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## Somatics of Collaboration

Collaboration is defined as “one or more people or organizations working together to achieve a common goal.” Initially, this seems straightforward. People who want to work toward a common goal get together and design the actions to achieve the intended result. In reality, however, there are many times when “working together” does not go as well as we expect. In this article I will explore some of the fundamental skills for successful collaboration, focusing on the embodiment of these skills and suggested practices for greater proficiency.

The process of collaboration emerges when people work together towards the accomplishment of a shared goal, whether that is in a well-defined project, a creative exploration or artistic endeavor, shared research or investigation. Why would we want to work this way, instead of doing it all ourselves? Advantages of working collaboratively include sharing knowledge, increased learning, obtaining greater resources, recognition, and reward. Structured methods of collaboration encourage introspection of behavior and communication, aiming to increase the success of teams as they engage in collaborative problem solving, innovation, and creative results. The English naturalist, Charles Darwin, who is known for his theory of survival of the fittest, argued that cooperation and collaboration evolved as an evolutionary advantage.

So what does successful collaboration require?

TRUST:

Trust allows us to be open to others’ sincerity conveyed in their suggestions and actions. We trust ourselves to be prudent and to assess what the capabilities are of those we collaborate with. We trust that our colleagues are competent to make offers that they have the skills to deliver on. We trust that they are reliable to deliver in the allotted time, and that they are also open to our contributions and support with challenges and breakdowns. We trust them to be committed to a successful outcome and to maintain open and honest communication during the collaboration.

To grant trust takes time in which you are building a relationship. When you have the experience of reliability, sincerity, skill and care that meet your specific standards of behavior, you are willing to maintain your openness to further collaboration. Trust requires that we have positive assessments of our team members in these areas, and we see them as open, available, and having enough self-esteem to be able to listen to others without falling into ego driven

agendas of their own.

When we are making an assessment of someone's trustworthiness, we are also making observations of their body. A body that can be trusted is grounded (literally, on the ground, connected to the earth and present to the current reality), standing tall in what's important to them, clear about what they care about, yet flexible (not stiff or rigid) and able to be moved emotionally and physically by someone else's passion, commitment and ideas.

When you observe bodies working well in action together, you can observe their abilities to be responsive to each other, the purposefulness of their moves, the way in which they appear connected, centered and attentive in action. As an analogy, recall your observations of ballroom dancing or fencing. Although the structure of the activity the couples are engaged in are very different (one has the result of a flowing interpretation of rhythm and music in walks, glides, curves, turns, etc. and the other displays an obviously measured linear footwork, accented with a series of balanced forward and backward lunges, the added skill of managing a weapon to defeat an opponent), yet both are riveting to watch and exhilarating to experience when done well. The same is possible in the experience of successful collaboration.

MOODS:

In addition to trust, other equally important requirements are that collaborators share a common purpose and intended result for the project at hand, they establish and take care of interdependencies, supporting other team members' success (including offering and asking for help, often skills that need development as well), clear communication, candid feedback (both acknowledgement and correction), smooth handoffs, and coaching where appropriate.

Another key aspect of successful collaboration is establishing a mood of ambition and optimism about accomplishing the team's mission. When there are challenges and breakdowns we ideally work to move to quick identification of what the commitment is and what is necessary to move toward solutions. If one or more of the team members fall into a negative mood, it requires skill from the other team members, or team leader (depending on how mature the skills of the team members are) to explore the missing conversations that are in the background and unspoken.

The skill of observing, managing and designing moods supports the team to maintain a productive attitude for success rather than to automatically "fall" into a mood which gets in the way of open, productive communication. As moods are contagious, they also reverberate through an organization, affecting the level of energy, enthusiasm and confidence in the future. The moods quickly show up in our conversations and our bodies. For example, think of a time that you were resentful. How were you sitting or standing? Now think of a time you felt completely optimistic and ambitious. What was the shape or posture of your body in that mood? Observing moods in the body through these differences helps us to understand the interpretation about the future that someone else has at that moment and gives a place for conversations to address the concerns and continue towards a successful relationship.

#### SOMATIC AWARENESS:

Our ability to be skillful with all the moves of successful collaboration lies in the structure of our bodies, since it is through our body that we express our beliefs, move towards or away from conversations that are difficult or missing, take action or not, open to opportunities, or close down to others. Once we can objectively observe and recognize the limitations we find ourselves in, it is possible to design practices to shift the inhibiting structures, to give us the freedom to make the moves that lead us to success.

Our bodies are shaped by our life experience. In our formative early years, much of this shaping takes place in response to our parents and other family members or close friends who may have an influence on the family dynamic. In addition, the environment we grow up in, the organizational structures we've been part of, and our cultural backgrounds, in other words, our entire history, has shaped us to be who we are today.

A simple example of the phenomenon of shaping (or "armoring" in the model developed by Wilhelm Reich, a student of Freud's) occurs when an impulse is stopped at the muscular level. A child naturally cries when sad, however a child who is punished for crying will often find a way to inhibit the natural behavior. Through trial and error, the child may tense the muscles of the eyes and face, stop breathing, pull the chin into the neck, or whatever else might work to halt the tears. When a child is repeatedly admonished for crying, the inhibiting behavior becomes learned and integrated into the child's way of being. It becomes habitual and unconscious to contract the muscles that help stop the tears, and the child no longer notices they are doing anything different. After years of this inhibiting behavior, the body takes the shape of the constricted musculature, often at a cost of freedom of choice in later years when the grown person is sad or grieving.

For many of us growing up in Western I-can-do-it-myself culture, learning to learn alone, work alone, face challenges alone, collaboration is new and even uncomfortable. We have learned to be "lone rangers" with all the qualities that characterization implies: distrust of others, silence instead of open communication, need to know, etc.

So what can we do if we want to be better at collaborating? The first step is awareness of our skill level through an honest self-assessment. Here are some guidelines, developed in collaboration with colleagues Julie Ann McClain and Charlotte Maure:

**Beginners** as collaborators have themselves as a priority

- to express their own opinion
- hold a view of win/lose in conflict
- not validate other views
- to state opinion as fact
- to dismiss or criticize others

- hold the belief that I can do it best myself/my way
- interrupt others to make a point
- pursue automatic internal conversations that diminish or demean others (“I’m right, they are wrong”)

**Intermediate** collaborators:

- listen to others without pre-judgment
- stop themselves in the middle of “yeah-but” and listen
- voice differences with respect
- raise points/concerns without accusations
- take calm-down breaks when conversations get heated
- have the ability to observe their own triggering and can self-correct by centering
- can identify differences in standards and values and re-frame discussions appropriately
- work to resolve breakdowns in collaboration consistent with own and team’s values
- proactively resolve differences and difficulties when conflict arises, offering apologies for personal and group moves that are not skillful
- express opinions and participate regularly
- can adapt to diverse cultural, age, and gender backgrounds
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**Advanced** collaborators, in addition to being skillful in all the areas shown above:

- are inclusive when others are unskillful
- in stressful conditions, exemplify and model
  - o deep listening
  - o validation of others’ views
  - o solution through shared values, standards, and mission
  - o “yes, and…”

Where do you see your competence level? Remember to observe yourself in situations where collaboration with others is an option, and could even lead to working collaboratively on a project. How does your body perform? Are you able to stay open to others’ ideas and contributions? Are your commitments for the fulfillment of the project dependent on the work others are doing, and are your results going to others for their next steps? Can you hear and act on constructive feedback? And are you providing both acknowledgement and constructive feedback easily to your fellow team members?

Once you have some awareness of your or your team’s capacity for collaboration, how can you measure your body’s ability to move well with others? The “two-step” practice with a partner provides a way for you to feel and observe what happens when you are moving with another person. The four-person two-step reveals what happens with a more complex series of easy, but revealing moves when two pairs alternate

doing the two-step, alternating which pair moves through the center of the pattern. This practice is more easily seen than explained, and can be viewed at the following site:

<http://www.archive.org/details/SamuraiGame2x2Step>

The two step and four-person two step are also demonstrated and practiced in the Collaborative Skills Clinic, developed by Julie Ann McClain and myself.

As you practice with your partner and your team, what does your body do naturally? Where do you pull back or move forward? Are there moments where you feel awkward, hesitate, or lose balance? As you observe yourself and your team, does your assessment about your expertise as a collaborator change? We may understand the concepts, but our competence to perform may not match our understanding. This is where somatic training can help us improve.

When you've completed your self-assessment and practiced to reveal even more about your ability to collaborate, you can identify the gap between where you (or your team) are on the scale, and where you want to be. From there, the actions are to practice, practice, practice, give feedback to each other, and practice some more.

In addition to the two-step practice with a partner, and in groups of 4, what are other basic practices to open one's body to greater trust and other competencies required for collaboration? Basic somatic practices of body scanning, full torso breathing, centering, dropping awareness into one's own body then extending to others, connecting to ground, grounded in what we as individuals and as a team care about and opening to connect from center before stepping into coordination/collaboration are all practices that will increase collaborative competence. These practices are described in detail in my book, [Listening to Bodies Long Distance: A Somatic Primer for Coaches, Managers, and Executives](#), and will also be demonstrated and practiced in the Collaborative Skills Clinic.