

Collaboration Isn't a Personality Trait.

It's the discipline our mobilisation toolkit is actually built on

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Most stakeholder toolkits assume something. Get the influence diagram right. Get the channel plan agreed. Good working relationships will follow. I don't believe that. Collaboration is not a personality trait. Some stakeholders are not naturally better at it than others. It is a discipline. It has its own research base, failure modes, and design principles. That discipline is what my stakeholder engagement toolkit is actually built on, underneath the canvases participants fill in.

The Discipline Behind the Discipline

Hansen's research on disciplined collaboration makes this clear.¹ Organisations that master it do not just feel better to work in. They outperform rivals that operate in silos. They unlock complementary expertise and avoid costly duplication of effort. Hansen also catalogued why collaboration fails so often in practice. Not-invented-here syndrome, where a function resists ideas because they didn't originate them. Hoarding, where information becomes a source of internal leverage rather than shared value. And two structural problems: first finding who actually holds the relevant knowledge in a large organisation, then successfully moving it once you've found it.

I see every one of these barriers in stakeholder engagement work, usually undiagnosed. A transformation stalls. Not because the plan was wrong, but because the finance function never trusted a model from operations. Or because the one person who understood why a previous initiative failed was never consulted. Read that as a communications problem and it looks like a message failure. Read it as a collaboration problem, and it's exactly what the research predicts.

Trust Is an Engineering Problem, Not a Mood

Lencioni's pyramid of team dysfunction places absence of trust at the base.² Without it, teams avoid conflict. They fail to commit. They dodge accountability. They lose sight of collective results. Each layer compounds the one beneath it.

Edmondson's research goes further, and it's the more useful finding for anyone doing stakeholder work under pressure.³ High-performing teams are not the ones that avoid

¹Hansen, M.T. (2009). Collaboration: How Leaders Avoid the Traps, Build Common Ground, and Reap Big Results. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

²Lencioni, P. (2002). The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

³Edmondson, A.C. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), 350-383.

mistakes. They are the ones with enough psychological safety, “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking,” to surface a mistake early enough to fix it. Google's Project Aristotle later validated this at scale as the single strongest predictor of team effectiveness.⁴

The implication is uncomfortable for anyone trained to treat conflict as a risk to be managed down. Conflict, surfaced early, is data. It tells you where the real disagreement sits before it hardens into quiet disengagement or open political escalation. A stakeholder relationship with no visible friction usually isn't aligned. It just isn't being honest with you yet. I don't treat trust as a soft outcome I hope for. I treat it as something I can design conditions for, deliberately, the same way I'd design any other system.

The Five C's: Commitment, Collegiality, Communication, Consensus, Continuity

Trust and psychological safety are the foundation. The Five C's give me a practical lens for building and auditing collaborative capability on top of that foundation, across a team, a coalition, or a partnership. They give a leader something more useful than “be more collaborative.”

Commitment asks whether everyone involved actually understands what they're being asked to commit to. Not the headline version, the real trade-offs. Commitment secured through ambiguity isn't commitment. It's deferred disagreement.

Collegiality asks whether people treat each other as partners with something to contribute, or as obstacles to route around. That's the difference between a coalition and a group of stakeholders who happen to be in the same meeting.

Communication asks whether information is actually flowing through the channels that matter, formal and informal, or stalling at the same predictable points every time.

Consensus doesn't mean unanimous agreement. That's rarely achievable, or even desirable, in a complex organisation. It means a genuine, tested convergence on direction that holds up under pressure.

Continuity asks whether the collaboration survives a change of personnel, a change of sponsor, or eighteen months passing. This capability decides whether engagement is a project activity or an organisational habit.

Mapped against my toolkit, the Five C's aren't an add-on. They're already doing work inside it. Commitment is what the Engagement Plan Canvas tests before a single message goes out. Collegiality and Communication are what the expectation-setting and message-design work actually train, underneath the templates. Consensus is what the negotiation and conflict sessions are built to produce without flattening real disagreement. Continuity is the entire point of the Culture Mapping Canvas: checking whether engagement is embedded in artefacts, values, and assumptions, or is being performed only as long as the sponsor is watching.

⁴Google re:Work (2016). The five keys to a successful Google team. Available at: <https://rework.withgoogle.com> (Accessed: June 2026).

T-Shaped, Not I-Shaped

Hansen also gives us the clearest description of the kind of contributor who can actually do this work.⁵ T-shaped, not I-shaped. Deep expertise in one domain runs down the vertical stroke of the T. Enough breadth, and genuine curiosity about adjacent domains to collaborate credibly across a boundary runs along the horizontal stroke. An I-shaped specialist optimises their own function and treats everything outside it as someone else's problem. A T-shaped contributor is the person a cross-functional initiative can actually be built around. They can hold their own ground and still make sense of someone else's.

This matters directly for who I built this course for—strategy managers, transformation directors, PMO leaders, functional heads, senior advisors. Each one arrives with genuine, hard-won depth in their own domain. My course and its toolkit aren't built to add more depth. They're built to add the horizontal stroke: the ability to work influence networks, negotiate across competing interests, and hold a stakeholder coalition together without becoming an expert in every function it touches. Not-invented-here syndrome and hoarding are, in the end, failures of T-shape. A retreat into the vertical stroke because the horizontal one feels risky, or slow, or beneath the seniority of the room.

Where the Toolkit Fits

This is why I built the companion toolkit as seven canvases, completed progressively across four days, rather than a single stakeholder map. Each canvas makes a piece of collaborative capability concrete and repeatable. The Engagement Plan Canvas tests for shared value before asking for commitment. The Expectation Management Canvas treats trust as something to maintain actively, not assume. The Message Design Canvas and the Channel & Ecosystem Map get communication actually flowing. The Measurement Dashboard turns consensus into something you can track, not just declare. The Culture Mapping Canvas tests for continuity. The Engagement Architecture Canvas pulls it all into a single artefact participants defend in front of a panel. None of this is collaboration theory presented as a slide. It's collaboration theory built into something a leader can pick up under pressure, on a real Tuesday afternoon, and actually use.

The Thesis, Restated

Stakeholder engagement rarely fails because the map was wrong. It fails because the collaboration underneath it was never designed. Trust was assumed rather than built. Commitment was secured through ambiguity rather than tested. The people doing the work were left I-shaped when the task needed T-shaped. The organisations that engage well have made the Five C's a discipline rather than an accident and have deliberately grown contributors who can hold depth and breadth at once.

If you're wrestling with how to make that capability repeatable inside your own organisation, rather than dependent on a handful of naturally collegial people, I'd welcome the conversation. This is the thinking behind Strategic Stakeholder Engagement for Organisational Transformation, the course I direct with Informa Connect Academy, and its companion toolkit.

⁵https://informaconnect.com/stakeholder-engagement-management-communication/?event_path=stakeholder-engagement-management-communication



For further information regarding Stakeholder Engagement, please contact [Beneficial Consulting](#).

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