

Socia@20 - Collaboration in resource constrained times

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

There was a time (not many years ago) when the idea of collaboration seemed to be part of the zeitgeist. Articles appeared on self-organising work teams across many sectors, 'place-based' initiatives were bringing together social enterprises, charities, and private sector organisations to deliver neighbourhood renewal projects, and 'collaborative leadership skills' was seen as an essential requirement in many job specifications.

These examples haven't gone away, and many people are still working collaboratively across boundaries in their communities as well as in their day jobs. But it can seem that the conversations about collaboration are becoming drowned out by other concerns, e.g. broken supply chains, backlogs at borders, and the need to secure increasingly scarce resources.

In June, at a dinner to mark Socia's anniversary with a group of 50 friends and clients who we've worked with over the last 20 years, we reflected that our 'argument for the value of collaboration' is not yet won. With the benefit of hindsight and a clearer understanding about the impact of ever scarcer resources, we wanted to move past the case of winning or losing an argument for the principle of collaboration. The challenge now is to focus on the need to be more analytical about where you as a leader invest your collaborative effort. Scarce resources is likely to be a new normal that leaders will need to address.

When access to physical resources, or energy, or talent is tight and likely to get tighter, the temptation is to focus inward and to try to secure as many of the resources you need to survive, as an individual, an organisation or a country. But this is a fool's errand, a road to tribal behaviour, which in turn leads to a focus on those we know and understand, and a dismissal of the views of those outside the tent. In a networked world the idea that a leader or an organisation can control all the resources they need to succeed is a fiction. There will always be more interdependence with others.

At Socia we've always taken the view that collaboration takes hard work and so shouldn't be applied as a principle everywhere. But approaching the world with a collaborative mindset means being able to spot the best opportunities for innovation across boundaries and prepares you to pragmatically accept the inevitabilities of interdependence, even when this means having to rely on people or organisations you don't particularly like or trust.

As we head into a what looks like an 'era of shortage' the concepts of collaborative leadership; **building relationships** (with people not necessarily like you), **handling conflict** (with confidence and empathy), and **sharing control** (which also means being willing to share the risks and the credit) are more useful than ever. But the process needs to start with rigorous analysis. Analysis of your interdependencies and how best to handle them. In some situations you may be able to reduce the consequential risks of supply chain constraints by clever design. In others you may be able to make more efficient use of your staff and those of your partners/suppliers by being more transparent in the sharing of resource forecasts. There is no one model answer for collaboration in tough times, but identification of interdependences is a good place to start.

However, for us leading people when resources are tight means leaders opening up to ideas and opinions of those outside their inner circle, or indeed their own organisation. And the flip side of that is leaders being confident to share their own data, their half-formed ideas, and their fears - in the belief that by doing so they can foster the collaborative relationships they need to succeed. Because while physical resources of many sorts may be in short supply right now good ideas don't have to be.