CREATING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS USING THE SEALL™ METHOD

CREATED BY JEFFREY S. DECKMAN

The SEALL™ Process

How to Design and Build Effective and Resilient Collaborations from the Bottom-Up

Introduction:
The acronym **SEALL** represents the 5 key factors that make up the components of a successful collaboration. The degree to which these factors are addressed, present, maintained and built upon will largely determine the level of success you will have, or can expect to have, when designing and implementing a collaboration.

The meaning of the letters in the acronym are:

Smart - **E**ngaged - **A**ble - **L**everage - **L**oyalty

This concept is inspired by the incredible effectiveness of Navy SEAL teams and draws upon some of the basic thinking that goes into assembling effective teams whose combined capabilities; clarity of objections and loyalty to one another allows them to be highly successful in an environment of constantly changing dynamics and conditions.

The **SEALL** process has been developed over many years of trial and error in real world situations across a wide range of sectors ranging from business, political, government and not-for profit. To that end it provides a very effective set of versatile guidelines which, if followed with discipline, will significantly increase your chances of designing a collaboration that maximizes strengths, leverages capabilities, addresses complexities and avoids the hidden pitfalls that can silently doom the effort prior to it launching.

This innovative and useful tool was created to provide a formal process that will determine if, how, and why a collaboration should be undertaken; and for how long. It helps the participants determine if they possess the necessary capabilities to be successful in the endeavor they are seeking to undertake. It also identifies mutual expectations, intrinsic motivations and governance issues necessary to address prior to entering into the arrangement.

The SEALL process addresses the following critical issues:

- What Constitutes Success
- Motivations of the Participants
- Which Services to Provide
- Expectations of the Participants
- Types and Levels of Compensation
- Governance
- Relationship of the Parties
- Resources Required
- Costs to be Incurred and by Whom

Of the 5 SEALL factors some apply to the organizations involved; others apply to the individuals responsible for the implementation of the collaboration; others vet the original idea and some apply to all three.

Methodology

The key to any successful collaboration is communication, transparency and commitment. The SEALL process insures that a series of in-depth conversations occur involving all stakeholders and key players. The purpose of these conversations are to:

- Explain and Refine the Concept
- Define Objectives, Strategies and Tactics
- Identify and Vet Potential Partners
- Define and Agree Upon “Success”
- Determine Feasibility of Success
- Define Participation Criteria
- Define the Methods of Exiting
- Design the Collaboration
- Determine the Lifespan of Collaboration
- Avoid Failure

It is through these conversations that the group will determine how to, and whether to, form a collaboration, and whom to include and why. Depending upon the level of complexity of the undertaking and/or the size of the collaboration it my take several or many conversations to work things out. But it will certainly take more than one.

The SEALL process provides a detailed checklist of critical items that must be addressed if a collaboration is to be successful. The topics covered and the questions to be asked create the guidelines under which the collaboration will be designed and operated. But perhaps even more important than defining the strengths of the group the SEALL process also uncovers hidden weaknesses or conflicts which, if undiscovered, will doom the collaboration to failure at some more expensive time in the future.

One of the only things worse than a potential good collaboration not coming together well is a poor collaboration falling apart mid-way through the endeavor. So, beyond the value of helping to design a profitable collaboration, following the SEALL process with discipline helps groups to avoid the damaging and expensive fallout that occurs when collaborations fail. The cost of which negatively impacts finances, relationships, reputations and clients.

Process Explained:.

While the SEALL process is extensive, it is impossible for any process to be 100% inclusive of all issues to be addressed by any collaboration in any environment. However, it does set the stage for the culture and the level of thinking and analysis to be employed throughout the collaborative effort. Paying attention to each of the following items will significantly increase your chances of success and minimize those of failure.

It is important that as you follow these guidelines through your design process that you remain open to exploring other issues or concerns that may arise that are specific to your collaboration. Feel free to expand upon or contract this list depending upon the specific nature of the conditions, environment and partners involved.

This process is designed to be fluid, flexible and adaptive to a variety of conditions. Yet it also has a specific structure that provides the direction needed to help you to achieve your objectives.

Getting Started: Activating the Acronym

The following are a series of questions and suggestions that should be considered by each individual, and then by the collective group. I, personally, run through much of this checklist on my own as a way to vet the idea of a collaboration prior to reaching out to others. Doing so has saved me and my potential partners a lot of time when I realize there wasn't enough commonality to convene a first meeting. I think of this step as a pre-vetting vetting process.

If the idea makes it through the initial vetting process I then reach out to others who I feel will be excellent partners in the venture. We then repeat this process as we vet the idea together.

Smart ~ If it's not Smart don't Start. This includes the following:

• Start small. Begin with a small core group of people who will serve as the center of the collaboration. You can thoughtfully add more partners as needed later. But if your initial group is large it significantly adds to the complexity and to the time required to make it through the vetting process. It is also easier to add people than it is to remove partners who it is deemed won't contribute significantly to the effort.
• Beware and be sensitive to potential competitiveness between the participants. While it is natural that there may be some overlap of capabilities and businesses be certain to address them up front and clearly define boundaries.
• Determine that you have the resources and intellectual capabilities to accomplish the goal. Discuss one another's capabilities in detail. Be certain to gain a clear and accurate understanding of each partner's abilities and expertise that they can contribute to the collaboration. It is critical that the group have a clear understanding of the collective capabilities, resources and time that can be dedicated to the project.

Is it a SMART idea to embark upon the venture?

• Are you being driven by "research", "emotion" or "hunches"?
• Is the challenge closely related to your current individual and collective competencies?
• Do the combined capabilities of the collaborating partners equal a minimum of 100% of the capabilities required to guarantee success or do you need more?
• Does the combined team possess the standing to be seen by the outside world as a serious player in the venture?

Be SMART in the ways you look at all aspects of the opportunity; the design; the participants and the possibilities.

• Work to keep ego and emotions out of the process from inception thru conception to completion.
• Figure out who works well with one another and who doesn't. Melding personalities plays a large part in a successful collaboration.
• "Flatten the network". Create a culture of "Best Idea Wins" regardless of the source.
• Assign and balance responsibilities and authorities appropriately. Make certain that if someone is responsible for an aspect of the project they have the appropriate level of authority to insure their success.

Can you assemble a collective that will possess enough resources to accomplish the task being undertaken?

• Can you immediately identify the players you need?
• Do you know them well enough to trust them in a business environment, or can you build that trust in time to enter into the arrangement?
• Assess your weak points and shore them up, or adjust your expectations accordingly
• Seek other partners who could turn your collaboration into a "Dream Team" of capabilities and credibility.

Engaged ~ Without Engagement there is no energy. This includes the following:

• Pay attention to how the individual members ENGAGE one another. Strive to facilitate the building of solid relationships that are based upon mutual respect and a concern for each partner.
• Are the reward factors in place which will create significant "gravitational pull" for the organizations to be truly intrinsically motivated to participate in the project from inception thru conception to completion? Factors would include but not be limited to:
• Financial compensation
• Positive impact on the organization's brand and/or reputation
• Entry into new market or field of endeavor which is appealing
• Enhancement to current capabilities or knowledge base in an area of value
• Opportunity to build closer working relationships with other collaboration participants
• Gain a new client or referral
• Are the reward factors in place which will create significant "gravitational pull" for the individuals who will be responsible for implementation at all critical levels to be truly intrinsically motivated to participate in the project from inception thru conception to completion? Factors would include but not be limited to:
• Financial compensation
• Positive impact on their current capabilities and/or reputation
• Opportunity to participate in a project that is of great personal or professional interest to them
• Enhancement to current personal capabilities or knowledge base in an area of value to them
• Opportunity to build closer working relationships with other collaboration participants and enhance their professional networks
• Adds to, and doesn't take away from, their professional goals or responsibilities
• Will the collaboration ENGAGE the client?
• Will they be excited by the combined capabilities of the collaboration?
• Will they view it as an admission of weakness or as a powerful enhancement to each of the participants brand?
• Can you ENGAGE everyone such that everyone is clearly aligned on what they can expect to give to and to get from the collaboration?

• Is there alignment on the expectations of the outcome?
• Is there alignment on the risk of failure and an understanding of which participant has what level of exposure?
• Is there alignment on the responsibilities and authorities of each participant
• Is there alignment on how the collaboration will be governed and managed?
• Is there alignment on how the financial costs and profits will be distributed and by whom?
• Is there alignment on how and when the collaboration will end, if at all?

Able ~ You must be Able to commit sufficient capabilities, resources, time or interest the collaboration. This includes the following:

• Are the participants ABLE to come together and operate as a cohesive group and create professional bonds that will weather conflicts and controversies as the project progresses?
• Are you ABLE to identify key prospective participants for the collaboration within 1 degree of separation?
• What is the likelihood of your being ABLE to attract them to the idea?
• Is each organization ABLE to afford to divert the necessary resources away from their current commitments to guarantee the collaboration's success?
• Is each organization ABLE to dedicate the management and financial resources required to implement, fund and maintain the collaboration?
• Are you ABLE to make the venture attractive enough to engage all organizations and all key personnel such that everyone intrinsically motivated to succeed?

Leverage ~ Look to Leverage everything and everyone as often as possible. Make it a mindset. This includes the following:

• How does the collaboration LEVERAGE the current capabilities of the participants to make the sum greater than the individual parts?
• How are those capabilities LEVERAGED such that they satisfy the needs of the task being undertaken?
• How can those capabilities be LEVERAGED to provide an advantage over the competition?
• Can the collaboration itself be LEVERAGED in such a way where the combined capabilities create a new breed of organization that represents a "disruptive technology" to competitors in the marketplace?
• What cost savings, relationships or efficiencies of scale can be LEVERAGED to assist the group to be more competitive or impactful?
• How can each of the participants LEVERAGE the collaboration in ways to further enhance their business in ways beyond the current opportunity?

Loyalty ~ Loyalty is the glue that bonds the collaboration.

• To what degree is there a sense of LOYALTY to the "cause"?
• What is the level of personal commitment between the participants?
• What is the level of organizational commitment to the completion of the project?
• What factors might cause a participant's LOYALTY to wane or cause a participant to pull out?
• Is there an "Exit Strategy" in case anyone has to pull out, or is it not an option?
• Have you created a "contract", memorandum of understanding or other document that defines agreed upon goals, objectives, roles, responsibilities, compensations, etc?
• What protections are in place to insure each participant's core business and their individual best interests are protected? Such as:
• Non-disclosure agreements
• Non-compete agreements
• Protection from employee "poaching"

Summary-

Once you have successfully made it though the SEALL process you will find that you have not only thoroughly vetted the viability of the collaboration but you will also have configured, designed, aligned and activated it as well.

You will have addressed key components and critical issues that touch upon compensation issues; roles and responsibilities; governance; motivations and expectations. But perhaps more important is the fact that everyone will have gotten much more familiar with each other as business people and as human beings. And this is a crucial point.

No collaboration, no matter how much sense it makes, will be successful unless the individuals involved have a very strong level of respect for one another and a genuine concern for each other's success. The closer the professional bonds you can create and the stronger relationships you can build will increase the level of stress, conflict and challenges the collaboration will be able to withstand.

Because at the end of the day regardless of how many items on the list get checked off it all comes down to the people involved. The rest is designed to help well intentioned, honest and committed people to pull themselves together in such a way to maximize their chances of success and to have a larger impact than they otherwise could achieve..

For more information or to get assistance in implementing the SEALL process feel free to contact Jeffrey S. Deckman at **jeffrey@jeffreydeckman.com**

For information on other innovative processes, management tools and information on 21st Century leadership programs go to **JeffreyDeckman.com**

Jeffrey Deckman