

2016

## What Collaboration Means to Me: Seeking Humility in an Insecure World

James Wisner

*Community College League of California*, [jwisner@ccleague.org](mailto:jwisner@ccleague.org)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wisner, James (2016) "What Collaboration Means to Me: Seeking Humility in an Insecure World," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol8/iss2/3>

This Columns is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collaborative Librarianship by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu).

## What Collaboration Means to Me: Seeking Humility in an Insecure World

James Wiser ([jwiser@ccleague.org](mailto:jwiser@ccleague.org))

Library Consortium Director, Community College League of California

It is a rather delicious irony that some of us entered this profession to avoid doing the very things we now spend most of our time doing. Some of us did not want to be business or finance majors, and instead ran quickly to a profession that supposedly removed money and profit from our day-to-day life. Those individuals very often became electronic resources librarians, and deal with vendors on exactly those issues on a daily basis. Others of us ran screaming away from law school, terrified of spending the next thirty years reading contracts or having to understand nuances of tedious legal issues like copyright law. Still others of us, the introverts among us, chose librarianship as a career because we imagined making a living while engaging in a life of the mind -- our own minds, to be more specific -- and appreciated the chance to work in an industry where introversion was accepted if not embraced as the norm. The irony here, of course, is that no matter where you find yourself in our profession, you must collaborate with many others in order to do your job well. Whether it be faculty or fellow librarians at your institution, colleagues in regional consortia or systems working on multi-institutional projects, or colleagues from across the country and around the world working on professional committees, our industry is a rough one for folks who would rather just work alone. If we do nothing or little else, we librarians collaborate. A lot.

At this stage of my career, I have worked seven years as a librarian in a traditional setting, six years in library consortia settings, and two and a half years in a library vendor environment. I cannot claim to have obtained a career's worth

of wisdom, but by now I have been around the block enough times to have a thought or two about what collaboration means to me and how and why it is so important to those of us in the library world. You cannot be a member of this profession and not collaborate with others, and if asked, most of us would quickly claim that we are actually good at collaboration or are "collaborative." After all, our LinkedIn profiles say we are! Yet I believe most of us could do a better job at collaboration, and our profession and constituencies would be better served for it. We all are involved in numerous efforts that require collaboration across many "walls;" how we can do it better, however, is something that has been on my mind a lot lately.

For many (most?) of us, working collaboratively has not come naturally, and not just for the reasons I allude to above. In library school, the classroom assignments I liked least were group projects, primarily because I was afraid I would get stuck with an unfair share of the workload or because I tend to become highly anxious in any setting where a group cannot come to a consensus. In fact, I am not sure I have ever met anyone who likes group projects, especially in our profession, a profession overrepresented by introverts. As much as we may have disliked group work in our graduate education, however, our instructors who warned us that the "real world" is run through teamwork and group projects were sadly correct. I have slowly come to the belief that an inability to work well with others is perhaps the most career-limiting and counterproductive trait a librarian can have, and librarians who lack this skill almost always



## Wiser: Seeking Humility

prevent their organizations from optimally serving their respective communities. When I talk to friends in our industry about what is frustrating them on any given day, it seems most frustrations stem from an inability to work well with a difficult colleague. Poor collaborative skills strangle so many libraries from reaching their optimal impact.

Regrettably, the personality trait that may be most needed for a person to excel at collaboration is humility. This is regretful because this is such a hard trait for any of us to develop; no matter how often adult life seems to do nothing but find ways of creatively humbling us (I just became a first-time dad, for example), very few of us -- and I quickly plead guilty here -- learn easily from our mistakes. Humility is what causes a professional to ask others what skills and experiences they may bring to the table on any project, and humility forces a professional to admit that she or he may have blind spots that interfere with seeing all the implications, perspectives, and possible consequences that are needed to be taken into consideration to ensure the best possible outcome for any project. Humility is admitting that you cannot possibly do your job alone, that you very well may be replaceable, and that one day someone will hold your current position and will make a very different choice than the key decision you feel so convicted to make today. Successful collaboration, then, cannot just be measured by how well you get along with your colleagues today; it can also be measured by how well the decisions you make today get along with your successor's decisions years down the road. Admittedly, it is very tough to check all the boxes to collaborate effectively with every stakeholder possible for every task. But perhaps we should set a reasonable goal for ourselves -- maybe tomorrow will be the day we send that extra email, or make that extra phone call, to pick a colleague's brain about what we are working on and how it impacts them. I have never regretted asking one

more colleague for their advice about a particular project, even if I have not taken their advice -- but I have certainly regretted not touching base with a colleague about a project only to see after the fact how useful their feedback and assistance would have been.

Actively seeking humility in collaboration also asks each of us to be self-aware enough to know where on the Hedgehog versus Fox continuum we land. This psychological framework, often purported to be first outlined by the Greek poet Archilochus (though some attribute it to philosopher Isaiah Berlin, or even to management guru Jim Collins) is a contrast between those people who are exceptionally strong at one thing (specialists, or hedgehogs) or modestly good at many things (generalists, or foxes). The very best foxes can learn how to do the many things they do reasonably well even better; the very best hedgehogs need to learn how to do many other things exceptionally well. We all find ourselves somewhere on this continuum, which means that collaboration is something we all need to do more if we wish to grow personally and professionally. An organization of foxes often ignores quality or precision in their workflow, while an organization of hedgehogs tends to create silos that dramatically reduce organizational efficiency. Is your library filled with hedgehogs? Maybe you could stand to hire a few more foxes, or vice versa. Collaboration requires that we be open to learning new things, and we all can probably stand to learn a little more about the world and our profession around us.

Successful collaboration also necessitates that we fight the understandable human impulse to seek input primarily from people who are like ourselves. I once participated in an organizational communication workshop where we were administered the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) by our facilitator; she compiled the results and divided the group four ways. Two of the groups were comprised of participants



## Wiser: Seeking Humility

whose MBTIs were very similar, while the other two groups were intentionally mixed to have a broader range of personality types. We were then given a fairly complicated puzzle to solve. The two groups whose personality types were similar finished the puzzle first, but the only group to solve the puzzle correctly was a group comprised of dissimilar personalities that took the longest amount of time to finish the task. In organizations, we see this all the time, and to me, successful collaboration requires the very hard work of seeking input from that person you like least, for their input so often seems to be the advice that can help solve a problem you didn't even know you had.

This, then, is what collaborative librarianship means to me. It means leaning into our discomfort with other people and actively seeking their input, advice, and discussion when we are making a decision that impacts them, whether that be our patrons, our colleagues, or even our future selves. Jean-Paul Sartre famously said that hell is other people, and while I am tempted to agree, I reluctantly concede that the only way to do our jobs well is to better embrace this occasional misery and realize that in doing so, we will create libraries that are far from hellish. Collaborative librarianship is the only way to do librarianship well.

