

Episode 6: Know When to Fold ‘Em

[Intro Music]

[Intro]

Eve:

Hello. Welcome. This is Stop, Collaborate and Listen! We are Eve.

Julie:

And Julie.

Eve:

And this podcast is all about relationships, but not in the way you might think. We’re talking about partnerships among folks who are connecting public audiences with science and science with public audiences. Today we're going to have the tough conversation about when and how to actually walk away from a partnership, consciously uncoupling, if you will.

Julie:

All right. Let's get into it with today's letter.

Dear Stop, Collaborate and Listen,

I have a dilemma. I'm part of a team working on broader impacts that just isn't working out. We all had good intentions to create a durable and structured partnership to support collaborative, broader impacts design activities between our science center and the nearby university. It's becoming clear, at least to me, that we just don't have the resources to execute our vision.

Some of our partners on both sides are determined to keep going, despite the fact that after two years we have not experienced any real success. Is some level of partnership better than nothing? I'm concerned that we're taking up space and funding that might be better used by another community organization, more prepared to effectively execute better impacts partnerships. Perhaps more importantly, I worry that keeping the partnership going without realizing success could do damage to the relationships and morale in both organizations.

How do you know when to walk away and how do you do it in a way that leaves the door open for future collaboration?

Signed,

Unconsciously Coupled

Eve:

Well, this letter really touches on a lot of complicated ideas. There are a lot of reasons that a partnership might seem like it needs to dissolve or maybe evolve. In this letter alone, I think they talk about the strain of resources. Sometimes it's a matter of personality. Sometimes it's just that the context has changed. But figuring out how to navigate that in a smart and productive way. Wow, that's really complicated.

[Discussion with Guest]

Julie:

All right. I'm so excited to have here with us today Dr. Dajung Woo, assistant professor at Rutgers University. Dr. Woo studies organizational communication and related boundary-spanning and partnership activities. She has explored this very issue. And in fact, one of her excellent papers in the Journal of Communications Research in 2019 is titled Exit Strategies in Inner Organizational Collaboration Setting the Stage for Reentry. So, Dr. Wu, welcome.

DJ:

Hello. I go by DJ and nice to meet you. And I'm happy to be part of this conversation.

Julie:

Great. Well, I am so excited you're here as a fellow qualitative researcher and a fan of grounded theory. I'm so excited to explore this issue and really get into the richness of the reasons these types of situations might come up. So to get us started, I wanted to just ask you, how did you move into this type of research where you were considering this kind of uncoupling and changing and dissolving partnerships?

DJ:

Initially, I wasn't just focused on the exit or decoupling of partnerships, but just broadly how collaborative endeavors evolve over time. So how collaborations are formed, how they're sustained. And also naturally, I've observed over time that collaborations by nature, they are temporary, and so they come to an end at some point. And so I became really curious about how organizations and people who represent organizations manage that process.

Some are more successful than others, and so the series of research projects that I've done focuses on the formation, the maintenance, and the ending of collaborations. And that project was funded by an

NSF grant when I was a Ph.D. student at UC Santa Barbara. So I got to do a larger project looking at collaborative efforts in the urban planning sector in multiple regions of the United States.

So clearly, you're the perfect person to help us navigate this really complex issue. I'm curious, what's your reaction to that letter?

DJ:

Yeah, that's interesting. So my first question would be, you know, the letter said we're not just seeing success. What does the success mean to you and your partner? And is there an agreed upon definition of what success looks like in that partnership?

Julie:

Yeah, that's a really good point. You know, in these broader impacts partnerships between universities and science centers, I think there's going to be a lot of different versions of success. Right? And so sometimes in partnerships that are struggling to have real tangible, measurable outcomes, I think it can be helpful to sort of scale back your expectations and think about the relationships that are being built and the learning and shared understanding that's developing through the attempts to kind of move towards that specific outcome.

But I wonder, one, what you think about the value of that type of work and two what's the expiration date on just kind of building social connection between two entities?

DJ:

Definitely. So it's not just about failure. So they probably have accomplished something. So reflecting on what they have done together and celebrating that and then talking about what areas or which of the visions they set out initially have not been achieved and why. I think that kind of mutual and collective sense-making can be a learning opportunity to, instead of just avoiding.

And in a lot in a lot of those cases, I've seen people kind of ghosting. The partnership just stopped talking to each other because they both feel like either they're embarrassed or they feel like they failed. So that stigma that they might have might be stopping them from opening up for that kind of conversation.

Julie:

You mentioned stigma. What do you mean by stigma?

DJ:

Yes. So people often feel embarrassed that they didn't follow through when it is very natural that the goals that they set out might evolve over time. So the embracing of the dynamic, collaborative process, I think that can be sometimes really hard because collaborative partners get together initially and usually in the beginning there's a lot of momentum they probably sketched out these are the steps we're going to take, these are the activities we're going to do. And when those things didn't become realized, I think they immediately kind of consider, Oh, nothing really happened. When in fact, just having regular meetings and conversations and learning about, oh, we have these resources, or I didn't know you guys have those resources, that alone can serve them in the future in the ways that may not be so immediate right now or the apparent right now.

And so I think that's part of the challenge of researching this very topic because people don't necessarily want to talk about why some collaborations didn't go as planned, that it was their fault, or they don't want to blame the other party, even though they think all the partners didn't do what they're supposed to do, but they don't want to blame their partners. So that's part of the challenge, I think, opening up conversations about this topic.

Eve:

Yeah, and it's interesting because in the really strongest partnerships that we've seen in this project, there is a level of openness and trust and comfort that you have to work really hard to establish. It takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of investment, and it's only with that trust in place that then you can have the conversation about whether it's right to continue. You can sort of get uncomfortable together and get into some of that sort of stickier stuff.

DJ:

That's very true. And when I guess when those conversations about why this collaboration isn't going as well might be because that collaborative relationships weren't based on solid relationships. So I think people often forget that collaborative projects are projects, but collaboration is done by the people. And so often at the beginning of a collaborative project, people get excited, Oh, we have this person from this organization, they focus so much on how they have the someone from this organization that we wanted to work with, but neglecting the fact that that person, you know, representing that organization is the person they're going to collaborate with, not the entity that they represent.

Of course, they go together but building genuine relationship and cooperative relations and ship that allows for reciprocal information exchange and the trust is a very important component too, because being willing to be vulnerable enough to trust and rely on each other. But when that doesn't happen, it's natural that those conversations about why collaboration isn't going as planned. That would be really tough. And maybe that's why ghosting and kind of disappearing and that kind of thing might happen inevitably.

Julie:

It strikes me that there's a bit of a bell curve. I like that, you know, Eve reminded us what a strong relational foundation you need to get to the point of collaborative outcomes and after all, that investment if you have the relationship and it's strong, but maybe you're missing some other piece. The resources, the timing. I mean, in the process of our broader impacts, design project, pandemics, things like that, that really change the course of an individual organization.

It must be so hard to let go because you've invested so much sort of both personal and professional energy in making something happen. I wonder if that's part of the reason why people end up ghosting their partners, who they work so hard to build relationships with, or maybe not admitting and not letting go of a partnership?

DJ:

Definitely. But when collaborations are stalled like that and they reluctantly come to the regular meetings they've scheduled, they don't realize the resources are still being wasted and the disappointment only gets bigger and bigger. So I think collaborators, when they get started and they're excited, I think it's good to keep some sort of exit plan in mind. You know, it doesn't have to be explicitly discussed. If both parties agree to discuss an exit plan, that's great. You know how this collaboration might end and what that might look like and when. Because, again, admitting that collaborative processes are dynamic, that also means embracing the fact that collaborations can come and go. And so, you know, you can ask your own organization and your own people who are part of that collaboration that, you know, when are we going to call this, you know, not very effective?

What is the plan? And how can we do that in a way that doesn't hurt the other organization or the other partner? And so keeping that in mind from the beginning, I think might help with these challenges that might arise. So it's just a matter of expecting that this collaboration will come to an end and collaboration might end, but the relationships don't have to end.

And so still fostering that kind of reciprocal relationship might be key to potentially leading to another collaboration in the future. Because the partner might think of you knowing that now that you've had that learning opportunity of what your interests are, what your hopes are, what resources that you have that can open up for another collaborative opportunity. But I think that only happens if there is trust and that relationships were built in the way that allows for continuation of the relationships, even if collaboration itself ended.

Eve:

What I love in what I think you're saying here is that this conversation about when and how and why to exit a partnership, you can start that at the very beginning. It's not necessarily acknowledging or imagining defeat from the get-go. In fact, it's just an essential part of a partnership. And so starting that conversation before anything, any trouble arises is really smart. So that doesn't catch you off guard and you're prepared.

DJ:

Definitely. I think that needs to become either a norm or a built-in process in the collaboration, because I can see why that might be difficult for somebody to bring that up, because it might give the other person the impression that maybe you're not in it 100%. You're already talking about how this collaboration might end. And so the mutual understanding that collaborations, again, this specific effort designed for achieving specific goals is temporary.

But again, that doesn't mean that their relationships are going to end at any point. So I can see that challenge of why bringing that up might be difficult. So I think if it's in any way a structured collaboration or a proposal or some kind of planned effort, building that into the process might be beneficial.

Julie:

You know D.J., as you're talking about this, I'm thinking actually about my own relationship and how early on with my partner when we went to buy a house, I was absolutely terrified at the level of commitment and the amount of investment we would have to make. And moving from that tiny little above garage apartment that we lived in to a house that we were fully responsible for.

And I remember having this conversation saying, I'm all in, I'm all in to this getting married and this long-term thing that we are doing, but we can walk away any time from this house. And here are the conditions now, one of us loses a job, a major health disaster. You know, and I think that that alleviated a lot of my anxiety about investing in our partnership through the purchase of a home.

You also mentioned proposals. And I think that one, that's something that's a very ever present in these partnerships where a lot of times the opportunity to write a proposal and engage a science center as a co-PI and co-developer or as a broader impacts partner the people with expertise to sort of deliver and evaluate the broader impacts of that work.

A lot of times that's the reason that the relationship starts in the first place. And I think a conversation that we might be missing, based on what you're saying here, is let's talk about the reality of us not getting this grant, because that is more likely than the reality of getting the grant, especially the first time. And I think that's a conversation that gets missed in these partnerships between universities and nonacademic entities because that understanding might not be there.

And it strikes me that that conversation being really intentional upfront and saying, I - from the university - want a partner with your science center. For these reasons, we have a time limited opportunity to try to jump into this and the chances that it's going to work out are pretty slim. But I see this as a first step. I wonder if you have any reflections.

You know, you're an assistant professor. You have to do broader impacts as part of your work as well. I wonder if you have any reflections about kind of setting up those expectations with external partners on proposals?

DJ:

Yeah. So early on I feel like the conversation about how, you know, in that example that you just shared, I feel like the painful process of preparing for proposal together itself was a valuable experience. I think that really was probably the foundation of that beginning of the collaborative relationship and you seem to have, you know, developed that trust early on by opening up about the challenges. And so you probably could talk about, you know, what might happen when the collaboration doesn't go as planned.

I'm thinking about my research experience where, I haven't seen how people have discussed the exit plan from the beginning, but I have seen people who started the collaboration together. And then a little less than halfway through, they realize, oh, this isn't what I envisioned, this isn't going as a plan. So they actually pivoted and created a new collaborative opportunity. And so that is possibly another strategy. I suggested, you know, having an exit plan early on, not because I've seen it done successfully, but I think it would have been. It's a lesson learned. I think by hearing people reflecting on what they should have done or could have done.

But if that wasn't done for whatever challenges, you know, having these checkpoints throughout the collaborative lifecycle might be helpful to that. Reflection points might be important too, because collaboration often with that momentum, in the beginning, it's usually about going, going, achieving those goals, taking that action steps, but without any moment to just get together, just to talk about what has happened, what has been achieved and what's not, and where are we headed.

So that reflection moment might be helpful. And sorry that I didn't answer that question about the example of the exit plan, but in my personal experience, when as an assistant professor, you know, I get excited about a lot of projects, right? So I was told to be careful to say yes to so many things. And so I'm very mindful when I talk about collaborative opportunities from the beginning, you know, I don't promise anything solid, but I talk about what this could be, you know, exploring the collaborative potential fully.

And to do that, it takes time to talk right. What are you hoping to achieve? And being very candid about why do you need me? You know, is this the project that really absolutely requires my expertise? Or can you have another person who may have similar expertise and more time and more interest? And so gauging that, I think early on, evaluating whether I think people often get kind of embarrassed or not wanting to talk about how when they go into a collaborative opportunity, they have self-oriented interest too.

And I think often smaller organizations or community organizations feel like they can't really talk about those self-oriented interests and they kind of have this hidden hopes all by doing this collaboration. I think we'll get these things out of it. And so I try to be as candid as possible about that. In the beginning and from the beginning, if our hopes and our intentions are not perfect match, I am usually candid about that early on.

You know, I have other priorities. So at this time, it might not be the best, but there was a project I tried to start and we spent some time on a building on that collaborative project. But I did have exit plan in my mind that I communicated when things weren't going as planned. So but the way that I ended, though, I was of course very mindful.

I did the tasks that I knew the person needed me for, and so I completed it and gave it to my partner. I knew you needed me for this particular task. I got it done. But I don't think from this point you need me. And candidly, my priorities have shifted. But I didn't want to hurt your opportunity to achieve this goal.

So here is my portion. So that's how I ended that relationship so that I don't hurt that relationship. You know, that person doesn't see this as a complete failure. So that's one personal example.

Julie:

I love that. And I know that you walk your talk because when I asked you to come and join us for Stop, Collaborate and Listen, we had that conversation. What is it about me? What is it that I can specifically contribute? And we decided, you know, we talked about the level of commitment and the time that it would take and the conditions under which this would work. And we made the decision to move forward and we were very intentional about that. And you really walk your talk. So I appreciate that.

Eve:

I really like your description of building in these checkpoints throughout the process of a partnership. And we talked in this project a lot about the importance of being open to the evolution of the partnership, to being open to it shifting forms. And to some degree, I think what you're describing is being open to a more radical evolution, you know, rather than just saying, oh, we're going to do two events rather than three.

You're talking about being open to a really foundational shift in the approach if necessary. And that leads me to want to know a little bit more about the paper that Julie cited earlier. Exit strategies for inter-organizational collaboration, setting the stage for re-entry. What if at one of these checkpoints you determined that the timing is just not right?

This is not the right partnership at this time, but you really want to leave yourself open to future collaboration. What are some of the strategies and maybe the steps that you recommend to make that possible?

DJ:

Yes. So in that paper, I compared those who successfully did set the stage for a future potential or another collaboration and those who didn't or those who didn't successfully set the stage for future collaboration, they knew halfway through this collaboration wasn't for them, but they kind of ingenuinely started sending proxy, for example. You know, I'm still going to have my foot in the door, but not in a fully invested way.

So I'm going to send somebody just to get that information that I need. But I'm still part of the collaboration. And so that that was seen by other collaborative partners as, oh, they're just there. But they're not actually invested. And so those individuals didn't continue that relational dynamics after or during that collaboration. But again, like I said earlier, those who successfully did set the stage for collaboration, they really valued and they knew the value of the relationship they built.

And especially, you know, many of the projects, collaborative projects that I've I've looked at, I studied, I've observed, had conveners, the organizers, or you can call them coordinators. Those individuals play a

very important role in collaborative projects. And so individuals who wanted to continue that relationship knew the importance of building that strong relationship with the conveners. And they - even if the collaboration they joined didn't work out, they would ask the coordinators. There are many task forces, many committees that they could have joined that surround the main collaborative. And so they would try to join, you know, this particular collaboration isn't for me, but can I join this task force committee that that are around this? So they're still staying within the problem domain, the domain they're interested in. They're trying to advance the sector they're part of.

But they so they would branch out to different kinds of collaboration. So they don't completely leave that space, but just join other opportunities. So they still stay connected to the convener who tends to be central players, at least in the project that I studied in that problem domain. So they had a lot of relationships in other spaces so they could bridge those relationships.

Julie:

I love that you talked about the conveners, right? So Etienne Wenger-Trayner talks a lot about conveners in his communities of practice research and that's research that I think circulates in our communities quite a lot. I also wanted to just make the connection. You know, we talk about broader impacts professionals in our community and that there are broader impacts professionals at universities and broader practice, professionals at science centers and other community organizations and professional societies, they are kind of all over.

But the key characteristic that they all share, no matter what types of organizations are at or what ways they enhance research through broader impacts, is that they are these sort of net-weaving people that create the glue of relationship and partnership across the organizations that need to be involved. Eve and I have a colleague who likes to call them the gold people, the people who sort of shine and keep everybody well-lit so they can see what's going on.

I really like how you brought up the importance of those kind of boundary-spanner individuals because at its core, that's what a broader impact professional is.

DJ:

Definitely. I've seen cases where in collaborations people joined the collaboration because they saw the opportunity to connect with this particular individual who represents another organization. They've hoped to collaborate for a long time. So they kind of, you know, don't realize the fact that the conveners play an important role and they could help them bridge those relationships outside of - in and outside of the collaboration.

And so I think there is a lot of missed opportunities when people neglect to build strong relationships with the conveners.

Eve:

Have you seen examples of a partnership where they hold on a little too long and it really does damage either to the individual organizations or to the future prospects for collaboration or to the individuals involved in some way.

DJ:

Yes. So in one collaboration, without naming what it was, but it was a long statewide effort to tackle a particular social problem. And when I talked to the majority of the people involved, many of them said, I actually don't know what's going on, but I, I attend the quarterly meeting or monthly meeting and the meetings have become so unproductive that they - they would you know, the people involved they would just send proxy - different people just because they ran out of resources, people retired, people left, turn over.

So it just kept going and going with these painfully uninformative meetings that come together just to get information. But there's no information givers. There's only information receivers who want to receive information that they want. And so that led to I don't know what specific damage was done to each of those organizations, but based on my qualitative research, it was the perception that, well, this isn't going anywhere.

Well, nobody's getting anything out of it, but they're all holding on to it. And I feel like just sending even a proxy to that meeting for an hour, a quarter that's also a resource is there they are spending. And so I noticed the collective impression I don't think they're talking to each other, but they were telling me that well this is isn't going anywhere, this is totally a disaster.

But I still go because I'm not losing that hope in case something happens magically that that could be beneficial to my organization. And so I think they weren't realizing that they're sadly wasting resources with these hopes that something might come up without nobody putting in real effort.

Eve:

That resonates just to an extreme. Because I think I've been that proxy, you know, when I was much earlier in my career.

Julie:

Ha, yeah me too.

Eve:

Yeah, there was it just, it's amazing how similar my experience is to what you just described. There was an initiative and again, I won't name specifics, but I think I was the third or fourth person from my organization to have been sent to these periodic meetings.

And when I first got the invitation, I was so excited because it felt like it was a real step up. And I got there and realized I realized that it really didn't matter they just needed someone to be there. But I think the harm done was that it was tremendously demoralizing. It felt to me like my time actually wasn't terribly valued by my leadership because they thought, Oh, whatever, we need to send someone. So in a small way, that was damaging.

Julie:

I can so relate to that, to that excitement of saying, oh, they're trusting me with this big thing and actually learning later is that they don't care about that big thing. And that's why they're they're sending me when I was earlier in my career. It's a harsh reality.

You know, to follow our thread of kind of relationships, but not in the way you think this you know, this strikes me as any romantic relationship where you stay in too long because you've invested too much. It's too challenging to decouple. Or maybe it's also because of the sort of social expectations that once you have sort of hit a certain point, you're expected to stay together. I wonder about this kind of professional pressures around sustaining partnerships, right? So, often when we get a new grant, one of the first conversations we have is how do we sustain this work in perpetuity?

And that's you said earlier on, DJ, that collaborations have a natural end point. And I wanted to talk a little bit about sort of the professional and organizational expectations of sustainability and how that relates to how challenging it is to walk away.

DJ:

Yeah, definitely. I think if it's okay for me to talk about right here, the difference between collaboration and cooperation. I think often when I mentioned that collaboration by nature is temporary because organizations don't just have infinite amount of time and resources to dedicate to a collaborative project. But what often I think people hope for is actually cooperative relationships.

Cooperation is different from collaboration in that you don't necessarily have this mutually shared goals or processes or governance, but it's the informal agreement that I'll help you out with what you need with an understanding that the other person will help me out in the future. I think that cooperation is often what people hope to have sustained.

Eve:

All right. So bringing it back to our listener unconsciously coupled, you know, given the fact that clearly that they didn't have those early conversations, that maybe in the future we would recommend, but they didn't have those early conversations about making a smooth exit. What piece of advice would you offer now given where they are, given their current circumstances?

DJ:

Yeah, given the current circumstances, one of the parties would have to open up that conversation opportunity. Right, to create that mutual learning opportunity and be candid about their perceptions and their understanding of the project. And each party needs to ask themselves, do we have enough resources to keep it going? Have we achieved the goals at least part of the goals that we set out early on? And is it time to celebrate those goals and an exit? And it's okay and that needs to be, again, ideally mutually discussed.

Julie:

What I'm really hearing from you is that an elegant exit is all about great upfront planning, being authentically engaged in the partnership and not disingenuously engaged, and about the trust, right? Having the trust so you can have the conversation if it's time to dramatically shift the nature of what we thought was a collaborative co-developing partnership to a coordinating or cooperative agreement to help each other out, or to just walk away and make space for something to happen in the future.

What kind of final words of wisdom do you have to offer? And I cannot resist here, but I'm just going to ask D.J., revolve it.

DJ:

The most important thing would be understanding that walking away or ending partnerships or ending collaborations doesn't have to be negative. It's not a negative thing. It's reframing the mindset around this very idea of collaboration can end, and that's natural. Collaborative processes are dynamic, it is formed and it disappears and there is a whole collaborative lifecycle, just like any other relationships that we've experienced in our lives.

Eve:?

And I love that you suggested, you know, celebrating what was accomplished. It might require a little bit of reframing. You know, maybe you expected to accomplish X, Y and Z, and instead you accomplished A, B and C, but acknowledge that, embrace that and celebrate that. So it does feel like you're honoring the time and energy that you committed to the relationship as it existed.

Julie:

So, you know, there we have it. Collaboration doesn't always work out. And moving it to the next phase is to be celebrated. And we do that with our life events, too. Right? I love as a parent, I love thinking at the end of a bad day, what's one good thing that happened today? And I think we can do that in our collaborations and our partnerships and our work relationships that when things don't work out, we lose our funding, or we don't have the resources to enact our vision, we can ask ourselves, what's one good thing that came out of this? And I really like thinking of this not as failing forward as we talk about that a

lot too, because it's not actually a failure. It's just a movement and an evolution. It's really exciting. DJ, we can't thank you enough. I feel like we could talk for hours.

And I know that as much as we tried to resist, it was so geeked out a little bit as researchers here. But I think there's so much that we can learn from the research that you're conducting now and what you still have to offer. So I would encourage our listeners to look up DJ's work, Dajung Woo, and we'll put some links in the show notes as well for you and really try to see what you can learn and understand about collaborations and how they should end from what she's working on.

DJ:

Thank you so much for having me.

Eve:

Oh, thank you for being here with us. This has been fantastic.

Julie:

Awesome. Thank you so much.

[Outro Music]

[End Credits]

Eve:

Thanks for listening to Stop, Collaborate and Listen with your hosts. Eve Klein from the Institute for Learning Innovation and

Julie:

Julie Risien from the Oregon State University's STEM Research Center.

Eve:

There are so many partners who supported this work. For a full list, please see our podcast description. Specifically, we want to thank Liz Neely from Liminal and Julia Furlan for their guidance and consultation.

Julie:

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