

From “Let’s collaborate”
to “Let’s collaborate
effectively”



From “Let’s collaborate” to “Let’s collaborate *effectively*”

For it to be meaningful, collaboration needs to be purposeful and conducted with rigour.

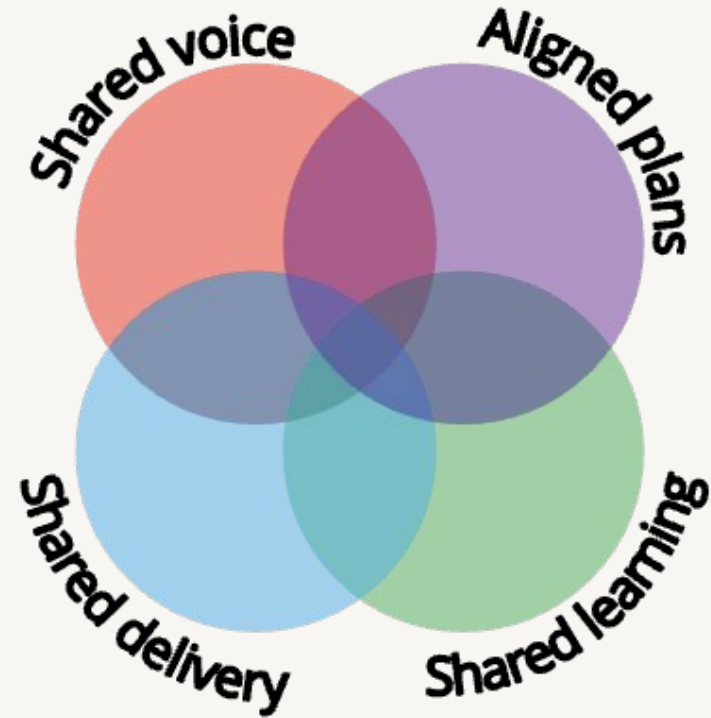
We looked at the evidence base and existing high-performing collaborations.

What we found was that while the purpose and activities can vary widely, successful collaborations consistently share a set of **eight characteristics**.

We use these characteristics to guide systems, organisations and individuals to understand their collaboration's strengths and what they can do to collaborate more effectively and create more value together.



**Four ways
collaborations can
create value
together**



There are four distinct -ways to collaborate. But clarity matters because the ‘why?’ shapes the ‘how?’

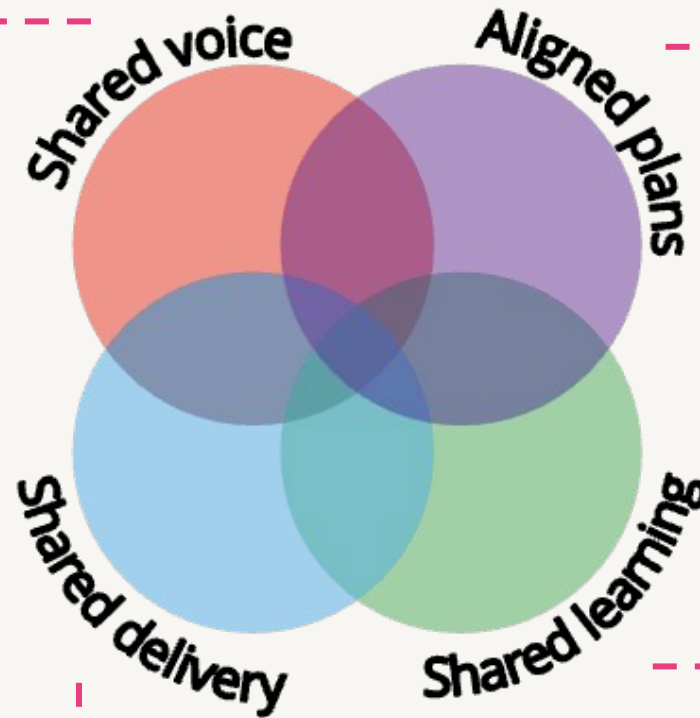


Shared voice - Collaborating to amplify the voices of partners, which are more powerful the larger and more diverse collaborators are. Examples include labour and social movements and advocacy initiatives.

Aligned plans - Collaborating to ensure that member activities are coordinated so that at a minimum they don't overlap or duplicate and aiming to complement each other to achieve shared goals. Examples include aligning community activities and initiatives with statutory services.

Shared delivery - Collaborating to develop, test and implement new products or services. Examples include primary care networks and safety collaboratives.

Shared learning - Collaborating to learn from each other. This enables the transfer of best practice and avoids duplication of efforts and repetition of mistakes. Examples include the Virginia Mason Institute Partnership and the Global Digital Exemplar Learning Network.





Eight characteristics of effective collaborations

High-performing collaborations have a **clear, shared purpose...**

...with a focus on building the right **culture...**

...and the **resources and structure** to succeed.



Purpose with values

A compelling shared purpose supported by aligned values and a strategy with defined, stretching and compelling goals



Partners committed to purpose and empowered to act

Partners demonstrate commitment to shared purpose through their decisions, investments and behaviours, with autonomy and support to take meaningful action.



Deliberate cultivation of trust and generosity

A culture where partners share openly, support each other beyond formal requirements, and prioritise collective benefit over organisational advantage.



Leaders who actively span boundaries

Leadership with the skills to connect people, organisations and ideas across traditional boundaries, building bridges between different groups, organisations and sectors.



Ways to communicate and convene

Deliberate approaches to connecting people and sharing information that make collaboration easy, efficient and purposeful.



Ways to measure and improve

Robust approaches to measuring both the health of the collaboration and its impact, using data to drive learning and improvement.



Enabling governance processes

Governance enables inclusive collaboration and clear decision making. Promotes diversity of voice and perspective. Avoids bureaucracy that stifles innovation and action.

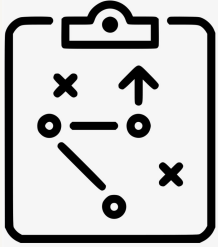


Skills and capabilities

Partners have the right mix of skills, resources and support to collaborate effectively, with ongoing investment in developing collaborative capabilities.



1. Purpose with values



A compelling shared purpose supported by aligned values and a strategy with defined, stretching and compelling goals

Why is this important?

- In complex health systems, shared purpose provides the foundation for difficult decisions about priorities and resources.
- When truly compelling, purpose motivates partners to move beyond organisational interests to focus on population outcomes.
- Aligned values ensure partners approach challenges consistently, building trust and enabling faster decision-making.
- Clear purpose helps partners explain to their own organisations why collaboration matters.

Indicators

- ✓ Partners consistently reference purpose when making key decisions.
- ✓ Values visibly shape how partners work together and resolve conflicts.
- ✓ Theory of change links collaborative activities to system outcomes.
- ✓ Regular strategy and planning reviews ensure activities remain purpose-aligned.

Inspiration for action

SEL ICS Virtual Wards Community of Practice: Six south east London programmes used the Eight Characteristics model for virtual hospital-at-home services. Early co-production of purpose and values created strong collaborative foundations, with 89% of members finding participation valuable and directly improving services.

ImproveCareNow (US): A collaborative community uniting clinicians, researchers, patients, and parents to continuously improve inflammatory bowel disease care for young people. Their unwavering focus on the network's purpose has successfully enhanced clinical remission rates through reliable, proactive care approaches.



2. Partners committed to purpose and empowered to act



Partners demonstrate active commitment to the shared purpose through their decisions, investments and behaviours, with the autonomy and support to take meaningful action.

Why is this important?

- Collaboration can't run on goodwill alone. There needs to be genuine commitment from partners.
- Clear agreement between partners on levels of investment is crucial - whether that's time or resources.
- Although the levels of investment may vary, what should not be negotiable is the commitment to the principles of collaboration.

Indicators

- ✓ Partners consistently prioritise collaborative work and attend key meetings.
- ✓ Partners demonstrate ownership by actively driving work between formal meetings.
- ✓ Partners report that their voices are heard and that they are able to influence decisions.

Inspiration for action

The Climate Group: An international non-profit founded in 2003 to achieve a goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Corporate and government members set their own targets and action plans to meet the collaborative goal.

Buurtzorg (Netherlands): Has built a culture of international self-management enabled by a shared commitment around a clear and motivating purpose.



3. Deliberate cultivation of trust and generosity



A culture where partners share openly, support each other beyond formal requirements, and prioritise collective benefit over organisational advantage

Why is this important?

- Entering into collaborations often involves a level of cost and risk for partners.
- Trust enables difficult conversations about resources, performance and priorities.
- When partners feel safe to be generous, innovation and improvement flourish.
- Collaborative relationships are not transactional, they are about sharing without 'keeping score'. Without trust and generosity, it is competition, not collaboration.

Indicators

- ✓ Partners routinely share challenges and offer support without being asked.
- ✓ Meetings demonstrate psychological safety through open discussion of difficulties.
- ✓ Partners share resources, expertise and learning beyond formal agreements.
- ✓ Partners advocate for each other's needs within the broader system.

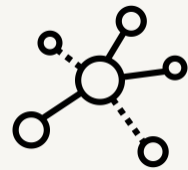
Inspiration for action

Microsoft: When Satya Nadella became CEO, he inherited an organisation known for internal competition. His systematic approach to building trust, including having his leadership team study 'nonviolent communication', demonstrates how deliberate action can transform culture.

Khan Academy: This non-profit demonstrates how trust enables scale and innovation in complex systems. By trusting volunteer experts to adapt educational content for local needs, they created a self-sustaining ecosystem of collaboration.



4. Leaders who actively span boundaries



Leadership with the skills to connect people, organisations and ideas across traditional boundaries, building bridges between different professional groups, organisations and sectors.

Why is this important?	Indicators	Inspiration for action
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Healthcare improvement requires bringing together clinical, operational and community perspectives.Complex challenges don't respect organisational boundaries – neither should leadership.Distributed leadership across partners creates resilience and enables sustainable change.Fresh insights often come from connecting with different sectors and ways of working.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Leaders actively build relationships across organisational and professional boundaries.✓ Leaders create psychological safety for cross-boundary conversations and innovation.✓ Different professional and community perspectives routinely shape decisions.✓ Leaders help partners understand and navigate different organisational cultures.	<p>Sussex ICS: Kaleidoscope helped Sussex ICS develop boundary-spanning leaders through a systems development programme where leaders from the NHS, local government, and community organisations built shared values and new ways of working through structured workshops.</p> <p>The Eden Projects: Sir Tim Smit brought together musicians, artists, botanists and architects to create the exhibits that make up The Eden Projects. He was able to bridge boundaries and align partners behind his vision.</p>



5. Ways to communicate and convene



Deliberate approaches to connecting people and sharing information that make collaboration easy, efficient and purposeful

Why is this important?

- In complex health systems, good communication prevents duplication and enables rapid problem-solving
- Different stakeholders need different ways to engage – one size doesn't fit all.
- Regular connection builds relationships and trust between formal meetings.
- Effective knowledge sharing helps spread innovation and prevent repeated mistakes

Indicators

- ✓ Regular rhythm of connection points, from formal to informal.
- ✓ High engagement levels across all partner organisations.
- ✓ Knowledge and learning are actively shared and easily accessible.
- ✓ Partners report feeling well-informed and able to contribute effectively.
- ✓ Multiple channels are available to suit different needs and preferences.

Inspiration for action

NHS Senior Operational Leaders Network:

Kaleidoscope-supported network using mixed virtual/in-person formats facilitate both deep learning and quick problem-solving, fostering sustained participation.

National Pediatric Cardiology Quality Improvement

Collaborative: International network exemplifying effective communication across professional and public audiences through clinician-family partnerships that create accessible research summaries, fostering dialogue that leads to better-informed care decisions.



6. Ways to measure and improve



Robust approaches to measuring both the health of the collaboration and its impact, using data to drive learning and improvement.

Why is this important?

- Healthcare collaborations must demonstrate value to maintain partner commitment.
- Partners need to know if their collective efforts are making a difference.
- Good measurement enables early course correction and helps identify what works.
- Shared data builds trust and enables honest conversations about progress.
- Clear measures help tell the story of impact to stakeholders and funders.

Indicators

- ✓ Clear measures for both collaboration effectiveness and impact outcomes.
- ✓ Partners actively contribute to and use shared measurement systems.
- ✓ Regular review cycles turn data into improvement actions.
- ✓ Data is accessible and meaningful to all partners.
- ✓ Success and learning are both measured and celebrated.

Inspiration for action

South East Essex Alliance

Kaleidoscope partnered with the SEE Alliance to codesign a development programme that brought together partners across a complex local landscape. Their approach combined quantitative data from NHS and local authority sources with qualitative insights from community engagement. This data was used to develop a shared outcomes framework enabling the collaboration to track collective progress and make evidence-based decisions about priorities.



7. Enabling governance processes



Governance arrangements that enable inclusive collaboration and clear decision-making – promoting diversity of voice and perspective while avoiding bureaucracy that could stifle innovation and action.

Why is this important?

- Healthcare collaborations need clarity about how decisions are made and who is accountable.
- Good governance enables rapid action while managing risks appropriately.
- Partners need to know how to contribute to and influence decisions.
- Inclusive governance ensures diverse perspectives shape priorities.
- Clear processes help maintain trust when difficult decisions are needed.

Indicators

- ✓ Partners understand how and where decisions are made.
- ✓ Decisions routinely made using evidence and data.
- ✓ Partners report feeling able to influence key decisions.
- ✓ Leadership that reflects the diversity of partners and communities.

Inspiration for action

Sheffield PCMHT: Demonstrates enabling governance through clear objectives and an empowered core team of clinical/executive leads rather than multiple committees. This lightweight approach maintained accountability while enabling rapid decisions and innovation, with regular stakeholder engagement keeping work connected to frontline realities.

Linux open source community: Shows how clear governance enables large-scale collaboration without bureaucracy through detailed decision-making protocols and distributed leadership. This well-designed process supports rather than stifles innovation, allowing thousands of contributors to work effectively together.



8. Skills and capabilities



Partners have the right mix of skills, resources and support to collaborate effectively, with ongoing investment in developing collaborative capabilities.

Why is this important?

- Effective collaboration requires specific skills beyond traditional management capabilities.
- Partners need protected time and resources to participate meaningfully.
- Investment in collaborative skills helps sustain momentum and impact.
- Building capability creates resilience and enables adaptation to new challenges.

Indicators

- ✓ Partners have protected time and resources for collaborative work.
- ✓ Training and development in collaborative skills is available and prioritised.
- ✓ Partners understand and value each other's unique capabilities.
- ✓ Capability gaps are identified and addressed systematically.

Inspiration for action

Our Healthier South East London: Kaleidoscope established a System Leadership Academy with SEL ICS focused on community development, capability building, and innovation scaling. This comprehensive approach helped leaders work effectively across organisational boundaries, enabling more integrated care delivery.

National Children and Young People's Diabetes Network: Shows how targeted capability building drives measurable improvement. Partnership with RCPCH combined clinical expertise with quality improvement skills in a 'learn-by-doing' approach, with concrete results: participating units showed accelerated improvements in blood glucose control compared with non-participants.



Resources and further reading

- [Love2Care Devon: 6 Point Promise](#)
- [ImproveCareNow Purpose and Success](#)
- [The Climate Group](#)
- [Energy Foundation Review: Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success](#)
- [The Buurtzorg Model](#)
- [Microsoft non-violent communication](#)
- [“Koe wai hoki koe?!”, or “Who are you?!”: Issues of trust in cross cultural collaborative research](#), Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences
- [Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World](#), General Stanley McChrystal
- [Dorset ICS Case Study](#)
- [The Eden Project](#)
- [The role of boundary spanners in delivering collaborative care: a process evaluation](#), BMC Family Practice
- [Wikimedia](#)
- [Midland Decision Support Network](#)
- [Sheffield Primary Care and Mental Health Transformation \(PCMHT\)](#)
- [National CYP Diabetes Network](#)
- [National Pediatric Cardiology Quality Improvement Collaborative research explained](#)
- [Clinical Communities, Johns Hopkins Medicine](#)