



Trouble Shooting Guide

What will you learn?

What patterns of challenges and conflicts might occur in multi-stakeholder collaborations

How to avoid escalation of difficulties through good communication and relationship management.

What will it help you with?

To be aware of conflicts and difficulties when they arise

How to deal with them in a collaborative, effective and results-oriented manner.

When is this factsheet particularly relevant?

In all Phases of the **Dialogic Change Model**



For an in-depth understanding of making collaboration work, please view our open access publication

Kuenkel, P., Kuehn, E., Stucker, D., Williamson, D.F. (2020)

Leading Transformative Change Collectively
A Practitioner Guide to Realizing the SDGs



Challenges in multi-stakeholder collaboration



Difficulties and conflicts in multi-stakeholder collaborations are normal side-effects of contrasting points of view and different, or even opposing, interests. They can cause disagreements and misunderstandings and can complicate implementation.

Many challenges can be prevented by applying careful planning with the **Dialogic Change Model** and the **Collective Leadership Compass** and by equipping dialogic process facilitators with the skills to facilitate dialogue and lead transformative change collectively.

However, multi-stakeholder collaborations remain complex processes and will always

need to overcome difficulties at some stage. This makes it important to be aware of difficulties and conflicts when they arise and how to deal with them properly.

It is not possible to avoid them completely; however, it is possible to avoid the escalation of such difficulties through good communication and relationship-management.

Not all key actors will engage in the same way. Some stakeholders are more difficult to engage. In many organizations, people continually change positions, send new people to meetings without briefing them, or drop out of processes from pressure to attend to other commitments. 'Staff turnover' may lead the core group to include people who were not included before, or to deal with the loss of a key supporter who is suddenly called to a different task. The composition of collaboration ecosystems may shift over the course of the four phases. Hence, relationship management and good communication remains the key task for dialogic process facilitators that aspire to achieve results. Set-backs and difficulties are normal. What counts is their in-depth understanding of high-quality processes and high-quality dialogue.

Challenge pattern # 1

Some stakeholders do not have the willingness to communicate or talk with each other.



In order to overcome this difficulty, it helps to focus on the *Compass* dimensions of **collective intelligence** and **humanity**.

- Engage actors individually and informally in conversations;
- Understand and solve the conflict outside the formal structures of the collaboration process;
- Hold bilateral conversations to clarify objectives and topics;
- Explain the premises and methodology of multi-stakeholder collaborations;
- Clarify the participants' different needs;
- Get a bilateral commitment for staying in the process;
- Allow time for informal conversations creating opportunities where stakeholders can meet as people.

Challenge pattern # 2

Hierarchy or authorities feel they have not been sufficiently involved and question the collaboration initiative.



In order to overcome this difficulty, it helps to focus on the *Compass* dimensions of **engagement** and **wholeness**. This means:

- Go back to the essentials of Phase 1 and re-clarify the context or conduct a stakeholder analysis;
- Re-do a systems diagnosis with the **Collective Leadership Compass**;
- Engage hierarchically or important powerful actors bilaterally or informally and on an individual basis; build resonance by understanding their interests, perspectives, and concerns, then engage them officially and integrate them into the process;
- Inform the hierarchy using a report and, through this, gain interest for the process; and
- Agree on regular communication with high level actors.

Challenge pattern # 3

‘Territorial’ conflicts occur: the multi-stakeholder collaboration is perceived as covering topics that are considered to be the territory of certain (involved or not involved) stakeholder institutions.



In order to overcome this difficulty, it helps to focus on the *Compass* dimensions of **wholeness** and **engagement**. This means:

- Go back to the essentials of Phase 1 and re-clarify the context;
- Make yourself aware of territories that exist and how a change initiative would be perceived by different stakeholders;
- Clarify conflicting boundaries before starting engagement processes;
- Engage in bilateral conversations, build or re-build resonance, and start genuine dialogue with stakeholders that may feel threatened or are annoyed;
- Look for synergies between conflicting parties.

Challenge pattern # 4

The collaboration initiators are not supported because they have no official mandate.



In order to overcome this difficulty, it helps to focus on the *Compass* dimensions of **future possibilities** and **engagement**. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 1:

- Get high-level sponsorship for the topic of the collaboration initiative;
- Promote the benefits of multi-stakeholder collaboration;
- Improve ways of communicating the potential benefits of the collaboration initiative;
- Listen to stakeholders, refrain from teaching them about the future;
- Carefully compose a core group with the consent of high-level sponsors; and
- Strengthen or rebuild the core group as a good container and include important stakeholders.

Deep dive into the essentials of Phase 2:

- Explore which stakeholders can give a clear mandate;
- Explain the initiator's role to important stakeholders;
- Underline the initiator's goal of bringing about positive change and demonstrate that there is no hidden agenda;
- Interact neutrally with stakeholders but with a clear engagement towards the collaboration goal.

Challenge pattern # 5

Clashes of interest, ideological differences, or hidden agendas arise.



This is a difficulty that usually emerges in Phase 2 and is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **wholeness** and **collective intelligence**. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 1:

- Understand the system: re-do conflict-mapping, re-do the situational diagnosis with the **Collective Leadership Compass**, and improve the stakeholder analysis;
- Clarify what is in it for all parties; and
- Clarify the underlying interests in bilateral conversations.

Deep dive into the essentials of Phase 2:

- Review the process architecture using the **Collective Leadership Compass** (see **factsheet 1** and **www.compass-tool.net**: Design Collaborative Interventions).

- Carefully construct dialogic settings and co-creative meetings using the Compass (see **factsheet 1** and **www.compass-tool.net**: Design Collaborative Interventions).
- In stakeholder meetings, ensure structured dialogue and make differences transparent; let parties state their differences and discuss with them what is at stake if no solution is found;
- Seek support from other important actors, if necessary.

Challenge pattern # 6

Stakeholders complain about a lack of transparency



This is a difficulty that often emerges in Phase 3 and is best dealt with by focusing on the *Compass* dimension of **engagement** with a special focus on process quality. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 3:

- Ensure comprehensive information about the process and progress to all involved;
- Make sure that issues of communication and information are agreed upon by the stakeholders involved;
- Conduct individual conversations with critical stakeholders and obtain their feedback on the process; and

- Review the process architecture and check for elements that ensure transparency, using the **Collective Leadership Compass** (see **factsheet 1** and **www.compass-tool.net**: Design Collaborative Interventions).

Challenge pattern # 7

Power differences become obvious and create mistrust in the process and purpose of the multi-stakeholder collaboration.



This is a difficulty that can emerge in all phases, but mostly shows up in Phase 2 when the collaboration ecosystem is still fragile. It can also occur in Phase 3 if not enough attention has been given to the quality of Phase 2. It is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **humanity** and **collective intelligence**. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 1:

- Understand the system: improve the stakeholder analysis;
- Design strategies to engage weaker stakeholders and strengthen their capacity and voice.

Deep dive into the essentials of Phase 2:

- Ensure that all voices are heard;
- Ensure that less powerful stakeholder groups remain in the process or enter into the process; get support for this from key stakeholders;

- If necessary, address power issues with stakeholders separately and talk about their effects; remind more powerful stakeholders of their impact on the success of the multi-stakeholder collaboration;
- Review process architectures with the Compass (see **factsheet 1** and **www.compass-tool.net**: Design Collaborative Interventions).
- Support weaker groups with capacity-building and advocacy.



Challenge pattern # 8

There is a lack of willingness to come to an agreement.



This is a difficulty that is typical for Phase 2 when the system of actors needs to move from dialogue to action. It is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **humanity** and **engagement**. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 1:

- Re-analyze the situation (diagnose systems patterns) with the **Collective Leadership Compass**, and re-do the stakeholder landscape analysis (see **factsheet 12**);
- Try to understand fears and constraints individually by applying the dialogic practices;
- Consider the possibility that some stakeholders may benefit from the continuation of the status quo; and re-do essentials of engagement and resonance building from Phase 1.

Deep dive into the essentials of Phase 2:

- Find out about stakeholders' willingness to commit individually and facilitate their coming to a solution separately and informally;
- If no willingness exists, postpone the stakeholder meetings and work backstage on Phase 1 essentials; and
- Assess the influence and importance of the stakeholders blocking agreements and explore the possibility of moving on without the stakeholders in question.

Challenge pattern # 9

There is a lack of resources to carry out the process steps for the multi-stakeholder collaboration.



This is a difficulty that is very common when initiators are passionate about collaborative change, but have not secured sufficient resources. Not all collaborations need to be well-funded, but lack of financial or professional resources may impact on quality and results. Such a situation is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **future possibilities** and **engagement**. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 1:

- Create resonance with key stakeholders and high-level sponsors;
- Get the help of high-level actors to connect to funders;
- Promote the potential result-orientation of the multi-stakeholder collaboration;

- Re-do the diagnosis of the system with the **Collective Leadership Compass** (see **factsheet 15**) and assess the maturity of key actors for change;
- Re-do the stakeholder analysis and devise strategies to engage powerful and financially well-set stakeholders.

Challenge pattern # 10

Stakeholders do not understand or agree with the purpose or objective of the multi-stakeholder collaboration. They do not see the urgency to act together.



This is a difficulty that hints to an insufficient quality of Phase 1 that has not built resonance for change. It may happen in situations for which some actors see an extreme urgency, while other stakeholders are complacent towards the situation. Such a situation is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **future possibilities** and **engagement**. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 1:

- Consider advocacy strategies and information campaigns around the issue;
- Create awareness about the issue by engaging potential stakeholders into the process;

- Integrate content-related capacity building into the process design;
- Re-address goal alignment as part of the engagement process.

Challenge pattern # 11

Stakeholders do not understand the requirements of multi-stakeholder collaboration; they lack skills in leading collectively.



This is a difficulty that often occurs in multi-stakeholder collaboration, as many actors assume collaborative change is no different from the way they are used to work in other areas. This difficulty can occur in all phases, but is best addressed in Phase 1 and 2. It is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **innovation** and **engagement**. This means:

Integrate capacity building steps into Phase 1 and Phase 2:

- Expose stakeholders to examples of successful multi-stakeholder collaboration or make them familiar with the *collaboration catalysts* as easy understandable success factors;
- Integrate capacity building for collaboration as a methodology into the process design of Phases 1 and 2;
- Specifically build the capacity of the core group to become experts in dialogic process facilitation.

Challenge pattern # 12

There is a lack of leadership or initiative by participating stakeholders; there is no sense of collective responsibility and ownership.



This is a difficulty that can occur in all phases, most often as a result of an insufficiently completed Phase 1 and Phase 2. It is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **engagement**, **collective intelligence** and **future possibilities**. This means:

Reiterate steps of Phase 1:

- Adhere to the principles of an engagement process, strengthen the initial container, then gradually build the broader container towards a functional *collaboration ecosystem* (see **factsheet 2**); only gradually involve more stakeholders;
- Reflect adjustments in process architectures with the core group;
- Build collaboration capacity building into Phase 1 and combine it with visioning exercises;
- Emphasize the importance of each stakeholder's contribution;
- Improve full understanding of the problem; re-do a systems diagnosis with the **Collective Leadership Compass**;
- Conduct stakeholder interviews (see **factsheet 14**) to explore the reasons for lack of ownership.

Deep dive into the essentials of Phase 2:

- Ensure strategies are co-designed by all key stakeholders;
- Re-do a resource mapping to understand the constraints of stakeholders;
- Focus on the benefits of result-orientation;
- Review process-architectures and improve them using the Compass dimensions (see **factsheet 1**);
- Conduct a process monitoring with the collaboration catalysts to identify entry points for improvements;
- Address in informal conversations what would create the feeling of ownership;
- Ensure honest participation;
- Apply dialogic practices in stakeholder meetings (see **factsheet 9**);
- Create a clear vision with all participants.

Challenge pattern # 13

Conflicts arise about decision-making logics, speed of implementation, or reporting requirements between the public sector, private sector, and NGO (e.g. clash of organizational cultures).



This is a difficulty that often occurs in Phase 3, when stakeholders tend to be under pressure to deliver and naturally resort back to their own way of doing things. It is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **engagement** and **collective intelligence**. This means:

- Make differences in decision-making structures, reporting requirements, and cultures/rationales of different stakeholder groups transparent;
- Integrate capacity building for multi-stakeholder collaboration and the understanding of inherent sectoral differences into the process architectures;
- Create mutual understanding through structured dialogues about the constraints, expectations, and rationales of the different institutions;
- Explore the needs for reporting with different stakeholder groups.

Challenge pattern # 15

There is the perception of deteriorating or absent trust.



This is a difficulty that occurs in Phase 3 either after a not fully transparent or insufficiently completed Phase 2; or in Phase 2, if the process architecture is not transparent and reliable. It is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **engagement** and **collective intelligence**. This means:

- Conduct a process monitoring exercise within the core group using the collaboration catalysts and review the process architectures with the **Collective Leadership Compass**;
- Ensure that dialogic practices are implemented in all stakeholder meetings (see **factsheet 8** and **9**); conduct events in a way that allows for good conversations and frequent interaction among participants (round tables, coffee break, etc.), (see **factsheet 10**);
- Engage in one-on-one conversations to explore the reasons for a lack of trust;
- Ensure that the initiator/facilitator is a living example of trustworthiness;
- Ensure transparency and reliability of process and time planning;
- Keep agreements and keep to the agreed process-designs;
- Genuinely engage and involve stakeholders; do not make false promises;
- Work both informally and in a structured way on relationship-building;
- Create face-to-face situations in communications;
- Create and celebrate common successes (success must be tangible).

Challenge pattern # 16

Key actors do not want to get engaged and refuse to join the initial container or the broader container; or stakeholders change positions, drop out, or send substitutes.



This is a difficulty that occurs in a neglected Phase 1 that does not invest sufficiently into the three key steps of resonance building, understanding the context, and building a container for change. It can also occur in Phase 2 after a not fully completed Phase 1. It is best dealt with by focusing on the Compass dimensions of **wholeness** and **engagement**. This means:

- Conduct a systems diagnosis with the **Collective Leadership Compass** (see **factsheet 15**) and re-evaluate the stakeholder landscape analysis (see **factsheet 12**);
- Develop specific engagement strategies for highly influential stakeholders that are needed to make the initiative a success (see **factsheet 2**);
- Design specific strategies to engage difficult actors, and be sure that you understand what makes them engaged or disengaged;
- Check if the timing for the initiative is right;
- Invest in additional resonance building by exploring the interests of important stakeholders in inspiring conversations;
- Meet the important stakeholders where they feel comfortable, for example at issue-related conferences;
- Convey the goal but link it to the interest of the difficult stakeholders;
- Accept that you may need to slow the process down and ensure that you get the right people on board;
- If the people attending meetings continuously change try to engage superiors more consciously and explain how important it is that the same people attend consistently;
- Invest in relationship-building and invest time in getting people on board.



↑
Office Europe
Kurfürstenstrasse 1
14467 Potsdam
Germany
Phone: +49 331 5816 5960
germany@collectiveleadership.com

↑
Office South Africa
11 Abelia Street, Mont Claire
7785 Cape Town
South Africa
Phone: +27 83 772 0958
southafrica@collectiveleadership.com