



Beyond Collaboration: “Co-tangle”

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“A great metaphor is like shooting imagery straight into the brain.”

Quantum physics introduces us to a bizarre world where things can be in multiple states concurrently. For example, incomprehensible as it may be to those versed in Newtonian thinking, a quantum system can, simultaneously, be both up and down. It also introduces us to the reality of one thing being in two places at the same time. And that’s just for starters. If you do no more than merely observe a quantum particle, an entirely separate particle – even though it be light years away – will change its properties and “dance” in instantaneous and perfect unison with the first. Difficult to comprehend? Don’t worry ... take solace in the fact that even Einstein described “entanglement” as “spooky action at a distance.”

Some time ago I was coaching the partner of a major law firm. In exploring fit with her needs, I asked her what she wanted from a coach. She answered, “I am looking for a new





metaphor, one that clarifies what it means to be a leader.” It was an insightful answer from an exceptionally talented leader.

A metaphor is a way to convey meaning. It can make the complex easy to understand. It can add power and colour to one’s communication. A vibrant metaphor is like shooting imagery straight into the brain. In doing so it bridges intent with emotion. Information can get people’s attention but orchestrating change means being in the emotional transportation business. To lead without the ability to reach for, shape and create metaphors is like inviting yourself to a gunfight armed only with a rubber knife.

Today, things are the slowest they will ever be ... if it can be digitalised it will be digitalised ... exponential change is becoming the new norm ... globalisation and disruption continues unabated ... the organization itself has to be rethought anew ... and much that is captured under the term “talent management” is tired and ineffectual. If ever new metaphors were needed, it is now!

We have two perfectly good words to explain the interaction between individuals and/or between teams: “cooperation” and “collaboration.” People usually confuse the two, but they are meaningful forms of expression. Cooperation is two or more people working together with a common goal and where the intent is that all of those involved will share the benefit (usually as equitably as possible). Collaboration, by comparison, is altruistic; two or more people working together in pursuit of a common goal where **your** success is more important than **mine**.

Leadership isn’t just about monitoring performance against established standards ... in a business environment changing at an ever-increasing rate, it means both continuously raising **and moving** the bar. It’s earning the right to lead ... every single day. In an era of uncertainty, to lead, to make a difference, draws on empathy, vulnerability ... and letting go. It means giving up traditional notions of control. It’s shedding the mask ... striving to live and sharing our own story. It’s building community. It’s knowing that the “soft stuff” is the really “hard stuff.” It’s the recognition that how we learn is more important than what we learn. It’s casting a pebble in the pond and being connected to every ripple. If applied appropriately, cooperation and collaboration are invaluable terms but their limitation is that they are an echo of what has been. They take us down the path well-travelled. They lock us into assumptions about what worked yesterday.

Working in tandem with computers (cobotics); AI supported connectability between client and customer that, in the past, would have been impossible; the internet of things; new social norms; being truly values-driven when most of your team work in remote locations; responding “now” to ideas that have the potential to change the industry; the network organization and with new approaches such as holocracy; global sharing of best practice; crowdsourcing that brings smart machines to the party; creating a digital platform to build



true community; and access to technology that provides an opportunity for all-the-time, in-the-moment interaction ... all imply behaviour that moves beyond collaboration.

Cooperation suggests a state of play where building on established practices rules the day. Collaboration moves the needle towards creativity and stepping ahead of the customer's expectations. Neither, however, introduce scenarios that capture immediacy, global leadership reach, the ecology of multiple partnerships, speed of learning, involving many in the dance and/or influencing people in real-time who are separated by time and distance.

When Jim Collins wrote *Good To Great*¹ (2001) only two of the eighty-four executives interviewed for the book ranked technology as the primary driver of their transformation. A similar study today would clearly turn Collins' research on its head. Technology isn't just changing what is possible ... it's changing how we think about what is possible.

In a world marked by uncertainty, ten **imperatives** shape successful change. Ten "must-have" attributes that enable any move beyond collaboration.²

1. Curiosity wedded to a view of the marketplace that moves beyond, "How can we better serve the customer?" ... to one where we (the provider) shape intent by developing products and services that the customer doesn't yet know that they need.
2. Inspiring leadership.³ This means both a compelling purpose⁴ and shared values that influence how decisions are made at every level, every day. It also implies a shift from shareholder to a stakeholder value creation as a means to measure long-term organization success.
3. An inherent dissatisfaction with the status quo. Not forgetting that for the change agenda to have traction, the benefits of the change being described must be greater than the emotional cost associated with that change.
4. A map that helps us understand where we are and where we need to be. This implies measurement – especially measuring the organization culture we have and the culture we need.
5. Organization design, processes, systems and tools (e.g., technology) that enable us to move to where we need to be. Here it is important to recognize that as position power gives way to influence, as it must, to succeed, the team leader works for the team.
6. Both a formal and informal village green(s). Space where people from different disciplines/organizations "bump" into each other.

1 The philosophy behind the book is timeless: good is the enemy of the great.

2 The technical term that describes the state of play if one of these is missing is, "we are stuck."

3 Part of what it means to inspire is to make tomorrow come alive in the room today. In making that happen, a successful leader invariably reaches for imagery, story and metaphor.

4 Why do we do what we do?



7. A willingness to take risks and, as a result, the absolute need to build trust. Trust, meanwhile, without its alter ego psychological safety is about as useful as a painter without access to a canvas. Trust draws on four essential pillars: (i) rapport; (ii) winning respect; (iii) actions guided by shared values; and (iv) orchestrating win-win outcomes. For trust to flourish all the parties involved must also recognize both the implicit and the implied promise that underlines any conversation around trust. If poorly understood and/or defined, it's the *implied* promise that most often causes trust to derail – without those involved understanding why.⁵
8. Team and individual capability ... at the heart of which is speed of learning.⁶ This speaks to resilience, comfort with ambiguity and a serving spirit. In the environment being described, it also means that leaders who can't coach are ill-equipped to lead.
9. Those in leadership roles display mastery in working at the level of mindset.
10. The courage to let go of not only what isn't working but – where needed – what is.

Most such lists ignore curiosity. My experience is that without the grain of sand that grows into an oyster ... without continuously asking “what if” questions ... without aggressive reading habits ... without an innate and driving sense that there is a better way ... without a personal ethos driven by learning how to learn ... “change” becomes what others enact.

At the heart of a “change mindset” is the conversation we have with ourselves. Central to that conversation is the language we access ... same old language, same old behaviour. Cooperation is indispensable, collaboration is essential but in reinventing the very nature of what it means to be an organization – as we must – there is a case to be made that we need to add a new metaphor to our vocabulary.

It's tough (one might argue that it's impossible) to achieve something that you don't have a word for. Entanglement is an intriguing metaphor. It captures, in some ways, the new challenge of smart and unbridled connectability ... of one element in the system impacting other parts of the system without those involved fully understanding how. Except, as a term, it is way too esoteric, way too bizarre to have any real currency. If Einstein didn't really understand it we shouldn't go there. May I suggest an alternative, one that builds on the notion of entanglement but without the unfathomable implications. To Cooperate ... To Collaborate ... To **Co-tangle**.

5 For more on trust see *Building Trust – Overtures Not Arrows*, John O. Burdett (2018). Available for download on all of the major book sites.

6 Speed of learning is the only truly sustainable competitive advantage.



John is the founder of Orxestra Inc. He has written ten books on leadership and organization culture. His latest offering is *The A-Z of Organization Culture* (2017). He has worked in over 40 countries and his work on organization culture embraces some of the largest organizations around. He is based in Toronto.

John has a long-term relationship with the Bedford Group and is a strategic partner with TRANSEARCH International. In any one year, the talent acquisition and talent management products/tools he has created, exclusively for TRANSEARCH, are used all-around-the world by many hundreds of major organizations.

To access John's most recent books and a number of his "one-chapter" offerings go to any of the major websites: Amazon.com, eBooks, Barnes and Noble, and Kobo. Use the author's name: John O. Burdett.



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