Collaborative Public Management: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?

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Abstract
This article analyzes the most important issues, concepts, and ideas in collaborative public management research and practice today. The issues, concepts, and ideas are (a) competing definitions of collaboration; (b) changes in the environment of public management that have encouraged the growth of collaborative public management; (c) “thinking DaVinci”—lateral thinking and interdisciplinarity; (d) the management challenges of working in networks; (e) the paradox of balancing autonomy and interdependence; (f) factors to consider before collaborating; (g) the importance of the individual; (h) the shifting leadership challenge; (i) weaknesses in collaborative public management research; and (j) the missing link between theory and practice. The authors conclude that the study and practice of collaborative public management is generally fragmented with low level of consensus. From a research perspective, it is a low-paradigm field. The authors close with a view to the future. To advance the study and practice of collaborative public management the authors urge (a) agreement on definitions of commonly used terms, beginning with the term “collaboration”; (b) agreement on pressing collaborative public management challenges and substantive research and practice questions; (c) more precise theoretical models of behavior; and (d) agreement on the measurement of relevant variables.

Keywords
collaboration, collaborative public management, research and practice

With the evolution from government to governance, public management scholars have given renewed attention to forms of organization that cross agency boundaries. This phenomenon has been the subject of an explosion of research in recent years. The new collaborative public management scholarship responds in part to the growth of collaborations among public, private, and nonprofit organizations; the context, environment, and constraints within which they work; the situation of the public manager in a network; the governance processes and decision rules collaborators use; the ways they define their work, tasks, and goals; and their impact on public policy and the policy process. The collaborative public management literature uses a variety of sound bites to describe the importance of this phenomenon to our field. Sometimes, scholars talk about the public manager’s “toolkit,” or “strategies.” Sometimes, they talk about collaborative

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public management as an “option” or a “choice.” Sometimes, they refer to collaborative networks as “models” or “structures” within which managers find themselves. There is a tension between literature on a manager’s (or his or her organization’s) individual choice to collaborate and literature that looks at intentional or fortuitous collaborative collective design.

In this article, we focus on collaborative public management, and more particularly, on what we think are the most important issues, concepts, and ideas in collaborative public management research and practice today. Some issues, concepts, or ideas require great length to explore, while others may be explained easily in a paragraph or two. Behind these issues, concepts, and ideas is our belief that academic work on collaboration has much to offer the world of practice. At the same time, we believe that practitioners have insights about collaboration that inform academic work.

For the first two parts of this article, we focus on competing definitions of collaboration and the changing environment of public management. Both ideas are important to practice and theory. Next, for Parts 3 through 8, we focus on the world of the practitioner, including what it means to be a collaborative thinker, on-the-ground challenges, and paradoxes of collaborating, factors to consider before collaborating, new notions of collaborative leadership, and the skills and traits of the effective collaborator. Then, for Parts 9 and 10 we reflect on some theoretical and research weaknesses and the seeming disconnect between theory and practice. We close with predictions for the future.

Competing Definitions of Collaboration

Collaborative public management is an idea that resonates with many, yet the term “collaboration” lacks a common lens or definition; there are seemingly “101 definitions of collaboration.” Three examples from three different decades are provided here for illustrative purposes. Each is widely cited today. Gray (1989) defined interorganizational collaboration as an emergent process between interdependent organizational actors who negotiate the answers to shared concerns (pp. 12-13). Huxham (1996) defined collaboration as “working in association with others for some form of mutual benefit” (p. 1). Bardach (1998) defined collaboration as “any joint activity by two or more agencies working together that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately” (p. 8).

Accordingly, we were forced to make strategic choices as to how to define collaborative public management for the purposes of this article. Although scholars have developed additional definitions of collaboration, some emphasizing the preconditions, process, or outcomes of the relationship, for this article we adopted the following definitions, adopted from Agranoff and McGuire (2003):

Collaborative public management is a concept that describes the process of facilitating and operating in multi-organizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved or easily solved by single organizations. Collaborative means to co-labor, to achieve common goals, often working across boundaries and in multi-sector and multi-actor relationships. Collaboration is based on the value of reciprocity and can include the public.

There is considerable confusion in the literature regarding the distinction between collaboration, coordination, and cooperation. Gray (1989) and Gray and Wood (1991) observe that these concepts are different because “cooperation” and “coordination” do not capture the dynamic, evolutionary nature of “collaboration.” Collaboration from this perspective is best examined as a dynamic or emergent process rather than a static condition. In Selden, Sowa, and Sandfort’s (2002) dimensional illustration of a collaborative continuum (Figure 1), the right-hand side of the continuum describes the highest level of service integration and the least autonomous
relationships, and the left side describes relationships where the joint action is less central to organizational mission. Feiock (2009) and Feiock and Scholz (2010), examining these concepts through the lenses of decision-making and game theory literatures, argue that these are not points on a single scale and that problems of coordination and cooperation are fundamentally different forms of collaboration in terms of the risks faced by potential collaborators. One seemingly simple yet powerfully important challenge for practitioners and researchers alike, then, is to define what they mean by collaboration and to make sure that there is a shared definition.

Changing Environment, Changing Practices

Public managers who work collaboratively find themselves not solely as unitary leaders of unitary organizations. Instead, they often find themselves facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organizations. Although collaborative public management has been around a long time (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Grodzins, 1960; Hall & O’Toole, 2000, 2004; Hanf, Hjern, & Porter, 1978; Hull & Hjern, 1987; O’Leary, Gazley, McGuire, & Bingham, 2009; O’Toole, 1985; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), there have been many changes in the environment of public, private, and nonprofit organizations that have encouraged the growth of collaborative public management. All are important for researchers and managers alike to understand.

First, most major public challenges are larger than one organization, requiring new approaches to addressing public issues. Second, in many jurisdictions, outsourcing has grown in volume and dollar amount. By its very nature, outsourcing is a collaborative endeavor between the public agencies awarding the contract and the organizations performing the contracted tasks. Third, the desire to improve the effectiveness of publicly funded programs is encouraging public officials to identify new ways of providing public services. Fourth, technology is helping government agencies and personnel share information in a way that is integrative and interoperable, with the outcome being a greater emphasis on collaborative governance. Finally, citizens are seeking additional avenues for engaging in governance, which can result in new and different forms of collaborative problem solving and decision making.

Reflections on the Practice of Collaboration

The literature on the practice of collaboration is vast. In this section, we present what we think are the most compelling ideas concerning what it means to be a lateral thinker, on-the-ground challenges and paradoxes of collaborating, factors to consider before collaborating, new notions of leadership, and the skills and traits of the effective collaborator.

Think DaVinci—Lateral Thinking and Interdisciplinarity

The phrase “lateral thinking” is used to describe creativity that stems from taking knowledge from one substantive context or discipline and applying it to an entirely different one. One well-known
example of a lateral thinker was DaVinci whose genius stemmed from moving fluidly from art to science, engineering, mathematics, medicine, architecture, and beyond. He found universal rules of nature manifest in widely varying contexts (Riding, 2006). He dissected the human arm and a bird’s wing and then tried to engineer a machine to enable people to fly. In this way, DaVinci applied what he learned from human physiology and natural science to engineering.

“Think DaVinci” is important for any collaborator to remember because in an ideal world, the primary reason to collaborate is if you think you can create something better than if you did it yourself. Huxham (1993) writes that “collaborative advantage will be achieved when something unusually creative is produced—perhaps an objective is met—that no organization could have produced on its own and when each organization, through the collaboration, is able to achieve its own objectives better than it could alone. In some cases, it should also be possible to achieve some higher-level . . . objectives for society as a whole rather than just for the participating organizations” (p. 603).

And yet, much of collaboration is mandated, where at least some of the partners may not have a choice whether to collaborate or not. Huxham (2000) documents the downside to collaboration and echoes the sentiment that collaboration is very difficult to do. If one can achieve the same outcome acting independently, Huxham advises one to avoid collaborating if possible.

Major Challenges of Collaborative Networks: Paradoxes and Complexities

There are many challenges in all collaborative endeavors; here we focus on collaborative networks. For example, all networks are not created equal. Some are sophisticated and well run; others are awkward and poorly run; most are somewhere in-between. In addition, motivation to collaborate varies. Some leaders choose to collaborate to increase performance, to better serve the public, or to “think DaVinci”. Others may collaborate in order to be free riders and obtain benefits without commensurate effort. For these and other reasons, collaboration is not always wise. In fact, it could negatively affect the primary mission of one’s organization. Tied in with this is the possibility that collaboration may lead to conflict. Managing that conflict can be a formidable challenge.

Networks by definition are complex conglomerations of diverse organizations and individuals. The characteristics that add to the complexity of network disputes are numerous (O’Leary & Bingham, 2007):

There are multiple members. Network disputes typically involve many individuals and organizations. Each member brings their own interests that must be met. If interests are not met, members may leave the network.

Network members bring both different and common missions. There must be some commonality of purpose to provide incentive for becoming a member of a network. Each organization also has its own unique mission that that must be followed. These can at times clash with the mission of the network.

Network organizations each have a different organization culture. Culture is to the organization what character is to the individual. Just as each individual is unique, so is each organization culture. Diversity among network organizations’ cultures may present challenges within the network itself.

Network organizations have different methods of operation. They will differ in degrees of hierarchy as well as forms of management control. These and other differences may affect what a network can and cannot accomplish and the speed at which it is accomplished.

Network members have different stakeholder groups and different funders. In order to satisfy their diverse constituencies, network members embrace different perspectives on appropriate direction and activities. Some of these preferences will overlap, some will not.
Network members have different degrees of power. Not all members of networks have equal standing. Despite network rules that may give an equal vote to each member, some are typically more powerful than others. For example, in emergency management networks, often times federal organizations are the beneficiaries of legislation that allows them to preempt local and state actions. Differences in power can pose immense challenges to collaborative entities.

There are often multiple issues. Networks typically are formed to address complex problems that are not easily solved by one organization. Complex problems bring with them multiple issues and subissues. Multiple issues and subissues typically yield multiple challenges.

There are multiple forums for decision-making. Public decisions may be made by networks. At the same time, the same public issue may be debated and dealt with in the legislature, in the courts, or in the offices of career public servants. Whether and how a decision is made by a network can be a challenge.

Networks are both interorganizational and interpersonal. The networks studied in the management literature typically are spider webs of organizations. But each organization typically is represented in the network by one or more agents of that organization. Just as networked organizations may clash, so too may networked individuals.

There are a variety of governance structures available to networks. How the network chooses to govern itself, lead members, develop consensus, and create conventions for dialogue and deliberative processes all are exceedingly important and demanding for networks. Just the design of governance rules for the network can be an exceedingly complex procedure.

Networks may encounter conflict with the public. Increasingly, collaborative public management networks are engaging citizens through a variety of means. Because networks often address issues of concern to a diverse public with multiple interests, conflict may emerge.

The Management Paradox—Balancing Autonomy and Interdependence

Connelly, Zhang, and Faerman (2008) write of additional paradoxes involved in being a collaborative manager. As managers work both within their own organizations and within networks, they are challenged in ways very different from traditional management. These challenges demand different skill sets from managers. Borrowing from Connelly, Zhang, and Faerman, here are more paradoxes of being a collaborative manager. While we focus on networks, these challenges pertain also to collaborations outside of networks.

Collaborative managers must work both with autonomy and interdependence. As a leader of a single program or organization, managers often work with independence, setting the rules and calling the shots. As a member of a collaborative network, a manager is typically now one of many managers with numerous intertwining interests that must be met.

Collaborative managers and their networks have both common and diverse goals. Each member of a network has goals that typically are unique to that member’s organization or program. At the same time, as members of a network, managers typically share common goals.

Collaborative managers must work both with a fewer number and a greater variety of groups that are increasingly more diverse. When organizations combine to form a network, they become one body—hence, the fewer number. Yet within this one body typically is a great variety of organizations with different cultures, missions, and ways of operating—hence, the greater diversity.

Collaborative managers need to be both participative and authoritative. Behavior within a network is typically participative as the members make decisions concerning the direction of the group. Yet as a manager of a single program or organization, a manager is expected at times to take command and call the shots as he or she sees them. (Connelly, Zhang, and Faerman, emphasize that authoritative is the key word here, not authoritarian that connotes a more dictatorial style.)
Collaborative managers need to see the forest and the trees. A manager of a single program or organization needs to master the details and fine points of what they do on a daily basis. At the same time, as a member of a network, that same manager needs to think holistically and laterally.

Collaborative managers need to balance advocacy and inquiry. Every manager has an obligation to promote, support, and act in favor of his or her organization. Yet because of the intertwining interests, managers need to probe and question to gather the information for decisions necessary to act in the best interests of the network.

What is a collaborative manager to do? Connelly, Zhang, and Faerman emphasize that these paradoxes should be accepted, embraced, and transcended, not resolved. These paradoxes are fundamental challenges of working collaboratively both within and outside of networks.

Factors to Consider Before Collaborating

Collaboration for public managers can be complex. There are no one-size-fits-all recipes for a successful collaboration, as managers need to balance many factors. Some of the most important factors that affect collaborations are presented in this section. These factors come from 14 case studies from 9 countries (Mexico, Ecuador, Mali, Madagascar, France, Nepal, Belize, Ecuador, and the United States) presented at a Maxwell School conference (see Benjamin, Brechin, & Thoms, 2011) as well as from Vij’s research in India (2011).

Context. All collaborations are embedded in a specific policy context, and the behavior of collaborators is influenced by that context (Isett, Mergel, LeRoux, Mischen, & Rethemeyer, 2011). Contextual factors, however, may also include environmental complexity and turbulence due to market competition, government regulation, litigation, legal and tort reform, statutory and court mandates, and unionization that interact with organizational culture and management practices. A collaboration that works in one context may be unsuccessful in another.

Purpose or the mission of the collaboration. Collaborations serve a variety of purposes. The interests of collaborators may conflict with each other, but collaborators must agree on the overall purpose of the collaboration to work together. Numerous studies conclude that among the success factors in collaboration is a clearly mutually agreed upon purpose or mission (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Ingraham & Getha-Taylor, 2008; McGuire & Silvia, 2010; Page, 2008; Provan, Kenis, & Human, 2008). One factor to weigh when considering collaborating is whether your organization’s mission is compatible with the purpose or mission of the collaboration.

Member selection and capacity building. Those who collaborate bring their unique skills, resources, expertise, experience, perspectives, knowledge, diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, as well as values to collaborative endeavors. Capacity is the ability of a member to secure the human, technological, political, or other necessary resources that allow it to participate in collaborative activities (Gazley, 2008). A collaborating group’s “representativeness” could suffer if participants lack sufficient competence to participate effectively (Leach, 2006). Communication, training, and a diverse selection of participants with multiple (representative) perspectives often are needed for building capacities. Furthermore, as individuals collaborate, they most likely will learn from other individuals and there typically will be a generation of social capital (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Waugh & Streib, 2006) and shared meaning (Gray, 2000). Capacity building often times increases the likelihood of success in collaborations and could help in developing an interorganizational mission and a collaborative culture. Hence, among the factors to consider when weighing whether to collaborate or not is how members will be selected, who will participate, and how or if collaborative capacity can be built.
Motivation and commitment of the collaborators. Individuals and organizations come together to collaborate for a wide array of reasons, including economic, social, organizational, or political, to address cross-sector failure (Bryson et al., 2006), leverage resources and knowledge (Graddy & Chen, 2009), for more efficient delivery of services (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Bardach, 1998), to seek visibility or legitimacy, and to build collaborative relationships. Before one agrees to collaborate, one should weigh the motivation and commitment of other collaborators.

Structure and governance of the collaboration. Among the factors that may affect the success or the failure of a collaboration are "the structure of the collaborative effort and how . . . [it] will be governed" (McGuire, 2006, p. 38). Structure in part delineates authority and responsibilities within the collaboration. Collaborators face a paradox of flexibility-stability here. Collaboration is often preferred over bureaucratic structures because it may be more flexible. But it can also be unstable and may make accountability difficult. A centralized structure tends to yield coordination and efficiency to the collaborative arrangement (Milward & Provan, 2003, p. 8). Governance is the activity of making joint decisions and rules to govern the collaboration. These might include rule making and agreements concerning how collaborators will interact, communicate, and work within the collaborative structure in order to achieve the outcome. O’Leary and Bingham (2007, p. 27) provide a nine-step process for building a collaborative governance structure with the aim of trying to prevent conflict through forethought and adaption to the needs of the collaborators, resource and power distribution, communication, context, and the degree of flexibility required for the collaboration to progress.

Power in collaborations. Power imbalances within collaborations may result in conflict and cooptation and may affect the success of the collaboration. Structure and governance mechanisms can be both a source of and a remedy to power imbalances, as they delineate the power-sharing arrangement and authority among collaborators. Collaborators with more resources may have stronger bargaining power. Sometimes, the reputation of the collaborators may also be source of power. Government officials may be able to exercise power over the other collaborators because they represent the government. Agranoff (2006) concludes that a legal mandate will increase authority and power and, hence, will tend to increase the likelihood of success of a collaboration. Hence, when considering whether to collaborate or not, one should analyze sources of power as well as possible power imbalances.

Accountability. Accountability in collaborations has been defined as “ensuring that collaborators work together in ways that accord with the intent of voters and public officials who authorize their joint efforts” (Page, 2008, p. 138). Collaborations often address policy problems that cross jurisdictional and sectoral boundaries. Solutions require the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, such as national, regional, and local government actors; nonprofit organizations; and the private sector. Private organizations that work in collaborations, in particular, have a unique responsibility to citizens. Collaborative networks tasked with carrying out the business of government have received criticism for perceived problems with accountability and, tied in with this, a lack of transparency. Unlike an agency that acts alone in a traditional bureaucratic way, a network typically does not present a clear chain of command of clearly identified responsibility. Network meetings are not always open to the public. And yet, collaborative public management networks often are carrying out the essential missions of governance: They are making, implementing, and carrying out public policy. Before agreeing to a collaborative arrangement, it is important to determine whether and how a collaborative group will be held accountable to citizens and public officials.

Communication. Information exchange, dialogue, sharing ideas, brainstorming, articulating and asserting views, negotiations, bargaining, deliberations, problem solving, conflict management, and conflict resolution are important for collaborations (Bingham, O’Leary, & Carlson, 2008). Deliberation and dialogue allow collaborators to brainstorm, critically examine each
other’s arguments, identify common interests, and build a base of shared knowledge and social capital (Creighton, 2005; Leach, 2006; Roberts, 2002). Those who are weighing whether to collaborate or not should make sure that communication channels are inclusive, transparent, and regular. These can be formalized in governance mechanisms.

**Perceived legitimacy.** Legitimacy is a generalized perception that the actions of a collaborating entity are desirable, proper, or within some system of norms, beliefs, and definitions. For a collaboration to exist, work, and achieve its purpose, collaborators should consider how they will build and manage legitimacy (Milward & Provan, 2006). Legitimacy may help in securing political and financial resources, as well as assuring the perpetuation of organization activity (Alexander & O’Leary, 2009). Legally mandated collaborations have a certain degree of granted legitimacy. Legitimacy can also be built through trusting previous relationships and by conforming to the norms of the institutional environment (Bryson et al., 2006). One factor to consider before collaborating is what is the perceived legitimacy of the collaborating group.

**Trust.** Many scholars maintain that trust is critical for building relationships and sustaining a collaboration (Bardach, 1998; Gray, 1985; Huxham, 1996, 2003; Milward & Provan, 2006; Van Slyke, 2007). Cummings and Bromiley analyze trust as keeping commitments, negotiating honestly, and not taking undue advantage of individuals or groups (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996). Some collaborators prefer to work with others with whom they have a previous history of relationships or associations, as an element of trust is already built in between them (Tschirtart, Amezcua, & Anker, 2009). Trust can be developed among new collaborators, however, through clear communication, reciprocity, goal alignment, transparency, information and knowledge sharing, and by demonstrating competency, good intentions, and follow-through. Before agreeing to a collaboration, ask whether you trust those with whom you might be collaborating or whether trust may be built.

**Information technology.** Some collaborations have transgressed geographical borders to become virtual organizations and networks almost limitless in their scale, scope, and structure. Integrated information networks can now link all major components of organizations, management information systems, geographic information systems, intranet, and internet. Communication technologies, social media, and other technological innovations have led to a more intricate, integrated, and interactive form of e-governance. Collaborators must understand how best to harness the potential of information technology but should also be cautious of the challenges it poses. Those contemplating a collaboration should fully understand the need, role, and nature of the technology required to participate fully in a particular collaboration, as well as their own capability to manage the information technology needed for effective collaboration (Pardo, Gil-Garcia, & Luna-Reyes, 2010; Rainey, 2009).

### The Importance of the Individual in Collaborative Partnerships

The role of the individual in collaborations has largely been given short shrift in the public management literature. Much of the published research is on networks of organizations, with little mention of the fact that although organizations and jurisdictions collaborate, it is always in the form of individuals. For example, Huxham (1993) early on researched organizations’ “collaborative capability” but emphasized that she was focusing “not on collaboration . . . between individuals, but on collaboration . . . between organizations” (Huxham, 1996, p. 1).

Four years later, Huxham shifted her lens to include, in part, the people who represent their organizations in collaborations, writing that the relationships between individual participants in collaborations are often fundamental to getting things done (Huxham, 2000, p. 341; Huxham & Vangen, 2005, p. 74). In a later work, Huxham explained:
Collaborations are, of course, enacted by individuals. . . . [T]hese individuals are generally linked to the various organizations that form the collaboration. Commonly, they are acting in a representative function. In the course of collaborative activities, such individuals tend implicitly (and often unwittingly) to converse about their aims, and those of their partners at three levels: the level of the collaboration; the level of the participating organizations; and the level of the participating individuals. (Huxham & Vangen, 2005, p. 84)

Indeed, throughout Huxham’s large body of work on collaboration are repeated findings about, and references to, the difficulties and challenges involved among the individuals who represent the organizations that collaborate.

This sentiment is echoed by Frederickson (2007). Clearly, collaboration is deeply dependent on the skills of officials and managers. Important is who is representing an organization, agency, or jurisdiction at the table and whether they have the necessary skills to be an effective collaborator. In 2010, O’Leary, Gerard, and Choi (O’Leary, Gerard, & Choi, 2011) surveyed members of the U.S. Senior Executive Service (SES) and asked them the question, “What is the skill set for the successful collaborator?” Based on the literature on collaboration and networks, and given the fact that SES members are standard-setting senior executives who often times have immense decision authority as well as deep knowledge, extensive experience, and long tenure in national governance issues, these researchers thought they would find three things. First and foremost, they thought these executives would tell them that the most important skills in the skillset of the collaborative manager are thinking and acting strategically, including visioning (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004; McGuire & Silvia, 2009; Milward & Provan, 2006). Second, based on their own work facilitating collaborative groups, as well as the literature, they thought that the desired skills, after strategy, would be facilitation, collaborative problem solving, and conflict management (Crosby & Bryson, 1992; Emerson & Smutco, 2011; Getha-Taylor, 2008; Huxham, 1993, 1996, 2000; Huxham & Hiibbert, 2004; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; McGuire & Silvia, 2009; Silvia & McGuire, 2010; Williams, 2002). Finally, again based on their “real world” work with collaborative groups, as well as the literature, O’Leary et al. (2011) predicted that interpersonal skills would be highly ranked (Emerson & Smutco, 2011; Getha-Taylor, 2008; Silvia & McGuire, 2010).

Their respondents surprised them: The most frequently mentioned answers to the question of what is the skill set of the collaborative manager dealt with personal characteristics and interpersonal skills, followed by group process skills, strategic leadership skills, and substantive/technical expertise (in that order). Personal characteristics outnumbered strategy and expertise in the responses by two to one. The most frequently mentioned personal characteristics were (in order): open minded, patient, change oriented, flexible, unselfish, persistent, diplomatic, honest, trustworthy, respectful, empathetic, goal oriented, decisive, friendly, and sense of humor. The most frequently mentioned interpersonal skills were good communication, listening, and the ability to work with people. Tied with this were group process skills, mentioned third in importance as part of the skill set for the successful collaborator. These included facilitation; interest-based negotiation; collaborative problem solving; skill in understanding group dynamics, culture, and personalities; compromise; conflict resolution; and mediation. The common thread here is the emphasis on people and people skills.

The Shifting Leadership Challenge—Leading When You Are Not in Charge

More than 90% of global executives who were surveyed by the Center for Creative Leadership said that collaboration is vital for leadership success (http://www.ccl.org). But when the follow-up question was asked, “Are the leaders of your organization good at collaboration?,” less than
50% of the respondents said that their leaders were good at collaboration. In a horizontal world, there are many times when collaboration is needed, but often one does not know how to do it and do it well. Collaboration yields significant leadership challenges.

Tied in with this, often times when one is working in a collaborative capacity, one is not in charge and so one is leading in a way that is nontraditional. In the early 1900s “great man” theories of leadership were popular. These theories focused on “identifying the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political, and military leaders” (Northouse, 2001, p. 15). Scholars at that time believed that leaders were born, not made, and numerous studies of “great” leaders were carried out to determine the specific traits that clearly separated leaders from followers (Bass, 1990; Jago, 1982). The focus was solely on the talented individual who could single-handedly enter the picture and save the day.

Yet in a world where collaboration is common place and where most complex public policy problems are larger than one organization to handle, very different leadership skills—the skills of being a leader when one is working in a network, for example, have become very important. Lester Salamon (2002) observed that collaboration and collaborative governance shift the emphasis from the control of large bureaucratic organizations and the bureaucratic way of managing public programs to enablement skills. These enablement skills are used to bring people together, to engage partners horizontally, and to bring multiple collaborators together for a common end in a situation of interdependence. Examples include negotiation, facilitation, collaborative problem solving, and conflict management.

Reflections on the Theories of Collaboration

Every academic discipline and subdiscipline has enduring theoretical, empirical, methodological, and conceptual challenges. Collaborative public management is no different. In this section, we reflect on weaknesses in collaborative public management research and the seeming disconnect between theory and practice.

Weaknesses in Collaborative Public Management Research

When one looks at collaborative public management research through a theoretical lens, five inherent weaknesses emerge. First, although the literature of collaborative public management is rich in insights from numerous disciplines, there is a need for a consistent overarching theory. Instead, what we have is a piece-meal approach (Bingham & O’Leary, 2006; Cooper, Bryer, & Meek, 2006; Graddy & Chen, 2009; Gray, 1985; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994; Thomson & Perry, 2006; Wood & Gray, 1991). For example, there is a need to have a comprehensive vision of the antecedents, processes, and outcomes (Bingham et al., 2008; Thomson & Perry, 2006). This is reminiscent of the riddle of the elephant and the six blind men, and Waldo’s comment five decades ago (referring to organization theory research as a whole): Although “there is little doubt here that it is a single elephant being discussed. . . . Each of the observers begins his description from a different point and often with a special end in view” (Waldo, 1961, p. 216). It seems we still have not explained the entire elephant.

Second, although the field derives richness from incorporating theories from other fields, it also suffers from blind spots concerning theoretical diversity and fragmentation and lacks depth (Nesbit et al., 2011). Third, the present research tends to limit itself to cross-sectional analysis with often a retrospective perception of collaborative management cases, whereas we need to understand how collaboration actually performs over time from its inception to its culmination. This may involve actually tracking collaborations in real time and more longitudinal studies. Fourth, there has not been enough research to distinguish and study mandated collaboration
separate from voluntary collaboration. Fifth, collaborative public management still lacks a distinct identity as a distinct area of inquiry. Contrast this to the area of public deliberation, which now has its own journal.

**Conceptual weaknesses.** The next weakness of collaborative public management research comes from conceptual stretching. For example, conceptual boundaries among coordination, cooperation, coalition, collaboration, network structures, collaborative public management, collaborative governance, civic engagement, alliances, mergers, and partnership are blurred and lack clear, coherent, operational definitions that can be mutually agreed upon by researchers. The multiple terms, meanings, and implications are overlapping, elusive, and unclear, leading to inconsistencies in the nomenclature (Huxham, 2003; Isett et al., 2011; McGuire, 2006; Nesbit et al., 2011). This is most acute between the research on collaborative governance and the research on network governance. Although collaboration can be a feature of networks, it can also exist outside of networks. Similarly, networks too can extend beyond collaborative linkages. Since the terms are often used interchangeably, however, the incorrect impression is that all networks are collaborative and all collaborations happen in networks.

**Methodological weaknesses.** Deriving from theoretical and conceptual weaknesses, there are two primary methodological shortcomings in collaborative public management research. First is weak empirical validation and a greater reliance on anecdotal description, which prevents the field from improving itself as an applied science. There is no single or even a set of valid, reliable, recognizable measures for analyzing and comparing different collaborations and drawing conclusions on how to foster and maintain effective collaborations (Gazley, 2008; Graddy & Chen, 2009; McGuire & Silvia, 2009; Moynihan et al., 2011; O’Leary & Bingham, 2009; Tschirhart, Amezcua, & Anker, 2009).

Second, there are inherent inconsistencies in identifying the unit of analysis. If one is studying collaborative networks, for example, ideally, the unit of analysis as per definition should be the complete collaborative network. However, conceptual, resource, and time constraints tend to permit only formal collaborative networks to be captured, instead of including their informal extensions as well (for instance, behind-the-scene interpersonal interactions or relationship building that have an important bearing on collaborations (Isett et al., 2011)).

**Grappling with globalization.** Collaborative public management research has fallen short of keeping pace with the increased impact of globalization on network governance scholarship and academic discourse. Globalization has posed unprecedented opportunities as well as challenges for collaborative public management research. Governance has become more global, diverse, and represented by complex governing arrangements and values. Research has been lagging in two main global areas: globalized problems faced by public management and the emergence of transnational and regional networks (Bowornwathana, 2010).

**Collaborative public management in the new information technology (IT) era.** A fifth weakness is that collaborative public management researchers are just warming up to the importance of the already emerged new forms of collaboration catalyzed by social networking media tools. There is an expanded scope and complexity of web-based social networks in which collaborators can communicate. There is a need for further research analyzing how IT applications enhance or hinder interorganizational information integration, the sharing of knowledge in collaborative governance, the solving of transnational problems, and the utilization of analytical tools to deal with complex and uncertain problems.

**The Missing Link Between Theory and Practice**

We close by emphasizing the seeming disconnect between theory and practice in collaborative public management research (Bushouse et al., 2011). It is disturbing and worrisome that the
academic community is not able significantly to influence the world of collaborative practice. Research seemingly does not inform or influence the world of practice at large. In addition, there is a general lack of aggregation of knowledge on collaborative public management. As a result, we are not making great breakthroughs in understanding. The knowledge that is produced is not widely read, and so has little relevance to scholarly and academic readership as well as practitioners. This leads to the problem of producing more research but running the risk of knowing relatively less. Although a certain amount of fragmentation will occur in any field so diverse, too much diffusion and fragmentation leads researchers to isolate themselves from each other and limits their ability to access the work in other traditions and approaches (Nesbit et al., 2011).

A View to the Future

This article has highlighted what we think are the most important issues, concepts, and ideas in collaborative public management research and practice today. It is safe to say that the study and practice of collaborative public management is generally fragmented with a low level of consensus. From a research perspective, it is a low-paradigm field. Some of the specific reasons behind this slow knowledge development include the lack of agreed-upon definitions of commonly used terms and variables, little consensus on significant research topics, a piece-meal approach to theory building, reliance on anecdotal description, differing and incomplete units of analysis, and a failure to keep up with global and IT developments. From a practice perspective, there is a poor connection between practice and theory, a lack of agreed-upon definitions of commonly used terms, paradoxes and complexities in collaborative practices, challenges in balancing autonomy with interdependence, difficulties that arise when leading when one is not in charge, and limited transfer of knowledge and lessons learned from one manager to another.

To advance the study and practice of collaborative public management, we need agreement on definitions of commonly used terms, beginning with the word “collaboration.” We need more precise theoretical models of behavior. We need agreement on the measurement of relevant variables.

We need deeper discussion of pressing collaborative public management challenges and substantive research and practice questions. For example, it will be important to understand the interplay of factors such as public leadership and social equity in collaborative public management. This requires us to broaden and sharpen our methods of inquiry and to understand how collaboration is itself interpreted and practiced differently by public administrators in many countries around the world.

Recent international phenomena like the Arab Spring further reinforce the need for theories and models to understand collaborative leadership in local governance in global communities. The role of technology in collaborative public management needs to be better understood, including virtual transnational collaborative networks as well as web-based social networks. The advancement of knowledge concerning collaborative public management is likely to remain slow, but we are optimistic that it is well worth the effort to improve research on, and the practice of, collaborative public management.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Helpful Sources
For cases, simulations, and syllabi concerning collaboration, see http://www.e-parc.org

References


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