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What Collaboration Means to Me Collaboration as a Cocktail: Shaken and Stirred

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Consider the cocktail: an alcoholic drink consisting of a spirit or several spirits mixed with other ingredients. One part this, two parts that, et voila! A new creation emerges, in this case a tasty beverage. What does this remind you of? Collaboration? Yes!

There are many reasons to collaborate: bring in new ideas, share workloads, learn from each other's expertise, gain perspectives, build relationships, leverage resources, etc. However, despite all the benefits, collaboration does not come without cost, be it autonomy, control, or time. There should be a good reason to collaborate, and it can be postulated that collaboration, like a good cocktail, should create something greater than the sum of its parts.

Do you know the science behind shaking versus stirring? Bartenders and cocktail aficionados, put down your hands, please – you know the answer. It's fascinating, really. According to The Kitchn, an online food magazine, shaking "introduces tiny air bubbles into the mixture" and stirring is for those cocktails which demand "no air bubbles or little shards of ice to cloud the clarity of the drink."¹

Imagine a meeting room with several people sitting around a table. Now picture idea balloons over each person's head. That's collaboration 'shaking it up!' Not only are people introducing their ideas into the mix, these ideas can foster 'creative abrasion,' a painful sounding process that can lead to perceptive insights and problem solving. Likewise, our world of relentless ambiguity demands occasional breaks of clarity,

something that might be attained from the stirring of people and ideas, which comes from collaboration.

In the public library setting, it seems that everything we do is some form of collaboration. First of all, we believe strongly in sharing. That's what public library collections are all about. And sharing is fundamental to collaboration. You have to believe in sharing to be a collaborator or you bring nothing to the table. Secondly, libraries have learned that when we put our resources together, we can leverage those resources much more fully. Interlibrary loans, consortial arrangements, shared purchasing – libraries have come up with all kinds of ways to pool resources to make them go farther.

Most of us in libraries work with staff and other partners, people who we can collaborate with – another necessary ingredient of the collaboration cocktail. Committees, support groups, teams, library boards – these groups tend to exist in great numbers in and around libraries. Libraries are hotbeds of collaborations. It's in our core.

One of the reasons to collaborate is that none of us has all the skills we need for every task. I know I'm lacking in certain skill sets and do much better when I can run my thinking by someone else. I'm like gin – I'm best mixed with other ingredients. Fortunately, I'm surrounded with the means to collaborate daily. Because I can, and know I should, I'm constantly seeking second opinions, ideas, and perspective from the people around me. And like drinking, I've been



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collaborating for a long, long time. Here are a few things that I have learned about collaboration over the years:

- **Emotional intelligence is really helpful.**

Emotional intelligence is like ice: it dilutes or chills the ingredients of the cocktail so that the parts work better together. Is this you? Do you do relationships well? Are they fun? Do people like to work with you? Do you like to work with others? Collaborating probably really works well for you. If this is not your strong suit, sit back, listen, and pay attention. You are likely to learn a great deal about people from collaborative processes.

- **Collaboration requires adaptability and an open mind to get the most out of it.**

If you are open to new ideas and can be flexible about some things, then the collaboration will be more worthwhile. Perhaps it's time to move on from the appletini to the real thing? If you cannot be flexible and are not open to new ideas, good luck. You may be going into this with an agenda and feel you only need a partner for a particular resource, but this is not a true collaboration, and you should be transparent about this up front.

- **An understanding of relationships and local and/or organizational politics can help.**

This might be even more important. If you are working with another group, the history of their interactions with your group might have more bearing on your project than you'd like. If your history does not extend deeply with your partners, perhaps you need to seek background information. Is there someone you trust who might have this history? You might want to ask if there is anything of which you need to be aware. It's helpful to know before you start drinking that the Long Island Ice Tea is notorious for expediting intoxication!

- **Collaborating is a great way to build relationships and you can (and should) be a bit strategic about that.**

The process of collaboration can forge great bonds and build really strong relationships. If it's possible to choose your associates, give this some thought: who does the library need to partner with and

why? Start simple—who are the natural partners? Think gin and tonic or Campari and soda. It doesn't need to be complicated to be effective.

- **Like family, you don't always get to choose your collaborators.**

There are times when you are told who you will be collaborating with, there are times when there is only one logical collaborator, and there are times when your partner brings in other collaborators. Don't you just love people who bring in other people . . . sometimes? It can bring energy or aggravation, but this is one of those areas that is true to collaboration. Perhaps this cocktail needs a little 'ice'.

- **You don't get to control everything.**

What?! This can be liberating and this can be frustrating. How much control you have may depend on your role and what you are trying to accomplish. The nature of collaboration is that you do not get to make all of the decisions on your own. Because of this, it is really important to look out for the interests of your organization. They can easily get run over in the pursuit of the goal, or in making one group or another look good. **Which leads to compromise.** There are various and many compromises to be made in a collaboration by each party. It's somewhat like a marriage in which you adjust and negotiate and cooperate along the way. Each partner has to decide if they are giving up too much and if the collaboration is worth it.

- **Like cocktails, some collaborations are more successful than others.**

Some ideas are worthy of collaboration and some aren't. Sometimes it's not only easier to do things on your own, but involving other people or groups is a waste of their time. It's important to do some preliminary thinking about this before assuming that partners will be the secret ingredient to a fabulous creation. Not only are some projects not worthy of collaboration, some partners are not up to the task either. Don't just pile on partners so that you can claim a joint effort; make sure that those partners bring something to the table. It's not always possible to know the full extent of their contribution ahead of time but it's worth thinking about.



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It's no fun being disappointed down the road. Don't make a [Cement Mixer](#)!²

- **Collaboration is not always equal.** In a lot of respects, it's not about being equal. Different partners bring different things to the table. Your role will change in different projects. This variety can be really refreshing. Appreciate people and groups for their contribution and realize that some roles will be bigger or smaller than others. Take the Manhattan – without the bitters or the cherry, it's just not a Manhattan. All roles, no matter how big or small, are crucial to the success of the collaboration.
- **There's plenty of room in collaboration to work alone, apart, and in small groups.** I think when we imagine collaboration, we often picture big group activities. In fact, you may collaborate with someone on a project and the most important work is the work you do away from the collaboration. Each party needs to be responsible and accountable for assignments and contributions they bring back to the large group or the project after tasks have been determined. Typically, not everything can get accomplished in the large group setting. So, go away and be your single malt scotch self for awhile. This too will contribute to the collaboration.
- **Collaboration doesn't mean you don't need a leader.** Just like every cocktail starts with an essential spirit, be it vodka, gin, rum, or other, someone has to be the point person, to set up meetings, to keep track of progress, to ensure partners' contributions are timely. This person might be thought of as a project manager or chair, and every project, no matter how many collaborators, needs one. Or two. Co-chairs work, too. This may or may not be you, but be

wary if there is not some kind of 'head' person. The hardest part about collaboration might be keeping it going.

- **Collaboration CAN meet joint needs and individual needs . . . occasionally.** The best kind of collaboration meets everyone's needs and goals. However, sometimes what starts out as a great collaboration for all morphs along the way. Resources may change – those rarely improve and may often be reduced. Do all of the partners agree to accept a reduced realization of their goal? Sometimes people's reasons for being at the table or roles may change. Has your organization gone from being the essential bitters to the optional, but pretty, cocktail umbrella? Maybe this is ok or maybe this starts to sour a relationship. Just remember not to burn any bridges – you might want to return to this bar someday!
- **Lastly, collaboration does have a price and that price is often compromise, patience, and time.** Often, including other people and partners takes more time and energy. It requires compromise. When you agree to collaborate, you give up some control. And did I mention that it can take more time? I'm talking a mojito versus a shot of tequila. The end goal needs to be worth it and if it is, then focus on the prize. Remember, without this collaboration, you might not even be considering this goal.

Like drinking cocktails, collaborating can be really fun. And like cocktails, you can overdo or choose unwisely. There is a fit and an appropriateness to the projects and the partnerships which, if selected wisely, will result in success. And before going into any collaboration, remember this cocktail: equal parts communication and compromise with a twist of comedy. Ah, that's a tasty beverage!

¹ Maynard, N. (2010, February 19). *Mixing Cocktails: When to Shake and When to Stir*. Retrieved May 11, 2017, <http://www.thekitchn.com/mixing-cocktails-when-to-shake-109031>

² Graham, C. (2017, January 11). *The Cement Mixer Shot: Don't Delay and Just Slam This One!* Retrieved May 11, 2017, <https://www.thespruce.com/cement-mixer-shot-recipe-759617>

