groups, the impact of good collaboration support and high levels of commitment is significantly larger, and these are therefore the groups that will benefit most from facilitation and the use of structured methods.

Collaboration is a highly interactive process. If a group simply divides tasks, and combines results in one end product, I believe they did not really collaborate, or only in a very limited way. In collaboration we expect people to help each other, complement each other; we expect that there is synergy: one plus one is more than two. For example because new solutions emerge, or extra efficiency is gained, or because there is just a lot more fun in working together.

2.2 The essence of collaboration

Effective collaboration knows two key challenges: first the dynamics of the group and second the complexity of the task. To facilitate group dynamics we need ingredients such as commitment, trust and the will to combine forces. For the task, we need overview, shared understanding and structure to combine the knowledge and experience of all participants in an effective way, and to establish results with support from the group. In other words: logic thinking, rigorous working and effective communication by dedicated people. That sounds simple, but it isn't.

High levels of interaction have a down side. If you work individually, you do not need to explain what you are doing, or to understand what others think of it. You do not need to agree on how you work together either. Collaboration requires a lot of extra communication and coordination in comparison to individual work and is much more difficult to manage or control.

If we see 'collaboration towards a goal' as a production system (see figure 1), we can identify the main resources to be effort and knowledge (and coffee of course). Effort and knowledge are not tangible, and its deployment depends on the willingness of participants to contribute to the group process. Therefore, there are two essential factors in effective collaboration:
1. Commitment: participants need to be willing to share knowledge and make effort,
2. Structure: participants need to integrate their knowledge and coordinate their effort to achieve the goal.

Effective collaboration therefore only works when participants can formulate a joint goal that takes into account the individual goals of all relevant stakeholders. That is also why it is so important to formulate the goal of a task or project: when it is unclear what the group wants to achieve, then the incentives for the participants to contribute are also unclear. Not only should the goal be clear, but the goal should also be supported. Participants should be willing to work together: they should actively contribute knowledge and effort to achieve the goal. Therefore, commitment is an essential success factor. It requires a shared vision, the will to join forces, sufficient motivation, and trust in the group. Also, once the group is committed, there is another challenge to keep them actively involved and engaged. Such involvement requires investment in a sustainable relationship with constant guarding of loyalty, motivation, safety and trust in the group.

But even a group that is highly driven, and completely focused on the goal, is not always effective if participants are not capable to coordinate their effort and more importantly, to integrate their knowledge. Joint overview and shared understanding are essential, especially when participants come from different backgrounds, cultures, languages, educations or domains. For the content of the collaboration process, the solution lies in structuration. Collaboration is a cognitively intensive effort. Integrating different perspectives requires divergent thinking and clear communication and coordination. Structuring the task content is complex and requires shared understanding.

The crux of collaboration (see figure 1) is therefore balance. Balance between on the one hand group dynamics and working towards commitment, and on the other hand, structuring the complexity of the task and the process, creating synergy and focus. Facilitation and support by means of structuring methods and tools can help groups to create this balance. The role of the facilitator is essential in this.
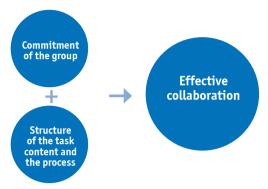
Figure 1: The crux of effective collaboration

2.3 Collaboration in practice: endless meetings

This all sounds wonderful, but practice is fraught with challenges. While a culture of endless meetings and gatherings is still thriving in many organisations, we have less and less time for such expensive meetings and their preparation. We need to understand the value of collaboration. When there is no synergy, collaboration only brings extra effort and precious meeting time is better spent on something else.

There are many useless meetings, let me give you some examples:

1. **Only sending.** If you want to get a message across, or you need to communicate information, sending an e-mail or letter will suffice. Meetings are only useful if you need input from all the people present: lessons, experiences, insights, feedback, support, creativity. There are many good reasons to bring a group together, if you are at least willing to listen to what the group has to say and if you are willing to learn from different perspectives.

2. **Progress meetings.** Simply reporting the status of a task or project is not very effective. Progress meetings are useful when there is no progress, when there are problems, when the group needs to (re-)coordinate tasks or (re-)gain focus. It can also be useful to learn from each other's experience. But just updates of 'statuses' do not require an actual meeting, unless lives, jobs, or other crucial matters are at stake.

3. **Getting acquainted.** Getting to know each other is important, but a meeting is not very appropriate. We get to know each other when we do something together, and not by formal introduction rounds. If you have to do a round of introductions in a meeting, make sure that you document important information about each participant in an online profile (short resume) or on paper. Focus the introductions on real information about participants, such as their passion, ambitions, expectations, etc. rather than on their name, role, and education background, which everyone has forgotten by the end of the round.

4. **Milking.** In this meeting participants are milked. They are asked for input, experience, knowledge, estimations and expertise, but nothing is done with this information, at least not during the meeting. Sometimes it is effective to gather expert knowledge in this way or to evaluate a project for future learning; but for the participants it is not very rewarding, and there is little they gain or learn from the effort. Make sure that you at least create

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