

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Collaboration done right – key traits of successful partnerships

Speakers: Professor David Loseby and Frank Lee.

[00:00:00] **David:** Well, hello and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm David Loseby. I'm a Professor of Research Impact in supply chain management at Leeds University Business School. And today, I'm joined by Frank Lee, the Chief Executive Officer at the Institute for Collaborative Working, normally sort of referred to as the ICW.

So hello, Frank, and thanks for joining me today.

[00:00:30] **Frank:** Good morning David. Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

[00:00:34] **David:** You're very welcome. You're very welcome.

So the “Ideas in Practice” conferences and summits that we run annually - last year, we collaborated with the Institute for Collaborative Working on the area of delivering social value and sustainability through collaboration, as a great example of activity between two very well established, I'll call it organizations.

We've got a number of, I think, really interesting points that we thought we'd actually highlight on this podcast. And so it'd be good to think about, you know, what collaboration looks like, how organisations can benefit from collaboration, and obviously share some of these insights with a wider audience.

So, without further ado, I'm going to launch into a series of questions, Frank, the first one being as follows.

You say that everyone believes it's a good idea that collaborators work and are a bit like nobody ever really owns up to being a poor one. But what do you see as being the real true qualities that you find in a good collaborative partner?

[00:01:42] **Frank:** Yeah, it's a really interesting question actually because I always, I usually sort of link this to people owning up to being good drivers Everybody believes they're a good driver. No one will ever admit that they're this bad, dreadful driver, that's been driving for 20 years or something, and never had an accident.

[00:02:00] And when you look in the rear-view mirror, you see this tale of catastrophe in their wake. And because no one wants to be that person and it's, it's almost like we can't admit to it. So whenever you say to someone are you a good collaborators, everyone's like, “yes, of course I am. I always am”, without really thinking about the qualities, the interpersonal skills, that you need to be a good collaborator. And of course, we at the Institute and I talk a lot about what you need in order for an organisation to collaborate. The

right systems, the right processes, the right competencies, the right culture. But of course, individuals, what do they really need?

And I think there's a sort of blend there of interpersonal skills, ethical, strategic qualities. If you're a good collaborator, you're trustworthy, you have integrity. You know, you act with transparency when you're negotiating, when you're discussing, when you're working with other people. You keep your commitments - that helps you build trust between partners, and you ensure that what you're doing, the decisions that you make, they're ethical; you avoid conflicts of interest, so you own up about conflicts of interest.

Communication - you're a good listener. You're not just someone who transmits the whole time. Good listening is really important in a good collaborator. And you articulate, you're clear about the goals, the expectations. And actually, you need to be a little bit adaptable in communication as well, depending on the situation that you're in, the circumstances, the people that you're collaborating with.

I think a really important one also is emotional intelligence. How self-aware are you, as an individual? Do you really see how you're perceived by others? And certainly, I've met a number of individuals in the past who would probably claim to be good collaborators, but actually have no idea that people see them as quite the opposite.

They're individuals that, [00:04:00] that they'd rather not work with because they don't demonstrate some of those empathetic behaviours, if you like - that aren't able to look at things from a different perspective. And actually, in terms of conflict, we always look at collaboration as a really friendly thing that we do, which it is hopefully.

But we also have to say that a good collaborative business relationship will have times when you don't agree. So how do you handle that conflict? Do you handle it constructively? Do you look to see the other person's point of view? Or do you, perhaps, as I've seen some individuals, refer to type and become rather aggressive, or rather combative?

So all of those sort of skills, I think, are present in a good collaborator. And I think respecting the other people and demonstrating that respect to them is really, really important as well. And of course, then those sort of people build these strong, respectable, equitable relationships. And they're accountable for what they do as well.

So there's a whole range of skills that a good collaborator has. I could probably talk about it for the whole podcast, David, to be perfectly honest.

[00:05:15] **David:** Thank you, Frank, for that opening introduction. And one of the things that, we do recognize is that you do talk a lot, obviously, and, understandably, about the principles of collaboration as we define them under the ISO standard 44,001, as being the bedrock for collaboration.

But why in particular do you think that they are so important when we look at things like social value benefits being a desired outcome that you might be willing or seeking to achieve from a collaboration, particularly in large and complex alliances, programmes, major projects, et cetera?[00:06:00]

[00:06:00] **Frank:** I think, I think certainly in major projects, and if we look at social value and the delivery of social value in this country at the moment, there's no doubt that government would like to see a lot of legacy from the projects that we undertake - as we should, both to the local communities and to our society as a whole.

The principles as defined in ISO 44,000 provide, I think - that basic structure that an organisation can pick up on and start to deploy. And, if we are going to get social value and a lot of value within the infrastructure projects that we work on, one of the great drivers for this is going to be the SME community.

Larger organisations probably have quite well established processes, in these areas. SMEs - maybe not. What the principles do is that they give you that foundation that you can build your system up on. They can give you that structured framework that will help the partnerships that you're in, the relationships that you're in, become more effective, ethical, more impactable.

And actually, hopefully, if we can get those structures in place then we can drive more meaningful longer-term benefits. So I think that if you look at those principles, they create a foundation for trust within that relationship. They foster mutual benefit and shared purpose and, you know, some key things that they look at there. They reduce risks. They help you identify risk, help you manage that risk.

As a result of that, hopefully you will reduce that risk and then that should strengthen the resilience of the relationship. And also, when obstacles come along, we say, obviously, well they do in all projects, and they help you address those, those obstacles more meaning.
[00:08:00]

But the key things in the 44,000 series of standards and then the principles really helped to generate this, is this culture of knowledge sharing of joint problems, looking at joint problems together and co-creating value, which is really important.

And one of the things we as an institute really like our members to do, for example, is to look from moving from this siloed approach to value, you know, "what's value to me?", and then "what's value to you?" and both look at that independently as a coming together and saying "how can we co-create real value here that benefits both of our organisations, but also the wider society?"

And I think that those principles can really enable organisations to do that. And they can put those, if you just work on those 12 principles to make sure you have that structure in place,

or some structures in place, then I think you can really move forward as a bedrock there. So that's why I think that's why they're so important.

Any organisation of any size can really pick those principles up and work with them. And then as you get, as you develop and you become more mature, and perhaps you want to go to the next stage, then they form that bedrock, that framework that you can use when you look at, let's say, for example, the requirements in the gold standard, which will be ISO 44001, but those principles have that rigor throughout that I think is really, really important.

So I always say, you know, if you're starting out, start out with those principles. If you do nothing else, start out with those principles and at the very least, you'll end up with a relationship management plan that will give you that basis for starting any relationship and moving forward with it.

[00:09:46] **David:** Super. Thank you. I think my supplementary really to that would be talking about sort of, and you've mentioned many times here, sort of the whole attributes in terms of trust, creating that socioeconomic, [00:10:00] if you like, in a sense, structure. But one of the things I've recognised, certainly from you and your leadership style is one of genuine humility and sort of, how can I put it, a willingness to sort of understand and listen to other parties.

Do you think that's a common sort of skill and an attribute in a sense that we see sufficient of in many of the sort of endeavours that we see, up and down, if you like, in a sense, the global sort of spectrum of major projects and alliances.

[00:10:35] **Frank:** I think that over the last few years we've seen that approach improve significantly. I don't think we've reached the end of the journey there, by any stretch of the imagination. And I think what can often happen is that when projects get into difficult periods, that those behaviours that we talked about right at the start tend to disappear, and people, you know, revert to type. Or when there's an opportunity, if you like, for someone to gain some benefit from maybe working in a less collaborative manner for them to do so.

So, actually a supplementary question here reminds me a little bit of the first question. When I look at individuals who are particularly collaborative and in the way they approach things, you don't need to, you can trust them that they will tell you what you need to know when you need to know it without having to ask the question.

And there's an example that's always in my mind because I believed on one occasion that I was in a collaborative relationship. And the organisation concerned, I have to say, had a very good track record of working collaboratively. And so did the individual that I was dealing with.

Hopefully they won't recognise themselves [00:12:00] if they listen to this podcast, but they did something that made my life rather difficult. And when I asked them afterwards why,

they hadn't told me that this was going to happen, they gave me a very simple answer. So they said, you didn't ask, so I didn't tell you.

So I think it's really important that as we move forward, for an organisation to become more, hopefully more collaborative, and people see the benefits that a collaborative approach can come, they realize it isn't just nice and easy and being warm and cuddly. A proper collaborative approach helps you when things are difficult.

They'll enable your collaborative partner will work with you to maximize an opportunity or to address an issue. Rather than you having to maybe, actually, non-collaborative way. So I think there's an awful lot of world that we have to go down before we get to, maybe the state that we'd all like to see.

But I think we are moving in the right direction. And I think as more and more new leaders join the workforce and people graduate from institutes like, like Leeds and the Business School there. And that collaboration forms a greater part of the courses that people take, then I think we hopefully will see that change.

I think we certainly are. I think the younger generation of leaders today are naturally more collaborative maybe than in the past. But there's still a long way to go, David.

[00:13:35] **David:** Well, that's super. I think I think I'd like to sort of ask a final question because what I suspect is that if, with the years of experience that you've got, what would be the one really insightful piece of advice that you'd give any organisation, or individual for that matter, of any size or setting in terms of that collaborative undertaking? What would it be?[00:14:00]

[00:14:01] **Frank:** Well, it's difficult to give one if I'm perfectly honest.

[00:14:06] **David:** Give me several.

[00:14:07] **Frank:** Well, certainly "choose your partners well" is one. If you don't choose the partners well, then you will definitely have problems. But the other key thing for me is be absolutely clear about what the outcome you want to achieve is, and make sure that is communicated, understood and bought into by your collaborative partner.

Absolutely any ambiguity in this area can lead to both of you having slightly different interpretations of what that outcome will be. And as a result, you won't get the desired outcome you want to do. So alignment of goals and purpose where all parties share a common vision and understand the objectives from the outset is absolutely critical.

If those expectations are misaligned, then you'll end up with more conflicts, which are time consuming; they'll take the value away. Inefficiencies - because you'll duplicate what you're doing, and actually probably disengagement over time as well, if they aren't really clear from the outset.

And then, you know, be absolutely clear about what that value is. We talk about outcomes, we talk about value. Good outcomes come with additional value. Now, hopefully we will build this piece of infrastructure, it will be dealt with on budget, it'll be dealing with on time, maybe ahead of time for people to use more effectively, but also if we want some legacy issues there, what are they?

What is that value? What will it do? So be absolutely clear about that. And then that helps you prioritize your resources, measure the risk. Really important as well not only understanding what that value is but understanding how that value will be measured. How that outcome will be measured.

If I believe we'll measure it in one way and [00:16:00] you believe we'll measure it in another, then actually we'll probably end up with different outcomes at the end of the day.

So I think for me, that's the key thing - that choosing the right or the key two things choosing the right partner, and then that alignment on value - being absolutely clear what that value is, or what those elements of value are that we're going to deliver here and I think if we can get those right then your chance of success rises enormously.

[00:16:25] **David:** Super. I think one of the things I'd reflect on from that statement is that, you know, some of the conversations I know that we've had in, how can I put it, setting the foundations potentially for more collaboration between ICW and Leeds University Business School in the future, but where we start to see, you know, the fact that we're recognizing that value is, is determined or seen and delivered in different ways for different organisations as well as the common ones, and therefore, understanding those is so, so important, as we both know, in terms of what different parties may want out of, how can I put it, a collaborative endeavour through a contract, or whatever it may be.

[00:17:07] **Frank:** And that's why it's so important that organisations and individuals are open and honest with one another about the value they want it. If I'm not clear about the value that you're trying to get from our relationship, then I can't help you achieve that value. I can't work with you to achieve that value in the most effective way. And of course, I don't buy into that at that stage either because I don't really know what I'm buying into.

If we get that relationship right and you trust me that I will help you achieve your benefits, your value, then you will in turn help me achieve mine. And we'll also work together more effectively to achieve our mutual benefits as well.

So being really open and upfront. And of course, as I went back to the start, choosing the right partner who can help you and who you can help in achieving those benefits, is absolutely so critical.

[00:17:59] **David:** [00:18:00] Fantastic. Thank you Frank. I really appreciate you giving up your time today and with that we're going to call this a wrap and do join us for another episode.

[00:18:09] **Frank:** Thank you for having me David. I really enjoyed the conversation

[00:18:12] **David:** Likewise. Thank you, Frank.