Abstract

This article provides an overview of the theory of collaborative advantage. This is a practice-oriented theory concerned with enhancing practical understanding of the management issues involved in joint working across organizations. Two contrasting concepts are central to it: collaborative advantage which is concerned with the potential for synergy from working collaboratively; and, collaborative inertia which relates to the often disappointing output in reality. The theory is structured as a set of overlapping themes, which are predominantly issues that practitioners see as causing pain and reward in collaborative situations. Five example themes are discussed: common aims; power; trust; membership structures; and, leadership. It is argued that the theory captures the complexity that underlies collaborative situations and conveys it in a way that seems real to those involved. It aims to empower those involved through legitimising experienced frustration and providing conceptual handles to help address the practical issues involved.

Key words
Collaboration, collaborative advantage, action research, partnership, leadership, joint working
SEEKING COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE: A THEMES-BASED THEORY

This article aims to provide an overview of the theory of collaborative advantage that has been developed over the past fourteen years (see Acknowledgements). The focus is predominantly on this particular theoretical perspective so the article does not systematically review more general research in this area. Nevertheless, it begins here with a brief reflection on the latter.

A characteristic of research in inter-organizational collaboration is the wide variety of disciplines, research paradigms, theoretical perspectives and sectoral focuses from which the subject is tackled. Even the most basic terminology is subject to varied interpretations and there seems to be little agreement over usage of terms such as ‘partnership’, ‘alliance’, ‘collaboration’, ‘network’ or ‘inter-organizational relations’. A further characteristic of the field is that there appears to be little mutual recognition of research across disciplines and paradigms, so there tends to be little overlap in the articles that are cited in reference lists. The complexity of perspectives can be baffling, making it difficult for individual researchers to interpret material fully that is coming from another perspective. Nevertheless my own view is that we should strive to retain diversity and value it.

Despite that view I do have a personal preoccupation. It is with the practice of collaboration. My concern is in understanding anything to do with convening, designing, managing, participating in or facilitating collaboration. My research seeks to understand how to develop, present and disseminate theory that will have a real, positive and reasonably direct influence on practice (Huxham and Vangen 2001a).

This research has been carried out through action research of the sort specified in Eden and Huxham (1996) (see also Huxham and Vangen 2001b; Huxham 2002). The approach has some similarity to ethnography in the sense that theoretical insights are derived from naturally occurring data rather than through interviews or questionnaires (Marshall and Rossman 1999). Using action research, however, requires us to intervene in the organizations studied and work with organizational members on a matter of genuine concern to them and over which they have a genuine need to take action. We gather research data and insight alongside the intervention, for example in the form of notes taken during or after meetings or telephone calls or flipcharts or video recordings made during workshops. The requirement for the ‘subjects’ of the research to be concerned with action, together with the closeness of the researcher to the system being studied, increases the opportunity for gaining data about participants’ ‘theories in use’ (Argyris and Schon 1974). In intervening into inter-organizational situations in this way, I have worked in a variety of roles including facilitation, sounding board, awareness raising, in-depth interviewing and method and tool development. I have also been directly involved as a participant in a number of collaborative situations.

In action research of this type, theory is derived ‘emergently’ (Eisenhardt 1989). The analysis methods used to derive theory from the data have varied according to
topic and circumstance and any method for deriving theory inductively from qualitative
data would be appropriate in principle. The method that we have most often used
involves: scanning the data for items that appear to relate to the particular topic within
the theory of collaborative advantage that is being worked upon; creating more generic
interpretations of these; clustering apparently similar data items and interpretations;
giving labels to the clusters; and successively trying out ways to frame and write about
the emerging theory. A full description of this action research process appears in
Huxham (2002).

The intervention settings in which the action research has taken place have been
predominantly concerned with collaborative arrangements aimed at addressing social
issues including community planning, the environment, economic development,
unemployment, special education, community care, criminal justice, health promotion
and health service provision and poverty alleviation. Some, however, have involved
only partners in the commercial sector. This latter point is relevant because although
the theoretical outcomes of the research have been mainly generated from public and
community sector settings, they appear to be directly applicable in these commercial
settings.

Two concepts have dominated this research. The first, collaborative advantage,
emerged early in the research and essentially captures the synergy argument (Huxham
with Macdonald 1992; Huxham 1993). To get the real advantage out of collaboration it
is argued that something has to be achieved that could not have been attained by any of
the organizations acting alone. This concept provides a useful ‘guiding light’ for the
purpose of collaboration. However, after working with more collaborative groups a
second concept, collaborative inertia, emerged to capture what we saw happening very
frequently in practice (Huxham 1996). This is that the output from collaborative
arrangements often appears to be negligible or the rate of output to be extremely slow.
Even where successful outcomes are reported, stories of pain and hard grind are often
integral to the success achieved. The comment below is typical, emphasizing the
frequently raised problem of meetings that are not achieving action and even, in this
case, actual conflict between two of the key agencies.

... by the time I was appointed people were refusing to come to partnership or subgroup
meetings because they were not achieving action ... there was a lot of conflict between two of the key
agencies ... my predecessor left after nine months
and I think I know why ...

manager, rural partnership
The remark about her predecessor suggested that managing this partnership had been a very painful and difficult experience. It would be possible to quote endless similar examples.

This dilemma between advantage and inertia leads to one of the key questions for this research:

If collaborative advantage is the goal behind both the policy rhetoric of partnership and the ambitions of practitioners who initiate them, why is collaborative inertia so often the outcome?

Our approach to this has been to create a set of overlapping pictures, which together form a deep theoretical conceptualization of the nature of collaborative working. This approach differs from that taken by other researchers who have aimed to build practice-relevant understandings of collaboration, since it does not conceptualize collaborative activity in stages or phases, nor does it seek to identify success factors or produce a how-to-do-it guide (see, for example, McCann 1984; Gray 1989; Mattesich and Monsey 1992; Kanter 1994; Winer and Ray 1994; Das and Teng 1997; Faerman et al. 2001).

We refer to the pictures as themes in collaboration (Huxham and Vangen 1996, 2000a). Most have been generated out of practitioner concerns. A fairly consistent set of issues appears to cause them pain and reward in collaboration and these, not surprisingly, are reflected in much of the research literature. Those listed in Figure 1 are typical. Some of our themes however, have not been generated specifically out of the expressed concerns of practitioners but appear to us to cut across most of the practitioner-generated themes. A third type of theme has not been expressed by practitioners but does appear to be of concern to policy makers.

A large part of our research agenda, then, has been to form a deep understanding of the complexity underlying each of these theme areas. This is an ongoing research programme and much remains to be done. It will not be possible, here, to outline all aspects of the theory to date. I will concentrate on some key features of five of the themes as indicated in Figure 1.

**THEME 1: COMMON AIMS**

I begin with this theme because members of collaborative groups with whom I work consistently raise it. It appears to be common wisdom that it is necessary to be clear about the aims of joint working if partners are to work together to operationalize policies. Typically people argue for common (or at least compatible), agreed or clear sets of aims as a starting point in collaboration. The common practice, however, appears to be that the variety of organizational and individual agendas that are present in collaborative situations make it difficult to agree on aims in practice.
Our response to this has been to create a goal taxonomy (summarized in Figure 2) that aims to identify the kinds of goals that are present in collaborative settings (Vangen et al. 1994; see also Eden and Huxham 2001). In particular it distinguishes between the goals of the collaboration, the related goals of each individual organization (as seen by the participants) and the individual participants’ personal goals. The taxonomy emphasizes also that, while some of these goals may be explicit, many will be taken for granted (assumed) by one partner but not necessarily recognized by another, and many will be deliberately hidden.

**Common aims: The practical conclusion . . .**

In brief, our conclusion is that it is always going to be inherently difficult to satisfy the common wisdom in practice. When working with practitioners therefore, I often find myself arguing that *sometimes* it is best to get started on some action without fully agreeing the aims. I have often quoted the manager who made this point so eloquently in the context of writing a bid for funding:
Clearly issues in the other theme areas indicated in Figure 1 increase the challenge of agreeing aims. For example, some of the difficulties that arise out of the need to communicate across different professional and natural languages and different organizational and professional cultures are unlikely to assist the negotiation process. Likewise, concerns about accountability of participants to their own organizations or to other constituents are unlikely to make it easy for individuals to make compromises. Similarly, if major power discrepancies are perceived, or if relationships between parties are not wholly trusting, the negotiation process is likely to be more difficult. I will next focus on these latter two themes.

**THEME 2: POWER**

As with the previous theme, there appears to be some fairly common wisdom in this area. Typically people argue that ‘the power is in the purse strings’, implying that those who
do not have control of the financial resource are automatically disempowered. Our observation, as relatively independent participants in these situations, is that these perceptions are quite often at odds with ‘reality’ since most parties do, minimally, generally (though not always) have at least the ‘power of exit’. However, the common practice, unsurprisingly, is that people act as though their perceptions are real and often display defensiveness and aggression.

Our approach to understanding power in collaborative situations has been to identify where power is actually enacted in influencing the way in which collaborative activities are negotiated and carried out. We call these points of power and together they make up what we have referred to as the power infrastructure of a collaboration (Huxham and Beech 2002). Many of these occur at a micro level in the collaboration and would often not be particularly obvious to those involved. One example of a point of power would be the naming of the collaboration, since this is likely to influence what it does. Those who are involved in the naming process are therefore in a powerful position at that time. Another set of examples concerns invitations to join a collaboration. Those who choose who to involve are obviously powerful, but those who choose the process of who to involve may be more so. A further point of power connected to invitations to join, which is often hidden, relates to the determination of the way in which representative groupings are identified. For example ‘the community sector’ may be considered as a representative unit. Such identity groupings are often taken for granted but may not be consistently identified by different stakeholders. Being in a position to name the groupings is therefore potentially very powerful, even though the degree of influence on the outcome that this may have is often not recognized.

Many points of power relate to communication media and processes. One set of examples concerns the arrangements for meetings. Clearly any person taking the role of chair or facilitator in a meeting is in a position of power while the meeting is in place, but those who get to choose which facilitator to appoint are more subtly and perhaps more significantly powerful. Those who choose the location of a meeting may be in a powerful position, particularly in terms of determining whether it will be on the premises of one of the participants. Those who choose the timing of the meeting are also powerful.

It is possible to continue identifying points of power of this sort that are typically likely to be present during the activities of collaborations. The power infrastructure, however, is not static. The locus of power is continually shifting. In common with other researchers (McQuaid 2000; Mayo and Taylor 2001) we have noted these shifts at a macro level, between phases in a collaboration’s development. For example, in a pre-start-up phase those who get to write bids for funding may be powerful, but in a start-up phase, once money is available, those who are appointed to administer the collaboration may be highly powerful in determining quite a lot of parameters concerned with direction and ways of working. It may only be at later stages that the actual members become active and have the chance to exert power.
Our theory, however, also focuses on micro-level continuous shifts that occur in all phases. For example partnership managers are often in powerful positions between meetings of members because they are the only people employed by the partnership and hence the only people who have its agenda as their main concern. They may also have access to the partnership funds. During meetings, however, members can shift many of the points of power in significant ways, often determining new members, times and locations of meetings as well as influencing agreements about action. Those less centrally involved, such as facilitators or consultants, can be in powerful positions for short periods of time. External influences, such as those from government, can sometimes be extremely powerful in a short-term way as they make demands for reports or responses to initiatives.

**Power: The practical conclusion . . .**

Although issues concerned with control of purse strings remain significant there are many other points at which power is, in practice, enacted in collaborative settings. In using this aspect of the theory with practitioners we argue that understanding the points of power can enable any participant to assess where others are unwittingly or consciously exerting power, where others may view them as exerting power or consider how explicitly to exert power. Responding to all of these, however, requires a willingness to accept that manipulative behaviour is appropriate, which some would argue is against the spirit of collaboration. This point will be returned to later.

**THEME 3: TRUST**

As with themes 1 and 2, there is a *common wisdom* associated with the issue of trust. Many practitioners argue that trust is a precondition for successful collaboration and this is reflected in the research literature on the subject (see, for example, Das and Teng 1998; Lane and Bachman 1998). However, while the existence of trusting relationships between partners probably would be an ideal situation, the *common practice* appears to be that suspicion, rather than trust, between partners is commonly the starting point. Often partners do not have the luxury to choose others to work with. Either imposed (e.g. government) policy dictates who the partners must be or the pragmatics of the situation dictate that partners are needed where trust is weak. This suggests that it is appropriate to focus on trust *building* between partners.

Our approach to researching trust has been slightly different from that in the other themes since there has been a very large amount of research carried out on trust in inter-organizational settings by other researchers. This research takes a variety of different perspectives, but in reviewing it my colleague, Siv Vangen, specifically focused on searching out what it might have to say about *trust building*. She summarized
the findings in the form of a trust building loop depicted in Figure 3, (Vangen and Huxham 2003). In brief this argues that research indicates that two factors are important to getting started in a trusting relationship. The first is concerned with the formation of expectations about the future of the collaboration and that these will be based either on reputation or past behaviour, or on more formal contracts and agreements. Given the previous comments about the difficulty of agreeing aims for collaborations this in itself is a non-trivial starting point. The second starting point involves risk taking. The argument is that partners need to trust each other enough that they are prepared to take a risk to initiate the collaboration. If both of these initiators are possible then the research appears to imply that trust can be built through starting with some modest but realistic aims which are likely to achieve success thereby reinforcing trusting attitudes and so gaining the underpinnings for more ambitious collaboration.

**Trust: The practical conclusion . . .**

The practical conclusion from the trust building loop is very similar to that concerning the management of aims, namely sometimes it is better to get started on some action without fully developing trust. Such an approach would not be practical if an immediate need to attain a major objective is paramount. However, in other situations this small wins approach is appealing. I shall return to it later.

![The trust building loop](source: Vangen and Huxham 2000.)
THEME 4: MEMBERSHIP STRUCTURES

Moving away, now, from the practitioner-generated themes, I turn to the cross-cutting theme of membership structures. Our theory in this area has three aspects to it conceptualizing the structures of collaborations as ambiguous, complex and dynamic (Huxham and Vangen 2000b).

Ambiguity

Even after fourteen years of working with people who are involved in collaborations, I continue to be surprised about the number who are unclear about who they are in collaboration with. Often those who are very centrally involved in managing collaborations, such as partnership managers, cannot list the membership of their partnership without referring to formal documentation. There would appear to be a variety of reasons for this. For example, people or organizations consider themselves or others to have different statuses. For instance the person who argued,

I am just a resource to the group

member, anti-poverty collaborative

considered that he was there to support the group and not as a member, but other members of his group regarded him and his organization as a central member of the group. In many cases it is unclear whether it is individual people or organizations that are members of a collaboration. For example, the person who argued,

there is ambiguity about whether I or the university is a member

member, environmental alliance

commented that he was invited to join local partnerships because of his expertise in facilitating groups but that nobody, either in the partnerships or his university, seemed clear about whether or how the resource and expertise of the university as a whole should be drawn in. A third example concerns ambiguousness in representativeness. For example the person who commented that,
was describing a collaboration in which members were invited because of their different ethnic backgrounds but pulled in with them the organizations for which they worked. At any one time it could be impossible to tell which of these two hats (or indeed any other) they were relating to.

Complexity

The lack of clarity about who partners are is often compounded by the complexity of collaborative arrangements in practice. The example of Figure 4 has been described in detail elsewhere (Huxham and Vangen 2000b); I include it here only to illustrate one way in which complexity can be apparent. In this case complexity is evident in the complex hierarchy of collaborations in which the local authority is a member of the regeneration partnership but is also a member of community collaborations which are in turn members of the community umbrella group, which is in turn a member of the regeneration partnership. Figure 5 illustrates another form of complexity. This indicates the ever-increasing numbers of partnerships that are appearing in localities and the numbers of these that some individuals become involved in. For example the person indicated by the small circle numbered 1 is a member of partnerships B, C, E, F, G and H and presumably regularly attends meetings of all of these. This tendency towards ever-increasing numbers of collaborative entities has been labelled by one of the more eloquent practitioners with whom I have worked as ‘partnershipitis’. A recent phenomenon is an emphasis, even by government, on ‘rationalization’ of partnerships.

Dynamics

The ambiguity and complexity indicated in the previous two sections would be difficult enough for participants to get to grips with if it stood still. In practice, however, the structure of collaborations appears to be highly dynamic. There is an inherent dynamic at the heart of collaboration since the members of the collaboration should define its purpose, but the purpose ought to indicate which members are needed. In principle this could mean a continuously shifting structure as each new member manages to negotiate a shift in purpose which in turn suggests that new members may be needed. This cycle is depicted in the centre of Figure 6.
In practice this dynamic is likely to settle down through compromise of expectations. However, policy influences, which may be internal but are very frequently imposed externally, often generate restructuring of member organizations—merger and de-merger, new start-ups and disbandings are all evident—implying, in turn, a necessary restructuring of any collaboration in which they were a member. Equally, internal, or more often external, policy influences will affect the purpose of the collaboration and this in turn will imply shifts in the relevance of it for members. New members may join and others may leave. Another source of dynamic change comes with individual movements. The relationships between individual participants in collaborations are often argued to be fundamental to getting things done. This makes them highly sensitive to changes in individuals’ employment, even if these are simply role changes within one of the participating organizations. Finally even if all of that stood still there is often a further inherent dynamic since if an initial collaborative purpose is achieved, there will usually be a need to move to new collaborative agendas and these are likely to imply different membership requirements.

All organizations are dynamic to the extent that they will gradually transform. However, collaborations are sensitive to the transformations in each of the partner...
organizations and therefore may change very quickly. In one case, for example, we watched a collaborative group change over the space of about three years from a having an ambiguous structure involving many partners, through three reincarnations, and ending up as a very controlled collaboration between two partners. Its final stated purpose was similar to, but definitely not the same as, the original one. It would be reasonable to argue that this final partnership was a different beast to the original collaborative group, but it is possible to trace a clear lineage from one to the other.

Membership structures: The practical conclusion . . .

Clearly, it is hard to agree aims, build mutual understanding and manage power relations in structures that are so ambiguous that members do not know who their partners are and so complex that it is often very unclear how parts of collaborations relate to other parts. In addition the dynamic nature of collaborations makes the appealing trust building loop inherently extremely fragile because effort put in to building mutual understanding and developing trust can be shattered, for example, by a change in the structure of a key organization or the job change of a key individual.
The practical conclusion, therefore, is that those who want to make collaboration work need to be prepared to ‘nurture, nurture, nurture’ them. This nurturing process must be continuous and permanent because no sooner will gains be made than a thunderbolt, in the form of a change to one of the partners, (Figure 7) will come to disturb them.

Figure 6: Dynamics in the membership structures of collaborations

Figure 7: Fragility of the trust building loop

Policy influences on member organizations
Policy influences on purpose
Individual’s job changes
Moving to new collaborative agendas

Reinforce trusting attitudes
More ambitious collaboration
Form expectations about the future of the collaboration based on reputation or past behaviour or contracts and agreements
Have enough trust and take a risk to initiate the collaboration

Successful outcomes

Realistic (only modest)
THEME 5: LEADERSHIP

Given the inherent difficulties with collaborative forms that have been outlined in the context of the four themes discussed so far, the issue of leadership in collaboration seems highly relevant. Our approach to looking at leadership in collaboration conceptualized it as being concerned with the mechanisms that 'make things happen' in a collaboration. More formally this relates to a concern with the formation and implementation of the collaboration's policy and activity agenda. The theory that we developed here has two strands to it (Huxham and Vangen 2000c).

The first strand is concerned with the media through which leadership is enacted and argues that structures and processes are as important in leading agendas as are the participants involved in the collaboration. Thus, for example, a structure in which two organizations only are involved in partnership should allow both organizations good access to the agenda but does exclude others. To take the extreme contrast a collaboration in which any organization that wants to be a member may send a representative allows wide access to the agenda in principle, but it may be difficult for any individual to have much influence in practice. Similarly, in the context of collaborative processes, a collaboration for which a major form of communication is through open meetings is going to allow a very different form of access to the agenda from one whose principal mode of communication is through e-mail and/or telephone. Thus, agendas may be led by the type of structure that is in place and the type of processes used. They can, of course, also be led by participants.

The important additional point is that all three leadership media—structures, processes and participants—are often largely not controlled by members of the collaboration. Structures and processes may be imposed externally, for example, by a funding body. Even if this is not the case, they often emerge out of previous action rather than being explicitly designed by members. Even in the context of ‘participants’ as the leadership medium, it may not be members of the collaboration who take the leadership roles. As one person argued,

there are a lot of influential people around here who are not part of this partnership

representative, special education partnership

She was referring to key people in other agencies who were strongly influencing the territory of the partnership. A strong lead is often also given by partnership managers who are usually not members of the partnership but employed to support it. As one argued,
The second strand of the theory is concerned with the leadership activities that those participants, whether they are actually members or not, carry out. We have been able to identify many of the types of things that they do in order to move collaborations forward in ways that they regard as beneficial for it. A broad conclusion is that in carrying out these activities leaders do affect the outcomes of collaborative activity. However—and this is an important additional conclusion—they are frequently thwarted by dilemmas and difficulties so that the outcomes are not as they intend.

The partnership manager who argued,

\[\text{we have put the workshop series onto a backburner because we have to produce a report for a funder}\]

is typical.

**Leadership: The practical conclusion . . .**

Once again this leads to the practical conclusion that continual nurturing is essential to leading collaborations towards the desired outcome.

**Two perspectives on leadership activities**

A second thrust at developing a theoretical understanding of leadership in collaborative settings focused on a more detailed investigation into the nature of leadership activities. This revealed that much of what is done by those aiming to move a collaboration forward may be said to be fundamentally within the spirit of collaboration. These activities seem to be highly facilitative and are concerned with embracing, empowering, involving and mobilizing members. More detail on the types of activities done under each of these headings can be found in Vangen and Huxham (2003). However, we also see those same people engaged in activities that, on the face of it, are much less
collaborative. Many of them are adept at manipulating agendas and playing the politics. We have characterized these types of activities as being towards collaborative thuggery after the member who told us that a partnership that he was involved with had been successful:

... because the convenor is a thug; if people are not pulling their weight he pushes them out

He appeared to be arguing that this was a positive and effective mode of leadership. Both of these aspects of leadership are represented in Figure 8.

**Leadership activities: The practical conclusion . . .**

Does this, then, suggest a dilemma between ideology and pragmatism? We think the answer is ‘not necessarily’. One way of thinking about this is to consider the nature of nurturing. This word is often used in connection with horticulture (see Figure 9). Nurturing is often talked about in the context of the gentle care required for fragile plants (Wistow and Hardy 1991). However, to nurture an overgrown garden back to health rather more decisive tactics have to be taken; chopping down of excess growth and pulling up of weeds are likely to be key activities, in addition to the nurturing back to health of individual plants that have become overpowered by others.

We do not have hard and fast evidence of this, but it is our observation that those who lead successfully operate from both perspectives – the *spirit of collaboration* and

![Figure 8: The essence of leadership for collaborative advantage](Source: Vangen and Huxham (2003).)
towards collaborative thuggery – and continually switch between them, often carrying out both types of leadership in the same act. A representative of one partnership captured this rather nicely, arguing that:

... partnership means going behind people’s backs in a trustworthy sort of way

representative, health provision alliance

**SEEKING COLLABORATIVE ADVANTAGE**

Most reported research on collaboration involving public and community organizations focuses on investigating the relevance and value of governmental policies and initiatives (see, for some recent examples, Deakin 2002; Thurmaier and Wood 2002; Wyatt 2002) or on delineating and evaluating different forms of relationships, structures,
processes and so on (e.g. Diamond 2002; Klijn 2002; Vigoda 2002). While such research potentially has valuable practical relevance, this is primarily at a policy level rather than the practice level focused on in the theory described here.

There are recent articles, however, that do focus on issues of practice. Some focus on the skills needed for managing networks and other forms of collaborative relationships (Jackson and Stainsby 2000; Williams 2002), acknowledging some of the issues raised in this article. Another studies the management of networks using a more traditional research approach, proposing hypotheses about managerial behaviour under certain proscribed circumstances, taking account of far fewer variables and consequently suggesting much tighter causal relationships (McGuire 2002). A third approach investigates factors that impinge on success or failure but encapsulates a greater level of richness than is amenable to capture in hypothesis-oriented approach (Faerman et al. 2001). A fourth perspective investigates group processes for working with multi-constituency groups (e.g. Bryson and Anderson 2000).

By contrast, the theory described here focuses on a conceptual description of the complex micro-processes of participation in collaborative initiatives. In this respect it is very similar to Cramton’s (2002) approach to studying communication in dispersed collaboration. Indeed, the incorporation of her observations on aspects of communication that cause difficulty into a theme on communication would be natural. Unlike Cramton, however, we are not seeking to provide ‘guidelines for practice’ as such. In drawing to a close I want to comment, therefore, on the purpose of this theory. We have been seeking to develop a theory of collaborative advantage that will helpfully support those who seek collaborative advantage in practice. Figure 10 summarizes our intentions and indicates some practitioner reactions.

Our aim has been to understand the complexity that underlies collaborative situations and convey it in a way that seems real to those involved, even though they could not have explicated it themselves. The intention is that it should empower those involved in two ways, providing a dual basis for thoughtful action.

The first basis is through legitimizing the pain and addressing the isolation that people often feel when trapped in collaborative inertia: many practitioners find that simply understanding that the problems that they are experiencing are inevitable is empowering. In this respect the theory is intended partly to increase self-confidence and partly to highlight the need to tackle the problems of collaboration more determinedly and sometimes more aggressively. The notion of collaborative thuggery can be particularly helpful in legitimizing a degree of manipulation and politicking.

The second, and perhaps more significant way in which the theory provides a basis for action is through the conceptual handles that the theory underlying each of the theme areas provides. In this summary article it has only been possible to give a sense of the types of issues that have to be addressed. The more detailed explications of the theory referenced earlier provide a greater appreciation of these issues. However, even these do not provide a recipe for good practice. Given that the theory frequently highlights tensions between common wisdom—or in some cases deeply researched
seeking collaborative advantage

understand the complexity

convey the complexity in a way that seems real

empower by legitimizing the pain and addressing isolation

empower through conceptual handles knowing what to nurture

help practitioners to find their own way through ........

Figure 10: Intentions for the developing theory of collaborative advantage

wisdom—and ‘practical reality’, and between alternative ways of addressing these dilemmas (Huxham and Beech 2003), to provide clear-cut solutions would be to misrepresent and mis-use the theory. Instead, the theory is intended to alert managers to aspects of collaborative situations that will need active attention and nurturing if problems of collaborative inertia are to be minimized. Each theme provides a particular perspective on this, and can be used in isolation to stimulate thinking about that aspect of a collaborative situation. However, the issues raised by each theme overlap with those raised in others, so the combination of themes always needs to be in the background even if the focus at a particular time is on one of them.

The theory is therefore designed to be used in a reflective practice mode in which the actual action to be taken is a matter for practitioner judgement (Huxham and Beech 2003). Judgements of this sort have to be made contingently, depending on the particular circumstance so particular approaches to resolving issues are not necessarily transferable to other situations, even those involving the same set of individuals.

A final point is worth making, lest those that read this should conclude that I am strongly advocating collaboration. Although the theory described here is by its very nature imprecise and there are no clear-cut guidelines for how to act, there is one hard and fast conclusion from the research. This is that making collaboration work effectively is highly resource consuming and often painful. My strongest piece of advice
to practitioners, therefore, is ‘don’t do it unless you have to’. Put rather more formally, the argument is that unless the potential for real collaborative advantage is clear, it is generally best, if there is any choice, to avoid collaboration. It is worth noting, however, that collaborative advantage sometimes comes in non-obvious forms and may be concerned with the process of collaborating rather than the actual output. For example, the advantage may come from the development of a relationship with a partner rather than through achieving the substantive aims of the collaboration.

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