

Three Phases of Collaboration

While some lessons applied across the lifetime of a collaboration, some seemed to be more relevant during one particular period. Three phases of collaboration emerged:

1. Getting Together, an initial period where partners get to know one another, set expectations of roles, and determine goals.
2. Building the Foundation, getting the project up and running together.
3. Developing and Sustaining the Vision, when partners continue to solve problems together, but also may make adjustments to their initial agreements, as they build a longer term working relationship.

	Phase One Getting Together	Phase Two Building the Foundation	Phase Three Developing and Sustaining the Vision
1	Define roles, responsibilities, and outcomes.	Create short-term benefits to cement commitment	Couple honest disagreement with a need to cooperate
2	Learn, assess, and build trust	Stabilize revenue and multiply learning through simultaneous projects with a range of partners	Pay attention to the practical business end.
3	Make sure that both parties benefit	Keep partners engaged through intellectual excitement.	Be patient and persistent.

Phase One: Getting Together

1. Define roles, responsibilities, and outcomes.

In the first phase, successful collaborators define roles, responsibilities, and desired outcomes. Check for these, and put them in writing if necessary:

- Clear expectations,
- Clear responsibilities, and
- Shared commitment to clearly articulated outcomes.

Many get roles and responsibilities detailed in writing. “The thing that sinks collaborations is a lack of clearly defined expectations of the results you’re aiming for. Get a letter of agreement out, early on, to see if everyone’s looking at the project in the same way about roles, products, and deadlines. “If all of a sudden things fall apart, if they don’t agree with you about those basics, you have to be able to walk away.

2. Learn, assess, and build trust.

Successful collaborations take the time for partners to mutually assess capacity, judgment, professional habits, and trustworthiness.

These are some of the questions you should have answers to, either by asking, by observing behavior, or by researching your possible partner's history:

Make sure that your partner has the knowledge and skills you need.

Does he or she possess:

- Insight,
- Knowledge,
- The ability to appreciate the expertise of others,
- A history of successfully delivering what he or she promises, and
- The demonstrated ability to handle the responsibilities he or she has agreed to deliver for this project?

Make sure that you and your partner are compatible.

Does he or she have working habits that fit and complement yours? Even in the early stages of getting to know another professional, it is possible to get a strong sense by careful unclouded observation of whether you work well as a team.

- Does your counterpart deliver a response that is timely but also thorough, thoughtful, and on-target?
- Are content and style suited to your way of working on problems and projects?

Make sure that each of you brings something essential to the project.

Collaborations often work well when different skills, experience, and resources come together to make a whole. Strong teams are built on diverse abilities.

- Does your partner deliver something you can't, or something from a network you're not attached to, or something you would never have come up with yourself, which improves the project?
- Do all partners understand that each is obligated to responsibly deliver, since each provides something essential for this project that other partners lack?

Make sure that your partner seems to you trustworthy.

Assessing intellectual and professional compatibility has an intuitive component. If you are careful and analytic, your first impressions are likely to be right.

- When you talk about issues and trends, do you tend to see eye-to-eye, or, if not, do you leave the conversation feeling that the differences have been productive and the interchange fruitful?
- In these early stages, does a dynamic develop where all partners are open, honest, and clear?

Make sure that you and your partner have strong mutual respect, even at the beginning.

It is important that both parties understand one another, have assessed one another, and respect one another. Trust and respect are not always quantifiable but they are, nonetheless, essential in any collaboration.

3. Make sure that both parties benefit.

A collaboration is sure to founder unless there is mutual benefit. Be sure that all partners will benefit in at least one of the following ways:

- Financially,
- Intellectually,
- By improving services and opportunities for people with disabilities, or
- In satisfying a need to achieve, contribute, create, or change the world.

By the end of Phase One, both parties should agree on the terms and goals of working together, see and begin to trust one another, and understand that the process and the desired outcomes create valuable results for both sides.

Phase Two: Building the Foundation

In Phase Two, collaborators get down to work. The excitement of a new alliance fades, replaced by key strategies that cement relationships with partners and users and build long-term stability from the very start.

1. Create short-term benefits to cement commitment.

Whether it's getting trial software in the hands of users, completing or adapting a tool that can bring your development of a product to the next stage, or simply working together effectively to meet a deadline, getting something accomplished early on brings satisfaction (and confirms that positive assessments in Phase One were accurate). Here are a few of the ways in which short-term benefits cement commitment:

- The partners' initial belief in the collaboration is reinforced, morale improves, and pride in the team effort increases,
- Enjoying intermediate results actively involves and invests partners more deeply in the project, and
- The desire to help someone learn, often a key motive, is satisfied.

2. Stabilize revenue and multiply learning through simultaneous projects with a range of partners.

Many collaborators partner with many people and organizations simultaneously. Often, similar or same products are implemented in different settings with different users.

- Multiple projects at different stages provide a steady stream of product, stabilizing business revenues.
- Greater numbers of partners connect the work to a greater number of funding opportunities and, often, more diverse funding streams.

- Different organizations bring diverse points of view to the same idea or initiative.
- Findings from one project can benefit another.

3. Keep partners engaged through intellectual excitement.

In the field of Assistive Technology, partners often feed on exchanging ideas, imagining new possibilities, understanding from different perspectives how people learn, finding ways to design something that is useful in a new way, or applying existing knowledge to a new use.

By the end of Phase Two, a collaboration should have high levels of trust and evidence of success working together. This foundation supports partners as they move into mature collaboration, in which differences are aired and project goals reviewed and possibly revised.

Phase Three: Developing and Sustaining the Vision

Collaborations come to maturity in Phase Three. Successful partners come to consensus through differences, continuously attend to the needs of the business end, and have the patience and persistence to develop projects in light of changing needs and opportunities.

1. Couple honest disagreement with a need to cooperate.

This dynamic lies at the heart of healthy ongoing problem solving. In a strong collaboration, each partner brings something essential for success. Each must be heard, but none can dominate. Effective partnerships include forums where partners solve problems together.

- Honest disagreement is often the first step in articulating ideas, testing hypotheses, and solving problems.
- Cooperation and compromise prevent the work from stalling and falling victim to power struggles that can devour the energy needed for running and developing the project.

2. Pay attention to the practical business end.

The vision is made real only when manifest in real-world applications—and the project will be sustained only if funding continues. Collaborators pay appropriate attention to the business end when they:

- Articulate the practical benefits of the product,
- Take whatever steps needed under their jurisdiction to help get the products to market, and
- Use their time wisely, even if it means not pursuing some opportunities.

3. Be patient and persistent.

Patience and persistence are often necessary in the AT world. Despite the fact that AT has the potential to help millions of learners achieve their full potential, case study interviewees cited barriers to widespread implementation including intractable attitudes both among key gatekeepers and in the

general public, demanding business cycles, and unresolved questions on research priorities and design priorities. Virtually every partner interviewed:

- Had a deep commitment to a larger mission,
- Articulated that commitment with passion and conviction, often describing a literal vision of a changed future that sustained them, and
- Shared that vision with collaborators.

Greater Opportunities Through Collaboration

To guide you in setting up a collaboration, refer to these lessons. When the partnership hits a rough patch, see if these lessons can help you and your partner to define and settle your differences.

Getting together may be a protracted process or relatively quick—but while partners are taking those first steps, they need to take a close look at one another—and be honest in presenting themselves. A foundation of clear expectations, assessment, trust, and shared benefit will enable the collaboration to thrive.