



Aligning Teams for Successful Collaboration

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During my time with the Center for Rural Engagement, our initiatives have taken us to dozens of Indiana counties to work on hundreds of projects running the gamut from parks planning to blood pressure screenings.

As we complete projects, our team distills lessons from them to ensure that we continue to improve. And while assessing the effectiveness of a community engagement project is complicated, what I have discovered is that there is one simple indicator that tends to be more highly correlated with successful projects than any other.

That indicator is most simply described as close alignment among key project leads. In particular, when you find that participants display a level of commitment that transcends their organizational missions and roles, you can expect to find a successful project.

Groups that have attained a high level of alignment tend to share a belief that a collaborator's success is their success, no matter if they will benefit from the success or not. Put simply, this state of collaboration evokes the old adage attributed to President Harry S. Truman, "it's amazing what can get accomplished when no one cares who gets the credit."

There are unexpected ways to tell if a group has achieved these levels of social capital. One surprising indicator might be the degree to which the group takes an interest in each other's lives outside of work. Another might be that the group regularly exchanges updates and messages—which can be a sign that the project and the group is top of mind for the group leaders.

Part of what I've learned about this state of collaboration, I've learned through my work with regional partners at WestGate Technology Park.

Since 2019, dozens of regional partners have worked together on a master plan for WestGate. And in late 2021, I took on a temporary assignment to help build a new nonprofit research foundation—called the [Uplands Science and Technology Foundation](#) (USTF)—focused on implementing the WestGate Master Plan.

What I have learned is that WestGate is a unique laboratory for nurturing collaboration. The park sits at the intersection of three counties—Davies, Greene, and Martin—and has multiple different public and private landowners. So needless to say, there are many stakeholders and getting all of them to coalesce around a single vision for the park is not easy.

A big part of our focus with USTF has been to try to build the kind of social capital that fuels other high-performing teams. And while building trust takes time, I have seen some promising signs of growth.

My favorite indicator of high-level collaboration that I've seen at WestGate is that, in some cases, group members' roles and responsibilities have become blurred. In the beginning it may have been clear who was responsible for a particular task or an expenditure, but now it is less clear. This is a great sign that group members are trying to be helpful and are seeing the mission through each other's eyes.



Building empathy as a team

In her article, "[The Secret Ingredient that Makes Some Teams Better than Others](#)," Margaret Heffernan describes a unique exercise to try and build this kind of empathy. In the exercise, department heads make the case for the budget for another department besides their own. The benefit here is "getting each executive to see the company through the eyes of others and to appreciate the vital connections and dependencies between one another."

Another sign that we're growing social capital at WestGate is the willingness to openly have difficult conversations and to express contrary opinions. This has enabled us to confront thorny issues and to sharpen our ideas and focus.

At the 2022 IU Rural Conference, keynote speaker Jack Hess of CivicLab described a concept that he calls "systemness," which can be used to guide team-building efforts. In simple terms, "systemness" is focusing more on the parts of the system—the networks of people and relationships—than on the problem or solutions. Groups that are bonded and aligned will more easily find ways to dissolve problems. This is a great principle for anyone looking to elevate the performance of their team.

Although much work remains, I am encouraged by the progress we've made so far. The work of elevating social capital is fun. Building trust means that your collaborators become your friends, confidants, and allies, and that makes our successes even more rewarding.