The Essence of Collaboration:
The IC Experience

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Introduction

Since the stand-up of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in 2005 and with the completion of the ODNI 500 Day Plan in late 2008, the Intelligence Community has laid the foundation for transforming itself into a collaborative, integrated Community that can provide mission-advantage to policymakers, warfighters, and law enforcement to protect the nation's security. Policies and intelligence directives have been promulgated that mandate information sharing and joint assignments, foster common tradecraft standards, and clearly delineate governance structure. The community is increasingly connected through JWICS and SIPRNET and web-based environments such as Intellipedia and A-Space.

As noted in the accompanying article, "Building a Culture of Collaboration – Observations from the Trenches," the Intelligence Community is increasingly collaborating across organization boundaries to improve the quality of intelligence provided to customers and may be approaching a tipping point in the transition to an integrated, multi-agency, collaborative environment. Numerous obstacles remain, however; managing and empowering this transformation poses major challenges.

This article articulates three core principles, six imperatives, and four critical enablers that the authors believe collectively establish an essential framework for successful collaboration. The assessment is based on the authors' extensive experience working in the Intelligence Community and supporting cross-agency collaboration efforts.

Focus on Human Factors

Extensive involvement in the interagency process has led the authors to conclude that the key to establishing a robust collaborative environment lies in focusing attention primarily on the human factors.

Collaboration is fundamentally about behaviors and interactions among individuals working toward a common objective enabled by IT tools and appropriate organizational policies and underlying cultural norms.

- The correct nexus for collaboration is the human interface with other minds, not the human interface with IT.

- Robust social networks serve as an essential underpinning of collaboration and ensure that communities can come together to put more eyes on the target, promote analytic excellence, and facilitate informed decisionmaking.

- Achieving a robust collaborative environment requires sustained leadership commitment on the part of senior leaders in every IC and military organization.

> **Why Do We Need to Collaborate?**
> - In today's increasingly complex and interdependent world, no one person or organization has a monopoly on what is needed to get the job done.
> - With more than half the community having less than five years of work experience in the IC, the need to connect new officers with more experienced members of the workforce is growing dramatically.
> - Expertise is increasingly distributed as the boundaries between analyst, collector, and operator become ever more blurred.
> - It is more efficient to engage the full spectrum of key players at the start of a project and generate consensus on how to proceed than to wait until the end of the process and fight over what is right.

Achieving a robust collaborative environment will require far more than just improving IT and enabling information sharing systems. While these actions will help, the obstacles—cultural, structural, and managerial—to institutionalizing collaborative practices across a diversity of cultures run much deeper and go to the heart of how the community has traditionally conducted its affairs. Better IT networks alone will be unavailing in the absence of a culture that encourages their use.

While technology is an important multiplier in promoting better collaboration, collaboration is unlikely to become embedded in the operating culture until work processes take advantage of its potential power. Senior leaders need to demonstrate their support for collaboration by "walking the walk" if they "talk the talk." Some senior leaders have established their own blogs, and a growing number are using collaborative platforms to request information and articulate their vision. More important, senior leaders must empower their workforce to integrate such tools into the daily work process, hold subordinates accountable for fostering transformation, and accept or even encourage the risk inherent in change.
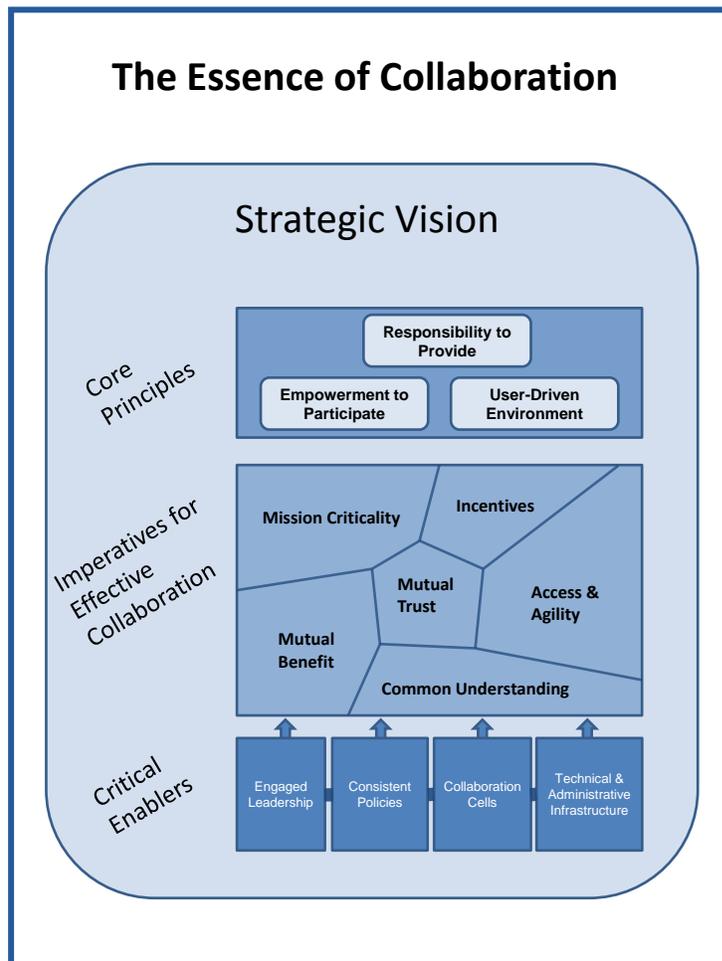
Antiquated policies also play a big role in impeding effective collaboration. In all too many cases, risk aversion trumps risk management, and the need-to-know trumps the need-to-share. The Intelligence Community, for example, has explicit penalties for sharing information too broadly—including loss of employment—but imposes no comparable penalties for sharing insights and information too narrowly. Analysts battle over who gets credit as the primary drafter, while those who contributed significantly to the quality of the final product often go unmentioned. Team building and teamwork often are overlooked and sometimes even rejected as criteria for career advancement.

Core Principles

To overcome the obstacles and achieve a truly collaborative and integrated community, a major transformation is needed in how the Intelligence Community conducts its business.

This will require the entire workforce—and particularly senior leaders—to understand and embrace three Core Principles:

Responsibility to Provide. The Intelligence Community must move from a culture and mindset of "need-to-know" to a culture where everyone accepts responsibility to share information with those who need it to perform their mission well. This concept has already been embedded in ICD 501 "Discovery and Dissemination or Retrieval of Information within the Intelligence Community," which directs all IC elements to make collected information and analysis discoverable by automated means. Further, it establishes that all authorized IC personnel have the responsibility to discover and to request information believed to be relevant to their assigned mission.[i] In addition ICD 208 "Writing for Maximum Utility" calls on the Intelligence Community to maximize support to multiple customers—including non-traditional customers at the federal, state, local and tribal levels—by tailoring products to best meet customers' requirements at the appropriate classification level.[ii] While responsibility to protect sources and methods remains, the expectation is that IC personnel will act in a manner that ensures that getting the right information to the right person is paramount.

The Essence of Collaboration

Strategic Vision

Core Principles
- Responsibility to Provide
- Empowerment to Participate
- User-Driven Environment

Imperatives for Effective Collaboration
- Mission Criticality
- Incentives
- Mutual Trust
- Access & Agility
- Mutual Benefit
- Common Understanding

Critical Enablers
- Engaged Leadership
- Consistent Policies
- Collaboration Cells
- Technical & Administrative Infrastructure

Implementation of these directives is critical to ensuring uniform access to all relevant information for intelligence personnel striving to achieve common mission objectives—an essential precondition for effective collaboration. Colleagues will no longer be at the mercy of information "owners" to provide access or even awareness but can proactively seek access for all group members. Information must also be available through common information platforms that allow IC personnel with appropriate clearances to interact with each other and with the information in a transparent fashion. In addition, implementation of "Writing for Maximum Utility" will help open the doors to collaboration with nontraditional IC partners. As the workforce takes on more responsibility to share, management must also take on more responsibility for providing clear guidelines and additional training on the characteristics of a good sharing environment and how to properly protect sources and methods.

Empowerment to Participate. People should be empowered to share their insights, information, and work in progress (within pre-established guidelines) without being required first to seek the permission of their superiors. Empowerment also carries responsibility. Guidelines should be established that set parameters for what can be shared, how, and with whom. Officers must be provided with explicit "rules of the road" for engaging with others both within and outside their organizations. The function of management is to audit these exchanges. Risk-averse managers may prefer the alternative—to require pre-approval for every interaction—but this will ensure that little collaboration takes place.

The key is to foster an open, sharing environment and accept the risk that on occasion someone might cross the line. From an information-sharing standpoint, it is far better to reel someone in who starts to cross the line than to discourage sharing in order to diminish or eliminate risk. Some mistakes may be made, but the overarching value is that a culture has been created where true collaboration may take place.

User-driven Environment. Collaborative communities should be self-defining, self-creating, agile, and adaptive. The users should effectively own the environment. This principle simply acknowledges the complexity of the world in which we now must function. No longer does the community enjoy the luxury of Cold War targets that are mostly state-based and static. In today's world, targets are increasingly fluid and agile. They are more likely to be networks than states. It usually takes a network to confront a network, putting the onus on IT providers to instill the same degree of agility in the operating work environment if we are to succeed.

Six Imperatives for Effective Collaboration

A review of collaborative initiatives suggests that successful, sustained collaboration is most likely to occur when members foster a collaborative environment that promotes positive, even enthusiastic participation. The following characteristics, which we have dubbed the Six Imperatives, are key to creating and sustaining such an environment, particularly when participants need to rely on virtual collaboration to sustain their interactions:

Mission Criticality. IC personnel must see participation in collaborative activities as essential to their core activities and not as a "nice-to-have" activity or as a resource to exploit when they have extra time. For virtual collaboration, users should feel a personal need to draw on the network, engage their colleagues, and work in the shared environment as part of their daily routine. If several organizations decide to collaborate in creating a joint database, the data should only reside in the shared space; no one should enter data into their "home system" and then enter it again into a "shared" database.

Mutual Benefit. Participants must derive benefits from each other's knowledge and expertise in ways that help them perform their key missions. Participants should possess a shared sense of mission and articulate a common set of goals and objectives for the "collective good."

Mutual Trust. True collaboration is a personal process that requires the willingness to share partly formed opinions and insights, risk being wrong, and adopt new collaborative business practices. For these reasons, people feel the need to trust those with whom they collaborate. A good way to develop such trust is to organize face-to-face meetings. Such sessions lay the ground work for future interactions in the virtual environment, particularly for the older generation of workers. Increasingly, behaviors and norms are emerging that foster trust among counterparts collaborating solely in virtual environments. As trust develops, participants then become much more willing to engage in collaborative behavior.

Access and Agility. Collaboration requires that users be able to quickly connect with each other and, given the pace of world events, must be able to coalesce into virtual work groups or add new members to their group within hours, if not minutes. The government must be able to do its work at the same pace of business and with the same agility as its adversaries. Likewise, one size does not fit all. Policies and collaboration tools must enable innovation, "public" thinking, broad dissemination, and the tracking of source and method but also permit compartmented, small group collaborations.

Achieving the necessary degree of agility requires not only common access to the same work environment but pre-established networks and business processes that foster the organic shaping and re-shaping of collaborative communities as demanded by the global events. One innovative approach is to establish "trust bubbles" comprising interlocking cells of six to eight colleagues. It is easier to maintain a high level of trust in such small cells. Individuals who belong to two or three cells are also much more efficient human sharers of information. They know exactly how much information their colleagues can absorb and what is most appropriate to share given that group's culture and work style.

Incentives. Collaborative work practices must save participants time over the long run, increase their impact, and enhance their careers. The most important, and often overlooked, incentive for collaborating is the psychic reward from solving a hard problem, improving the intelligence product, or saving time. Effective collaboration at the start of a project almost always leads to faster coordination at the end. Management needs to reinforce these messages by giving credit for collaboration and teamwork when evaluating their personnel.

Common Understanding. A concerted effort to understand cultural differences across the multitude of agencies and to develop a common lexicon and transparent rules of engagement can reduce misunderstanding and use those differences to improve the quality of intelligence. Given the wide variety of organizational cultures, the chances for miscommunication abound. Anecdotal evidence derived by the authors from a decade of working with interagency teams and task forces suggests that the amount of miscommunication that occurs in such settings is consistently underestimated. Similarly, the need for lists of common terms, acronyms, and definitions cannot be understated. For example, great value can be derived from documenting in one place all the key assumptions that underlie a group's analyses and operational decisions. The simple process of listing the key assumptions usually forces everyone to critically examine and prioritize the list. Differences of opinion can often be traced to the varying definitions team members are using for terms such as collaboration, system, and information sharing. The development of mutually agreed-upon Rules of Engagement for a collaboration initiative or environment can promote a common understanding and build mutual trust.

Critical Enablers

Successful implementation of a robust culture of collaboration requires proactive engagement by the members of the Intelligence Community to ensure that, first, the technical infrastructure is in place and, second, that organizational and community policies and practices are aligned with the vision of an integrated, collaborative Intelligence Community. The authors assess that four critical areas need to be addressed to enable the transformation.

Engaged Leadership. Virtually every study of successful transformation of a business culture includes a key finding that change must be led from the top. If CEOs do not practice what they preach, then many employees will view pronouncements about the need to collaborate as empty rhetoric or just another fad. More important, engaged leaders send a powerful message to the workforce when they integrate collaborative practices into their daily work practices—and those of their staff. This validates the message that collaboration is not only a preferred mode of conducting business but is the most effective way to do so. Needless to say, the use of web-based tools has created some discomfort within the ranks, especially among mid-level managers. Although some have resisted this more collaborative way of doing business, most will learn quickly how to play by a new set of rules if an appropriate set of incentives are in place.

Collaboration Cells. Collaborative systems are almost certain to fail in large bureaucracies if the participants do not have access to "human enablers" or facilitators who can advise on how to work best collaboratively and assist in tailoring a set of collaborative tools to specific work objectives. Collaboration Cells provide this essential ingredient in the process, addressing key human factors that have traditionally been overlooked. They help translate the vision of senior leaders and assist both managers and employees in tailoring application of the Core Principles and Six Imperatives to their specific requirements. Collaboration cells can also lead the way in promoting best practices and leveraging lessons learned across the community.   (For more details on this concept see the accompanying article, "Transformations Cells: An Innovative Way to Institutionalize Collaboration.")

Consistent Policies. Policies must support collaboration and be adjusted when they do not. Managers should be particularly alert to situations where oft-cited "policies" turn out to be better described as deeply encrusted traditions. In many cases, when collaboration collides with bureaucracy, closer scrutiny will reveal that what was asserted as dogma is no more than common practice that can be fairly easily changed. Policies must also be consistent across all organizations. Requiring people who work in the same spaces to operate under different sets of rules quickly erodes the ability to collaborate.

Technical and Administrative Infrastructure. One of the quickest ways to discourage the instinct to collaborate is to make tools difficult to access, make them too difficult to use, or deny officers much-needed technical support when difficulties arise. Analysts, collectors, and operators are much more inclined to try out and continue to use collaborative systems and software when the tools are intuitive, access is easy, and technical support is available— preferably within hours, or at most days. Administrative practices must also be consistent with an organization's Core Principles and the Six Imperatives of effective collaboration. Personnel appraisals should include collaboration criteria, stressing both the willingness to work in teams and the development of specific collaborative skill sets. Similarly, security

policies in each organization should be scrubbed to determine if they unnecessarily impede efforts by the workforce to move across organizational boundaries and personally engage colleagues in other organizations.

Instituting a More Collaborative Work Process

Transforming how the government conducts its daily business is a daunting task. Effective change management requires strong leadership, a well-articulated vision, constant iteration, and persistence. Cultural change demands a long-term strategy and a senior leadership fully committed to change. The good news is that most organizations already have a solid community framework to build on and an increasingly younger workforce that they can empower. A successful collaborative work environment can be achieved within a matter of a few years—not decades—with a modest investment in collaborative tools, training, and staff support accompanied by committed and visionary leaders.

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[i] ICD 501, The Discovery and Dissemination or Retrieval of Information Within the Intelligence Community, 21 January 2009. http://www.dni.gov/electronic_reading_room/ICD_501.pdf.

[ii] ICD 208, Writing for Maximum Utility, 17 December 2008, http://www.dni.gov/electronic_reading_room/ICD_208.pdf