

Rosemary O’Leary

Syracuse University

Yujin Choi

Florida International University

Catherine M. Gerard

Syracuse University

The Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator

In this article, the authors focus on members of the U.S. Senior Executive Service who choose collaboration as a management strategy to increase performance and, in particular, their views of the skill set of a successful collaborator. Based on the current literature on collaboration and networks, these executives might be expected to identify strategic thinking and strategic management as the most important skills. Contrary to expectations, the federal executives most frequently mentioned individual attributes and interpersonal skills as essential for successful collaboration, followed by group process skills, strategic leadership skills, and substantive/technical expertise. The article provides empirical substantiation of the previous literature, with one major difference: the strong reporting of the importance of individual attributes by federal executives (much more than previously reported by other scholars in the field). Strategic leadership skills, strategic management skills, and technical skills matter, but they are not the most important factors behind successful collaborations, according to federal executives.

In his 2007 Donald C. Stone Lecture at the Annual Conference of the American Society for Public Administration, H. George Frederickson was among the first in the field of public administration to focus on the fact that while formal organizations and established jurisdictions collaborate,

[It is] always in the form of managers and officials. Effective collaboration is deeply dependent upon the skills of officials and managers.

Organizations may appear to collaborate, but in fact it is individuals representing organizations who collaborate. (2007, 16)

Yet most of the literature on collaboration in the public sector focuses on organizations, with the role of the individual in collaborations receiving limited attention under the labels of the “collaborative manager”

(Alexander 2006; Getha-Taylor 2006), the “champion” (Eagle and Cowherd 2006; Emison 2006), the “boundary spanner” (Belefski 2006; Donahue 2006), and the “integrative leader” (Crosby and Bryson 2010; Huxham and Vangen 2000; Morse 2010; Vangen and Huxham 2003). 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 this article, we focus on the people who choose collaboration as a management strategy and, in particu-

lar, what they view as the skill set of the successful collaborator. We define collaboration as the process of facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved or easily solved by single organizations (Agranoff and McGuire 2003).

In this article, we focus on the people who choose collaboration as a management strategy and, in particular, what they view as the skill set of the successful collaborator.

Today, the term “collaboration” is widely used in all sectors around the world—public, private, and nonprofit—and it is especially prevalent in the public management and leadership literatures (O’Leary and Bingham 2009; Bingham and O’Leary 2006). There are several reasons for the increase in collaborative public management, both in the literature and in practice. First, most public challenges are larger than one organization, requiring new approaches to address public issues. Think of any major public policy challenge: housing, poverty, the economy, education, and pollution, to name a few. In order to address any one of these challenges effectively, a “full-court press” is needed, with collaboration across boundaries. As Kettl, quoting Friedman (2005), puts it,

The nation is struggling to tackle more intricate problems whose causes and consequences pay no attention to the boundaries we have created ... Issues spill over more quickly into adjoining agencies and neighboring jurisdictions. As the

Rosemary O’Leary is Distinguished Professor, Phanstiel Chair in Strategic Management and Leadership, and the Birkhead-Burkhead Professor of Teaching Excellence in the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. She has won 10 national research awards and nine teaching awards. She is the only person to win three National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration awards for Best Dissertation, Excellence in Teaching, and Distinguished Research. She is an elected member of the National Academy of Public Administration.

E-mail: roleary@maxwell.syr.edu

Yujin Choi is assistant professor of public administration at Florida International University. Her current research focuses on networks, collaboration, and diversity management.

E-mail: yujchoi@fiu.edu

Catherine M. Gerard is director of the Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC), associate director of Executive Education Programs, and adjunct professor of public administration in the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. In her role as director of PARCC, she oversees an internationally known center for theory building and practice in collaboration, conflict analysis, and resolution. Her focus is on the education and practice of managers and students in the skills of collaborative leadership and change.

E-mail: cgerard@maxwell.syr.edu

world becomes flatter, many local issues reach around the world and many global issues have local implications. (2006, 13)

Second, the desire to improve the effectiveness of publicly funded programs is encouraging public officials to identify new ways of providing public services. Collaboration can result in innovative approaches to service delivery, including multisector partnerships (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Goldsmith and Kettl 2009). For example, the province of Nueva Vizcaya in the Philippines successfully brought together public, private, and nonprofit groups to create and run day care centers. In the same province, indigenous tribes were made partners in forest and watershed management (Ramos-Jiminez, Masulit, and Mendoza 2004). Within 12 years, the province had slashed its poverty rate from 52 percent to 3.8 percent, lowered its employment rate to 4.2 percent, and created one of the most successful watershed protection programs in Southeast Asia, an achievement largely attributed to collaborative governance (O’Leary, Gerard, and Bingham 2006).

Third, 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. Current thinkers on the future of public administration see information technology as central to collaborative governance. According to Pardo, Gil-Garcia, and Luna-Reyes,

Within the context of emerging complex global and regional problems, a networked and information technology-enabled public administration emerges not only as a possible vision for a prepared public administration of the future but also as a necessary one. (2010, 129)

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. Compounding this complexity is the fact that networks with more than one federal, state, or local agency may encompass many varieties of citizen participation, as each agency can make its own choices about the public’s role (Bingham and O’Leary 2006, 164). As Salamon (2002) puts it, these factors, taken together, shift the emphasis from management skills and control of large bureaucratic organizations to enablement skills—the skills required to engage partners that are arrayed horizontally in networks and to bring multiple stakeholders together for a common end in a situation of interdependence.

This article seeks to fill a void in the literature by reporting our findings concerning the skill set of the successful collaborator using data derived from a 2010–2011 survey of U.S. Senior Executive Service (SES) members. We asked both career and noncareer SES members to respond to a confidential, online survey with open-ended questions about their collaboration experiences. Because SES positions require collaborative leadership qualifications, it is especially valuable to know these leaders’ perceptions of collaboration and the skill set of the successful collaborator.

The Literature

Collaboration as a mechanism to improve federal government performance is well documented. Between 2004 and June 1, 2012,

the U.S. Government Accountability Office published more than 70 reports explicitly evaluating collaborative efforts or calling for increased collaboration among agencies, as well as with other actors. Taken as a group, the reports are immensely valuable in demonstrating the breadth of collaborative efforts and the challenges to success, particularly the need for compatible processes, procedures, budgetary practices, and information systems among agencies with common missions and policy agendas. Few examine, analyze, or concern individual collaborators, however.

One report identifies eight collaborative practices from the study of three efforts (Healthy People 2010, health resource sharing between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense, and wildland fire management) and refers to leadership, trust, and organizational culture as important factors underlying successful collaborations. The report discusses successful trust-building practices at the interorganizational level, such as face-to-face activities, interagency training, and colocating staff that need to work together, but it fails to address how the collaborators themselves achieved success (GAO 2005). A more recent report evaluates professional development activities aimed at improving interagency efforts in the national security arena (involving the Departments of State and Homeland Security, as well as others) and finds many examples of skill-based training in leading interagency collaborations and networks. The report’s purpose, however, is not to evaluate the content of the training, and it does not offer a useful summary of the skills that were developed (GAO 2010).

While it seems self-evident that collaborations are implemented by people, the research literature has also not adequately reflected this fact. For example, early on, Huxham researched organizations’ “collaborative capability” (1993) but emphasized that she was focusing “not on collaboration ... between individuals, but on collaboration ... between organizations” (1996, 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, 341; 2005, 74). In a later work, Huxham, who seemingly had moved a full 180 degrees, explains,

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 and Vangen 2005, 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. For example, she writes about the difficulties that arise in collaborations because of “differences in aims, language, procedures, culture and perceived power” (Huxham 1996, 4), all phenomena created by individuals. Table 1 captures the essence of Huxham’s work that informed our research.

Table 1 Comparison of Findings: The Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator

	Huxham and Vangen (1996, 2005), Huxham (2000), Huxham and Hibbert (2004)	Emerson and Smutko (2011)	McGuire and Silvia (2009, 2010), Silvia and McGuire (2010)	Getha-Taylor (2008)	Williams (2002)	O’Leary, Gerard, and Choi (present study)
P	Individual attributes	Maintains personal integrity and professional ethics		Values other people’s perspectives on shared problems	Respectful	Open-minded
E	Open attitude	Self-reflective		Supports altruistic behavior by example	Honest	Patient
R	Sharing attitude			Does not expect return on investment	Open	Change oriented
S				Demonstrates empathy	Tolerant	Flexible
O				Supports altruistic behavior by example	Approachable	Unselfish
N				Does not expect return on investment	Reliable	Persistent
					Sensitive	Diplomatic
					“And many others”	Honest
						Trustworthy
						Respectful
						Empathetic
						Goal oriented
						Decisive
						Friendly
						Sense of humor
						Humility
O	Strives for good communication between core group and one’s organization	Good communication		Uses boundary-spanning language to find shared meaning	Communicating	Good communication (verbal and written)
R	Legitimizes pain and addresses the isolation that people often feel when trapped in collaborative inertia	Listens		Listens	Listening	Listens
G		Uses Web-based communications and social networking tools		Develops close relationships	Understanding	Works well with people
A					Empathizing	
N						
I						
Z						
A						
T						
I						
O						
N						
	Group process skills	Facilitation	Brainstorming	Seeks win-win solutions	Influences	Facilitation
	Facilitates group processes, engaging as a neutral facilitator if needed	Interest-based negotiation	Creates trust	Understands how to motivate group	Negotiates	Interest-based negotiation
	Balances assertion with facilitation	Understands group dynamics; builds working relationships	Uses incentives to motivate network members	Understands needs for power, affiliation, and achievement	Creates trust	Collaborative problem solving
	Manages the sensitive negotiation process	Participation in teams effectively	Permits the network to set its own pace	Demonstrates enthusiasm in connecting personal effort with larger outcomes	Networks	Skill in group dynamics, culture, handling personalities
	Acts democratically with group in deciding who should be involved		Permits the network members to use their own judgment in solving problems	Adapts own strategies to group		Compromise
	Builds and manages trust		Shares leadership role with other network members	Defers to others’ expertise when appropriate		Mediation
	Manages risk by developing trust		Inspires enthusiasm for a project			
	Compromises		Maintains a closely knit network			
	Uses participative management style					
	Manages power relationships; addresses power imbalances					
	Empowers others					
	Builds mutual understanding					
	Ensures proper democratic process and discussion					
	Engineers “right moments”					
	Conflict management	Manages conflict	Settles conflicts when they occur in the network	Collaborative conflict resolution	Resolving conflict	Conflict management and resolution
				Welcomes conflict for purpose of gaining new perspective		

Table 1 (Continued)

	Huxham and Vangen (1996, 2005), Huxham (2000), Huxham and Hibbert (2004)	Emerson and Smutko (2011)	McGuire and Silvia (2009, 2010), Silvia and McGuire (2010)	Getha-Taylor (2008)	Williams (2002)	O’Leary, Gerard, and Choi (present study)
Strategic leadership	<p>Designs collaborations</p> <p>Continual focus on actively managing the collaboration</p> <p>Manages aims/goals: explicit, unstated, and hidden</p> <p>Manages agenda</p> <p>Understands the complexity</p> <p>Nurtures the collaboration</p> <p>Manages stakeholders</p> <p>Represents and mobilizes member organizations</p> <p>Enthuses and empowers those who can deliver collaboration aims</p> <p>Manages politics</p> <p>Concerned with accountability</p>	<p>Plans, organizes, and manages for collaboration</p> <p>Analyzes situation and issues</p> <p>Understands political, legal and regulatory context</p> <p>Analyzes decision for negotiation and agreement seeking</p> <p>Collaborative leadership style</p> <p>Political and entrepreneurial skills</p>	<p>Establishes a shared vision</p> <p>Establishes agreement on the nature of the tasks</p> <p>Identifies stakeholders</p> <p>Identifies resources</p> <p>Encourages support from superiors</p> <p>Encourages support from outside stakeholders</p> <p>Keeps the network in good standing</p> <p>Influences the network’s values and norms</p>	<p>Creates lines of sight</p> <p>Identifies outcomes that benefit all involved partners</p> <p>Identifies opportunities for collaboration that connect organizational goals with public service goals</p> <p>Connects collaborative effort with noble public sector outcomes</p> <p>Balances needs of own organization with needs of others</p> <p>Inclusive achievement perspective (“We did this”)</p> <p>Reluctant to take credit for collaborative outcome</p>	<p>Manages complexity and interdependencies</p> <p>Manages roles, accountabilities, and motivations”</p>	<p>Big picture thinking</p> <p>Strategic thinking</p> <p>Facilitative leadership</p> <p>Creative thinking</p>
Sharing	<p>Democracy/equality</p> <p>Shares credit</p>	<p>Enacts/enforces fairness, transparency, inclusiveness</p>	<p>Treats all network members as equals</p> <p>Freely shares information</p> <p>Looks out for the welfare of network members</p>	<p>Treats others as equals regardless of rank</p> <p>Shares resources</p>		<p>Sharing of leadership, power, goals, credit</p>
Technical/substantive knowledge	<p>Designs structures appropriate for the collaboration</p> <p>Changes structure if needed</p> <p>Monitors performance and evolution of collaborative entity</p>	<p>Evaluates outcomes and impacts</p> <p>Sets group goals and indicators of success</p> <p>Assesses and adapts ongoing process</p> <p>Assesses information requirements</p> <p>Develops methods and standards for data collection</p> <p>Uses computer-based decision support and spatial analysis tools</p>	<p>Coordinates the work of the network</p> <p>Selects performance measures</p> <p>Establishes member commitment to the network’s mission</p> <p>Makes sure individual roles are understood by the network members</p> <p>Decides how tasks will be performed</p> <p>Lets network members know what is expected of them</p> <p>Asks that network members follow standard rules and regulations</p> <p>Keeps work moving at a rapid pace</p> <p>Assigns network members to particular tasks</p> <p>Puts suggestions made by the network into operation</p> <p>Schedules the work to be done</p> <p>Publicizes the network’s goals and accomplishments</p> <p>Takes charge when emergencies arise</p> <p>Changes the network’s structure</p>			<p>Technical expertise</p> <p>Project management skills</p> <p>Time management</p>

Emerson and Smutco (2011) distill collaborative competencies from nine different published sources, including U.S. government position descriptions, government documents, practices recommended by the International City/County Management Association, blue ribbon committees, and interviews. These competencies are also informed by the authors' extensive experience as facilitators and mediators of public disputes. Important for our study is the authors' use of terms. They refer to "competencies" as a broader term for mastery of associated knowledge, behaviors, and skills. "Skill sets" in their article refer to a combination of skills, techniques, tools, and information that constitute a given competency. Based on their analysis, Emerson and Smutco present a framework of five collaborative competencies encompassing 10 specific skill sets that together constitute what the authors call "collaborative competence." The five collaborative competencies along with their skill sets are (1) leadership and management competency (includes the skill sets "strengthening collaborative leadership" and "planning, organization and managing for collaboration"); (2) process competency (includes the skill sets "communicating effectively," "working in teams and facilitating groups," and "negotiating agreement and managing conflict"); (3) analytical competency (includes the skill sets "applying analytical skills and strategic thinking" and "evaluation and adapting processes"); (4) knowledge management competency (includes the skill sets "integrating technical and scientific information" and "using information and communication technology"); and (5) professional accountability competency (includes "maintaining personal integrity and professional ethics").

McGuire and Silvia (2009, 2010) and Silvia and McGuire (2010) surveyed 417 county emergency managers across the United States. The managers were asked to compare the frequency of various leadership behaviors exhibited in their government agency with the frequency that they exhibit those same behaviors in their collaborative network. The behaviors are divided into three categories: people oriented (e.g., treating all network members as equals), task oriented (e.g., coordinating the work of the network), and organization oriented (e.g., identifying resources). Among their most important findings is that leaders in collaborative networks focus more on people-oriented behaviors and less on task-oriented behaviors when compared with traditional management or leadership. Table 1 shows the skill set analyzed by McGuire and Silvia that informed our research.

Getha-Taylor (2008) reports the results of her study of collaborative competencies among public sector leaders in the United States. She finds a mismatch between what human resource managers believe collaborative competencies to be and what exemplary collaborators demonstrate. The competencies of effective public sector collaborators found by Getha-Taylor (reported in table 1) include the following: values other people's perspectives on shared problems; demonstrates empathy, supports altruistic behavior by example; does not expect a return on investment; treats others as equals regardless of rank; shares resources; uses boundary-spanning language to find shared meaning; listens; develops close relationships; seeks win-win solutions; understands how to motivate the group; understands needs for power, affiliation, and achievement; demonstrates enthusiasm in connecting

personal effort with larger outcomes; adapts his or her own strategies to what the group needs; defers to others' expertise when appropriate; uses collaborative conflict resolution; welcomes conflict for purpose of gaining new perspective; creates lines of sight; identifies outcomes that benefit all involved partners; identifies opportunities for collaboration that connect organizational goals with public service goals; connects collaborative effort with noble public sector outcomes; balances needs of his or her own organization with needs of others; has an inclusive achievement perspective ("we did this"); and is reluctant to take credit for collaborative outcomes.

Williams attempts to "build a framework of competency-based variables and factors that influence collaborative engagement, behavior and management" (2002, 121). Using a combination of surveys and in-depth interviews, Williams finds that the important skill set of the effective collaborator includes communicating, listening, understanding, and empathizing; influencing, negotiating, creating trust, and networking; resolving conflict; and managing complexity and interdependencies, as well as managing roles, accountabilities, and motivations. Most importantly for our study, Williams discusses the importance of personality traits, mentioning the specific traits of being respectful, honest, open, tolerant, approachable, reliable, and sensitive. Williams drops the ball, however, by adding "and many others" (referring to traits), leaving the reader hanging with the comment that "the 'best' boundary spanners are considered to be those with an easy and inviting personality, particularly those who are able to divest themselves of their organizational and professional baggage" (116).

Morse (2008), in a comprehensive literature review concerning collaborative leadership competencies, argues that certain key attributes, skills, and behaviors are all important. The needed attributes of a successful collaborator are a collaborative mind-set (Linden 2002), a passion for outcomes, systems thinking, openness and risk taking, a sense of mutuality and connectedness, and humility. The skills needed to be a successful collaborator, according to Morse, are self-management, strategic thinking, and facilitation abilities. Desired behaviors are identifying stakeholders, assessing stakeholders, framing strategic issues, convening working groups, facilitating mutual learning processes, inducing commitment, and facilitating trusting relationships among partners.

Research Question

Our primary research question was, what do SES executives perceive as the skill set of the collaborative manager? Based on the

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literature on collaboration and networks, and given the fact that SES members are standard-setting senior executives who often have significant decision authority as well as deep knowledge, extensive experience, and long tenure in national governance issues, we thought that we would find two things. First and foremost, we thought that these executives would tell us that the most important skills of the collaborative

manager are thinking and acting strategically. Second, based on our own work facilitating collaborative groups, as well as the limited literature, we thought that the most important skills, after strategy, would be facilitation, collaborative problem solving, and conflict management.

Data and Method

As key leaders in federal government, SES members are the link between presidential appointees and the rest of federal workforce and serve in important roles in national policy-making and government activities. In their selection, the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) identified by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) are required for their entry. These are leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and learning coalitions. Of the five qualifications, the ECQ that best captures our definition of collaborative leadership is “building coalitions,” described by the OPM on its Web site as “the ability to build coalitions internally and with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, nonprofit and private sector organizations, foreign governments, or international organizations to achieve common goals.” The competencies that the OPM requires to be successful at coalition building are partnering, political savvy, and influence/negotiating.

As of 2011, there were 7,893 SES members (Carey 2011). We asked both career and noncareer SES members to respond to a confidential, online survey with open-ended questions about their collaboration experiences. The e-mail addresses of our survey sample were obtained from the *Leadership Library on the Internet*, an electronic source of contact information for all federal agencies (<http://www.leadershipdirectories.com>), and three Freedom of Information Act requests. In total, 6,296 e-mail addresses were collected, but 251 e-mails bounced back. Although our sample was not randomly selected, it covered a considerable number of total SES members (more than 87 percent). We received a total of 305 usable responses from 71 federal agencies and obtained a 5.05 percent response rate (see appendix for a list of agencies).

We were disappointed with our low response rate, as it can yield sampling bias (Lee, Benoit-Bryan, and Johnson 2012). We cannot, and we do not, claim that these results are generalizable. At most, a study like this may generate hypotheses and ideas for future research. A more definitive study could be created in the future by increasing the response rate. This could be done by obtaining the assistance of the OPM, by shortening the survey, and by providing incentives for participation. Even better would be a random sample of face-to-face individual personal interviews with members of the Senior Executive Service to better judge their use of collaboration as a management strategy and to ask them why they made specific choices to collaborate or not. Case studies that drill down into the dynamics of major collaborations also would be helpful (see, e.g., Goldsmith and Kettl 2009).

Yet when we started reading, coding, and analyzing the 305 responses, we realized that, with one exception, we had attracted the “believers” in collaboration. We concluded that these data are from “believers” because, in total, they wrote more than 500 single-spaced typed pages of comments and insights about collaboration. Given their busy schedules, there were incentives to simply delete our request for information. They did not, and in fact went in the opposite direction, offering example after example about how they used collaboration as a management strategy. This left us with a treasure trove packed full of insights about collaboration from executives at the highest level of the U.S. government who wrote about their experiences as collaborators. We found tremendous value in learning

about the skill set of the successful collaborator from those who do it all the time and wrote about it for us in great detail, in their own words. In addition, 12 respondents agreed to be interviewed. This resulted in 25 hours of taped, coded interviews, which also yielded a greater depth of understanding.

Open-ended survey data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software package (<http://www.atlasti.com/>). Codes were generated based on inductive readings of the responses as well as a priori research questions. The final codebook contains 249 codes nested in 44 code families that hold the schema. In order to facilitate quality control, the coders participated in the development of the codebook and in intensive intercoder alignment activities over a three-month period prior to actual coding. A weekly iterative and cumulative discussion of possible codes was the main technique for coping with any coding disagreements, as well as operationalizing and defining constructs for the codebook. With qualitative coding in ATLAS.ti., each coder uniquely delimits the unit of meaning for each quotation in each text, and so traditional methods of calculating intercoder agreement are inappropriate. In terms of intersubjective coding agreement, members of the research team agreed 80 percent of the time, on average, about which codes to apply to given responses and close to 95 percent on which codes not to apply. The coding software generated two data sets, the (qualitative) master hermeneutic unit and the (quantitative) frequency count data set. With ATLAS.ti, the hermeneutic unit is an “idea container” that is meant to enclose qualitative data, all findings, codes, memos, and structures under a single name.

Table 2 Demographics of Survey Respondents

Category	Count	%	Total
Age			305
22–35	5	2%	
36–45	32	10%	
46–55	116	38%	
56–65	130	43%	
65+	22	7%	100%
Gender			
Female	111	36%	
Male	194	64%	100%
Education			
Not college graduate	7	2%	
College graduate	60	20%	
Advanced degree	238	78%	100%
Location			
D.C.	211	69%	
Not D.C.	94	31%	100%
Organizational tenure (years)			
0–1	41	13%	
2–3	37	12%	
4–5	18	6%	
6–7	12	4%	
8–9	17	6%	
10+	180	59%	100%
Position tenure (years)			
0–1	87	29%	
2–3	110	36%	
4–5	44	14%	
6–7	23	8%	
8–9	13	5%	
10+	28	9%	100%
Type			
Career SES	274	90%	
Noncareer SES	26	9%	
Nonresponse	5	2%	100%

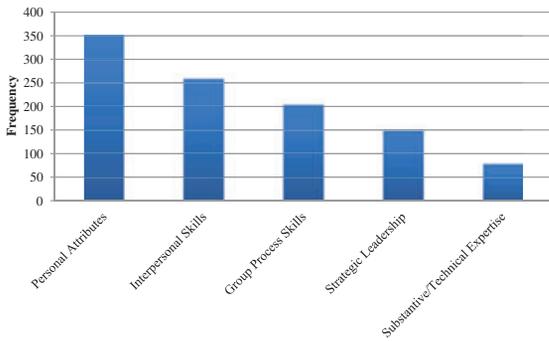


Figure 1 What Is the Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator? Overall Results

The frequency count data set was merged with the demographic and rating scales of the quantitative data gathered with the survey instrument.

Survey Respondent Demographics

The demographic breakdown of the survey respondents is provided in table 2. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 46 and 65 (81 percent total, with 38 percent ages 46 to 55 and 43 percent ages 56 to 65). Significantly fewer respondents were age 35 or under (2 percent), between 36 and 45 (10 percent), and over 65 (7 percent). In all, 64 percent of the respondents were male.

For the education level of the respondents, the largest proportion had an advanced degree (78 percent), while fewer had only a college degree (20 percent), and only 2 percent had not completed college. Most of the respondents were located in Washington, D.C. (69 percent), and the vast majority had career status in the Senior Executive Service (90 percent).

More than half of the respondents had worked in their current organization for 10 years or more (59 percent). A quarter of the respondents had worked for three years or less in their current organization (25 percent total, combining 13 percent with up to one year and 12 percent with two to three years). A smaller

percentage had worked for four to seven years (10 percent) or eight to nine years (6 percent) in the organization where they were then employed.

On average, the respondents had spent fewer years working in their current position relative to the time spent in their current organization. The highest percentage had worked for two to three years in their current position (36 percent), and a fair number had held their current position for a year or less (29 percent). A smaller number of respondents had held their current positions for four to five years (14 percent), six to seven years (8 percent), eight to nine years (4 percent), or more than 10 years (9 percent).

Findings

Our original task seemed simple: to learn from U.S. Senior Executive Service members what they view as the skill set of the successful collaborator. Our respondents surprised us: the most frequently mentioned answers to this question dealt with individual attributes and interpersonal skills, followed by group process skills, strategic leadership skills, and substantive/technical expertise (in that order). Figure 1 shows the frequency counts for each category.

Individual Attributes

As reflected in our literature review, researchers have discussed collaborative competencies, including specific skills for collaborators, but the individual attributes that leaders possess have not been emphasized. By individual attributes, we mean individual characteristics. Like Morse, we use the term “attribute” rather than the word “trait” “because trait connotes a fixed characteristic; something that is inborn and not subject to change.... A personal attribute is a characteristic quality, but not necessarily one that is hardwired or fixed” (2008, 85).

Our SES respondents saw collaborators as having distinctive individual attributes, mentioned 352 times (see figure 2). They insisted that the primary skill of the successful collaborator is an open mind (mentioned 82 times), which they defined as being open to new ideas, to the ideas of others, to change, and to helping others succeed. Patience was frequently mentioned as an important attribute (46 times). One executive called it “the patience of a saint.” The successful

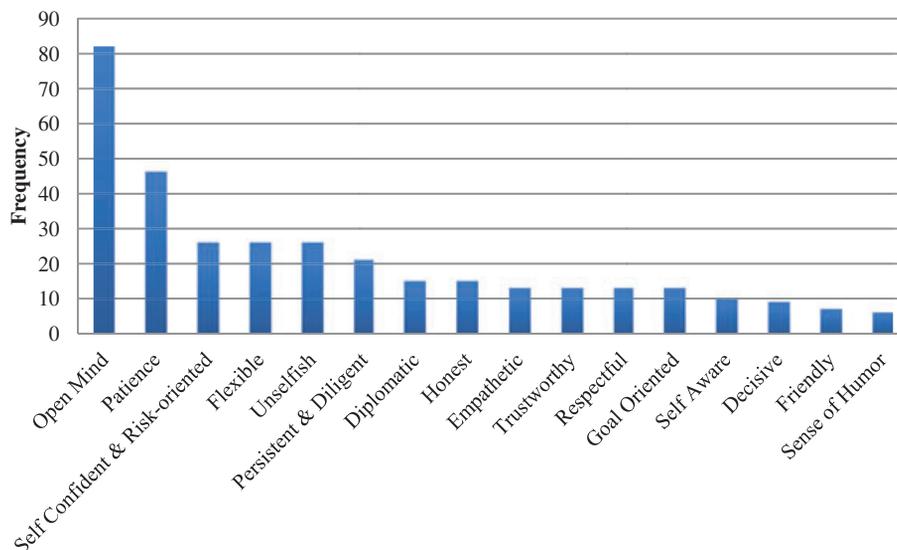
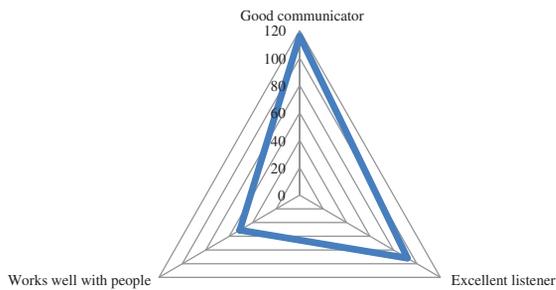


Figure 2 Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: #1 = Individual Attributes



Note: Each spoke of this spider chart represents one variable. The length of a spoke is proportional to the magnitude of the variable for the data point relative to the maximum magnitude of the variable across all data points in this category.

Figure 3 Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: #2 = Interpersonal Skills

collaborator was seen as self-confident and risk-oriented (32 times). Other attributes identified were flexible (26 times), unselfish (26 times), persistent and diligent (21 times), diplomatic or tactful (15 times), empathetic (13 times), trustworthy and trusting (13 times), respectful (13 times), and goal oriented (13 times). Respondents pointed to the collaborator as needing to demonstrate honesty and integrity (15 times), self-awareness or emotional intelligence (10 times), decisiveness (9 times), friendliness (7 times), and a sense of humor (6 times). Humility also was mentioned as important.

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills were offered by our SES respondents as an answer to the question, “what is the skill set of the successful collaborator?” (mentioned 258 times). By interpersonal skills, we mean “broadly applied learned characteristics” used by a person to appropriately interact with others (Van Wart 2005, 92). See figure 3. SES respondents indicated that a collaborator must be a good communicator (116 times), an excellent listener (92 times), and adept at working with people through interpersonal communication or “people

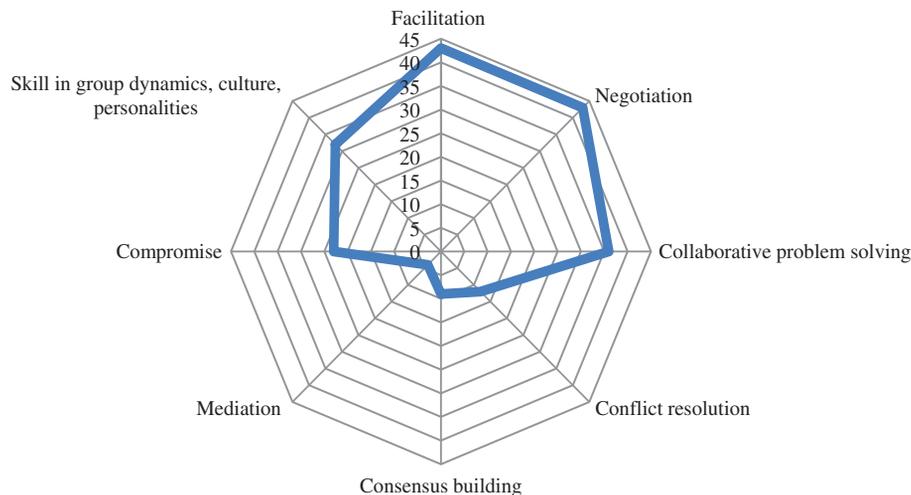
skills” (50 times). As one of our respondents put it, “The successful collaborator is open to listening to other points of views and has the ability to see how they may improve the policy/initiative.”

Group Process Skills

The need for group process skills was mentioned next as important for the successful collaborator. By group process skills, we mean “broadly applied learned characteristics” used by a person to appropriately interact with others in groups (Van Wart 2005, 92). See figure 4. These include facilitation (cited 43 times); negotiation (44 times), interest-based or collaborative problem solving (36 times); skill in group dynamics; organization culture, and dealing with personalities (32 times); compromise (23 times); conflict resolution, including deescalation (12 times); consensus building (9 times); and mediation (4 times).

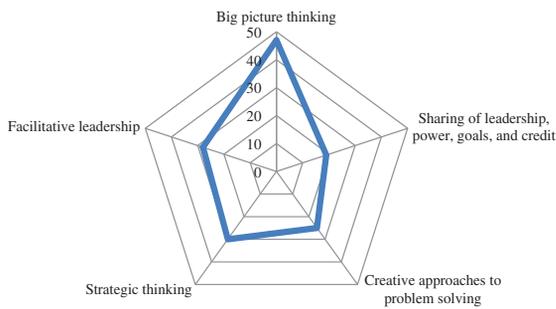
As a group process skill, the topic of conflict management in collaboration was approached by various questions in our survey. About two-thirds of respondents (193 out of 304) responded that collaboration yields conflict. When asked how they manage conflict within collaborations, the government executives and managers surveyed responded with a range of methods. The conflict management strategy mentioned most frequently was “allowing conflict to happen,” which was mentioned 37 times. The use of conflict management processes such as interest-based problem solving, mediation, and negotiation were mentioned 63 times within the 277 responses to this question. Other less commonly cited methods included compromise (18 times), breaking down the conflict into smaller issues (11 times), neutralizing opinions by diffusing and depersonalizing the conflict (12 times), and avoidance (7 times).

The most common facilitation strategies for managing conflict included identifying common ground, which was mentioned 42 times; giving all parties at the table a voice, which was mentioned 32 times; and, in turn, listening, which was mentioned 27 times. Another common strategy among respondents concerned the clarification of the rules, frameworks, goals, and problems faced by



Note: Each spoke of this spider chart represents one variable. The length of a spoke is proportional to the magnitude of the variable for the data point relative to the maximum magnitude of the variable across all data points in this category.

Figure 4 Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: # 3 = Group Process Skills



Note: Each spoke of this spider chart represents one variable. The length of a spoke is proportional to the magnitude of the variable for the data point relative to the maximum magnitude of the variable across all data points in this category.

Figure 5 Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: # 4 = Strategic Leadership

the collaborative group; this included establishing ground rules (11 times), framing agreements (7 times), clarifying goals (15 times), identifying the core of the problem (12 times), reframing the issues (7 times), and focusing on outcomes (18 times). Other less commonly cited methods included consensus building (15 times) and relationship building (5 times).

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership has been defined as “a person’s ability to create a vision” (Ireland and Hitt 1999, 43), currently championed by many who study networks and collaboration (e.g., Milward and Provan 2006). Respondents described the successful collaborator as a skilled visionary who has the ability to see the big picture (47 times) and who thinks strategically (30 times), developing goals, structures,

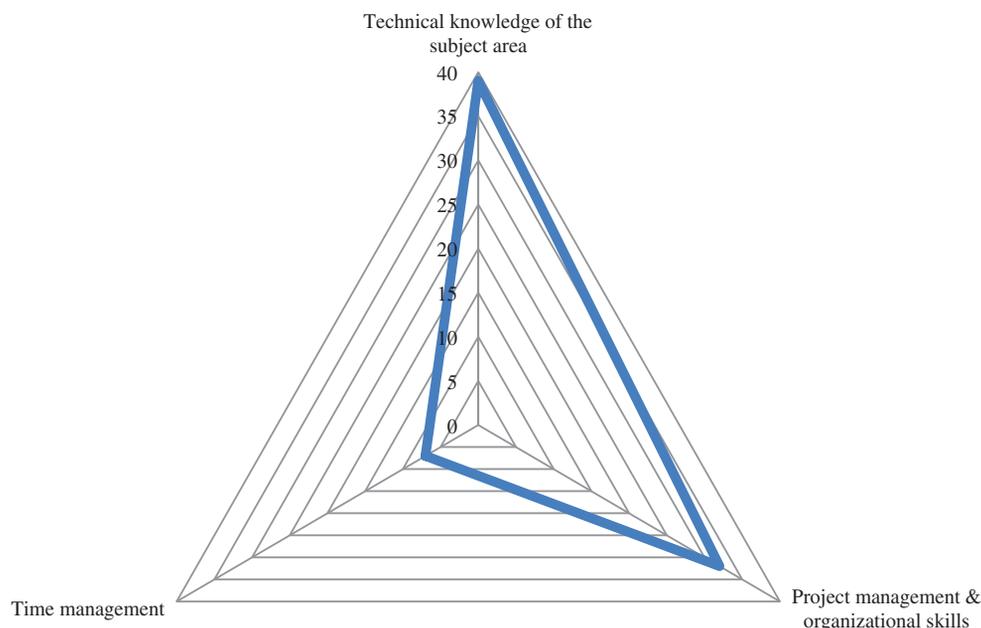
inputs, and actions to achieve them. The collaborative manager exercises facilitative leadership (28 times) and uses creative approaches to problem solving (25 times). Less frequently mentioned but equally interesting was the ability to share. Respondents mentioned the sharing of leadership, power, goals, and credit as central to collaboration (19 times). See figure 5.

Substantive/Technical Knowledge

Substantive/technical knowledge was mentioned fifth by SES respondents as important to successful collaborators. By substantive/technical knowledge, we mean an understanding of the subject matter that is at the core of a collaboration. For example, for a navy official collaborating with a government that runs a seaport, knowledge of how nuclear submarines work may be important. Respondents identified expert technical knowledge of the subject area (39 times), project management and organizational skills (32 times), and time management (7 times) as important skills for achieving the goals of the collaboration (see figure 6).

Discussion

The reasons why organizations and the people who represent them collaborate are numerous. For most, it is an attempt to create a product, service, or outcome that one organization alone could not produce. For our SES respondents, while their collaborations were often mandated, the overall reason to collaborate was very concrete: to increase performance. Our executives reported this in very hard-nosed management terms: they were looking for a way to implement a program in a superior way, to enhance a project in ways that it could not be enhanced if there were no collaborative efforts, to increase economic benefits to the government, and to better serve the public. They collaborate primarily when their personal and organizational cost–benefit analyses indicate that it will be a savvy management decision to do so.



Note: Each spoke of this spider chart represents one variable. The length of a spoke is proportional to the magnitude of the variable for the data point relative to the maximum magnitude of the variable across all data points in this category.

Figure 6 Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: # 5 = Substantive/Technical Knowledge

Given this rationale, one might hypothesize that strategy, visioning, and technical skills such as cost–benefit analysis might be those most highly prized by SES collaborators. Instead, strategic leadership skills as a group were ranked fourth overall by our respondents, and substantive/technical knowledge—although deemed important—came in fifth.

The extent to which individual attributes were ranked first in the skill set of successful collaborator is significant. While others have found that individual attributes are somewhat important (e.g., Getha-Taylor 2008; Huxham 2000; Huxham and Hibbert 2004; Huxham and Vangen 1996, 2005; McGuire and Silvia 2009, 2010; Morse 2008; Silvia and McGuire 2010; Williams 2002), we believe that it has never been to the extent reported by our SES respondents.

The discussion of individual attributes has a long and complicated history in the management and leadership literature. How do the specific attributes mentioned by our SES respondents as important for the skilled collaborator fit in this discussion? The most frequently mentioned attributes, in the order in which they were most mentioned, were open-minded, patient, change oriented, flexible, unselfish, persistent, diplomatic, honest, trustworthy, respectful, empathetic, goal oriented, decisive, friendly, and sense of humor. Comparing these to the top five listed by leadership scholar Northouse (2001), there is overlap in three areas: determination (persistent), integrity (honest, trustworthy), and sociability (friendly, sense of humor). Similarly, there is some overlap with leadership scholars Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) in two areas: drive (persistent) and honesty/integrity (honest). Open-minded was among the most frequently mentioned attribute identified by the SES respondents; this is somewhat similar to the personality trait “openness to experience.”

Delving deeper into the answers of the SES respondents’ yields more evidence about the skill set of the successful collaborator. One federal executive put it this way:

A successful collaborator has to be concerned not only with his or her own interests, but the interests of others. They must recognize the benefits of synergy and the great ideas it produces. That means recognizing that no one individual has all the best ideas. Collaboration with others results in ultimately identifying the best ideas and solutions. In addition, respect is a foundational quality. When you respect someone enough to involve them and seek out their opinions, you help create mutual respect between the parties. The resulting collaboration builds an atmosphere of support, mutual goal setting, and shared accomplishments.

Another federal executive offered this insight:

A successful collaborator must have a genuinely open mind and maintain a willingness to be persuaded. The least successful (or at least the most frustrating) collaborators are just the opposite—they enter the relationship with the idea that it is a competition and getting their way is paramount to their own success.

It makes sense, then, that interpersonal skills were the second most frequently mentioned skill set of the successful collaborator. These included good communication, which was mentioned more frequently than any other skill, listening, and the ability to work with people. These results are highly consistent with previous studies (Emerson and Smutco 2011; Getha-Taylor 2008; Huxham 1996, 2000; Huxham and Hibbert 2004; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Williams 2002). Tied with this were group process skills, mentioned third in importance in

The extent to which individual attributes were ranked first in the skill set of successful collaborator is significant.

Table 3 Themes and Quotes from Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator

Theme	Example quote
Individual attributes	
Open Minded	the willingness to accommodate other opinions openness to change respect for opposing views to the point you seek them out
Patient	patience with stupid people some efforts take a long time to become a reality
Risk taking/change oriented	look beyond the obvious and explore new opportunities
Unselfish	“self-confident” “low ego” “service motivated and selfless” “not needing to receive all the credit (unselfish)” “team player”
Persistence	“an almost manic persistence” “tenacity—follow-up, pick yourself up, learn as you proceed, and do not give up on the mission”
Emotional intelligence	“someone who constantly questions themselves- how can I be better” “self-awareness/emotional intelligence”
Respect	“In addition, respect is a foundational quality. When you respect someone enough to involve them and seek out their opinion, you help create mutual respect between the parties”
Interpersonal skills	
Communication skills	Communicate, communicate, communicate A successful collaborator needs to be able to articulate the issues Good communication—verbal and written
Listening	Listen, listen, listen, and if you didn’t hear that, listen Active listening, restating, and clarifying expectations Primary skill is the willingness and ability to listen to others, identifying their objectives for the collaboration, and integrate across multiple objectives to understand what type of approaches will work
Works well with people	an ability to work with a number of people and communicate with them effectively the ability to separate oneself from the task and be able to accept criticism without making it personal or internalized (a thick skin!)
Group process skills	
Facilitation	Real issue for collaborative effort is the availability of dedicated staff to keep things moving and continuing interest of leadership to support the partnership.
Negotiation	Negotiation skills are essential for a successful collaborator.
Collaborative problem-solving	Willingness/ability to work toward solutions and to find the commonalities of positions
Skill in group dynamics	Recognizing that there is no “I” in the team Knowledge of group dynamics and political culture
Compromise	A willingness to compromise in finding a solution
Conflict resolution	Good conflict resolution skills (of course, the best collaborator knows how to proceed so that insurmountable conflicts don’t arise
Consensus building	Bringing everyone to common ground

the skill set of 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. These results are consistent with Emerson and Smutco (2011), Getha-Taylor (2008), Huxham (1996, 2000), Huxham and Hibbert (2004), Huxham and Vangen (2005), McGuire and Silvia (2009, 2010), Silvia and McGuire (2010), and Williams (2002). Table 3 presents the themes and quotes concerning interpersonal skills and group process skills.

Closely tied with group process skills and interpersonal skills are conflict management processes. After “allowing conflict to happen,” interest-based problem solving, mediation, and negotiation were mentioned again as highly used to manage conflict, followed by facilitation strategies. “Finding common ground,” another way of expressing collaborative problem-solving and interest-based negotiation, was highly emphasized, followed by giving all parties at the table a voice and, in turn, listening.

The common thread here is the emphasis once again on people and people skills. This trend continued in answers to other questions. For example, in another survey question, SES executives were asked, “What are the challenges to collaboration?” The most commonly mentioned challenge to collaboration was relational challenges, which included seven subthemes that were all about people. Among them, turf wars/power struggles were most commonly mentioned by respondents (86 times). Respondents also cited group characteristics, such as personalities or whether the right people were at the table (64 times). Other responses reported were challenges in reaching consensus and achieving buy-in (40 times), communication challenges (34 times), and lack of mutual trust (23 times).

The thread about people challenges in collaboration arose in one other answer to our survey. SES executives were asked, “What are the catalysts for collaboration?” With respect to this question, the responses fell into six major themes, with people issues again coming in first. The most mentioned response, relational catalysts, included 11 subthemes. Among them, leadership—including strong, senior, or new leadership—was the most commonly mentioned by respondents (54 times). Respondents also cited a common or shared view of the mission as important (mentioned 47 times). Other responses reported were the attitude of participants (30 times), willingness to collaborate (23 times), and success (21 times). Having a champion or advocate was mentioned 17 times, personal relationships were mentioned 16 times, and communication was mentioned 15 times. Trust among collaborators and previous successful collaborations involving the same people both were mentioned 11 times each.

This study provides empirical substantiation of the previous literature, with one major difference: the strong reporting of the importance of individual attributes by our SES respondents, much more than has been reported previously by other scholars in the field. It is not that strategic leadership skills and technical skills are not important. They

do matter, but they are not the most important factors prompting successful collaborations in the environment in which federal executives collaborate.

A possible alternative explanation for the low ranking of strategy and visioning is that many federal executives are agents of political principals and representatives of democratically accountable officials. For the most part, strategy and vision are parts of the role of principals. The discovery that career senior executives are not strategizers or visionaries may be good news: they see their jobs as implementers of public policy. Tied in with this, another alternative explanation is that within the federal government, many collaborations involve complex management or operational issues, not policy-level determinations.

Contrasting with these ideas is a possible explanation for the low ranking of technical skills and substantive knowledge. Federal executives swim in the water of politics (see e.g., Kettl 2011; Fenwick and Macmillan 2005; Radin 2002; Rhodes 1997; Hecl 1978; Seidman 1980). Their job is to be political actors, and they have staff on whom they rely for technical skills and substantive knowledge. The personal attributes they discussed in their responses, their interpersonal skills, and their group process skills are useful in working in a highly politicized environment.

Another possible explanation comes from Daniel Goleman, who found that IQ and technical skills are “threshold capabilities” to effective leadership (2004, 2), but emotional intelligence—comprising self-awareness (self-confidence, realistic self-assessment, self-deprecating sense of humor), self-regulation (trustworthiness and integrity, comfort with ambiguity, openness to change), motivation (strong drive to achieve, optimism even in the face of failure, organizational commitment), empathy (expertise in building and retaining talent, cross-cultural sensitivity, service to clients and customers), and social skill (effectiveness in leading change, persuasiveness, expertise in building and leading teams)—is the sine qua non of leadership.

The agreement of our SES respondents with Goleman’s emotional intelligence model is striking: persistence, change oriented (motivation), open-minded and honest (self-regulation), humor (self-awareness), and friendly, unselfish (empathy). Our findings are different from Goleman’s in that we conclude that strategic leadership (including visioning) and technical skills are not threshold capabilities to successful collaborations, but rather important—but secondary—variables affecting the success of a collaboration. More important, according to our SES respondents, are individual attributes, interpersonal skills, and group process skills.

Our analysis suggests that our SES respondents are sophisticated situational leaders and managers who have learned which attributes to use in particular situations in order for a collaboration to succeed.

Conclusion

H. George Frederickson’s 1999 article “The Repositioning of American Public Administration” is one of the most influential articles in the field of public administration. In that article, he wrote that the fragmented state is the most important characteristic of contemporary public administration. He proposed three theoretical

perspectives—institutionalism, network theory, and governance theory—to understand how public administration is responding to its changing landscape. In 2012, Frederickson further argued that “public administration, prompted by the fragmentation of the state, is steadily moving ... towards theories of cooperation, networking, and institution building and maintenance” (235) and emphasized that “the role of civil servants in maintaining them remained more or less untouched” (219). Our study follows Frederickson’s emphasis on the importance of individual public managers.

Our analysis used data from a survey of federal executive collaborators to examine the question, “what is the skill set of the successful collaborator?” Our 314 respondents provided a comprehensive list of skills and, more importantly, described the attributes and mind-set of the collaborative leader. We argue that people, process, and communication skills are not enough. In addition, successful collaboration requires an individual with an intricate set of relational attributes. Our analysis suggests that our SES respondents are sophisticated situational leaders and managers who have learned which attributes to use in particular situations in order for a collaboration to succeed. According to our federal executives, who work in a highly politicized environment, individuals are the strongest factor in whether a collaboration is catalyzed or hindered, supporting Frederickson’s 2007 statement.

Our findings are important for several reasons: First, we revisit Salamon’s observation (2002) that collaborative governance shifts the emphasis from management skills and the control of large bureaucratic organizations to enablement skills—the skills required to engage partners arrayed horizontally in networks and to bring multiple stakeholders together for a common end in a situation of interdependence. Our findings concerning personal attributes, interpersonal skills, and group process skills are important because those are the skills that our SES respondents said enable public servants to do what Salamon wrote about.

Second, as Frederickson said, while organizations collaborate, it is always in the form of human beings. In other words, a collaboration is only as good as the people at the table. We have presented research on the people at the table and the skills they use to collaborate effectively, which may inform future collaborators’ decisions. Like the recent survey of Google employees (Bryant 2011), our SES respondents reported that while technical skills and substantive knowledge are important, the most highly desirable skills for successful collaboration are people skills and process skills, as well as particular personal attributes.

Finally, we return to the fact that the vast majority of the current public management literature on collaboration focuses on organizations and networks, not on the individuals who collaborate or the role of their collaborative skills in the success of a collaboration. This article is one step toward filling that void in the literature and points to the need for future research that contributes to our understanding by examining collaboration through the lenses of both leadership theories and attribute theories. Tied in with this, more research is needed on the important factor that our federal executives ranked highest as a catalyst to collaboration, and highest as a challenge to collaboration: human relationships.

Appendix List of SES Respondents’ Organizations

Administration on Aging
 Border Control
 Bureau of Indian Affairs
 Bureau of Land Management
 Census Bureau
 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
 Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
 Consumer Product Safety Commission
 Department of Agriculture (includes U.S. Forest Service)
 Department of Commerce
 Department of Defense
 Department of Education
 Department of Energy
 Department of Health and Human Services
 Department of Homeland Security
 Department of Housing and Urban Development
 Department of Justice
 Department of Labor
 Department of State
 Department of the Interior
 Department of the Treasury (includes FinCEN; Bureau of Public Debt, Office of Financing)
 Department of Transportation
 Department of Veterans Affairs
 Drug Enforcement Administration
 Economic Development Administration
 Energy Information Administration
 Environmental Protection Agency
 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (includes U.S. International Trade Commission)
 Federal Accounting Standards Advisory Board
 Federal Emergency Management Agency
 Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
 Federal Highway Administration
 Federal Labor Relations Authority
 Federal Trade Commission
 General Services Administration
 Government Accountability Office
 Health Resources and Services Administration
 Immigration and Customs Enforcement
 Interagency Council on Homelessness
 Internal Revenue Service
 Medical Center or Hospital
 Military (includes Naval Air Systems Command, SAF/GCQ)
 National Aeronautic and Space Administration
 National Archives and Records Administration
 National Institute of Health
 National Institute of Standards and Technology
 National Institute on Aging
 National Labor Relations Board
 National Nuclear Security Administration
 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and National Weather Service
 National Science Foundation
 National Telecommunications and Information Administration
 National Transportation Safety Board
 Nuclear Regulatory Commission
 Occupational Safety and Health Administration
 Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication
 Office of Government Commerce
 Office of Inspector General
 Office of Management and Budget
 Office of National Drug Control Policy
 Office of Personnel Management
 Office of Planning and Performance Management
 Office of the Secretary of Defense
 Office of the United States Trade Representative
 Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory
 Selective Service
 Small Business Administration
 Social Security Administration
 Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration
 U.S. Geological Survey
 U.S. Railroad Retirement Board

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