

IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

A look at collaborative working among management trainers/developers – Ian Hall

Introduction

At the University where I worked for many years, the culture was one which encouraged collaboration. During my time there, I was involved in a number of collaborative ventures - some richly rewarding experiences; some having "had their moments" whilst one or two have been "almost" failures!

What I want to explore in this paper are the factors that contribute to success/failure in collaborative work within training and development. To do this I will briefly describe four collaborative projects with which I have been involved and attempt to identify those features which I feel have contributed to the success/failure involved. Finally, I want to develop an approach to setting up collaboration which I hope will increase the probability of success.

What is "Collaborative Working"?

My working definition is - *"Any development situation in which a trainer/tutor works with one or more other trainers from a different organisation to design and/or run a course or programme"*.

It may also be helpful to consider the reasons why we should want to engage in this type of work at all! For me, these reasons include:-

- The need to provide a spread of expertise for the client which is not available in total within the resources of the training team.
- A specific request from the client for collaboration to take place.
- The need to provide opportunity for personal development for members of the training team.

A consideration of what constitutes success/failure

There are many measures which could be used to evaluate the success or otherwise of a collaborative programme. In the context of this paper, however, I am concerned only with success/failure as perceived by the tutors involved which I will express as:-

- *Very successful* - Tutors would look forward to running other joint programmes; would take active steps to find suitable situations for this and would have no reservations about each others possible contributions.
- *Successful* - Tutors would be happy to mount a joint course if and when the need arose. Some minor changes could be needed in the running of another joint programme.
- *Acceptable* - Although some difficulties arose, these could be resolved with careful negotiation before a further course.
- *Failure* - Difficulties in approach between the tutors made the programme feel disjointed. Would be reluctant to run a further joint programme.
- *Disaster* - Major differences in approach. Very stressful during the programme. Never again!!

Obviously it can be argued that these criteria are extremely subjective and in no way reflect the learning gained by the participants. I entirely agree, but would insist that when trainers consider whether or not to repeat a collaborative venture they rarely base their decision on criteria which relate to the client. They are much more concerned with how they feel about working with their colleague(s) since this radically affects the enjoyment, satisfaction and level of stress which they experience when they take part in the programme.

Programme A

Late in November 1987, I was invited to "sit-in" on an ICI training course. A free-lance Outdoor Development tutor was sitting-in on the same course and we agreed to look for opportunities to work together. This opportunity came rather quicker than we anticipated and in February 1988 after only two separate days planning together we ran a 3-day Team Building Programme for all 17 members of a Consultancy organisation at a residential centre in the Lake District. Subsequently we have run many further programmes together.

Reflections

- We were 'light' on co-ordination because of the time scale but despite that the course was a success.
- We both felt comfortable "chipping - in" on each others sessions where appropriate.
- We shared similar values about people (eg The need to be challenging but also supportive)
- We were both happy to take responsibility individually for different aspects (eg: Outdoor Exercises, Input sessions etc).
- We both felt comfortable working in 'unscripted' joint feedback sessions.
- We shared a good sense of humour.
- Although I had done the initial negotiations with the client, we had "co-ownership" of the course and shared the risk.
- We were both happy to work in a flexible way and to develop learning from points which the group members contributed.
- We both viewed the course as a series of learning opportunities rather than teaching sessions.

Programme B

Through a Professor of another department in the University, we were asked to collaborate in a programme of Total Quality Management Training for a range of managers, supervisors and team workers in a major British Engineering Company employing @ 3000 people. The organisation we were to work with was a consultancy company associated with the University.

Negotiations with the two consultants proved quite difficult but we felt that if we persevered, our differences could be resolved. Having obtained an initial brief from the client and spent a day "in plant" talking with all levels about their perceptions of the organisation regarding Quality, we then commenced drafting a detailed programme for a three day course. The

consultants took responsibility for inputs relating to the technical side of Quality and we took responsibility for the "people" side of Quality.

As discussion on the draft programme continued it became clear that the consultants saw themselves as "telling" the participants what they should do whilst we saw our role as "providing learning opportunities".

The course from our point of view went well but our fears about the "style" of the consultants were born out. We had drawn up a detailed Evaluation Questionnaire which showed a distinct perceived difference in acceptability between those sessions run by the consultants and those run by ourselves.

Reflections

- Despite efforts to foster an 'open' discussion in the Course Design, there was a distinct lack of trust between the two parties. Demarcation was the 'order of the day'.
- By utilising a participative teaching style we might have made it more difficult for the consultants to work with us...should we have changed our style?
- Our concern about the ability of the consultants to deliver in a way which matched our contributions, considerably heightened the tension on our team in their input sessions.
- We felt unable to abort from running the course and therefore decided to indicate clearly to the participants both through informal conversations and then introduction to each of our sessions that we were two distinct organisations who were contributing separate sessions within the total programme.... Was this appropriate behaviour?
- It would have been ideal to have had a joint feedback session at the end of the programme but we felt this posed too high a risk.
- The differences between our teaching styles, our attitudes to the client and our ability to work flexibly convinced us that the gap was too great to contemplate running any future courses together.

Programme C

This programme was a series of residential 2/3 day courses (9 days in total) to provide management training for senior university academic staff. University A acted as organiser/co-ordinator for the programmes which were to cover all the Northern Universities. Each course had @ 15 participants and a course tutor, who provided some of the inputs, with others being provided by guest speakers. The 2/3 day courses were run over the period of a year, and occurred during vacation periods.

As the programme progressed there were various changes made for a variety of reasons which resulted in a concentration of participating tutors from University A.

Reflections

- As a participating tutor I felt a distinct lack of ownership of the programme due to not having been involved in the design.
- Because the tutors were not involved in the planning meeting, I didn't feel completely in control.

- Maybe University A were reluctant collaborators from the start and had been forced into this "mode" by the steering committee of representatives from the Northern Universities.
- Because of low numbers for the second two day course, two groups were combined and there was only the need for one course tutor. Although an attempt was made to re-link with the course on a subsequent 2 day course I felt 'estranged' from the group.
- My problem with participating on this programme was not with the content (although there were some changes to this that could have been helpful) but rather that I felt distinctly marginalised in the collaborative process. I would have been happy if University A had suggested that they ran the total programme themselves and involved other tutors on a guest speaker basis but setting out what was ostensibly a collaborative programme and then "changing the goalposts" seemed very unsatisfactory!

Programme D

In 1986, we were invited by the MSC (Manpower Services Commission) to run a Graduate Gateway Programme. Each course would be for 25 unemployed graduates who would undertake two weeks intensive business skills training followed by a 14 week project placement in a small firm. The MSC let it be known that they would look more favourably on a bid from a consortium of suppliers and so a consortium of 3 Universities, 2 Polytechnics and a college of higher education was set up.

Considerable discussion took place among tutors from the different institutions, but the project only really moved forward when we agreed to host the courses and provide the overall lead (...The importance of this was not that Salford's expertise was better than other colleges, but that overall leadership responsibility had been vested with one institution).

Within 18 months, 7 courses had been run and almost 200 graduates had completed projects within small companies. Many of the graduates involved found the course extremely helpful and 15% were taken on by the sponsoring company at the end of the project.

The collaboration worked very well, apart from some teething problems with project supervisions which were solved by using freelance management trainers. Apart from the project supervision, other members of the consortium were responsible for 60-70% of the programme input. One very helpful feature of the collaboration was that Whitbread Breweries seconded one of their Personnel Managers to do a large part of the administration.

Reflections

- The consortium was essentially a network of individuals who were able to agree arrangements on behalf of their institutions...This enabled a speedy response to be made.
- Participating lecturers were treated as colleagues rather than as part-time lecturers.
- Apart from the project supervision which proved logistically difficult for participating members every effort was made to ensure continuity of staff by swapping session time slots where necessary.
- Complete freedom within a very broad framework was given to participating lecturers regarding content/teaching methods. Informal discussion was encouraged so that adequate liaison occurred.
- The initial design of the programme was put together by the consortium and subsequent changes resulting from Course Review sessions were discussed and agreed with the tutors concerned.

What are the factors involved in success/failure in Collaborative Working.

Reflecting on the various collaborative ventures with which I have been involved I collated those factors together which I felt had particular bearing on success/failure. The initial list was:-

- The tutors' preferred teaching/learning style.
- Their ability to feel comfortable in unstructured situations.
- The degree of control felt necessary by the tutors as the programme proceeded.
- The amount of trust/openness between the tutors.
- Adequate knowledge of the subject areas by the tutors.
- The degree to which the tutors were client-centred.
- Whether the tutors wanted to be owners or tenants of the programme.
- Whether the tutors' overall values were similar.
- The ability of the tutors to handle different roles within the programme (eg. Lecturer, Discussion leader, Coach etc).

Factors involved in success/failure of Collaborative Working.

(Questions to ask of each other as collaborating colleagues) - (Table 1)

Control/ Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How tight an event structure do I need? • How dependant on handouts am I? • How flexibly am I prepared to work?
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How open am I prepared to be? • How much trust do I place in the participants? • Is humour in learning important to me?
Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I prepared to share the design? • Am I prepared to share the risk? • Am I prepared to buy-in to others objectives?
Confidence in Colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well do I think he/she knows this subject area? • How well organised is he/she and does this match my needs/expectations? • Would I feel confident jointly running a discussion session with him/her?
Teaching – Learning Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is my main focus teaching or learning? • Am I happy with people asking questions throughout the session? • What % balance would I look for between input and participative sessions?

Conclusions / A way forward

My objective in trying to understand what constitutes success/failure in collaborative working is to develop ways of bringing about a higher probability of a successful outcome. To this end I feel that (Table 1) is helpful in understanding what is involved. However there is still a need to

provide a means of enabling 'would be collaborators' to understand more about each other and the process involved, before plunging into the design and running of the programme.

I have included two questionnaires as Appendices 1 and 2 which I hope will prove useful for trainers. The first is a framework for reflecting on the outcomes of a previous collaboration which should enable trainers to learn from their own experiences. The second is a questionnaire for "would be collaborators" to work on together.

I do not see this second questionnaire being used as a "vetting" instrument. Rather, in allowing trainers to talk through their understandings/values/and ways of operating they can appreciate their differences and develop/operate a more successful programme to maximise their combined strengths.

Despite some difficult moments, collaborative programmes have provided me with some of my most richly rewarding moments in Training/Development. If you have not yet been involved in this way of working, I commend it to you; if you have and it was a painful experience then I hope that the contents of this paper will encourage you to try again!

Appendix 1 Collaborative Working among Developers - Reflective Questionnaire

1 Brief description of situation
2 Who initiated the collaboration?
3 Why was this thought necessary?
4 How well did you know the person (people) before starting on the joint project?
5 How long did the planning take?
6 Were there any concerns regarding the working relationships during this phase?
7 Did you discuss the detail of your different inputs regarding:- (a) Content Yes.... No..... (b) Teaching Method Yes.... No.....
8 Did you feel comfortable about this?
9 Who was responsible for arranging details regarding handout style, O.H. Slides, etc. (a) We each did our "own thing" (b) We discussed an agreed "party line" and did our "own thing" within this framework. (c) One of us was responsible for providing all material in a particular format from "roughs" (d) Other - - -
10 Who was responsible for the administration details? Did this work well? Yes... No....
11 Did you "sit-in" on each others sessions? Yes... No...
12 Did you jointly tutor any sessions on the programme? Yes... No...
13 How comfortable did you feel about these?
14 If you used any form of course evaluation, was there an imbalance between the perceived success of your sessions/your colleagues sessions? Yes... No....
15 How did you feel about this?...

16 Have you worked with your colleague(s) since? Yes.... No....
17 What features of the process of designing/running the course would you like to incorporate in future programmes?
18 Which aspects of the process of designing/running the course would you try to avoid for future courses?
19. How would you rate the course? (Please tick one) Very Successful – Successful – OK - Could have been better - Put it down to Experience! - Never again!
20 Any other comments

Appendix 2

Collaborative Working - (Questionnaire/Discussion Brief)

Objective: To enable tutors who are planning to run courses jointly to appreciate more fully, differences of approach and understanding so that the collaboration may be a more rewarding experience for tutors and participants.

Explanation: The 26 statements which form the questionnaire attempt to cover a wide range of feelings/expectations which tutors bring to negotiations on a jointly run programme. You are asked to respond to each statement on the scale explained below. In addition if you wish to qualify any statement then you are encouraged to do this in the space provided. Having filled in the questionnaire individually then you can systematically discuss your answers together.

Comment: It must be emphasised that there are no right answers..... the purpose of filling in the questionnaire and discussing it is to develop a more understanding working relationship between tutors.

PS: If having discussed your differences you feel the need to abort, at least you are able to do this at the start of the collaboration!

Scoring:

• If you strongly agree with the statement	Score - SA
• If you tend to agree with the statement	Score - A
• If you have no feelings on the statement	Score - N
• If you disagree with the statement	Score - D
• If you strongly disagree with the statement	Score - SD

No	Statement detail	Scoring
1	I feel "exposed" unless I've got handouts and OHP'S covering all aspects of the programme - However -	
2	I get angry/nervous when a colleague overruns on his/her time allocation -However –	
3	I feel it's important to thoroughly discuss points raised by the group - However -	
4	I use handouts to make participants feel comfortable, but I rarely go through them systematically - However -	

5	I feel that most handouts are too restrictive on the tutor - However –	
6	I prefer to deal with participants points at the end of the input session - However -	
7	I encourage participants to contribute their own thoughts at any time during the session - However -	
8	I see the programme as a framework containing opportunities for learning for the participants (and tutor!) - However -	
9	I see my job as a tutor to make sure that I cover all aspects on the programme clearly and concisely - However -	
10	I feel that it's important to praise participants for useful contributions - However -	
11	I like to contribute to a programme where the design has been done by a tutor I respect - However -	
12	I feel quite comfortable working with a tutor who has a different teaching style to mine - However -	
13	I'm prepared to spend time initially ensuring that the participants get to know each other well - However -	
14	If I don't understand what my colleague is suggesting when we're designing the programme I will ask him/her to explain - However -	
15	I feel that I shouldn't voice a contrary opinion in front of the participants even if I disagree with my colleagues statement or behaviour - However -	
16	I feel uncomfortable having a colleague sit in on my session - However –	
17	I feel that a confrontational style of working is best to ensure that any misconceptions participants may have can be quickly destroyed - However -	
18	I feel that its more important to get all course members participating in discussion than to spend time dealing with a participant's statement which I may not agree with - However -	
19	I do not feel comfortable working on a programme unless I have been part of the design process - However -	
20	I feel that a strong sense of humour is vital for all tutors - However -	
21	If I make a mistake in front of a group then I feel that it's important to admit it immediately - However -	
22	I feel that its important to maintain a distinction between tutors and participants - However -	
23	I accept that dealing with criticism of any sessions on the course is a joint responsibility - However -	
24	I find it difficult to systematically deal with all the admin. arrangements for a course and would feel happier if this were done by someone else - However -	
25	I feel comfortable operating in a variety of different roles within a programme. (eg. Lecturer, Coach, Discussion Leader etc) - However -	
26	My strengths lie in the practical/theoretical. (delete one) aspects of the subject area(s) to be covered - However -	

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