

STEP 2: CREATING THE CONDITIONS



OVERVIEW

Safety is an important condition for this kind of work. Safety requires strong foundations, clear purpose and defined boundaries. These things create what we call a container for working together with trust and safety.



DISCUSS

Creating a container for collaboration

Most attempts at working together to create change fail because the foundations were not put in place at the start. One of those foundations is often called a 'container' which just means that it holds the process of collaboration inside clear boundaries and limits. This requires strong foundations, clear purpose and well-defined boundaries. Having understanding of our own power and that of others can be used to create these foundations and this container where people feel safe enough to stay in the heat and not retreat when it gets difficult.

Understanding and developing trust

We do not need trust before we start. Deep Collaboration goes beyond the old approach of agreeing on a plan at the beginning and working towards it. There is no plan when we are creating new ways of thinking and working together.

Often, you will find yourself working with people who do not agree with you or who you have thought of as current or historical enemies. Trust is related to people doing the things we expect them to. When we are creating something new we have to be ready for people to do and say things we do not expect.

The kind of trust we need to build in Deep Collaboration asks that First Nations and other participants are committed to learning and opening themselves up. Trust will grow stronger at times and sometimes be lost (and regained) by staying in conversation and working on the relationship as we go through this process.

Our invisible plans

None of us go into collaboration with no plan. Sometimes we write it down, explain it or just keep it in our mind. All of us have an idea about what will lead to success and what will cause the outcome we want.

This can be unhelpful when we are trying to create new ways of thinking and working. Our unspoken ideas and 'invisible plans' can get in the way of what we need to do. Talk about the invisible plans you bring in with each other. Instead of working from these old plans, we need to open up and create a shared plan with the people we are working with. By creating this together with shared principles, awareness and willingness to try new things, we can open the door to new possibilities.

Being vulnerable

Remember your purpose and be clear and open about it with others. Understand the types of power you have and the times you feel powerless. Every person feels vulnerable in different situations and to acknowledge it is a strength rather than a weakness. When we are together in a shared space trying to create new ways of working, we are all vulnerable and none of us have all the skills or knowledge we need.

This means that when we start to feel vulnerable, we do not need to retreat or withdraw from the shared space. When emotions are strong and the conversations are difficult, we can stay in them and find a way through to the other side. If we are honest about our hopes, fears and vulnerability then we can actually create a new shared purpose for our shared leadership.

The benefits of conflict

In Australia, most of us do not like conflict. Often, we see conflict in workplaces and communities hidden away or dealt with behind closed doors or under the surface. It is rare to openly talk about these disagreements and to question people who have power about the ways they use it.

One of the negative side-effects of this is that conflict can be hotter and harder to deal with when it does erupt into the open. Suppressing it just increases the pressure and increases the power when it explodes.

Conflict is part of being human. It is also necessary to creating something new, which is why we are collaborating in the first place. Productive conflict can be used to facilitate the emergence of new thinking and new relationships. Productive conflict happens when participants stay in relationship with each other rather than retreating back into their comfort zones. Unproductive conflict, what we are often most scared of, moves us *out of relationship*.

Resilience

We often think about resilience as the ability to survive trauma and hardship. The way we think about it in Deep Collaboration is as the ability to develop and change ourselves with inner-strength and our connection to others.

It can be helpful to reflect on what we need for growth, joy, higher purpose and connection. This is a way to build resilience in ourselves. The reality and history that exists in the relationship between First Nations and other Australians is not easy and quite often it can be hard to find hope.

Skills, good intentions and strong motivation do not prevent attack, denial, blame or scapegoating. Exercising leadership can require personal loss. This can be the loss of credibility, status, power, resources and certainty that change brings about. This process will ask you to give up ideas or concepts that may be important to you. It is important to be prepared by knowing how much or what you are willing to give up.

Compassion

This may well be the most important overall skill in Deep Collaboration. We all understand compassion in our personal lives, but many of us have not worked with it in collaboration with others. We need to recognise the ways that the feelings and experiences of others are similar to ours, and to accept them in ourselves. This may mean accepting things that cause us to feel shame or embarrassment.

This approach to compassion, goes beyond empathy or sympathy. Without compassion for both ourselves and others who are attempting this change we can end up losing the qualities of heart that led us to work on change in the first place.

SKILLS

1. Set up the environment

Think about the physical space where you will be working together in Deep Collaboration. This is important to create the container that we need.

Things that can be helpful include: neutral meeting place, comfortable chairs, rules of confidentiality, free from distractions and interruptions, separate from day-to-day work, and a setting that helps people relax and open themselves to discussion.

2. Who's in the room?

Deep Collaboration requires people with different views to work together. Each of the people participating will have different levels of readiness, capacity for collaboration, skills, and sense of urgency around the work. We all should try to understand this as well as possible.

We will never have all the right people in the room at the right time. The group should agree who is and isn't in the group and the group should be closed, at least for a certain period of time. Trust can be lost when different people come in and out of the shared conversation.

3. Agree on shared language

Discuss and agree on how people want to be described and what terms and language are respectful. This process can help build towards trust as it requires every participant to listen and accept the others' preferred way of being seen.

When people begin to use the same words with the same meaning, they communicate more effectively, minimise misunderstandings, and gain the sense of being on the same page, even while grappling with significant differences.

4. Create shared principles around trust

Ask people to reflect on what level of trust they need and what this looks like. It can be helpful to suggest to people to imagine the discussion getting difficult, and talk about what they might need. The goal is to keep people connected and avoid people retreating from the relationship. Discuss this as a group and write a list on a big sheet. Create some shared principles and go back to them when needed.

5. Create shared values and purpose

In a similar way to shared language, we need to find the values and purpose that are shared within the group. This means discussing the reasons people are participating and finding the common ground.

Coming back to shared purpose and values is vital to keeping people in relationship through conflict and at other times things are difficult. Deep Collaboration does not ask people to agree on everything, but to start with the common ground and create something new starting from that point.

6. Separate yourself from your role

In Deep Collaboration we will each have many roles that we play in the collaboration. They can be personal feelings, formal and informal positions and worldviews. It is helpful to see our positions on issues being discussed as a 'role' that we represent as well as our personal view. The role is not just you or I, but part of the collaboration. Becoming more aware of what role we are in, and the role others see us in, makes it easier to manage conflict and progress collaboration, particularly when we feel criticism from others. Whilst difficult, if we can learn to understand criticism **as criticism of a position or a role** and not an attack on ourselves as a person, it can help us stay connected during conflict. By viewing our positions as roles, it also gives us permission to sometimes let go of a role, even for a moment, to step into another perspective or let someone else take that role up and learn from it. Author Peter Block says "Take nothing personally before 6pm¹". After 6pm, there is an opportunity to think about the personal bit of some of the feedback we are getting.

7. Find and explore differences positively

Our goal is to create something new that is shared by everyone in the group. To do this, we have to talk about our differences and explore them as the key to success. Deep Collaboration will bring up differences in agendas, approaches, culture and power. As more difference surfaces, we often look to those with power or authority to maintain order, or attack them for not suppressing or ending conflict.

The practice and skill of exploring differences requires us to listen for different views, bring them to the surface, and stay in relationship as we talk through them, even if they bring strong emotions with them.

Once again, our shared purpose and values will bring us through these situations and turn conflict and difference into tools and keys for creating the new shared leadership we are here for.

¹ Block, P. Community: The Structure of belonging, Barrett Koehler, San Francisco 2008/