

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

Collaborative Cues

By Ben Emmens

Review by Mark Kramer

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Collaborative Cues

REVIEW BY MARK KRAMER

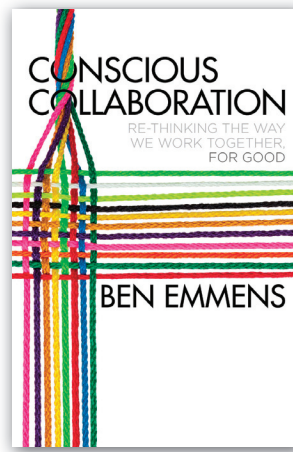
At this point in human history, we may have achieved as much as we can through specialization. Our future progress may depend instead on what we can achieve through collaboration.

Admittedly, specialization has driven human progress for several hundred years. In every field, an increasingly precise focus has deepened knowledge, reduced production costs, and expanded what it is humanly possible to achieve. The social sector is no exception, with nonprofits taking ever more customized approaches to particular societal challenges in discrete parts of the world.

And yet, specialization creates its own limitations. People lose sight of how the different specialties interact with and depend on each other. Their knowledge and vocabulary become harder to comprehend for those in other fields. Narrow and sector-specific incentives may deviate from goals that would advance the common good more broadly. As a result, nonprofits, government, and for-profit companies often work in opposition to each other.

Even within the social sector, each societal challenge intersects with many others. For example, improving educational outcomes depends on addressing a range of issues that require expertise in areas including poverty, nutrition, gender, housing, and on and on. Going back to being mere generalists wouldn't work either, because specialization has pushed the required degree of competence so high in every field. And so collaboration among specialists appears to be the only answer. The problem is that we don't seem to know how to actually collaborate very well.

Conscious Collaboration by Ben Emmens, a consultant who focuses on the social sector, aims to help out. It's a quick read, helpfully organized into bite-sized



CONSCIOUS COLLABORATION:
Re-thinking the Way We
Work Together, for Good
By Ben Emmens
211 pages, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

observations, recommendations, and anecdotes of a page or two within each chapter, and followed by a one-paragraph chapter summary. The tone is conversational and the author is careful to avoid falling into the jargon of academia that can befuddle the layman. The first section focuses on the question of “why collaborate.” The book’s argument is essentially that the complexity and scale of the world’s problems today means that no single organization is alone capable of delivering a full solution. In the author’s words, collaboration is “the only realistic hope we have.” Amen.

The second, longer section describes the elements of what the author defines as “conscious collaboration.” For Emmens, collaboration is conscious when there is mutual consent, mutual respect, and a common goal. It succeeds when people approach the collaboration with clear objectives, agree early on common principles to guide the work, bring a learning or “growth” mindset, understand competencies and weaknesses, and track and celebrate the “micro-outcomes” along the way to that final goal. This requires cultivating leaders who excel in five main

areas: listening and dialogue, working with others, self-awareness, critical judgment, and motivating and influencing others.

The book is filled with real-life stories of collaborations, good and bad, from the author’s own life experience, which he has translated into a very large number of lessons. Despite its brevity, the book offers many bits of often overlapping advice. They are all consistent with what I have learned and read elsewhere about effective collaborations, and they align quite nicely with the learnings of the Collective Impact Forum, a partnership between the Aspen Institute and FSG, my own social impact consulting group. I found nothing with which to disagree, but neither did I come away with many new insights or a deeper understanding of the subject.

For someone who has little experience thinking about collaboration as an intentional process to be designed and a set of skills to be mastered, this may well be an eye-opening book. It makes clear that there is a lot to be learned if one is to practice collaboration successfully. Its conversational tone and many anecdotes make for easy reading. But the book is truly collaboration 101, and there is some risk that a novice might be discouraged by the profusion of topics and recommendations. One can’t help thinking that a more concise distillation or a more profound analysis would have served to advance the field further.

The author notes in the introduction that the book is organized so that one can dip into it from time to time, or read the entire thing in the time it takes to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. I can well imagine dipping into the book for a quick reminder of some lesson during one of the all-too-common moments of frustration when facilitating a collaborative effort. And reading it straight through felt very much like having a conversation with Mr. Emmens while sitting next to him on a transatlantic flight. That would have been a very interesting conversation, indeed. ■

MARK KRAMER is cofounder and managing director of FSG and a visiting lecturer at Harvard Business School. He is the co-author, with John Kania, of SSIR’s 2011 article “Collective Impact” and an advisor to the Collective Impact Forum.