



International Journal of Public Sector Management

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Article information:

To cite this document: John Diamond, Linda Rush, (2012), "Intra-organisational collaboration in one UK university: potential for change or missed opportunity", International Journal of Public Sector Management, Vol. 25 Iss: 4 pp. 287 - 300

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Intra-organisational collaboration in one UK university: potential for change or missed opportunity

Collaboration
in one UK
university

287

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Received 2 February 2011
Revised 28 July 2011
Accepted 8 August 2011

Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to examine the promotion of intra-organisational collaboration within a university setting.

Design/methodology/approach – An ethnographic approach influenced by a phenomenographic framework of analysis was used.

Findings – Content analysis of qualitative data resulted in 11 overlapping themes being identified in respect of collaboration. Final analysis led to the identification of four hierarchically inclusive degrees of collaboration.

Research limitations/implications – The research, whilst based within one UK university, raises important conceptual as well as practical questions.

Practical implications – The implications of this paper have relevance for the ways in which universities and other agencies promote intra- as well as inter-departmental (or agency) working.

Originality/value – By using the framework developed it is possible to see parallels across different professional and agency settings.

Keywords Collaboration, Intra-organizational, Reciprocal leadership, Hierarchy, Boundaried, Leadership, Universities, Hierarchical organizations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Reports from various organisations, including AIM (2006) and The Work Foundation Jones and Morris (2008) highlight how collaboration is viewed as a critical competence for organisations. They recognise that it is a complex process concerned with “knowledge transfer” and “knowledge creation”, i.e. learning. There are real tensions between the capacity or agency of individuals working within hierarchically structured organisations to promote cross departmental or sector collaboration and when inter-organisational or intra-organisational collaboration is sponsored from the “top”. Indeed as Walsh and Kahn (2010) demonstrate the potential for learning and changing practice may be constrained by the scope for innovation which is permitted by the dominant culture within the organisation. And in seeking to explore the scope for innovation and so develop our own learning we wanted to examine the ways in which such learning could be situated in a broader theoretical and policy context. At the centre of our approach was a stress on “learning”. Indeed, it is argued that learning underpins many collaborative relationships. However, the process of collaboration is often messy, not clearly defined, difficult to manage and often reactive to unplanned



events or actions. It can lead to beneficial results i.e. collaborative advantage. But progress can often be slow, leading towards collaborative inertia. These challenges, also, have implications for a broader discussion on the role of universities (Goddard, 2009; Hoecht, 2006; Quinlan and Akerlind, 2000).

The general thesis of the current literature on collaboration and especially intra-organisational collaboration is to stress its potential to be creative and to stimulate new ways of thinking and working (Huxham and Vangan, 2005; Wenger, 1998). However, in this context a narrow definition or perception of one's professional identity has the potential to be seen as inhibiting new ways of thinking and working (McQuaid, 2010; Whitchurch, 2008a). Whilst this may be seen as an oversimplification of a more complex situation we are aware of the ways in which organisations and agencies have over the past 20 years sought to develop more co-operative and co-ordinated forms of working through partnerships or multi-agency fora (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Williams, 2002). Yet, the internal sets of relationships and structures of organisations have – to some extent- remained outside the influence of these changes. The extent to which public policy organisations (including universities) have remained detached from some of these changes will, of course, vary. A key variable will – we suggest – be the extent to which the organisation has a deliberate and conscious relationship with external agencies or practice. This is not to suggest that those that do are able to demonstrate a holistic approach to intra-organisational collaboration or to articulate a sophisticated analysis or audit of their practice. Rather, we argue, those parts of organisations which do set out to establish deliberate and considered relationships with external partners or collaborators may model this practice internally and so act as points of contact or development for their section or organisation. We think that a pre-condition for such an approach is an explicit commitment to and evidence of reflective practice. As Bradbury *et al.* (2010) argue:

[...] we propose that a critical understanding of reflection and reflective practice – one in which reflection is no longer seen as an isolated, individual activity but one which has the potential to bring about social and organisational change [...]” (p. 194).

Those organisations which have considered how to promote intra-organisational collaboration do share similar characteristics. They are likely to have promoted devolved managements structures, encouraged working across departmental/organisational boundaries, facilitated problem solving (or task and finish) approaches to joint working, legitimised time to discuss approaches and explicitly promoted reflection as a way of identifying positive/promising practices; and they are likely to have develop clear systems of accountability and leadership across and within the organisation (Benneworth, 2007; Diamond and Roberts, 2006; Mulgan, 2007; Nesta, 2007).

And yet we recognise that these are not unproblematic definitions or categories. As Gordon and Whitchurch (2010) in their collection of essays explore the ways in which identities/roles and definitions across UK based universities have developed over the past 20 years has not been without conflict. In her work Whitchurch (2008a, b) makes the point that some of the innovations and changes within universities have left the traditional academic department untouched. It has been in those areas where external developments have taken place or where there are professional practice departments working with their external reference groups that collaboration is at its most evident.

The challenge, we think, is how to develop such practice and ways of thinking within organisations where there may be resistance. Or as Amin and Roberts (2008) put how to create the space to innovate when the “dynamics and returns to the knowledge economy (are) still traceable to regulatory regimes” and (you want) “new forms of institutional and spatial organisation – decentred, distributive, collaborative, non-hierarchical, flexible [. . .]” (p. 31).

Context setting

As university academics we have significant experience of working co-operatively and in collaboration with practitioners and professionals from a variety of organisational settings. We take the view that intra-organisational collaboration is a precondition for effective “knowledge exchange” and “knowledge creation” within an organisation. We also argue that most of the challenges we face in the twenty-first century demand that we adopt multi-disciplinary and multi-professional ways of working (Claxton, 2006; Field, 2005; Fisher and Rush, 2008; Whitchurch, 2008a). But we have observed that, in reality, intra-organisational collaboration is rarely prioritised, resourced and commended. Furthermore, we believe that intra-organisational collaboration calls into question existing ways of working, of decision making, and demands an explicit examination of the organisational structure and the basis on which leadership is perceived (Karlsson *et al.*, 2008; Whitchurch, 2008a).

At the time of this research, both authors were located in departments within one university, both of which involved significant outward facing, across university activity, linked to the design and approval of the curriculum. As such, both were interested in seeking to understand the extent to which individuals and our organisation regarded intra-organisational collaboration as an opportunity to engage in a deliberate and conscious process of learning and reflection. We were aware that institutional sponsored approaches to co-operation or collaboration are likely to be shaped by the organisational structures and culture of the setting (Harris, 2008; Jones and Morris, 2008). A recurrent set of themes or questions evident in the literature stress the necessity of understanding (and enquiring about) the ways in which individuals are positioned within their organisational setting; the extent to which groups are brought together to collaborate through formal or informal arrangements; the opportunities (or constraints) for discussion, dialogue and reflection which are encouraged and facilitated; the willingness of the organisation to encourage discussion and the extent to which solutions are perceived as “open” and where there is a deliberate attempt to co-construct one another’s thinking; and the implications these processes have for the willingness of the participants to share in the leadership and management of the initiative. We are especially interested in the ways in which individuals are situated in their organisation – the extent to which professional roles and identities are seen as fixed and unchanging or are seen as being flexible and creative or adaptive (Whitchurch, 2008b).

The context of observed intra-organisational collaborative practice was linked to the process of curriculum design and development at one university. This was the focus of an internally funded institutional research project, supportive of evidence collection required in preparation for institutional audit, particularly in respect of “systematic enhancement”. The overarching aims of the project were to: identify key characteristics of promising intra-organisational collaborative practice associated with

curriculum design; and to explore how evidence behind the less and more sophisticated practices can be creatively adapted and successfully implemented. We were particularly interested in locating the discussion in the context of developing an understanding of how organisations/institutions “learn” and how individuals within those organisations are able – through collaborative ventures – to exercise agency in the choices they make. The project, therefore, was concerned with the ways in which intra-organisational collaboration was understood and conceptualised within the university through the processes for curriculum design, approval and validation.

From the outset, our intention was to identify, not only the promising practices which we hoped would emerge, but, also to explore through our own reflections and observations of key events the extent to which the university explicitly encouraged and facilitated collaboration across departmental boundaries. From our experiences of working with practitioners and professional groups in other settings we anticipated that the culture/climate of support for intra-organisational collaboration would be evident in the ways in which staff working in the university were encouraged to work across different disciplines, supported in external activity (including staff development), and valued cross boundary working through the ways in which it was rewarded/funded in the resource allocation model.

The decision of the university to support this piece of work could be seen as being indicative of its willingness to engage in processes of critical enquiry and reflection. We were always aware, however, that the explicit support given to the project by the university and our involvement as researchers (researching into our own institution) would influence the responses from the participants in our discussions/observations. We detail the methodological approach taken below and the different data sources we drew upon during the enquiry stage of the research project.

Methodology

An ethnographic approach was taken towards gaining greater understanding of the phenomenon being explored: intra-organisational collaboration. Ethnography involves direct observation of humans in their natural setting. Some portray it as a primarily descriptive or perhaps a form of story telling. Another attempt at defining it suggests that it provides a cultural description of a group and its activities from the viewpoint of the actors themselves (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989). The approach has developed with a view to understanding people better in natural settings. The essence being that “the researcher starts with no specific hypothesis. It requires a particular code of conduct in respect of ethics from the start, and the concern for it should continue through the write up and dissemination” (Verma and Mallick, 1999, p. 87).

In terms of this research the goal is to present a critical account of how individuals within one university collaborate as part of their involvement with one of the primary activities of a university’s existence, that of curriculum design, innovation and validation. Key areas of foci concerning the impetus for and support of intraorganisational collaboration, its form, the role, status and characteristics of those involved are central to the enquiry. As with all ethnography, it has involved: the study of a culture; multiple methods and diverse forms of data; observing things first-hand; recognition of us as researchers being key instruments in the research process; valuing of participant accounts; and a cycle of hypothesis and theory building (Verma and Mallick, 1999, pp. 86-7).

With a view to analysing and interpreting the data, a phenomenographic framework of analysis was drawn on. The goal of phenomenography is to arrive at categories of description of the qualitatively different ways in which participants' experience the phenomenon. Phenomenography aims at the construction of a typology (outcome spaces) of the different kinds of conceptions held by the participants themselves, albeit interpreted by the researcher in such a way as to provide what may possibly be a clearer and more articulate account of participant conceptions than participants would themselves generate (Akerlind, 2003). Highlighting the relationships between different ways of understanding or experiencing provides a way of looking at a phenomenon holistically, despite the fact it may be experienced differently by different individuals, and by the same individuals at different points in different contexts.

In adopting a non-dualistic ontology, a deficit approach to that which is being explored is avoided. Unusually, in this enquiry, emphasis was placed on action observed as opposed to experience-as-described. As with all phenomenographic research, the ultimate intention is to highlight the primary dimension of variation that distinguishes the outcome spaces from each other. A central methodological principle is the so-called epoch: that the researcher must begin by bracketing or setting aside prior assumptions about the nature of the thing being studied and so we set aside theories, research presuppositions, ready made interpretations, in order to reveal engaged, lived experience (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000).

Methods

A collective view of staff reflections (involving 50 + individuals) on intra-organisational collaboration were collated from a number of sources of data:

- two workshops at the institutional validation staff development conference;
- attendance at selected institutional validation events;
- lengthy discussions between the two researchers leading the enquiry;
- reflective discussions with members of course teams involved in the validation events observed;
- two dialogic institutional seminars in which interim findings were discussed; and
- an initial literature search/review.

At the staff development conference notes were taken during the workshops and were used to secure the credibility and support for the project (data source 1). During validation events both researchers kept separate notes as non-participant observers (data source 2). Directly after each validation event the researchers discussed extensively the notes that each had made and co-created a written summary of these (data source 3). Integral to the analysis was the setting up of a series of reflective discussions with those who have been observed, the primary purpose being to authenticate our interpretations of the observed events and, also, to enable members of the team to put in context the nature of the collaboration. Accordingly, programme teams were invited to meet for one hour with the researchers approximately a week later and notes taken and written up (data source 4). The data set was added to by making use of anonymous reflective essays (linked to staff engagement with the

university's Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning Support in HE) on observed validation events, considering the extent to which the validation process is used for enhancement, highlighting strengths of the process and lost opportunities (data source 5). Selected literature has also been drawn on concerning communities of practice, collaborative advantage, action learning groups, epistemic cultures and cluster theory (data source 6). Finally, use has also been made of reflective journals and ongoing discussion of both researchers involved in the enquiry (data source 7).

Findings

Initial stages of analysis (drawing on sources 3, 4 and 5) involved repeatedly reading through reflections, coding and categorising in an iterative manner, searching for underlying foci and intentions expressed in them. Content analysis of data at a basic descriptive level led to the following 11 overlapping, yet distinct, themes of collaboration being identified:

- academic leadership;
- drivers;
- operational v. conceptual;
- perceptions of that which is being collaborated;
- fear, compliance and conformity;
- notion of team;
- role of team member;
- role of key institutional and/or external verifiers in the approval of the proposed collaboration and its intended outcomes;
- level and depth of dialogue;
- amending or transforming practice;
- institutional narrative; and
- myths/integrity, truth and transparency

Discussion

A number of key observations were made following the analysis of the qualitative data (stemming from source 3). What our observations of these events showed was that our initial conception of intra-organisational collaboration was too restrictive. Rather than it being a linear journey with defined starting points and ending, and comprising a distinct group of individuals, we needed to recognise that it is multi-layered and multi-faceted with fuzzy starting points and finishing. Immediate questions were raised about the supporting structures and the extent to which the organisational culture promoted collaboration. Uncertainty, on behalf of group members of the nature of the collaboration and of their roles and responsibilities was consistently observed. Furthermore, there appeared to be a link between the lack of agreed understandings, beliefs, values of those involved and the quality of the collaboration. Questions too were raised concerning the role of leadership in the process. Significant members of the groups did not contribute to the discussion or even know one another, nor did individuals assert their authority of knowledge and leadership. Rather, they were

passive and appeared fragmented as a team. There was no rigorous narrative and no shared language which reflected the collaborative event(s).

The extent to which individuals felt able to engage with the processes either as part of the preparation for the authentication event or at the event itself illustrates the weaknesses and fragility of the relationships at departmental level. Intra-organisational collaboration is often perceived as risky or a challenge to the prevailing organisational cultures/orthodoxies. In order to support the introduction of change/innovation colleagues need to develop relationships based upon trust and mutuality. An absence of trust can lead to superficial engagement with the authentication process and a “staged performance” may result (Hoecht, 2006). Regulatory or rule driven systems/frameworks also re-enforced patterns of behaviour which were passive, dependent and mechanistic in their compliance with the dominant culture. In effect what was being demonstrated were examples of practice where rather than evidencing a developmental and informed approach to intra-organisational collaboration members revealed (indirectly) different ways in which their approach was orchestrated and staged to meet expected or anticipated outcomes – “counterfeit reflexivity” (Morley cited in Hoecht, 2006, p. 547).

As we discuss above intra-organisational collaboration can contain practice which runs counter to prevailing and dominant institutional norms (it may indeed be part of the process by which such norms are subsequently shaped) in such a context staff groups will be bounded by strong ties of mutual trust and accountability. As the themes illustrate the practice we observed and examined, on the whole, lacked such levels of trust and accountability as reflected in the characteristics of a significant number of individuals observed. The following range of key characteristics of individuals associated with collaborative practices (ranging from more complete to less complete) were observed:

- (1) *The pragmatic individual*. Novice; naïve; dominated; reactive; fearful; silenced; fragile; crises; detachment; parochial.
- (2) *The pedestrian individual*. Functioning; lack of clarity; anxious; isolated; individualistic; dependent; defensive; vulnerable; dominance of rumours and myths and narratives; engage on a conditional basis.
- (3) *The emerging enlightened individual*. Competent; co-operative; informed; individualistic; cautious; engagement at micro level; instrumental.
- (4) *The enlightened individual*. Reflective; nurturing; informed; sophisticated; open; enjoyable; dialogic; engaged; rigorous; high levels of self-confidence; sharing; sense of pride and identification; reciprocity; conceptually driven; professional; collaborative; progressive.

Increasingly, the primary criterion for collaboration was economic which had perhaps the unintended consequence of pragmatic decision-making.

Degrees of collaboration

Further stages of analysis of the data showed that the nature of the individual and the quality of relationships between these individuals could be depicted in the following, hierarchically inclusive, degrees of collaboration (Figure 1).

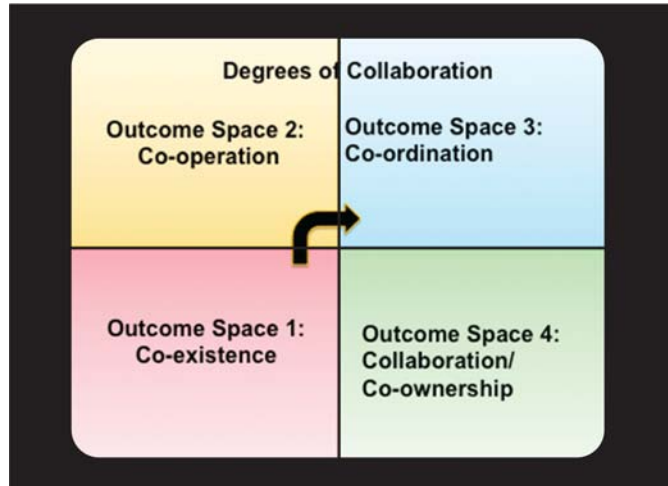


Figure 1.
Degrees of collaboration

In terms of co-existence the interaction between individuals is almost non-existent. Activity is task related, monitored, resource driven and compliant. This degree of collaboration is reflected by the following voices:

[...] made me an offer on the corridor [to be programme leader] – could refuse [...] Felt I was playing catch up when I joined the group a little later on [...] (data source 4).

At the degree of co-operation individuals are focused. Each person has an assigned role, roles are hierarchical and, as such, dialogue is positional. Dualist thinking prevails and a predetermined script is worked to:

[...] I wondered just how many of this team were actually involved in this validation or were some of them simply there “to make up the numbers”. Out of a team of nine members, only two spoke during the initial presentation and a third made an attempt to help in the questioning stage. The remainder were mute throughout [...] (data source 5).

The third degree of collaboration we define in terms of co-ordination. Here the relationship between individuals is dialogic. Within defined parameters, decision-making is shared, individuals are involved in joint problem solving and open to innovation:

[...] Felt part of a module team for those modules I felt part of [...] (data source 4).

It was clear from the verbal explanation given [...] that the overriding rationale was an economic one, that there was a gap in the market and that the proposals were an attempt to fulfil this market need [...] (data source 5).

The final degree of collaboration is viewed in terms of Collaboration/Co-ownership in which individuals are not limited by rules or accepted ways of doing things. It assumes a shared responsibility, in which individuals listen attentively and adopt non-dualist thinking:

It was clear that the panel asked questions in order to seek clarification on points they did not understand fully, and where there were criticisms or points of concern this was approached in

a constructive and professional way. Although the panel held the balance of power, since they had the power to reject the submission, the panel and the programme team interacted in a manner which suggested that they considered themselves to be peers and fellow professionals (data source 5).

[...] but the hidden bit would have been the collaborative discussions that go on externally, negotiating type of modules required re: skill development, knowledge development [...] and those modules picked up reflect strong collaboration with practice teams [...] so there is micro collaborations going on [...] (data source 4).

Primary dimension of variation in meaning and understanding of intra-organisational collaboration: leadership

Mindful of the ultimate intention of drawing upon a phenomenographic framework, we have identified the primary dimension of variation in meaning and understanding of the phenomena as leadership – it being central to the collated staff views (and observed behaviours) of both less/more sophisticated intra-collaborative working. In terms of outcome spaces 1 and 2 the presence of an individual or small group of individuals leading (dominating) in an Autocratic way, linked to their perceived hierarchical role within the institution, appeared to impact negatively on the quality of the intra-organisational collaboration:

X is the programme leader and starts after the validation [...] There was a team [comprising Y&Y] [...] pulling together [...] they met with me and the programme is written by me. I'll allocate a programme leader and they will take over (data source 4).

[...] there was obviously one major player and one minor player together with a number of individuals who I felt were there to show the strength and depth of the department but actually appeared to have minimal acquaintance to the process that was evolving around them (data source 5).

Conversely, more sophisticated views and behaviours of intra-organisational collaboration were observed when no individual leader emerged. Rather, the notion of reciprocal leadership prevailed in which everybody had authority and genuine regard for this was tangible:

[...] the proposed programme came under intense scrutiny at both events. I believe this was helpful in making the teams pull together and consider the unity and alignment of the suite of modules they were proposing to introduce. This highlighted the importance of team work when preparing for validation [...] early planning was done in teams, but individual lecturers produced their own module proposals, and the validation submission document was prepared by a limited number of people. This was a weakness in departmental planning for the validation event (data source 4).

The discussion amongst the panel was both interesting and thought provoking. The doubts and problematic themes they had realised during the pitch were heatedly debated and a general consensus attained (data source 5).

Discussion

Whitchurch (2008a) argues that the success of an organisation is dependent upon adopting a holistic approach to collaboration which would include some of the following elements: team working; project orientation; networking; accommodation to

uncertainty/complexity; political astuteness; adaptiveness. This approach is set against prevailing practice which tend towards rules/regulatory and hierarchical ways of working, which leads to individuals displaying those characteristics set out in outcome spaces 1 and 2.

We share with Whitchurch and others (Benneworth, 2007; Harris, 2008; Karlsson *et al.*, 2008) the view that such rules/regulatory and hierarchical approaches not only inhibit the development of organisations but also the individuals working within them. As others have discussed (Hoecht, 2006; Quinlan and Akerlind, 2000) the development of a rule/regulatory approach to quality assurance across the higher education sector can inhibit multi-disciplinary or intra-organisational collaboration. In seeking to reflect upon those factors which appear to constrain such initiatives we take the view that the development of models of trust and accountability are necessary pre-conditions for the start of discussions at departmental levels. We take the view that intra-organisational collaboration legitimises individuals working across disciplines and boundaries. Furthermore, we believe it has the potential to support the development of confident, autonomous, and creative professionals. However, such change in behaviours is unlikely unless it is legitimised by a particular style of management, which would include valuing cross-boundary working. A shift towards such an approach is likely to be disruptive to existing structures and is likely to be resisted by those “bounded” individuals who tend to dominate institutional cultures and practice.

We believe that there are a number of key factors that are pivotal to more sophisticated intra-organisational collaborative practice:

- (1) Clear leadership at all levels – ownership:
 - Explicit understanding by all those involved of its rationale, role and purpose – conceptualisation.
- (2) Debate and opposition are encouraged – contestation:
 - Structured time and space and processes for sustained “conversations” need to be created – conversation as enquiry.
 - Roles and capacity or disposition(s) in collaborative inquiry need to be systematically developed – professional development.

We have used these categories and the descriptors in Figure 2 with practitioners and professionals drawn across a number of agencies and disciplines. What is interesting is how they evoke a recognition and a connection with their own practice and experience.

Specifically, we think that exploring the concept of collaboration through the different levels/stages or degrees linked with the key characteristics of the individuals associated with collaborative practice facilitates an informed and informing conversation. And it highlights ways of being which are shaped by organisational cultures and behaviours. The exploration of how to both look for the space to promote collaboration in a difficult environment and to situate the learning within a community of practice or experience is challenging and difficult.

Conclusion

As we suggest intra-organisational collaboration has the potential to be disruptive of existing structures and practice. It can challenge existing models/systems of leadership and management. It will challenge organisational structures and the ways in which



Figure 2.
Promising collaborative
practices

individuals construct their sense of who they are. For those who wish to protect the status quo of their agency or organisation these challenges are not minor. It could also be argued that in times of resource constraint organisations need stability, security of purpose and structure in order to function effectively. We want to suggest that the demands of contemporary public policy choices and pressures rule out such an approach. The pressures on organisations (including universities) imply that co-ordination or collaboration are the necessary routes to adopt. But, this view may be seen as counterfactual by some key managers or strategic decision makers. Indeed, the growth of the audit and regulatory culture (industry) would appear to support this view. Thus, the shift from assurance to enhancement should be seen as a process of securing active engagement with initiatives and approaches. We observe that the norms of academic assurance are more likely to reduce the scope for innovation whereas an approach derived from an enhancement perspective offers the potential to draw in those who wish to engage in a more sophisticated and informed exploration of curriculum design and development. The pre-conditions for successful implementation are not organisational stability but rather a deliberate strategy of encouraging cross-departmental working, a more holistic approach to problem solving (less rule or status bound), and a more open approach to discussion and problem solving. As we set out above this approach to developing a reciprocal style of leadership within the organisation has implications not only for how the organisation is structured but also how the management of change is supported.

With a view to clarifying or demystifying the nature of intra-organisational collaboration, we offer the following diagrammatic (Figure 2) representation highlighting the ways in which an organisation (its culture and strategic practices) may inhibit or promote good or promising collaborative practices. The intention is that this should serve as a reflective tool; as an orientational device, so to speak, which allows individuals, groups of and strategic managers to recognise the boundaries of their interactions and borderlines of their intentions (see Figure 2).

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