



Constellation Collaboration: A model for multi-organizational partnership

Written by Tonya Surman

A CSI THINK PIECE

What it is...

The Constellation model is a complexity-inspired governance framework for multi-organizational collaboration. It is a way of organizing a group of interested parties to meet a need without having to create a new organization to 'hold' the issue. It is a tool to help us recognize and become conscious designers in a complex ecosystem of organizational collaboration.

Who it serves....

The Constellation model is a way to bring together multiple groups or sectors to work toward a joint outcome. It is a framework to serve and inform partnerships, coalitions, networks and movements. It is a model to serve social movements and to serve social change.

What it can do...

- Joint fundraising
- Joint and coordinated projects
- Shared voice
- Campaigns
- Coordination of policy positions
- Coordinated strategy
- Service delivery
- Health promotion
- Research

What purpose it serves...

The Constellation model seeks to recognize energy and to respect how this energy flows in a group. It is an attempt to develop a framework to understand and support the tensions that exist when several groups come together. This framework is designed to support collaboration where:

- Work is action-focused, as the model flexibly responds to the energy of the group and emergent opportunities. Conversely, where there is low energy or declining opportunity, partners do not pursue activities.
- Order, systems and accountability are balanced with opportunity, chaos and entrepreneurship
- Emergence of new ideas can happen, flexibly responding to opportunity and need while still staying clear about the primary strategic work of the group.
- Self-interest is harnessed, value and balanced with common interest or converging interests and the needs of the greater community. 'Coordinated mutual self-interest' is seen as the best way to secure resources and goals.
- Leadership and workload are balanced and shared depending on the issue area and partners' core competencies.
- Leadership is valued within a broader context of collaboration. The model privileges the 'initiative taker'. All types of leadership are valued and honored in this model, as long as the leadership is consistent with the larger vision and goals of the group.
- Organizations preserve their autonomy while carrying out the group's shared goals
- Groups work together to avoid duplication of efforts and competition for funding by working together and coordinating resource procurement strategies.

- Infrastructure and administration costs are minimized by eliminating the need for an umbrella organization/ This also ensures that they groups don't create an organization to compete with their own organizations.
- Provides a framework for shared voice and shared work – enables a group to iteratively build a body of knowledge and work
- Members and the partnership are flexible and capable of mobilizing quickly around issues and opportunities
- The capacity of members is built through their participation in the membership.

The model is bias towards action and is not necessarily a good framework for dialogue or policy positions. This said, the model is ideally suited to a group that is seeking to deliver a coordinated voice.

Some caveats before we start...

This constellation model emerged out of a need to support a tight partnership of 11 organizations – the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment. It has been emerging and serving since 2001 and is in constant flux as we iteratively adapt the structure to serve our vision and to expand our reach and more effectively engage our ecosystem.

Given that it was developed to serve a small group that is growing out, its applicability to networks and movements is still to be determined. However, it may offer some ideas that may inspire and reframe our around how we organize our groups.

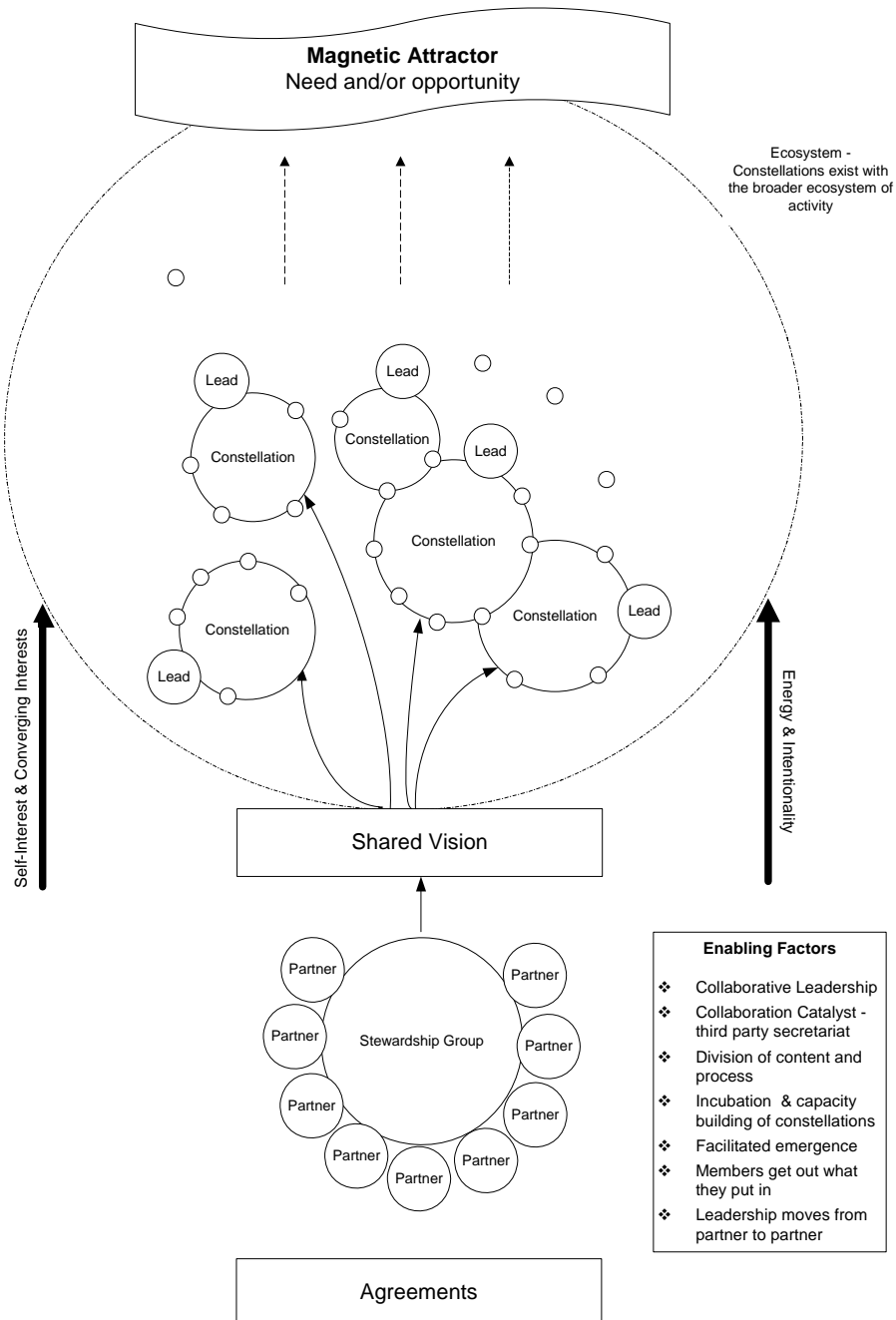
A model is only a framework to serve your thinking and organizing. One of the challenges of this paper is differentiating that which is the 'model' from that which we have adapted to meet the needs of a specific group. In any case, if it can provide a new way of looking at even one aspect of our multi-organizational collaboration, it has served its purpose.

It is only one model and is not meant to meet all of the needs of all collaborative projects. In fact, it probably won't serve most collaborative projects. It is however, a practitioner's contribution to trying to rethink about how we can work more effectively together to serve social change.

I am a practitioner not an academic. I apologize in advance for all of the thinkers that I have drawn on but haven't credited properly. The ideas captured here are a result of years of conversations with my co-creator and life partner, Mark Surman. I humbly offer this up as a thought piece to inspire and support other practitioners. I look forward to hearing how others respond to this thinking.

How it works...

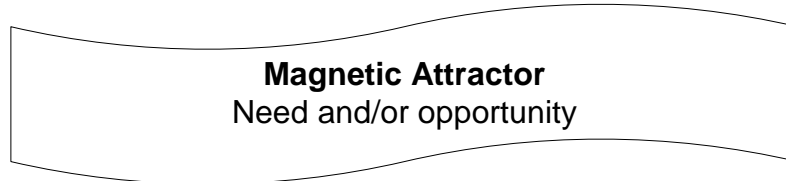
There are many elements to the constellation governance model. Each provides a specific value and serves a specific role. Despite calling it a 'constellation' model, the strength of the model is in its balance between strong base of roles, responsibilities, vision, strategy and planning that can then enable emergence to happen within the energetic constellations. The following provides an overview of the major constituent pieces of the model:



The above provides an overall picture of the model, but in order to fully understand it, the following describes each of the major components in greater depth.

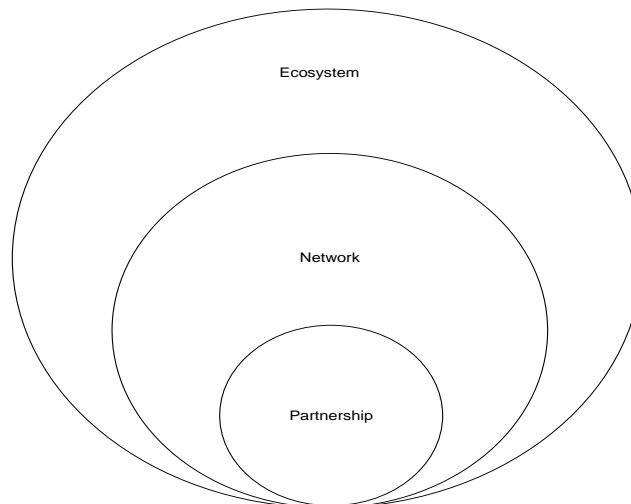
Building the model step by step...

1. A group of people recognize that there is a need or opportunity in which working together could both achieve individual and shared outcomes. This need and/or opportunity is described as a magnetic attractor, as it is the force which defines the scope of the ecosystem of activity.



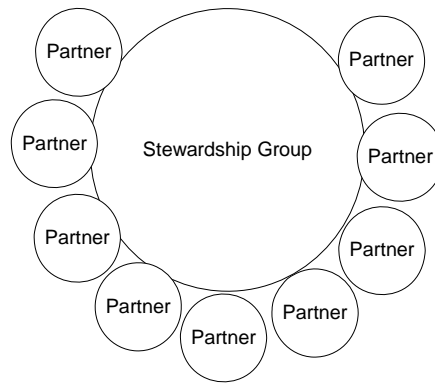
The magnetic attractor is the most important part of the model as its draw – its magnetism - will determine the level of priority that the partners will give it within their broader scope of work. It will determine the level of energy and initiative that will drive the success of the model.

2. The ecosystem is the sphere of activity that you are operating in. It would include all of the stakeholders and perspectives that affect the realm of the issue and it is not limited to just the partners or members of the collaboration.



An ecosystem is also connected to all other ecosystems in some way and as such we must recognize the intersection and loose coupling of these systems to each other. This is an opportunity to harness the powers of the collective ecosystems.

3. As the group recognizes and begins to scope the nature of the magnetic attractor, they form some sort of stewardship group – perhaps called a coordinating committee or steering committee – whose purpose is to serve the broader collective vision of the group.



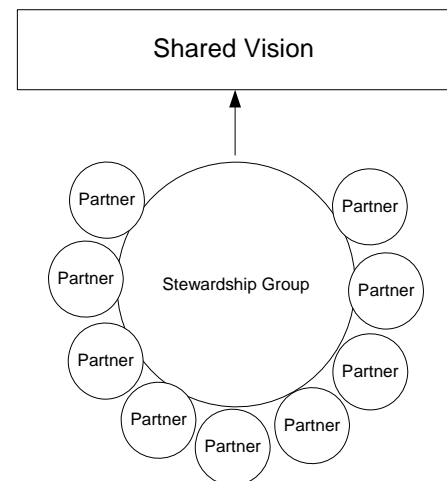
The stewardship group is composed of representatives from each of the partnering organizations. In the case of a network or ecosystem, members of the stewardship group are playing the role of ‘stewards’ for the ecosystem by providing a clear vision and strategic plan to guide the work of the collaboration.

Self-interest should exist primarily in the arena of the constellations and collective interest is stewarded primarily by this stewardship group.

The stewardship group is responsible for the management of the core agreements (described below) and for ensuring the overall health of the partnership and constellations. It provides the management oversight of the projects and constellations. The SC is responsible for:

- Assessing the current assets, successes, gaps and needs in the ecosystem.
 - Inviting new partners to be a part of the collaboration.
 - Scoping the nature of how and why the group should work together.
4. As the nature of the magnetic attractor is further defined, and in tandem, the group will also need to develop a clear set of assumptions, vision and loose plan:

- Assumptions - Shared understanding of the assumptions related to the magnetic attractors. This might take the form of Guiding Principles that articulate a shared understanding of the need or opportunity.
- Vision – It is essential that the group have a clear vision for their work.
- Plan – the plan for the collaboration should set out a broad framework for their work together. Depending on whether this is a tighter partnership or a looser network, the plan should build on the assets, core competencies and interests of the partners. It must be specific



enough to mobilize action and to be able to measure success but still loose enough for structures and initiatives to arise organically and be seized upon quickly. This is core to the 'loose coupling' concept which is desirable.

- Partner Assets Mapping - The Partners Assets Mapping is generally a chart which outlines how each of the partners wants to relate to the partnership – it would outline the strategic direction of the partner, describe their assets and core competencies, describe what the partner can offer and where they can be best mobilized. It would also include any restrictions or ways that they can't or don't want be involved. The Partners asset mapping both informs the vision and plan, but also the agreements.

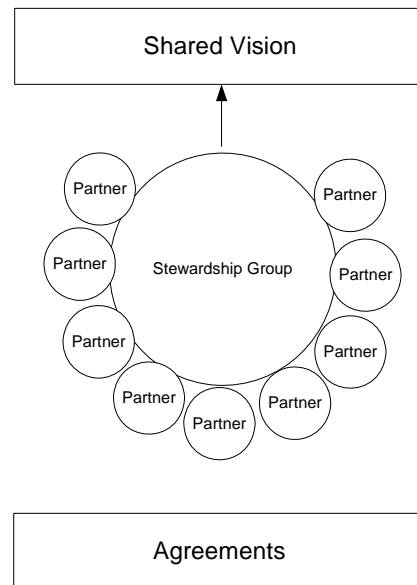
5. Now that there is a clear reason why you would collaborate, the next step is to take care of the housekeeping to agree on the group wants together. Now it is time to bring in the foundational 'agreements' which will support the decision making and avert potential conflict before it begins (ideally).

The partnership agreement articulates the way that the partners or members want to work together and describes the roles and responsibilities of the various players and how they want to work together.

For the model to work, the partnership agreement will need to have two (2) key agreements:

- The secretariat function resides outside of the partners and be handled by a third party organization or person.
- Leadership must move between the partners on a project by project basis.

In addition, it will also determine how decisions get made, how money is handled, how secretariat services are handled, an entrance and exist strategy for partners into the collaboration and a conflict resolution process.

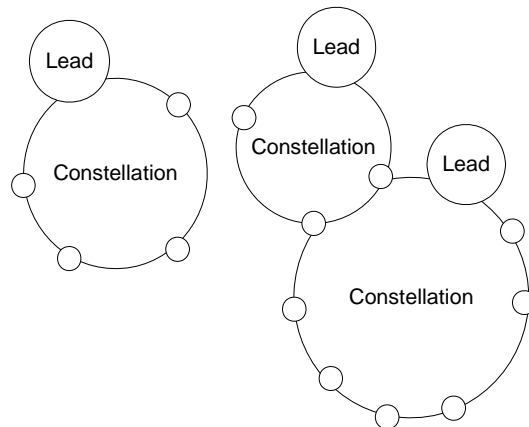


6. Now that the 'order' in the lower quadrant has been established and systems of accountability and coordination are in place, it is now time to create an enabling environment for 'chaos and complexity' to be honored. This takes the form of constellations.

Constellations are "self-organizing action teams" that operate in cooperation with a broader strategic vision. The structures and initiatives of the collaboration take the form of "constellations" - clusters of activity in which a subset of the partners voluntarily participate. Constellations can be formal projects, occasional and opportunistic initiatives, or committees that guide particular aspects of the work of the partnership.

Constellations are:

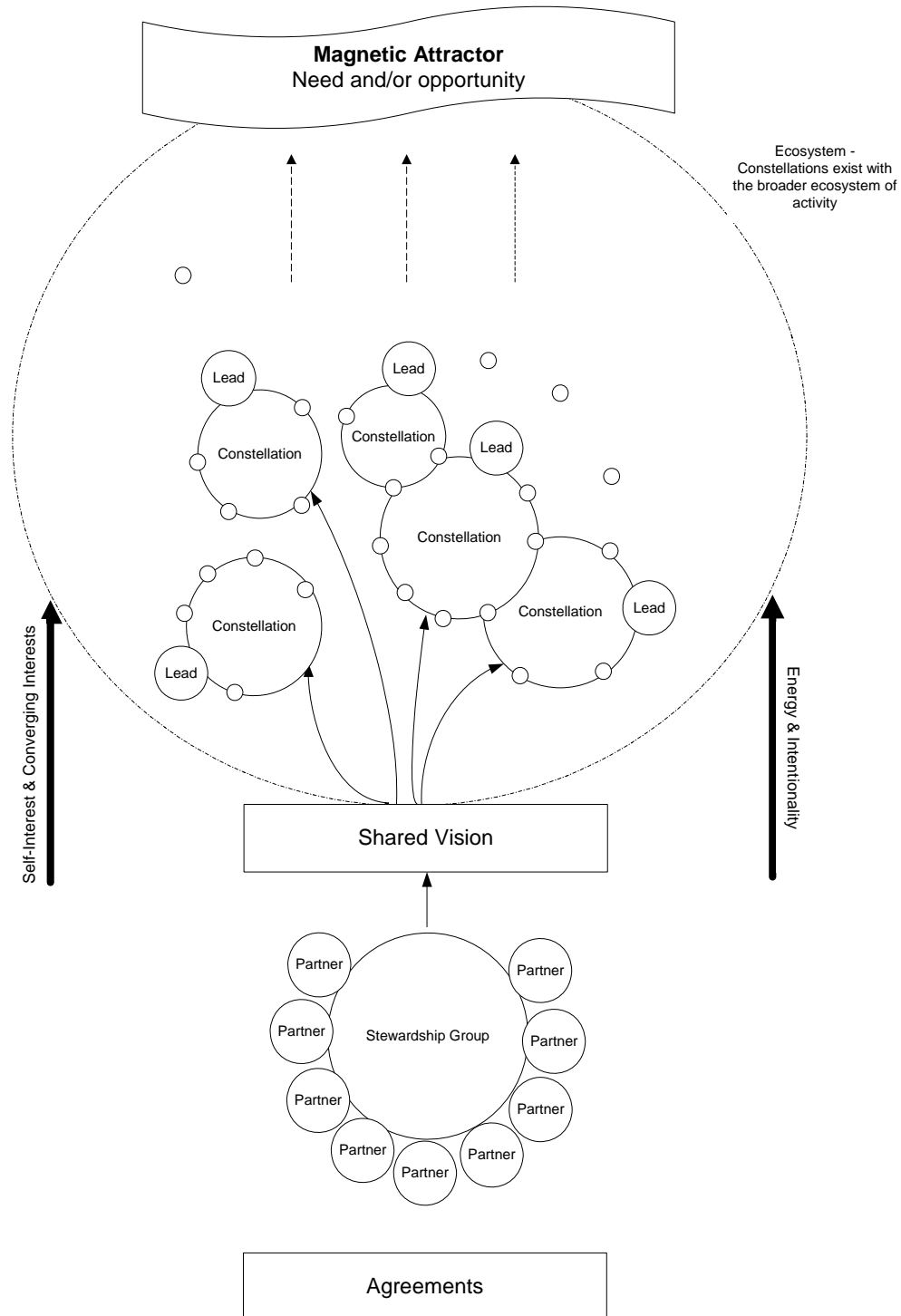
- Both opportunistic and responsive while also be strategic and agenda setting.
- Constellations are permeable - enabling groups to get in and out of the constellation easily. This puts pressure on group to remain relevant to stay alive.
- Constellation members are not necessarily only members of the collaboration, but rather, may participate in a constellation where there is converging interests.
- Constellations are created by a recognition of a need or opportunity which is matched with the energetic leadership to move a particular issue forward. Anyone can ignite a constellation within an ecosystem of activity. Most often they are triggered or led by the partners that are active in the SG.
- The constellations harness the power of loose coupling – enabling the right partners to come together based on their own interests and assets. This creates stronger action teams that are harnessing the power of self-interest within the a shared vision.
- Constellations must advance the interests of the ecosystem or partnership and must be consistent with the vision and plan of the group.
- Constellation members do not need to know that they are a part of this framework/model
- Within each constellation, one partner takes a leadership role and acts as the fiscal and legal authority on this activity. The lead is determined on a case-by-case basis, as determined by the partner's interests, competencies and fit with potential funders.
- Constellations liaise with the Stewardship Group to ensure that the constellations and partners are coordinating their efforts, avoiding duplication and further enhancing work toward the greater need and goal.



A constellation emerges, with the incubation support of the partnership director. The group works together to define their own terms of reference. What do they want to do with each other, how do they want to work? The group collectively discusses who amongst them should provide the energy to play leadership role, who has the organizational capacity to be the financial lead and what role each of the members will play, matching roles and responsibilities with the assets of each group. This agreement will be written down.

If appropriate, the constellations will work with the partnership director to get the resources necessary to support the constellation work – fundraising. The partnership director will also be providing other ‘incubation support’ to the group and will constantly be building relationships with potential funders for the constellation work. Once the resources are secured, the work of the constellations begins. By this time, a new constellation is already emerging and new work is being created.

- Once there are several constellations up and running, it becomes the role of the SG, potentially in concert with the broader membership, to assess the gaps and to evaluate the progress of the collaboration and how the issue is transforming within the broader ecosystem. With this information, the collaboration has the ability to adjust its strategy and to generatively adapt to the dynamic needs within the ecosystem.



8. Energy and intentionality are the underlying forces that support the model. Energy is simply the recognition of people and organizations motivations, priorities, strategic goals and sense of urgency around an issue. Energy is what people are willing to put toward the movement toward the magnetic attractor.

Intentionality is the consciousness of the work of the partners towards the magnetic attractor. Not everyone needs to be conscious of how they are working in the model, but the SG needs to be operating intentionally. This said, the model is ideally suited to adapt to the complex and changing environment. The intentionality is essential for the collaborative to be able to constantly adapt to this change in pursuit of the goal. Intentionality is the wisdom behind the energy.

9. When the need or opportunity has been met, it is probably best to ‘creatively destroy’ the constellations- and potentially the whole collaboration, as the energy has left and it can be an intense drain trying to transform or save a project, when it may be easier to ‘destroy’ the old purpose and to innovate a new collaboration – just remember to find a way to bring the assets of the old forward.

Irrelevance is the fastest way to kill collaboration. The second runner up is a lack of a clear need/opportunity or an ill defined vision and strategy. You will know when it is time to ‘creatively destroy’ a collaboration by the number of people who respond to the e-mail and the number of people that fail to turn up at the meetings. But before you kill it, a little resuscitation might be possible by bringing in a more clear definition of the purpose and by working towards some small successes to get people moving in the right direction.

Some Mechanics of the Model...

There are a number of assumptions and core systems which support the mode. They may be, in fact, more important than the model itself. These core systems include:

- Third-party Catalyst & Capacity Builder
- Collaborative Leadership
- No legal incorporation
- Managing the flow of money and power
- Communication and transparency

Third-party Catalyst & Capacity Builder

Core to the functioning of the model is the need for a clear third party agent to play the role of the process catalyst and capacity builder.

One of the standard challenges facing collaborative projects is the desire to place the secretariat function into one of the partners – and usually the partner who already has the most capacity. Although this can sometimes work, generally the impact of this decision is to completely and permanently alter the power dynamic of the group, both giving one of the partners more power and allowing the others to defer responsibility. This serves no one.

In the constellation model, the secretariat function must reside outside of the partners. This means that any staff would need to be working out of third party organizations. Generally, this has been a consultant or other ‘intermediary’ group. This third party agent should be familiar and interested in the nature of the collaborative work, but will not have a seat at the table as a content provider, but rather, will have a seat at the table as a process provider.

The role of the secretariat is to act as a third-party catalyst and capacity builder for the group. Their role is to support the process of the collaboration – guiding the group through the various planning stages, facilitating meetings, incubating constellations, fundraising for joint work, mediating conflict, ensuring the flow of information and generally building the capacity of the group to work towards their desired outcome.

Collaborative Leadership

Generally, this secretariat function comes in the form of a person – a highly skilled and experienced person that clearly understands their role and purpose. This is NOT a junior ‘coordinator’ position, but rather a highly skilled and discriminating person who embodies collaborative leadership. Effectively, this position is the Executive Director of the partnership and their purpose is to provide process support to the content experts – the members. This person is the steward of the process, constantly balancing leading the process with responding to the needs and nurturing the leadership of the partners. Responsibilities would include: facilitation, conflict mediation, project development, planning, strategy, partnership development, fundraising, incubation and support of the constellations.

No legal incorporation

The collaboration – either network or partnership – should NOT legally incorporate in any way. This, once again, undermines the power dynamic of the group and creates an entity that will innately want to build itself to compete with its own members. A collaboration is there to serve its members, but many of them emerge to compete with their own members.

Note: There is a role for membership serving organizations such as professional associations or service intermediaries whose mission is to serve a particular group. Each of these should explore other collaborative models. And it might be argued that they may require either a cooperative approach to their model or a much more entrepreneurial model. But this discussion must be saved for another paper.

As there is no legal entity, fiscal and legal responsibility moves to each member on a project-by-project basis. This means that the project lead has the final authority to make legal and fiscal decisions – however, the conflict resolution process should clearly outline the consultation and decision-making process taken to protect the members of the constellation.

Managing the flow of money and power

Constellations drive the model and therefore, leadership and resources for these constellations are constantly coming from different places and going to different organizations. This ‘in motion’ money and power management ensures that the active partners are compensated for their initiative.

If one or two partners tend to get all of the resources, the collaboration will become unbalanced and unhealthy – infighting will inevitably begin.

It is the role of the third party catalyst in concert with the Stewardship Group and in further concert with the funding community that balance the flow of leadership and money. The secretariat must have a commitment to building the capacity and involvement of the less active members.

Because the collaboration doesn't legally exist and because resources are generally tied to projects, it is very challenging to amass any 'core' funding. As a result, it is recommended that a portion of the administrative fees be allocated to the collaboration by the project lead. For example, in a case where standard admin fees are generally 15%, 10% might be retained by the lead and 5% allocated to the collaboration. This ensures that overtime some unrestricted income is accumulating to be used at the discretion of the SG to serve the collaboration.

Resourcing the Secretariat is generally the first thing that a group will need to do. Although it rarely happens this way, ideally, the first resources secured are for partnership development and capacity building. Whether the resources are coming from the members themselves or from outside funders, it is essential that the collaboration has enough time and resources to actually invest in the project and outcomes.

Realistically, small projects will need to identify one of their partners to attempt to detach themselves from their own organizations to play this servant leader – third party catalyst role. This decision should be made based on the personality traits of the partners. This person will need to have strong social capital in the group and must be able to frankly declare when they are speaking as the convener and when they are speaking for their own organization.

Communications and Transparency

The constellation model could not exist easily without the internet to facilitate group communications and feedback. Mailing lists, tracking changes and a web site are fundamental tools of the trade as transparency and information are at the foundation of the model. As such, for larger initiatives, a regular information update from and to the members is a great communications vehicle to support the collaboration.

The secretariat is responsible for facilitating the communication amongst the group. Part of this will happen at meetings, part of it will happen online and part of it will happen in the space between the meetings. Constantly engaging the members and partners in the space between the meetings is essential. This 'space between' is essential time to build the capacity of the individual members and to begin to align the work of the SG and the constellations in a strategic way.

This 'space between' is not a time for political maneuvering but is part of the overall engagement strategy to ensure that the group is moving forward, is fully informed and that the general capacity of the group is increasing.

What makes it work...

There are many things that make the constellation model come to life and succeed. Many of them are extremely logical and obvious, while some of them are not. The following provides an overview:

- Energy
- Intentionality
- Consciousness and reflectiveness
- Clear vision
- Trust and relationship amongst the group
- Clear division between process and content
- Loose coupling might also be described as the permeability of a group
- Magnetic attractors – have a clear and genuine need or opportunity to move the collaboration forward
- Focus on converging interests
- Generative leadership through out all parts of the system and not just centralized
- Feedback loops
- Attitude of service and collaborative leadership – no empire builders welcome
- Solid and preventative conflict mediation skills
- Action inspires action
- Knowing when to lead and when to follow

It is all of these things, and so much more.

The Metaphor and Philosophical Underpinning...

Imagine looking up into the sky on a pitch dark, cloudless night to see the awesome display of thousands, if not millions of stars. Sometimes there are clusters of stars, sometimes spectacular lightshows of the aurora borealis, sometimes shooting stars. On those evenings, usually far away from cities and towns, when there is a feeling of connectedness to all things, when we are feeling most insignificant and yet also so divinely grateful for the view onto the universe, we start to see constellations – clusters of stars that are starting to organize themselves in our minds. We start to see patterns and shapes, we start to create order, systems and meaning within this enormous context.

For eons, civilizations have created order out of the stars, assigned names, creating systems and using them to guide our ships across the seas. The human brain seeks tools and frameworks to understand the complexity of our world and a constellation is one such tool. In the skies, constellations are groups of stars that, from our perspective, act as guide posts, they are clusters that provide meaning within the broader context. We create the constellations of stars – Orion's star points actually have nothing to do with the actual orbital clusters in which Orion's Belt is actually working in – instead Orion's Belt is created out of our understanding of how these different orbital systems relate to one another.

Within the context of group dynamics, our constellation metaphor is a way to recognize that there are many stars in the sky and it is the power to cluster, to bring order and to assign meaning to these groups that provide a framework for organizing and action.

The constellation model is based in the metaphor of the skies, but it has evolved out of a complexity-inspired framework of thinking. At each stage of the evolution of the model, complexity-theory has been drawn on to help to understand the factors at play.

The following are some highlights of how the model interfaces with complexity-theory:

- Each constellation operates within the ‘panarchy’ model – recognizing that there is a innovation, conservation, creative destruction and rebirth phase of the work
- The ecosystem recognizes that there is a need for ‘diversity’ to enrich the ecosystem – it recognizes that even if a player is not in the partnership that they are still in the ecosystem
- The constellations harness the power of loose coupling – enabling the right partners to come together based on their own interests and assets. This creates stronger action teams that are harnessing the power of self-interest within a shared vision.
- Generative leadership is at the heart

A contribution to complexity thinking may be the need to recognize the role of ‘magnetic attractors’ (as opposed to strange attractors). The magnetic attractor is the need or opportunity faced by the group. Core to any group or system organizing itself is the ‘need or opportunity’ which is available. The magnetic attractor is the key mobilizing force which provides the trigger for the action. These magnetic attractors could be either ‘significant changes which evoke a set of reactions or it may be a subtle shift in forces which create opportunity or need over generations. It is the magnetic attractors which are constantly at play which create the dynamism of a system or group. It is essential that we understand the ‘magnetic attractors’ at play, to our ability to organize for social change.