

Collaborability

*Because nobody has
all the answers*

Word Out #1 Getting to why

Collaboration means two or more people **working together** towards a **common goal**. Sounds simple. Agreeing to what that 'common goal', or as I prefer, 'purpose', is not always so easy. We've all spent time in meetings or groups wondering where the group is headed. **How can we overcome this?**

Start with 'why' as [Simon Sinek](#)¹ famously says. At the start of a project, and every meeting ask, 'Why are we here?'. Check in on 'purpose' regularly.

'Purpose' tells us why a group exists, a project is started or a meeting is held. Purpose is a great word. It makes you sit up and pay attention. It demands a response and feels more active than 'mission', 'aim', 'goal' or 'common agenda'.

When helping groups get a shared understanding of their purpose, I have always had success with a process that Dale Hunter describes in her seminal book, [The Art of Facilitation](#)³. It involves individual reflection, visuals and group discussion. While best done with the guidance of an experienced facilitator, skills used in this process can be developed by anyone.

These skills and attributes include an open mind, deep listening, a quiet confidence to hold a space and to sit with silence. Dale Hunter nominates as a key skill the ability to read the energy in the room – does it lift on certain words and phrases? Watch people's faces, listen for their assenting or dissenting sounds in response to suggestions as the purpose emerges.

Another key skill to build is described as 'sense making'. This is the [ability to determine the deeper meaning or significance of what is being expressed](#)². One way to determine deeper meaning is to listen for what's *not* said or left *unsaid*.

The question to begin checking on purpose is deceptively simple: *Why are we here?*

If this results in stunned silence, then start with the problem. What problem are we trying to solve? Imagine it's five years down the track, what problem *have* we solved? What looks different? What's changed? What's better?



Everyone in the group will have different ways of working. Some will say whatever pops into their head, others prefer to reflect and ponder before speaking. Some will be visual and may like to use photographs or images to help them articulate purpose. It doesn't matter how people share their thoughts or ideas, but providing the opportunity for different ways to do so is valuable.

It has taken me as little as 15 minutes and up to two hours to agree purpose with some groups. With more complex partnerships, it can evolve over weeks or months. Partners and stakeholders might have to get to know each other better first and build some trust.

Regardless of the time it takes, you know when you've nailed it. The pieces fall into place and the group's purpose is there, written up, crossed out and corrected, for all to see. The process by which you've 'landed' is transparent. It feels right. We can imagine what success might look like.

A group's 'purpose' should be only one sentence and start with 'to' and be followed by a verb, *'To ...fix, resolve, find, provide, organise, be....'*

Once you've landed on your purpose, keep it front and centre of your collaboration. It can drift. A high school principal told me recently that every meeting agenda has the school's purpose in bold font, *'To improve students learning outcomes'*. If an item doesn't help the school achieve this purpose, it's crossed off the agenda. Ruthless but effective.

If purpose isn't clear, then how do you know who should be in the room?

Get the word out - share with your teams

Almost every group at IP Australia's recent Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meeting cited confusion about the purpose of a collaboration as a common challenge. A lack of clarity leads to other challenges highlighted by groups at the SLT meeting including unclear responsibilities, project drift and disengagement.

It takes practice to guide a group to arrive at its purpose. Encourage your teams to have a go. As Plato said, 'beginning is the most important part of the work'.

Perhaps your group was given its purpose. Does it mean the same thing to everyone in the group? A good time to check is when a new person joins the group or others leave. Here's a simple process for your teams or project leaders to try.

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1. Give people a piece of paper and pens of the same colour.
 2. Working *on their own*, ask people to write, in **one sentence**, *why* this project exists or *why* this group is meeting. Use large and legible letters. The sentence should start with "To....". (Try [Sli.do](#) or [Poll Everywhere](#) if you want to keep things completely anonymous).

3. Ask people to fold up their paper, swap it with someone, then swap again. Or put the pieces into a container and ask people to pull out a piece at random.
4. Stick up the pieces of paper on a wall. What commonalities and differences are there? (No differences? It's been a useful activity for the new people and a reminder for others).
6. Group any together if there are clear themes.
7. Compare these to the actual purpose of the group and discuss any differences and why they might exist. A rule of thumb is to ask 'why' five times before you get to the real, underlying reason.
8. Does the purpose need to be adjusted? Perhaps some of the comments are useful 'objectives' that support the common purpose.

This activity helps to air any misunderstandings and encourages a group to talk through differences and how they might be resolved.

Think about inviting someone other than the project leader to facilitate the exercise. It's a good opportunity to build the facilitation and collaborative skills of project member.

I look forward to hearing how your teams work with these suggestions for agreeing on, or checking, the 'why' of projects and collaborations.

Jacinta

References:

1. [*How Great Leaders Inspire Action*](#), Simon Sinek, TedX, September 2009
2. [*Future Work Skills 2020, Institute for the Future*](#),
3. [*The Art of Facilitation*](#), Dale Hunter, 2007

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