CREATIVE COLLABORATION
rules of thumb

by OpenEndedGroup:

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Start here.

This little manual will guide you in a particular kind of collaboration — creative collaboration, in which by interacting with each other, you discover genuinely new ways of thinking about and then doing or making something.

Collaborations of this kind are *not* committees, for collaborators not only conceive the work, they also play principal roles in carrying it out (not just delegating it).

Members of a collaboration:

Follow no leader but instead interact with each other on an equal basis. Their freewheeling investigation remains open-ended until they've reached (and sometimes invented) their shared goal.

Aim at unforeseen invention. Collaborators busy themselves with exploring diverse, far-flung, and even contradictory ideas, keeping at the task for as long as it takes for them to alight upon a good and novel solution.

Successful creative collaborations tend to:

Involve the fewest number of collaborators possible (but no fewer).

Enlist collaborators with little overlap in their respective fields of expertise. A diversity of viewpoints, backgrounds, and abilities helps prevent competitive friction between collaborators; it also insures that unarticulated "shared wisdom" (too much common ground) never dominates.

Establish complete trust and respect among all the main collaborators. A minimal but diverse team can only function when the exchange between its members is based on complete honesty and mutual reliance.

(This doesn't mean that collaborators must become best friends: healthy respect rather than warm affection is all you need to underpin a good collaboration.)

Collaborators ⎯

‣ **Work together on an equal basis** in the over-all conception, construction, and re-vision of the project;

‣ **bear full responsibility** for all aspects of the project they develop together;

‣ **grasp the crucial distinction** between their roles as full collaborators and the roles of four other kinds of participants:

CONTRIBUTORS
understand your intentions fully and, following your prompts, excel in contributing their special expertise to your project. They have the potential to make contributions that surprise you, exceeding what you initially specified.

CONTRACTORS
identify and solve domain-specific problems within the exact bounds you set. They are thus only as good as the specifications they get and the expertise they already possess. They will not surprise you, for their responsibility is to be competent, not creative.

CURATORS
may have initiated or sponsored the project, but then turn over its execution to the collaborators (whom, however, they may have helped to assemble and fund). They have no role within the creative collaboration itself, but influence its relation to (and reception in) the outside world.

CONSTITUENTS
are the audience or end-users of the product of the collaboration, whose perceived needs, expectations, and desires may well shape the project's means and goals. They are not always physically present during the collaboration—yet their presence (real or imagined) presses upon its outcome.

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Rules of thumb

Communicate clearly

*A group's communications structure replicates itself
in the structure of what they make or do.*
Conway's Law (restated)

When the collaborators' communication is focused and straight-forward, that coherence is reflected in the final design. But when it is oblique and twisted, that disarray comes through instead.

Miscommunication is often underpinned by blurred collaborative roles. When two people don't share a common understanding of what's expected of them and what they're responsible for, what one says is not what the other hears.

A second frequent cause is the overcrowding of a collaboration, whose members are too numerous and too redundant (TOO MANY COOKS).

Even the slightest sense of miscommunication should be taken seriously; it is a key indicator of the health of the collaboration, never to be ignored (TENSION).

Creative dialogue sparks ideas that the participants would never have had on their own, and this is the reason to collaborate.

Such ideas arise in the marvelous space in between two or more minds, whose exchange of perspectives leads them to unexpected angles on things. Habit and pattern are abandoned, and assumptions are exposed, because collaborators are talking — the rapid articulation and interrogation that happens only in the exchange, not the solitary formulation, of ideas.

Starting from point zero, you can talk things into existence, watching ideas gain solidity as they're traded back and forth in the conversation.

Historical examples abound — in science, Crick/Watson; in art, Picasso/Braque; in music, Lennon/McCartney.

Two heads are better than one

Gysin: *When you put two minds together*
Burroughs: *there is always a third mind*
Gysin: *a third and superior mind*
Burroughs: *as an unseen collaborator.*
Conversations with William S. Burroughs

Politeness is the slow poison of collaboration.
Edwin Land

Too many cooks make committees

An overcrowded collaboration is an inefficient one. This is usually caused by a bureaucratic mandate — a committee is established with members assigned according to their ranks in the institutional hierarchy. Thus it's not individual merit and expertise that count here, but simply position and title.

Often in such situations the real collaborative work occurs in the interchanges between just a few core members, with the others serving as mere distraction and interruption.

Thus, rudeness is sometimes called for here — you may dispense with bland bureaucratic courtesy, acknowledging that in this case not every voice should necessarily be heard "fairly." Accept this as the cost of everybody staying in the same room and getting something done.

Carried away in a creative conversation, you may find a strange thing happening: losing sight of yourself, you start generating ideas that you'd never have guessed yourself capable of producing.

Part of this stems from the stimulating give-and-take of dialogue, which can cast everything in a fresh light. A more subtle cause may be that in the openness of the exchange, you just drop your guard: you stop submitting your ideas to the powerful self-censor that ordinarily enforces a respectable consistency and coherence in your views.

This frees you to rely more instinctively on what comes to mind, seeing no reason to judge it harshly since your collaborators don't (NO BAD IDEAS).

Set yourself free

How can I know what I think till I see what I say?
EM Forster

The best predictor of past behavior is future behavior.

Past predicts future

But while it's true that collaboration can unleash new ideas in each participant, don't count on such a transformation ever being total.

At the end of the day, neither you nor anyone else will ever become an entirely different person. Having stretched ourselves a bit or even a lot, we all revert to past form, to our own character.

If you need an entirely new kind of collaborative input, don't expect that to come from within the group — look outside for a new collaborator to add to the mix.

In a good collaboration, participants are free to blurt out whatever bad idea occurs to them. That's because that first idea may trigger a second, perhaps equally bad idea, which in turn may spark a third, fourth, or fifth — this time brilliant.

The trust built up in a healthy collaborative circle gives everyone the confidence to advance an incomplete or inadequate thought, knowing that it may trigger other ideas and that no thought need be considered final until the whole group is satisfied with the conclusion (DON'T SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE).

Once created, this space where failure is rapid, acceptable, expected and ultimately productive must be defended at all costs: such openness does not survive much contact with the 'outside world.' So keep collaborative idea-making to yourselves; when you share your ideas to the world, PRESENT A UNITED FRONT.

"Bad ideas" can lead to good

For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.
HL. Mencken

Beware the "good idea"

Try again. Fail again. Fail better.
Samuel Beckett

The compellingly good idea, presented too soon, closes off the exploration of alternatives. It seduces everyone with its cleverness, its elegance, and its symmetry, stopping the process dead in its tracks. Enslaving your project, it goes unchallenged and untested, and its realization often leads to a brittle and flawed solution. You should make a point of accepting the first couple of good ideas that present themselves, and see whether all the bad ideas add up to something much better.

One more point: the forceful presentation of the good idea can be symptomatic of an essentially troubled collaboration or collaborator. For the good idea can mask a power play by a member wanting to assert control over the group; it can be a display of ownership or rank; or it can be an attempt to fall back on pre-prepared material or received wisdom.

Collaborators are on the same team, and their competitive energy is aimed at outsiders (USEFUL ENEMY).

They most resemble a team in a relay race, passing ideas to each other the way relay race runners hand off the baton. As one pushes an idea forward, the others catch their breath until it's their turn to continue. The gathering momentum of ideas can accelerate, and the collaborators will cover far more ground as a team than any of them could do alone.

Bear in mind that the hand-offs are not just one at a time, but several overlapping — which means that even if one exchange is fumbled, others aren't, and your pace never breaks.

Run a **relay race**

The strength of the thread doesn't lie in the fact that some one strand runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many strands.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

Have some friends who are so good it scares you.
Kenneth Koch

Set the bar **higher**

Not all collaborative work occurs when the group is working together. In between exchanges, collaborators often go off to work on aspects of the project alone. In this phase, the group energy sometimes tails off, with some members falling behind in their work and creating a drag on the project as a whole.

It is here that a kind of healthy competition between collaborators proves useful. An individual's shockingly great work can be provocative and stimulating, setting a usefully competitive example that the others feel compelled to live up to.

To borrow from track and field again, this is like pole-vaulting. With a good jump, any collaborator has the power to set the bar higher, daring the others to match or exceed that feat.

Oppose the prevailing wisdom, kill the sacred cows. Better yet, personify your adversary and then attack.

Nothing motivates a group more strongly than setting *us versus them*, so ask the insolent but fantastically productive question: what if they had got everything wrong from the start?

This leads you to throw out the accepted wisdom, starting over from scratch — free now to explore realms that had long been out of bounds under the rules of the old game.

It's all right to characterize your enemy by oversimplifying their position, for at this stage you need sweeping differences, not fine gradations. After all, the complex (and carefully justified) internal structure of what has gone before is precisely what you are trying to cast aside. So a little rudeness (or a lot) is fine for now: you can revert to good manners later.

Fight the useful enemy

It is difficult to deviate from an old line of thought just a little.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.
F. Scott Fitzgerald

Embrace the opposite

Just as you should start out with a clean sweep of accepted ideas, later you should turn around and do the opposite — re-embrace the outside ideas you first spurned.

Embracing the opposite is less perverse than it may seem, for three reasons:

‣ It calls your own presuppositions back into question.

‣ It may make old ideas new once again, now that they're seen in a context cleared for fresh thinking by your initial repudiation.

‣ It allows you to carefully and thoughtfully curate your assumptions. Secure in the knowledge that your absolute rejection or acceptance of a principle can be reversed in a later collaboration, you are safe to experiment with more vigorous positions.

Differing judgments will arise in any collaboration, so how do you find consensus, avoiding the paralysis (or poison) of disagreement?

A common recourse is to split the difference. But this is a weak and cowardly form of compromise, yielding watered-down ideas that drive no meaningful change. Worse, it's a form of unexamined compromise, neatly erasing the basis for the disagreement.

What's more, if all positions will ultimately get averaged out, participants will naturally take increasingly extreme positions. (If a sense of "fairness" now matters, then participants will start to keep score.)

Rather than seeking full unanimity, consider the more flexible goal of *provisional consensus* — so that a dissenter can decide to support the majority decision conditionally, trusting that the group will revisit that decision should it prove to be wrong.

Don't "split the difference"

There is no conversation more boring than the one where everybody agrees.
Michel de Montaigne

If you never change your mind, why have one?
Edward de Bono

Right the wrong turn

Even when, after a spirited debate, the group has settled on a course of action, it should not bury any prior points of dissent — rather, in keeping with the policy of provisional consensus, alternative views should simply be suspended while the plan is acted upon.

If that plan leads you to a wrong turn, you can easily track back to reconsider the original alternatives, and head off in a different direction.

When you gather together the very best experts in a given field, they are likely to share roughly similar assumptions, methods, and goals — because they will typically share the same training, experience, and social identity.

Thus a group of such experts does not perform radically better than just one of them acting alone. Their common expertise makes them search for the solution in the same reasonable areas — which is great if the best solution indeed lies there (they'll find it fastest), but not if it doesn't (they'll never find it).

A group of diverse individuals — all intelligent, but with different backgrounds, perspectives, and ways of working — will look all over the place for the solution. Their search-space is expansive, and if the best solution is to be found in an outlying area, one of them is much more likely to stumble across it there.

One for all, all for one.

Foster **diversity** inside

Present a **united front**

Diversity trumps ability … If people think alike, then no matter now smart they are, most likely they will get stuck at the same locally optimal solutions.
Scott Page

When your group has agreed upon a course of action, each of you must present it to the outside world clearly and decisively, expressing no individual reservations. This holds true even if you have reached only provisional consensus, in which second-guessing has been temporarily suspended (RIGHT THE WRONG TURN). In other words, to the outside world you speak with a single voice, and the pronoun you use is *we* not *I*.

The reasons? First, that the united front you present to the world gives your decisions their force.

Second, that by shielding the outside world from the complexities of your collaborative debate and appearing as a single unit, you reduce the costs of interacting with the world — and the costs the world has in interacting with you.

When tension arises within the group, it can be a momentary by-product of everyday human friction, but it can also point to something more important, especially if it persists. Such tension is often a telltale sign that the roles assigned to individuals in the group no longer fit (). Someone initially thought to be a consultant or a contributor may have gradually shifted into full collaborative mode. Or sometimes, more distressingly, someone may fail in his or her role, at whatever level it is.

In any case, this tension can signal a crucial moment of potential change for the collaboration: either a new and productive realignment comes about or else it's time to wind it down and think about a bigger restructuring. It's best to have both promotions and demotions happen quickly, cleanly and efficiently.

Pay attention to tension

Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!
TS Eliot

Because things are the way they are,
*things won't stay the way they are.*
Bertolt Brecht

File your future

Toying with the structure of a collaboration during a collaboration is obviously to be avoided. As you work on a given project, you must decide where your contributions, and those of your peers, belong. Most should fit right into the framework of the present project and require no further thought.

Some, however, may not — at which point you should file them away for the future. In this way of proceeding, you decide whether an idea or a role inappropriate for the present project should be carried over into a future project instead.

And if it is, then you can ponder whether you should pursue it within the same group, within a realignment of the group, or following the dissolution of the group.

Looking ahead: collaborating with intelligent systems
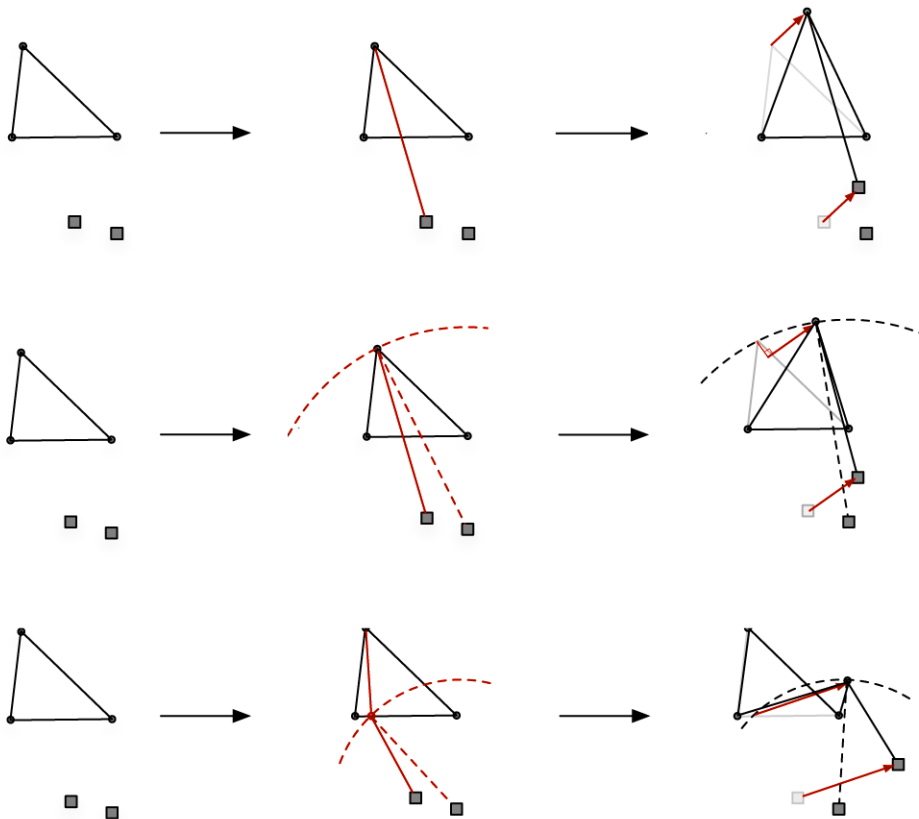
This diagram shows attempts of triangle creature to hitch rides on the dancers' motion-captured points (depicted as gray squares).

The triangle diagrams on the cover and here depict the workings of an artificially intelligent "creature" (software agent) that we projected in accompaniment to a dance by the Trisha Brown Dance Company in 2007.

Our code endowed this visual creature with the basic attributes that it relied upon to make its own virtual performance in counterpoint to the dancers' actual movements on the stage. The creature had:

‣ a goal: to cross from one side of a dance stage to the other;

‣ a perceptual system, tracking the dancers' movements by means of realtime motion capture and analysis;

‣ a means of locomotion, by which it could "hitch rides" on dancer's bodies as it sees them moving in the desired direction; and

‣ an anatomy that starts as a simple triangle and then grows in size and complexity as it sends out the tendrils by which it hitches its rides.

Since the creature's performance was in a sense as live as the dancers' on stage, with its path varying each time, we had to run it in rehearsal with the dancers beforehand.

The triangle creature's performance was a game of our own devising, but then so too was the dance a game that the choreographer created.

The interlocking of the two games, real and virtual, evokes the new forms now emerging around us, as humans collaborate more often and more deeply with intelligent systems. Soon we may need a second little manual of rules to complement this one.

Credits + License

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Get credit right

One last rule of thumb. Your satisfaction should come from your having produced as a group what none of you could ever have made alone. There ought to be plenty of surplus "credit" to go around.

Collaboration is best when no-one knows whose idea it was because

‣ everyone acknowledges that the idea could have only arisen in the group's interaction (two heads);

‣ nobody is keeping score that way (don't split the difference).

Even so, talented collaborators will more readily subordinate themselves to the group, offering their best thoughts freely, when confident they'll receive proper formal credit.

So, establish a simple understanding of how formal credit will work at the *start* of a project, and do this so clearly and so generously that you never give it another thought.