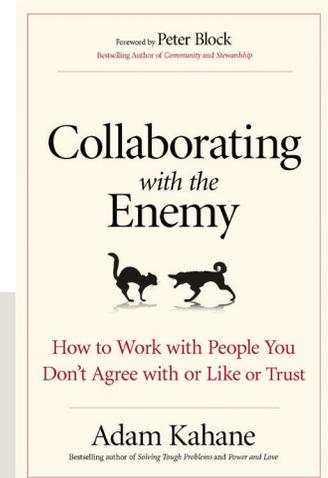


# Collaborating with the Enemy

A book excerpt by Mobius Senior Expert, Adam Kahane

Adam was recently recognized by Nobel Peace Prize winner Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos who referred to a meeting he organized with Adam 20 years ago, as “one of the most significant events in the country’s search for peace.”

This excerpt is from his forthcoming book, the publication of which we celebrate at the Summer Gathering to mark its launch. Additional materials from Adam are located in the Reading Room on [www.mobiusleadership.com](http://www.mobiusleadership.com) under Next Practice Institute.



## How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust

We face the same basic challenge everywhere: at home and work, in business and politics, on community and national and global issues. We are trying to get something done that we think is crucial. To do this, we need to work with others. These others include people we do not agree with or like or trust. And so we are

**“When we fall into the trap of telling and of not listening, we close ourselves off from being changed by the world and we limit ourselves to being able to change the world only by force.”**

- Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems*

torn: we think that we must work with these others and also that we must not. Collaboration seems both imperative and impossible. What do we do?

The reason such collaborations seem impossible is that we misunderstand collaboration.

Our conventional understanding of collaboration is that it requires us all to be on the same team and headed in the same direction, to agree on what has to happen and make sure this happens, and to get people to do what needs to be done. In other words, we assume that collaboration can and must be under control. Conventional collaboration looks like a planning meeting. But this conventional assumption is wrong. When we are working in complex situations with diverse others, collaboration cannot and need not be controlled.

Unconventional, stretch collaboration abandons the assumption of control. It gives up unrealistic fantasies of harmony, certainty, and compliance, and embraces messy realities of discord, trial and error, and

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cocreation. Stretch collaboration looks like martial arts practice. Stretch collaboration enables us to get things done even in complex situations with people we don't agree with or like or trust.

Stretch collaboration requires us to make three fundamental shifts in how we work.

First, in how we relate with our fellow collaborators, we must stretch away from focusing narrowly on the collective goals and harmony of our team, and move toward embracing both conflict and connection within and beyond the team.

Second, in how we advance our work, we must

stretch away from insisting on clear agreements about the problem, the solution, and the plan, and move toward experimenting systematically with different perspectives and possibilities.

And third, in how we participate in our situation — in the role we play — we must stretch away from trying to change what other people are doing, and move toward entering fully into the action, willing to change ourselves.

Stretch collaboration is challenging because all three of these stretches require us to do the opposite of what seems natural. Rather than shrink away from complexity

## TWO APPROACHES TO COLLABORATION

	Conventional Collaboration	Stretch Collaboration
How we relate with our collaborators	Focus on the good and harmony of the team (one superior whole)	Embrace conflict and connection (multiple diverse holons)
How we advance our work	Agree on the problem and the solution (one optimum plan)	Experiment our way forward (multiple emergent possibilities)
How we participate in our situation	Change what other people are doing (one paramount leader)	Step into the game (multiple cocreators)



*Conventional*



*Stretch*



Nocturne © Jim McManus

**“When we are working in complex situations with diverse others, collaboration cannot and need not be controlled.”**

we must plunge into it. Often this feels uncomfortable and frightening.

These stretches require us to pluralize: to move away from paying attention only to one dominant whole, one optimum plan, and one superior leader, toward attending to multiple diverse holons (wholes that are part of larger wholes), multiple emergent possibilities, and multiple cocreators.

Getting things done in complex situations with diverse others is never straightforward. Energies must be mobilized; needs must be balanced; actions must be taken. Stretching does not make this work disappear; it just enables us to do it with less fear and distraction and more connection and awareness. The proverb says, “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.” After enlightened stretching, we still have our work to do, but now we have a better chance of doing it successfully.

This book presents a theory and practice of stretch collaboration. Chapter 1 explains why collaboration is necessary and why it is intrinsically difficult. Chapter 2 suggests a way to decide when to collaborate and when instead to force, adapt, or exit. Chapter 3 specifies the limitations of conventional collaboration and the narrow conditions under which it is applicable. Chapter 4 outlines stretch collaboration, and chapters 5, 6, and 7 elaborate the three stretches it entails: embracing conflict and connection, experimenting a way forward, and stepping into the game. The conclusion offers a program of exercises to put these ideas into practice. ■



**ADAM KAHANE,** Director of Reos Partners, is the author of *Solving Tough Problems*, a bestseller of which Nelson Mandela said, “This breakthrough book addresses the central challenge of our time: finding

a way to work together to solve problems we have created.” We will be celebrating the launch of Adam’s latest book, *Collaborating with the Enemy*, published just in time for the Summer Gathering.