Polarity 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 early nineties, has produced extraordinary social justice 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 frameworks we draw on continually over the course of the work is "Polarity Thinking."

Polarity Thinking is a way of seeing and leveraging powerful tensions between underlying values, such as the tension between *what I want* and *what others want* from the work of the group. We tend to work with polarities in both the selection of our working group participants and in the ongoing management and work of the group itself.

What polarities make a good collaborative innovator?

Unlike other efforts at 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 influence key others in the value chain.

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

Characteristic	Polarity	Supports…
Held in high regard by their peers	Candor & Diplomacy	Influence through integrity. The group has far greater leverage when it's comprised of "high influence" stakeholders who are admired for their integrity (both inside their companies and in their segments of the value chain).
High expertise in their part of the value chain	Expertise & Ignorance	Having experts from each part of the value chain provides instant validation of new ideas, but any expert in one part of the value chain often knows little about another part of the value chain so they bring fresh, questioning perspectives to new ideas as well.
Practical thinkers	Action-oriented & Reflective	Are reflective and analytic while being oriented toward action. Conventional working groups are often full of thinkers who don't act quickly, or vice versa. Key Initiators are able to do analysis and take action in rapid iteration, allowing us to develop and test systems interventions within months, not years.

Proven collaboration abilities	Self-interest & Common good	Ability to dynamically create shared value and optimize the interests of all parties. If you've ever been on a team or committee with someone who simply couldn't collaborate effectively, this may be self-evident. Key Initiators are able to creatively and continually integrate their personal and business interests with the large social objectives of the group, designing new opportunities for shared value.
90% of participants are 100% committed to the goal; 10% are skeptics but open to evidence-based learning	Commitment & Skepticism	This mix allows us to create strong momentum and belief that the goal is in fact possible while also forcing the group to confirm its key assumptions along the way.

What polarities 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 from a passionate point of view 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 polarities. While not every leader will manage all these polarities well all the time, we do explicitly pay attention to these as a group of leaders over time.

Most importantly, we look for leaders in different roles to have high competence with different polarities. 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.

Polarity	How to Leverage it
Humility & Confidence	Listening deeply for what you don't know is important to building trust and learning, while assert your plan or analysis provides clarity and focus for the group (aka Inquiry and Advocacy).
Self-interest & Common Good	Working groups 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 the shared purpose around a greater common good. Part of this is asking each participant to operate from the "Principle of Generosity" and continually returning the group to the meaningful 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 working group. Most participants in our working groups 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 working group, and we continually monitor the "background pressures" on participants from their organizations and how we can support them in aligning organizational and working group interests.
Small groups & Large groups	When groups are formed (in our model, we have "initiative groups" to focus on particular areas or opportunities, they have a tendency to try to do too much at the group level. We encourage them 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 use the feedback back in the small groups to refine the strategy. Small groups are good for framing up a problem or solution, and refining it. Larger groups are good for critiquing the problem analysis or proposed solution, providing new insights, and offering resources.
Focus on task & Focus on relationship	On calls and in meetings, spend time doing the work and spend time building personal, trusting relationships among participants.
Visionary & Grounded	Focus on the practical tasks that need to get done and continually link these back to why and the greater purpose we're trying to achieve (aka ensuring that there's real meaning in each and every bit of work).
Action orientation & Planning focus	Keep momentum through continuous action and progress toward the goal and be sure to plan well to make the action as productive and high-impact as possible.
Pushing entrepreneur & Patient partner	The key initiators of the group (in our model, the design team, program director and initiative group chairs) should work with patient understanding from where their peers are, while at the same time pushing them to take greater risks in working from the big vision.
Simplicity & Deep understanding	It's important to keep things simple (goals, plans, roles, etc.) so that people can hold what's happening in their heads. Our idea is that participants can wake up each morning with the simple goal at the top of their minds! At the same time, we often do "Deep Dives" to help all stakeholders really understand a key issue so we can design more robust solutions.
Being intuitive & Being analytical/ data-driven	We naturally get a mix of thinking styles in any group, but we also design processes to draw on both intuitive and analytical thinking styles. Our process designers need to know how to create the conditions for both to emerge in a group. Our cycle often begins with helping the group emerge an intuitive understanding of whole problems or solutions, which we then break down and analyze carefully piece by piece.

Fostering unity & Encouraging debate	Our motto: Differentiate before we integrate. Every person needs to know that his or her wisdom, truth and perspective is 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 key sources of innovation.
Highest leverage actions & easily sellable actions	We work to build "the market's" appetite for the high-leverage solutions but in the end we have to do what sells. What's important, however, is to keep in mind that most constituents will only support a new solution if they believe it's truly feasible, so we do a lot of prototyping and scaling of ideas. We build support rather than asking for it.

Wow, that's a lot of polarities!

Yes, clearly, that is a LOT of polarities and we don't carry all of them around in our heads all the time, but in practice only a few polarities in the list above will be figural 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 Polarity Thinking itself—that is, the having the ability to recognize and dynamically manage and leverage these polarities as they emerge throughout the life of the group.