

Structured Collaboration: Realising Opportunities in the Credit Union Sector

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Abstract: In an interconnected world, collaboration is essential to business sustainability in many contexts and sectors. Effective collaboration requires a structured approach, and the Institute for Collaborative Working (ICW) has been at the forefront in the development of a methodology and international standards for collaborative working. This paper provides an overview of ICW's methodology and how it has supported a group of Credit Unions to adopt a structured approach in their evolving collaboration.

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Frank Lee, FICW, joined ICW as Chief Executive Officer at the start of 2023. He started his career at CIBA Geigy where he worked as a chemist in pharmaceutical research. He then spent over 30 years with BSI, where he started as a client manager, and went on to become Operations Director for Continental Europe Middle East and Africa region, then Regional Director for the Northern European region then EMEA Compliance & Risk Director. In 2021, he moved into the role of UK&I product Certification Director and was responsible for the introduction into the BSI Portfolio of a number of new products including integrated management systems, OHSAS 18001 (now ISO 45001), BS 11000 (now ISO 44001). He developed the ISO 44001 Certification scheme now used for the certification of organisations to ISO 44001.

Adrian Miller, BA(Hons), MBA, FICW, is the Membership Services Director and Fellow of the ICW, responsible for ensuring the Institute provides relevant support, in the form of events, organisational development, training, collaboration services and professional development for its members. He has over 30 years' experience in strategic procurement, supply chain management and developing collaborative relationships. He chairs the UK ISO 44001 committee (Collaborative Business Relationships) and acts as the UK representative on the International Standards Committee.

Bill Taylor MSc, CEng, FICW, FCMI, MIET, is the Technical Director and Fellow of the ICW. He is also the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) Technical Assessor and Expert on the ISO 44001 collaboration framework standard. Bill has extensive experience from his military, industry and academic career where he has held very senior positions. Bill is a trained executive coach and has coached, mentored and helped senior leaders across a full array of business sectors and government departments.

The Institute for Collaborative Working (ICW) is a purpose-driven, non-profit organization dedicated to advancing collaboration to create positive outcomes. We believe that effective collaboration between organizations can deliver additional value, both commercially and economically, while also generating real social value from the projects and relationships they engage in. Our members work more effectively with their supply chains and ecosystems, supporting sustainability objectives and progressing towards a net-zero economy.

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Introduction

Collaboration is essential in today's interconnected world, especially in complex and dynamic sectors, for high-risk projects and alliances and when managing critical supply chains to address the challenges that all of these bring. And, of course, today's business environment is not just about financial outcomes: The way we support our people, deliver social value, and meet sustainability targets are all part of how modern organisations must operate and perform. Evidenceⁱ has shown that collaboration needs structure and a different mindset in order to be effective and sustained. Effective structured collaboration is a key tool in the armoury for delivering strategic outcomes. Indeed, it is said that collaboration without structure simply amounts to wishful thinking!

The key elements of any effective collaborative structure are systems, processes, competence, and culture which, when combined with appropriate leadership, facilitate effective collaboration. Effective collaboration must, in turn, facilitate the alignment of resources - people, processes, systems, and assets - within suitably aligned commercial arrangements across the enterprise and the business eco-system, to deliver on the benefits and added value that collaboration can bring.

The Institute for Collaborative Working (ICW) has refined a client-tailored, structured, and staged approach to collaboration that has proven to be highly effective in fostering successful collaborative relationships. This methodology has had enormous success in helping organisations bring focus, clarity, and direction to their collaborative endeavours, and forms the bedrock of the International Organization of Standardization (ISO) standard 44001 for collaborative working. This collaborative business relationship standard provides the essential assurance wrapper and focus for continual improvement and a demonstration to stakeholders of rigour and confidence of success.

Recently ICW's ability to support organisations was demonstrated in the evolving collaboration within the Credit Union Sector as it helped Credit Unions (CU's) that are seeking to collaborate to maintain the presence and future capability required to preserve and deliver improved services to their members within their communities. It has enabled them to address regulatory changes, increased transparency of social value and sustainability drivers, higher costs, and the need for efficiencies, and to be responsive to dynamic market conditions.

Purpose and Direction

At the core of ICW's approach is the identification and alignment of shared purpose and outcomes. By tailoring its strategy to the specific needs and objectives of their clients and members, the ICW ensures that all parties involved have a clear understanding of the collaboration's drivers and aims. For the CUs, this initial stage was crucial in establishing a unified vision and creating a solid foundation for the desired collaborative relationship.

Strategic Planning

Once the purpose and direction are established, ICW's approach emphasizes the importance of strategic planning. This involves mapping out the collaboration's long-term goals and the steps required to achieve them. Context is a critical factor in any collaboration and the ICW approach has supported the CUs, who had particular cultural and historical context that needed to be factored in, in order to achieve the desired outcomes. For the CUs, this has meant developing a comprehensive strategy that detailed how the collaboration would evolve over time, addressing potential challenges, and outlining the key milestones. This strategic clarity allows all participants to focus their efforts on common objectives, enhancing efficiency and effectiveness while maintaining each CU's individual identity and the trust of their members.

Organisational Structure

A well-defined organisational structure is vital for any collaborative effort. ICW's methodology includes the design of a structure that supports the collaboration's objectives and facilitates smooth operations. In the case of the CUs, ICW helped them address the organisational framework that would delineate roles and responsibilities clearly, ensuring that each party understood their contributions and how they fit into the larger picture. This structure was essential for maintaining coherence and coordination among the collaborators.

Supporting an organisation in developing its collaborative capability is typical of ICW's non-traditional approach of capacity building within their clients. It has included the coaching and training of various groups and teams within the CUs to establish and distribute collaborative capital across the collaboration to support, implement and embed transformational change. Over time this will mean that they become the leading collaborative experts in their sector.

Governance Options

Effective governance is another cornerstone of successful collaboration. ICW provides governance options again tailored to the collaboration's specific context, supporting effective oversight and decision-making processes. For the CUs, ICW recommended governance models that promoted transparency, accountability, and shared leadership. This governance framework not only supports the ongoing management of the collaboration but will also build trust among the partners, which is crucial for long-term success.

Sustained Collaborative Relationships

By bringing together purpose, direction, strategy, organisational structure, and governance, ICW's approach fosters sustainable and resilient collaborative relationships. For the CUs, this holistic methodology, underpinned by ISO 44001, will ensure that the collaboration will succeed not only in the short term but also positions them for the long-term challenges by facilitating the reframing of their founding values and principles to bring relevance to how they operate in today's and future societies. Doing so has not only provided renewed purpose and meaning to today but also positioned the CUs to benefit from future regulatory and marketplace challenges.

Conclusion

The ICW's client-tailored, structured, and staged approach to collaboration known as 'Structured Collaboration' is a proven and powerful methodology which when coupled with its underpinning 'Growth Pathway' brings focus and clarity to collaborative endeavours. This is ideal for the Credit Union Sector, who are presently undergoing a form of renaissance / transformation to meet the challenges of the modern age. Adopting a structured approach to collaboration is allowing the CUs to tap into the collective skills and resources of the group. Being better together provides benefits from economies of scale through joint gainshare and mitigates risk through joint risk management.

Structured collaboration presents a different way of doing things beyond the traditional. By addressing the critical elements of purpose, strategy, structure, and governance, ICW helps organisations like the CUs build strong, effective, trusting, and sustainable partnerships. This approach not only enhances collaborative success but also signals to stakeholders and potential partners a credibility and integrity that support long-term resilience and agility, essential in today's fast-paced and uncertain world.

Note

ⁱ For further details see www.instituteforcollaborativeworking.com