

Creative Tensions in Collaborative Innovation

CoCreative has developed a number of large-scale innovation networks to change complex systems. The Collaborative Innovation approach, based on the “key initiator networks” pioneered by social innovator Susan Davis in the 1980s, has produced extraordinary social equity and environmental sustainability outcomes in arenas from energy and finance to recycled paper and agriculture.

While we draw freely on concepts and methods from design thinking, systems thinking, entrepreneurship, and group dynamics in our working groups, one of the underlying elements throughout the work is identifying and leveraging “Creative Tensions.”

To lead Collaborative Innovation most effectively, we need to be able to leverage the powerful tensions that arise naturally in this work, such as the tension between *what I want* and *what others want* from the work of the group. We leverage these tensions when selecting our network participants and in designing the ongoing management and work of the group itself.

Using creative tensions to identify collaborative innovators

Unlike many efforts around large-scale systemic change, we don’t simply choose the most powerful and most visible stakeholders. Instead, we search methodically for “high leverage” stakeholders who are well-positioned to produce innovation and to influence others in the system.

These Collaborative Innovators have the following characteristics, each of which represents a key tension between two seemingly opposing values. While we can often find stakeholders who hold one value in the tension, the challenge is to identify those stakeholders who can hold and creatively leverage the whole tension.

As Individuals, Collaborative Innovators have these attributes:

Characteristic	Tension	Supports...
Authentic Leaders	Passion & Competence ¹	...influence through authentic leadership. The group has far greater leverage when it's comprised of high influence stakeholders who are admired for their passion for the mission and their proven track records as effective leaders.
Inquisitive Experts	Expertise & Beginner’s Mind	...fresh perspectives on challenges and opportunities, with rapid validation of analysis and possible system interventions. Beginner’s mind is inherent in innovation networks since no one understands the whole systems when they are complex.

¹Other tensions also relate to peer influence, including having both candor & diplomacy and excelling at both innovation & operational excellence.

Strong Collaborators	Self-interest & Common good	...dynamic creation of shared value. If you've ever been on a team or committee with someone who simply couldn't collaborate effectively, this may be self-evident. Collaborative Innovators are able to creatively and continually integrate their personal and organizational interests with the large societal benefits being pursued by the group, creating new forms of shared value.
Reflective Action-takers	Analytical & Action-oriented	...smart, rapid innovations. Conventional working groups are often full of thinkers who don't act quickly, or vice versa. Collaborative Innovators are able to do analysis and take action in rapid iterative cycles, allowing us to develop and test market interventions within months rather than years.
Dynamic Negotiators	Individual interests & Institutional interests	...system-wide alignment and momentum. Each participant is a whole human being with his or her personal motivations for participating in the network, yet many of them also represent an organization with its own interests, priorities, and concerns. We work up front to make sure that we have someone capable of aligning his or her own organizations behind the goal and activities of the network, and we continually monitor the "background pressures" on participants from their organizations and actively support them in dynamically aligning organizational and network interests.

And as a group, they have this key attribute:

Characteristic	Tension	Supports...
90% of participants are 100% committed to the goal; 10% are skeptics but open to evidence-based learning	Commitment & Skepticism	...informed momentum. This mix allows us to create strong momentum in the belief that the goal is possible while also forcing the group to test its basic assumptions along the way.

What tensions must be well-managed in this work?

Leaders of collaborative innovation, whether program directors, facilitators, or members of an innovation network design team, are what we call "Facilitative Leaders." They work with passion toward a greater purpose and yet are entirely committed to find solutions that work for all.

Typically, a program director might have the following characteristics, all of which are valuable and important:

- Ability to quickly build trusting relationships with diverse stakeholders
- Project management skills
- Ability to understand and dynamically align interests
- Strong use of self, including the ability to recognize and work with personal biases around issues and personalities

In addition to these more standard qualities, we also seek working group leaders who are able to dynamically navigate a number of key tensions. When leading a Collaborative Innovation Network, we work to leverage each of these tensions well over time.

Most importantly, we look for leaders in different roles to have high competence with different tensions. As one example, while all our leaders should be strong in Humility & Confidence, we ask our Facilitators in particular to leverage the Task & Relationship tension in the meeting designs.

Tension	How and why to leverage it
Humility & Courage	Listening deeply and authentically for what you don't understand is important to deepening trust and learning, while asserting your own goals, plans, and interests provides clarity for others. This is closely related to the Inquiry & Advocacy tension.
Self-interest & Common Good	Networks accomplish little if the participants work only from their own personal or organizational interests. At the same time, they will contribute less time, money, and resources if the work is only altruistic. We constantly align the self-interest of participants with our shared purpose around advancing a greater common good. We do this by asking each participant to operate from the "Principle of Generosity" and by continually connecting the group to the greater purpose of the work.
Individual interests & Institutional interests	Each participant is a whole human being with his or her personal reasons for participating in the network. Most participants in our networks also represent an organization with its own interests, priorities, and constraints. We work up front to make sure that we have someone capable of aligning their own organizations behind the goal and activities of the network, and we continually monitor the "background pressures" on participants from their organizations and how we can support them in aligning organizational and network interests.
Focus on task & Focus on relationship	On calls and in meetings, we spend time both advancing the work AND building deeper, more meaningful connections among participants.
Visionary & Grounded	It's very helpful for Networks to both focus on the practical tasks that need to get done and continually link these back to the greater purpose they are working to achieve. This means ensuring that there's real meaning and a clear purpose in each and every bit of work that everyone is performing.
Action orientation & Planning focus	Be sure to keep momentum through continuous action and progress toward the goal and to also plan well to make the action as productive and high-impact as possible.
Pushing leader & Patient partner	The key initiators of the group (e.g. the design team, program director, and initiative team chairs) should work with patient understanding from where their peers are, while at the same time pushing them to take greater risks in working toward the greater purpose.

Working Individually, in Small Groups & in Large groups	<p>When groups form, they often try to perform all their work as a whole group. Instead, we encourage our Networks and Initiative Teams² to define chunks of work that 2-3 people will “own.” These small groups work up a concept and bring it back to the whole group for feedback, and then the small groups use the feedback from the large group or the whole network to refine their thinking and strategy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Network as a whole is a good place to ensuring overall shared intent and alignment, assess the overall strategy, setting priorities, critique the specific analysis or proposed solutions emerging from Initiative Teams, providing encouragement, and providing new insights, ideas and resources; • Initiative Teams are good for framing up a specific problem, developing concept solutions into working prototypes, piloting solutions in the real world, and refining the analysis and solutions over time; • Individuals or pairs are good at what we call “refining and pre-processing work: refining analysis and/or concepts to test with the Initiative Teams or the whole Network, or editing statements or documents to bring back to the larger groups.
Simplicity & Deep understanding	<p>It’s important to keep things simple (e.g. goals, plans, and roles) so that people can hold what’s happening in their heads. Our objective is that participants wakes up each morning with one simple goal at the top of their minds. At the same time, we also do “Deep Dives” to help all stakeholders really understand a key issue much more thoroughly so we can design more robust solutions together.</p>
Being intuitive & Being analytical/ data-driven	<p>We naturally get a mix of thinking styles in any Network, but we also design processes to draw on both intuitive and analytical thinking styles. Our process designers need to pay attention to creating the conditions for both to emerge in a group. Our cycle often begins with helping the group emerge an intuitive understanding of whole problem or solution, which we then break down and analyze our analysis piece by piece.</p>
Fostering unity & Encouraging debate	<p>Our motto: Differentiate before we integrate. Every person needs to know that his or her wisdom and perspective is both understood and honored before that person can fully offer the same to others. We create space to address differences, especially the deepest differences, and to leverage those differences as drivers of innovation.</p>
Highest leverage actions & easily sellable actions	<p>We work to build “the market’s” appetite for the high-leverage solutions but in the end, we must be able to “sell” the work to other stakeholders. Most constituents will only support a new solution if they believe it’s truly feasible, so we do a lot of prototyping of ideas. By focusing more on HOW to accomplish something together rather than asking for decisions on IF we’ll do it, we build support rather than asking for it.</p>

² These are small groups within a Collaborative Innovation Network designed to solve a specific part of the problem that the network is working on.

Wow, that's a lot of tensions!

Yes, clearly, that is a LOT of tensions that show up in this work and we don't carry all of them around in our heads all the time, but in practice only a few of the tensions in the list above will be important at any given time (though all of them are present all the time at some level). What's essential for effective leaders in innovation networks or any type of shared value or collective impact approach is the skill of identifying and constantly assessing ways to leverage these tensions better over time.