

Collaborate to accumulate

David Archer and Alex Cameron believe that better collaboration can help build a stable foundation for a future UK rail strategy

The Rail Technology Strategy (RTS), published in December last year, is a brave and far seeing document. In aiming to create a framework for the development of the mainline railway across the UK for the next 30 years its scope is rightly ambitious, for without a route map like this it's going to be very difficult for the rail industry to plan a course through a shifting landscape of changing political priorities, increasing customer demands, complex funding models and daunting environmental challenges.

Key to the RTS approach is a call to work now on establishing the 'enablers' of such a long-term strategy. This is not just about enabling technology, but also about creating the financial and management framework that will be needed to incentivise the radical changes that the strategy envisages and building the cross-industry relationships that can sustain it. The need for this to be a whole-system strategy and the requirement for greater industry collaboration comes across loud and clear.

Steve Yianni – the chair of the Technical Strategy Leadership Group that was responsible for developing the RTS is quoted as saying: 'We cannot work on one part of the system without affecting another, so we know that our approach has to be holistic, from the way the track



David Archer



Alex Cameron

relates to the trains and the trains to the signalling. By working together as an industry we have already unlocked opportunities for innovation – and the potential to develop more has been recognised.'

Building sustainable collaborative relationships to support innovation across an industry is a notoriously difficult enterprise – just look at how the

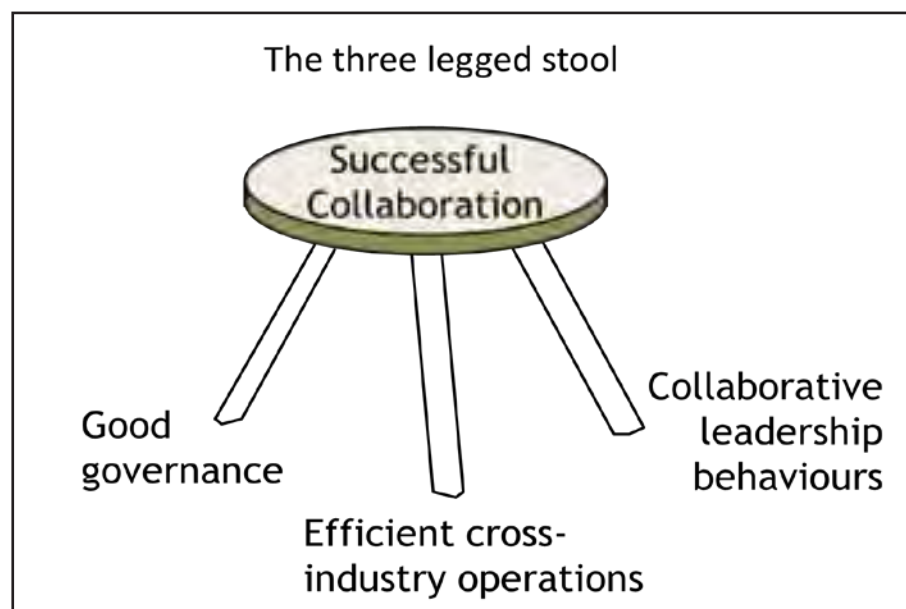
electricity supply industry and the health sector have struggled to embrace new players with radical ideas – but there is an emerging body of evidence on what helps and what hinders such long-term collaboration.

A useful analogy is a three-legged stool, a simple structure that is stable even on rocky ground - but cut away any of the legs and it falls over. When we are talking about creating a base for sustainable collaboration the three legs are:

- * good governance of the collaboration
- * efficient operational process that links all parties
- * collaborative leadership behaviours at all levels.

To define these terms a little further:

- governance means the formal ways in which the overarching purpose of the collaboration is agreed, how long-term objectives are set, accountabilities are defined and joint decisions are made. In the case of the RTS, the Rail Delivery Group could represent an important new component in this cross-industry governance. But a collaborative relationship built solely on formal governance is often inflexible and slow to respond. People stick to the letter of the contract and →



that means that new opportunities can be missed. This focus on playing by the letter of a contract also encourages people to game the system rather than looking for the greater good. So strong governance needs to be supported by efficient cross-system operations.


- in this context, operations mean the operation of the collaborative relationship – not the operation of the railway itself. So important elements here are how information and learning is shared, the processes by which cross-industry resources and expertise are allocated, and the way overall progress is measured and communicated. A lot of success in manufacturing and supply chain collaborations has come from a focus on end-to-end process design and efficient operations. Cross-industry bodies such as RSSB, which facilitates the Technical Strategy Leadership Group and the research that underpins the strategy, have a valuable role to play in enabling the industry to develop the RTS. A focus solely on process can produce collaborations which aren't good at dealing with more strategic change. Too tight a reliance on lean processes can mean that the governance isn't there to

force a re-evaluation of the situation, and the right behaviours haven't been encouraged to make people feel that they can raise the awkward questions that inspire change.

- so the final leg of the stool is all about behaviours and, in particular, the way leaders at all levels in different organisations act as role models of collaboration. Developing collaborative leadership behaviours in an industry where many people are set in their ways takes time. Joint leadership development initiatives can help - so Network Rail opening up its Senior Leaders Programme to people from its supply chain, from Toc's and the wider industry is an example of a step in the right direction.

An approach to collaboration that focuses primarily on getting the behaviours right might look ideal at first glance, but it's only sustainable if the other two legs of the stool are in place as well. Truly collaborative leadership behaviours can get you a long way, but contracts and measurement processes drive behaviours and if these incentivise the wrong behaviours the tensions will build up over time. The other problem

occurs when key people who have built good personal relationships move roles and suddenly there can be nothing left to fall back on and the relationship can feel remarkably hollow.

Like the wooden stool in the picture, any plan to put in place the collaborative relationships that will enable the success of the RTS requires all these three legs to be in place to be stable. There are signs of progress in many areas. As resources get tighter continuing to build good governance, efficient operational processes that link all the players, and developing collaborative leadership behaviours will be key if we are going to achieve the goals of the RTS and, in the words of the strategy, create a railway which is: 'A benchmark for service quality, customer satisfaction and value for money which contributes to the growth of the UK economy.' 

*The authors are co-directors of Socia (www.socia.co.uk), which advises the private and public sector on collaborative leadership issues. They are currently working with the SWT-NR Alliance and on other collaboration projects in rail. Their book, *Collaborative Leadership* is published by Routledge (March 2013).*