

Collaborative Journeys

Collaborative Maxims

Principles for working together in an organization

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Introduction

Collaboration is about people working together.

A maxim is a general truth, fundamental principle, or rule of conduct. (Merriam-Webster)

This e-book gives maxims for good collaboration. The real success stories of our time are about good collaboration: businesses, sports teams, political campaigns, causes...

Inspiration for this e-book comes from all the interesting people, organizations, ideas, and stories I've been pleasantly exposed to during the past year, my first as a blogger – on the topic of collaboration, of course! This e-book also draws heavily on my work as a mediator, helping people and organizations build consensus and move forward... together. These days, I tend to observe just about everything through the lens of mediation.

Use the maxims in this e-book as a guide, to good collaboration, and what it means to think and act collaboratively. Use these maxims in your organizations of choice. Believe and follow these maxims regularly, and you'll nurture your collaborative habits.

If you enjoyed this e-book, please consider letting me know and/or freely sharing this e-book with others. Thanks, Ben.

Collaborative Relationships

Bid for connection

Each of our daily interactions with another person is what relationship expert John Gottman calls a “bid for connection”. By choosing to turn toward, to turn away, or turn against each other’s bid for connection – no matter how ordinary or small – we establish a foundation that could determine the future success or failure of our relationship.

Good relationships usually develop slowly over time, growing out of the many mundane interactions we share each day. Building trust in a relationship doesn’t require gut-wrenching conversations that plumb the depths of our souls.

*“Daily life is
foreplay for
relationships”*

What is the optimal ratio of positive bids versus negative bids?

(Kate Feldman)

Gottman says 5:1 is required to sustain a marriage relationship. Social media strategist Chris Brogan suggests promoting others 12 times for every time you promote yourself. As a parent, I recall 3:1 as the magic ratio for praising vs. disciplining young children. In cultures and generations where reprimand and discipline rule(d), maybe a negative ratio applies?

Bid positively and strengthen your relationships.

Sit in a circle

Our ancestors gathered around a fire in a circle. Families gather around the kitchen table in a circle.

To gather in a circle is a community way to solve problems, support one another, and connect to one another.

Sitting in a circle is a process.

At the heart of the North American aboriginal circle process is the use of a talking piece, an object passed from person to person in the circle, and which grants the holder sole permission to speak. This tradition speaks to the need for inclusiveness, listening, and taking time to hear everyone's story. Circles are a way to build and restore relationships, and community.

Circles can be used almost anywhere; e.g., in the workplace, in schools, in neighbourhoods, churches, courts...

To maximize circle power, sit in a circle without chairs or tables in front of you. If you do use tables, the smaller the better.

Make it easy to gather close together, in a circle.

"When the tribe first sat down in a circle and agreed to allow only one person to speak at a time – that was the longest step forward in the history of law"

(American trial judge, Curtis Bok).

“Yes, and...”

“Yes, and...” (YES/AND) is a way of thinking. More likely we are used to saying “Yes, but...” YES/AND almost feels unnatural.

In the theatre world, YES, AND is used as an improvisatory exercise to maximize creative potential. The word BUT is a creativity killer.

To say YES is to say you matter, and aligns with our need to be acknowledged and respected.

YES/AND is inclusive; opening us up to the larger possibilities, of what both you and I have to offer.

AND implies abundance, additional new options, without taking existing options off the table (think BUT). An abundance mentality drives the creative resolution of tensions, and innovation.

The comma after YES (in “Yes, and ...”) suggests flow; taking a breath, pausing, without bringing the conversation to a dead stop (pox on BUT), and then channelling the flow elsewhere – e.g., to your interests.

YES/AND lubricates our collaboration engine.

Peel the onion

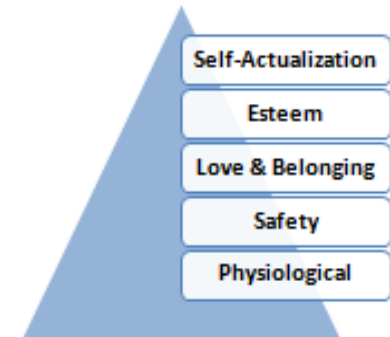
We all have needs. When we're stuck, dealing with unmet needs can help get things moving forward again.

Understanding needs can be like peeling an onion; there are many layers. It may be a bit painful in the peeling, yet good things can happen afterwards.

In the 1940s, Abraham Maslow developed a "hierarchy of needs", as a way of explaining human motivation. It remains a useful way of thinking about why people say and do certain things. At the bottom rung of the hierarchy are needs such as food, sex, and sleep. Level 2 is safety; of body, employment, property, family... Higher needs include the need to be loved, recognized, and the need to realize our full potential, which includes the need for creativity and problem solving.

The hierarchy suggests a relationship between needs, with basic needs the foundation on which other needs are built. If someone is going hungry, or suffering in an abusive relationship, how focused or committed are they to conversations about achievement and creativity at work?

Understanding ours and others' needs makes us a better collaborator, and helps us craft sustainable solutions, not just short-term fixes to problems. When needs are complex, being able to unravel and differentiate those needs is a gift.



Me and We

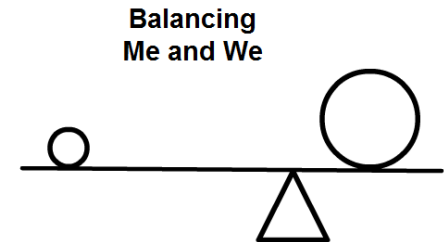
In our every conversation and negotiation, there exists the opportunity to think of what I want and need, and what the other party wants and needs.

Balancing advocacy with inquiry is entering into collaborative conversation. I assertively let the other party know my interests and needs, and I appreciatively inquire into their interests and needs. Our shared interests and needs lead us to common ground.

The collaborative way is to be “unconditionally constructive” (a term coined by Roger Fisher & William Ury in *Getting to Yes*), to do only those things that both are good for me, and the relationship, whether or not the other party reciprocates. Reciprocity is voluntary.

Asserting our own interests is facilitated through self-awareness and fluency with “I” language. Discovering the underlying interests of others flows from our curiosity, open questions, probing, appreciation, empathy, clarifying, paraphrasing... Negotiating common ground calls on skills in reframing, fractionalizing, summarizing, creative problem solving, power dynamics, solutions definition...

Being both me and we is the collaborative way.



Reframe conflict

Reframing is about changing the game. It's about how we describe a conflict.

So much of who we are, and can be, seems to be a paradox. We hold the capacity to be both: caring and uncaring, self-interested and appreciative of others, resistant to change and open to learning new things. Some ways of framing conflict lead to an adversarial climate and destructive outcomes, others lead to a collaborative climate.

When faced with conflict, it's natural for us to have two thoughts running through our mind; one that says "I'm right, you're wrong" and the other that says "Let's find a way to resolve this so we can both move forward, and get on with more important things." It matters which thought we choose to run with.

When he aggressively says: "You're out of your mind! That will never fly here"; your assertive, reframed response can be: "Tell me specifically how my idea doesn't meet your interests." When her narrow thinking is "The issue is that we need to get rid of Bill so we can do our work"; your broader thinking, reframed response can be: "Or could we say that the issue is: how can we address team chemistry so everyone is more productive." When the other side takes a hard-line position, our gut response is often to reject it, yet this usually only leads them to dig in further. Don't reject: Reframe.

To move us from positions to interests, adversarial tactics to collaborative negotiating, problem focus to a goal focus; that's the potential of a reframe.

Break bread together

Have a meal together.

Eating together helps people connect; helps bond individuals into a collaborative whole.

It doesn't matter what it is that you do, you need something to bring the team together — something that says we're special, we value each other, and we're in this together.

Food, dress, ceremony, celebration... rituals are developed around these types of things. When we carry out these rituals, we are behaving as expected. We are acknowledging that we belong to this group. We are respecting others in the group.

In some cultures, rituals are the bedrock of relationships; e.g., nothing happens without first eating together.

Rituals give us a way to appreciate the things we share in common; a way to bridge our differences.

When times are tough, rituals can be how we come together as a team, renew our spirits, and refocus our energy on the challenge ahead. Think of breaking bread and the act of “communion”.

Tight-knit communities have learned, survived, and prospered, by working and playing together.

Leading a Collaborative Organization

Think systems

Baking a cake is simple. Raising a child is complex.

Complex problems require systems thinking; a belief that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of relationships with each other, and with other systems, rather than in isolation.

Margaret Wheatley in *Finding Our Way* asks us to think of organizations as living systems. And, she asks us to think of organization more as a process, less as a structure. In living systems, everything is connected.

Systems thinkers bring the vertical and the horizontal into play, the forest and the trees, welcome paradox and uncertainty, and above all, values relationships with others. Approaching a new initiative from a systems perspective is to: involve everybody who cares, rely on and encourage diversity, engage stakeholder creativity, and welcome, and be surprised by, people's contributions.

“Independence is a political concept, not a biological concept.”

(Margaret Wheatley)

Command and Control: Exit stage right.

Live in two worlds

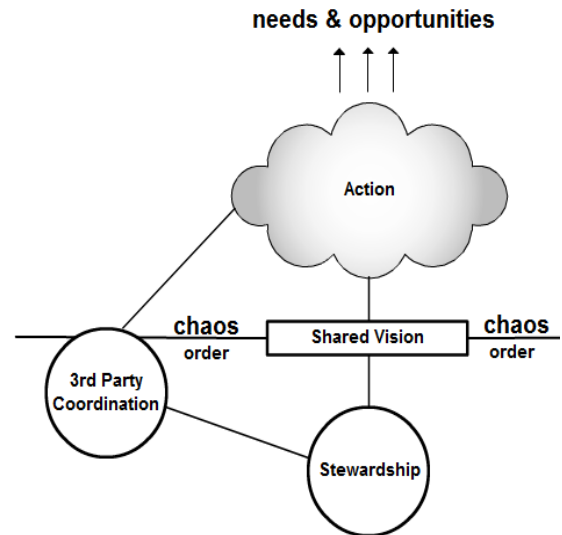
We live in two worlds – order and chaos.

In the world of order, we plan, reflect, and think about what to do next. In the world of chaos, things happen, we get things done, yet unpredictability persists. In one world, we like to think we are in control. In the other, we mingle with increasing complexity, conflict, and uncertainty.

One person: two worlds! We need collaborative frameworks that bridge these two worlds.

Tonya and Mark Surman have advocated for, and successfully applied such a framework, the Constellation Collaboration Model (my simplified version is shown in the diagram at right), in their work with the Centre for Social Innovation in Ontario. The model is put into practice (quite successfully!) through lightweight governance, action focused teams, and third party coordination.

The Constellation Model is a great way to visualize systems thinking, gain comfort with the paradox of order and chaos, and live in two worlds.



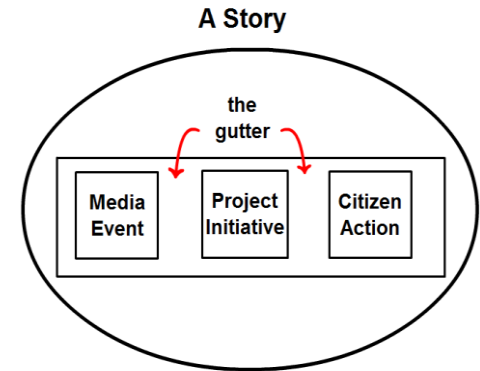
Tell stories

Stories connect. Stories help us connect the dots, the discrete events in our organization's life into some sort of whole. Those static measures of an organization; participation rates, reports produced, product cycle times... they only become useful in the context of stories that explain the causal links between them.

Scott McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics* talks about the “gutter” in a comic strip, the place between the panels, where you, the reader, are invited to participate, with your imagination. You combine the individual panels with your imagination to create a story.

Stories give us opportunity to engage in the arts. In an organization, a well-told story communicates vision, authenticates our experiences, and makes it easy for people to feel good about the organization, and what it stands for. Doug Lipman, in *Improve Your Storytelling*, says “*Stories can help people trust one another. They can lead to a sense of sharing without coercion.*” Stories help move people from compliance to commitment. Stories change us.

Get to know other people's stories. You can't hate someone whose story you know.



Structure for behaviour

Structure influences behaviour.

If we want people to collaborate better, then design structures that facilitate collaborative behaviour.

Design matters. It influences our ability to connect and engage with others, to manage projects, to retain and transfer knowledge, and to solve problems.

Design spaces that make you feel *“you are welcome here and that you came to the right place”* (Peter Block in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*); hospitable reception areas, meeting rooms designed with person-to-person interaction in mind, communal spaces that have an intimate feel, walls that have life, lots of light and windows...

Design offices that encourage connectedness; people in close proximity, tables that allow people to sit in circles, chairs that promote mobility and relatedness with others in the room... Design offices that accommodates different work styles and meeting needs; visitor stations, teaming rooms, “mixer” coffee stations, situation rooms, all-hands meetings, cubicles...

Find the right level of technology; one that facilitates warmth, sensitivity, and personal connection.

When your culture enables people to create, within collaborative structures, innovation flourishes.

Transform through conversations

Conversations bring us together. And when we are together, we are much more comfortable with change – personal change, community and organizational change. We can handle anything, as long as we are together.

Conversations help us get from here to there. Conversations help us see what was, help us reflect on where we are now and what might be, and help us embody the new.

Conversations help us build trust. And, when we trust the group we're in, something special happens. We are freed to be ourselves, to act, knowing that if we falter, the group will pull us through. Count on it!

Through conversation we discover shared meaning, and when that meaning changes, we are changed.

Conversations connect the organization to more of itself, a sign of a healthy living system.

There are so many ways to have a conversation; peer to peer meetings, through social media, with consensus building techniques such as conversation cafés or Open Space Technology, over food, through photo sharing, while watching a movie at someone's home...

Join the conversation. Lead the change. Solve the problem.

Make it safe to fail

Make it safe to fail... and learn, and innovate.

It takes time to get good at something. Daniel J. Levitin, musician and neuroscientist, talks about the 10,000 rule in *This is Your Brain on Music*; that it takes at least 10,000 hours of practice to become a master musician.

Innovation, too, requires a long-term perspective. The roots of innovation typically involve experimentation, failure, and time. It takes 2 years for bamboo to build its' roots and break ground, and then it can grow 100 feet in the next 2 years! – treat people this way.

Safety is a basic human need. People with a sense of security and belonging are stabilized for learning, creating, innovating. *“A group of wonderfully cared for, confident individuals will generate great ideas.”* (John Sweeney, author & consultant)

Create physical environments that are inviting, that allow people to take risk; to fully engage others in authentic conversation, *“to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine thinking together.”* (Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*)

Make it easier for people to build consensus and move forward together.

Supportive environment



Open to discovery



Integrate thinking and doing

*“The aim of learning is to integrate thinking and doing.” (Roger Fisher & Alan Sharp in *Getting it Done*)*

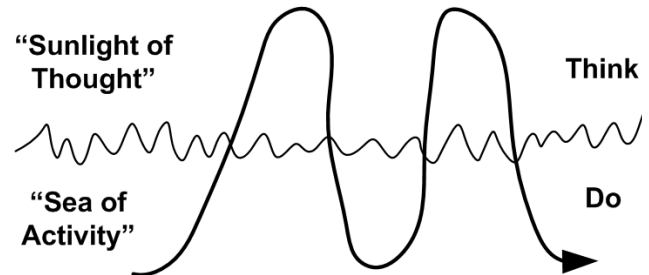
Organizations that routinely integrate thinking and doing are learning organizations.

Prototyping, experimenting, piloting... are ways to integrate thinking and doing.

Integrating thinking and doing is part of a package for getting things done; along with being purposeful and results-oriented, thinking systematically, engaging others, and giving and getting feedback.

Integrating thinking and doing is an adaptive strategy. In living systems, it equates with survival, whether those systems are aware of it or not.

Organizations that iterate, collaborate, on “think and do” are fostering adaptation. In uncertain times, is there any other way?



Appreciate the core

Appreciation may be the most significant human psychological need.

Appreciation is about being positive.

We learn it early in life. As children, when we are appreciated by others, we feel good, and our behaviour reflects it. We never lose that capacity, to feel appreciated and act in positive ways.

The field of Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the organization's "positive core"; appreciating and valuing the best of what is, envisioning what might be, and dialoguing what should be. The basic assumption is that an organization is a mystery to be embraced.

Organizations are living systems. They are strengthened through relationships. Explore the organization's potential, and frame positive images of the future to lead positive actions.

Collaborations are strengthened through appreciative relationships. You know you've got it right when you find yourself in a relationship in which you are listened to, dream together, choose to contribute, act with support, and are positive.

Plant the seeds of appreciative inquiry, practice appreciation, and lead positive change.

Invest your community's knowledge

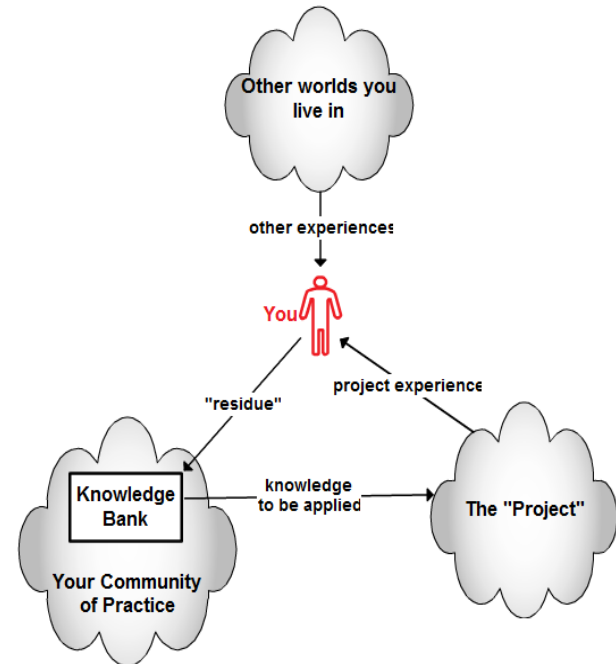
How does your organization learn from experience, take the knowledge of your experts, make it available to those who need it, and create value in the process?

Communities of practice are *“groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”* (Etienne Wenger in *Cultivating Communities of Practice*)

Wenger also describes the knowledge of experts as *“an accumulation of experience - a kind of residue of their actions, thinking, and conversations.”* Knowledge can be static or tacit.

Communities of practice are a way to bank this knowledge, systematically, one deposit at a time.

Communities of practice and knowledge banks provide an ideal way to share, learn from, and adapt knowledge.



Resolve disputes appropriately

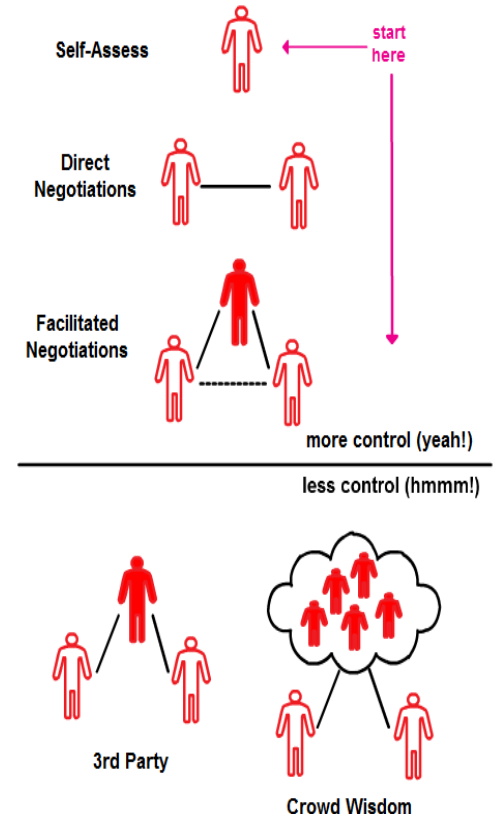
Conflict is normal. Disputes happen. What's an appropriate way to resolve disputes? Before getting someone to pass judgement on a dispute, consider other options.

Self-assessment (e.g., leveraging some diagnostic tools), direct negotiations (with the other party), and facilitated negotiation using a neutral 3rd party (e.g., mediator) are all effective ways to resolve a dispute.

These ways offer the parties a high degree of control over the dispute resolution process, including the design of that process, and are generally informal, interest-based, low cost, confidential, voluntary, allow for decisions to be made by the parties themselves, and align with a spirit of collaboration.

Other ways to resolve a dispute focus on a neutral 3rd party ruling; e.g., by an arbitrator, judge, or jury of peers (as in eBay's Community Court). These methods are more directive; leaving final decision-making in the hands of a 3rd party.

It matters how you resolve a dispute.



Link sustainability to long-term relationships

The essence of sustainability is long-term relationships.

A long-term view makes it easier to deal with the ebb and flow common to relationships, knowing we'll each be here tomorrow, for each other!

Knowing we are in a long-term relationship gives us a measure of security. It frees us to practice business in sustainable ways; no need to grab and run! Fair Trade partnerships build on this idea.

Building long-term relationships requires up-front due diligence, asking difficult questions; e.g., Do we share the same values? Is there business market demand for our product?

Long-term relationships are built on trust, and flow from consensus building processes; where participants are involved in the process design, all interests are represented and respected, direct interactions are possible, and each participant has an effective voice.

The long-term speaks to sustainable communities, communities that aim for generosity, a well-distributed and safeguarded abundance.

“Long-term is the only perspective for judging innovation.”

Appendices

Some authors and books worth checking out

Here is a partial list of some of the amazing books I read over the last 12 months, and which helped fuel my first year as a blogger, on the topic of collaboration. Thanks to all the authors.

On aboriginality and ancient wisdom

A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada, by John Ralston Saul

If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?, by J. Edward Chamberlain

The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World, by Wade Davis

On the web

Blog Blazers: 40 Top Bloggers Share Their Secrets, by Stephane Grenier

Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World, by Don Tapscott

The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors, by Hal Niedzviecki

Trust Agents: Using the Web to Build Influence, Improve Reputation, and Earn Trust, by Chris Brogan, Julien Smith

On community building

Community Conversations: Mobilizing the Ideas, Skills, and Passion of Community Organizations, Governments, Businesses, and People, by Paul Born

Community: The Structure of Belonging, by Peter Block

Demeter's Wheats: Growing Local Food and Community With Traditional Wisdom and Heritage Wheat, by Sharon Rempel

Inspiring stories

Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism, by Muhammad Yunus

The Blue Sweater: Bridging the Gap Between Rich and Poor in an Interconnected World, by Jacqueline Novogratz

Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time, by Greg Mortenson, David Oliver Relin

The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating, by Alisa Smith, J.B. Mackinnon

Dealing with uncertainty

Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious, by Gerd Gigerenzer

How We Decide, by Jonah Lehrer

Physics and Beyond: Encounters and Conversations, by Werner Heisenberg

From a performing arts perspective

The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature, by Daniel J. Levitin

Orchestrating Collaboration at Work: Using Music, Improv, Storytelling, and Other Arts to Improve Teamwork, by Linda Naiman, Arthur Van Gundy

The Collaborative Habit: Life Lessons for Working Together, by Twyla Tharp

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, by Scott McCloud

Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work or Play, by Doug Lipman

Novels about the future, for better or worse

The Year of the Flood, by Margaret Atwood

Rollback, by Robert J. Sawyer

General Business

Free: The Future of a Radical Price, by Chris Anderson

Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation, by Nandan Nilekani

The Dip: A Little Book That Teaches You When to Quit (and When to Stick), by Seth Godin

The Opposable Mind: Winning Through Integrative Thinking, by Roger L. Martin

Some web resources

A few of the networks I've drawn lots of inspiration from, during the past year:

[Business Alliance for Local Living Economies](#) – an alliance of networks of locally owned independent businesses dedicated to a sustainable future

[Mediate.com](#) - everything to do with mediation; including links to some terrific mediator bloggers

[National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation](#)

[Nonprofit Technology Network](#)

[Skoll Foundation](#) - social entrepreneurship portal

[Worldchanging.com](#) - a non-profit media organization headquartered in Seattle, WA, that comprises a global network of independent journalists, designers and thinkers

Four things about Ben Ziegler

He lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada with his wife Jackie, and two aspiring young adult children.

He feels lucky for all the opportunities, professionally and in other ways, that getting involved in the mediation field has provided him.

He hangs out with varied business, non-profit, and arts communities.

He's easily found online:

- You can email him: ben@collaborativejourneys.com
- You can send a tweet: [@benziegler](https://twitter.com/benziegler)
- You can read his blog: www.collaborativejourneys.com