

Socia@20 - Collaboration then and now

One of a series of articles contributing to Socia's 20th anniversary celebrations

When we started the research for our first book on Collaborative Leadership in 2002, there was a sense of many positive forces pushing the need for greater collaboration in a new millennium. Public private partnerships to rebuild our national infrastructure, globalisation of supply chains, technology to support remote teams, and international co-operation to reduce the risks of crop failures and climate change - and all of this would lead to increased understanding of the leadership capabilities that would make such collaborations successful. But now 20 years on, from today's perspective we could say that the case for increased collaboration has not (yet) been won.

In June this year we held a celebratory dinner to mark Socia's anniversary with a group of 50 friends and clients who we've worked with over the last 20 years - and in some cases for longer than that! There was a lot of great conversation on the lessons that executive teams and Boards had learned over the years, and given our history, it was inevitable that the topic of collaborative leadership was much discussed around the tables. In particular people reflected on the changes we've all seen in the business, political and technological environments in which collaboration may (or may not) take place, and the way attitudes to the need for and value of collaboration have changed in response.

In 2022, with threats of recession and global resource shortages looming large, we see politicians calling for protectionist measures and appealing to narrow nationalism. And whilst millions of us have become used to using video conferencing and file sharing tools that can enable collaboration across and between organisations, we have also seen the limitations of this technology. Online meetings have their strengths, but they struggle when there is a need to tackle challenging or complex strategic topics where there are conflicting views on the call. At the dinner people talked of commentators using these and other examples to paint collaboration as idealistic but ultimately unworkable idea whose time has been and gone. From this perspective, and with more austere times ahead, collaboration can be seen as a luxury that leaders cannot afford, and a desire to collaborate described as sign of naivety or weakness in leader who is not strong enough to stand alone.

At Socia we've always taken the view that collaboration is hard. It takes time and effort, and it means sharing control, across a contractual or organisational boundary, with people who are different from you in some way, and who you may not totally trust. But whilst building a collaboration can be hard work, in many cases the alternatives are worse and carry even greater risk. The consensus of views around our anniversary dinner table was that collaboration has never been a panacea, nor an ethical good, rather it is a pragmatic response to situations where teams, or organisations are inter-dependent (like it or not) and so have to work together for the long-term. Denying that inter-dependence or trying to isolate yourself from it is a high-risk, high-cost strategy.

For leaders who face into the challenges of collaboration this means having enough humility to admit that you don't have all the solutions, being willing to learn new skills that may take you out of your comfort zone and being ready to share the credit (as well as the pain). Ultimately, successful collaboration in 2022 requires a generation of leaders who can build new relationships, handle conflict with patience and confidence, and share control with others to achieve common goals. And those principles of collaborative leadership haven't changed much in the last 20 years even if the context in which they now need to be applied has, and will continue, to evolve.