The Tavistock and Portman
Leaders in mental health care and education

Tavistock and Portman E-Prints Online

JOURNAL ARTICLE

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

-

INSIDE KNOWLEDGE: How to

ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION

Dr Matthew Jones Chesters is a Clinical Neuropsychologist and Senior Lecturer on the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology course at the University of East London. He studies social cognition and cross-cultural neuropsychology.

Dr Sarah Davidson is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Deputy Clinical Director of the UEL programme. She is also Vice Chair and Psychosocial Advisor to the British Red Cross.

"When collaborators understand each other's experiences, ways of working, and challenges faced, common themes and ambitions inevitably emerge.

Using the 5Cs, conflict can often be transformed into useful challenge and debate."

The 5Cs

1. Context

2. Communication

3. Connection

4. Coordination

5. Coherence

People exist in relationship to one another - we are interdependent - though the qualities of relationships differ widely. We can turn to psychological perspectives as diverse as 'evolutionary psychology' and 'systems theory' to see how the desire to collaborate is a deeply felt urge for humans (and between groups of people). The question of how to encourage collaboration can be thought of as (a) how to facilitate useful cooperation, and (b) how to avoid unhelpful conflict.

There are many models for facilitating collaboration, but we can distil these into a few key themes, known as 'The 5Cs'. Problems in collaborative working tend to emerge when the 5Cs aren't given due attention.

1. Context
The first stage in the process of forging alliances is for the individuals or teams to meet, and form new relationships. In order to create as warm a context as possible in which to work, people need to feel valued and welcome. Care needs to be given to the environment - as a signal of the care that will be given to the collaborators. Meeting places ought to be private, comfortable, safe and inviting. Sitting in a circle, for example, promotes a sense of equality, a receptive atmosphere, and encourages participation. Environments that predispose to conflict are characterised by harsh lighting, loud noise, too little space, pressured target setting, with little choice.

2. Communication
The essence of successful collaboration is communication: collaborators share information about their situation and perspectives in a neutral, open, appreciative way. Regular meetings, where all positions and perspectives are valued, and where all ideas offered are entertained, are a good foundation for continuation. When people feel not listened to, when their contributions are not acknowledged and their perspectives ignored, communication becomes impaired. Providing opportunities to hear different perspectives and

meaningfully acknowledge these (even when suggestions are not taken up) helps people to maintain focus.

3. Connection
When collaborators understand each other's experiences, ways of working, and challenges faced, common themes and ambitions inevitably emerge. This might be a company ethos, or value systems in health and social care - the collaborators see the shared goals, while differences in style are perceived as less important. Facilitate connection by seeking out shared tasks and goals, and making them explicit. Conflict can be avoided by not forcing one group to accept the ambitions or working practices of another. Aim for a new synthesis rather than adopting one old orthodoxy.

4. Coordination
When the goals of joint working have been decided, working together begins with a process of role allocation; there will be generic tasks undertaken by most members of the new team, and specific activities undertaken by 'specialists'. This works best when team members can see how activities can be undertaken more quickly and smoothly by individuals (and sub-systems) with particular skills and interests. Avoid conflict by giving teams and individuals choice in their initial division of roles and activities: they can then feel ownership of any changes that may be needed later.

5. Coherence
Consistency and unity are the aims of shared working. Groups adopt agreed, understood processes for handling activities, dealing with challenges, and representing themselves and their stakeholders. Conflict is unlikely when decisions are made by the group, or by a leader acting according to unambiguous collective goals, rather than from an individual or one-sided perspective. Having shared goals that make sense and are explicit (eg written down in policy or an executive statement) encourages productivity, especially when each member of the team can see how their contribution fits and matters.

Finally, remember that not all conflict is deleterious; only when it detracts from the primary tasks and prevents innovation and engagement. Using the 5Cs, conflict can often be transformed into useful challenge and debate.