

# God's voice in the room: Collaboration

*Dawn Stallwood makes the connection between scriptural wisdom and collaborative working practices, especially the Collaborative Business Relationship Management Systems within ISO 44001. She ends by suggesting for each of us a commitment to Christ-like collaboration in 2021.*

## Collaboration – spiritual partnership in action

Throughout the Bible we are told that there is great spiritual goodness and achievement to be had through teamwork, unity and collaboration. The teachings of Jesus in the New Testament tell us about the personal behaviours and characteristics necessary to operate in a Christ-like way, whilst serving God's purpose here on earth.

In my experience, corporate culture and ethical outcomes are intrinsically linked to behaviours, competencies and capabilities; culture is foundational. I genuinely feel for business leaders and management teams who operate in a business environment that is focused on short-term results, self-interest (whether at an organisational or individual level), the chasing of

profit (sometimes at any cost to relationships), and a reward system which can be inconsistent with taking a longer-term, sustainable, relational and unifying approach.

In order to justify and focus efforts to improve collaboration and teamwork, trade and industry seem to gravitate towards programmes to change corporate culture, management and leadership as well as international standards and other accreditation programmes. This is in contrast to a focus on the wisdom found in scripture.

In the advisory work I do, I see the outcomes and consequences of behaviours in practice and how businesses and their leaders seek to 'bake in' their own preferred teamwork, leadership and collaborative behaviours, through a variety of means, including ISO 44001 accreditation

(Collaborative Business Relationship Management Systems).

There is energising when our spiritual life merges with our professional world, or vice-versa. For me, it gives me a greater sense of purpose, particularly in those moments of being weary and losing momentum. The transactions and major bid activities I support are marathons interspersed by sprints, with us mere mortals and all our feelings, context and idiosyncrasies in the mix, often burdened with overarching corporate expectations.

I decided to explore the connections and similarities between scriptural wisdom and collaborative working practices, the theory underlying them and in particular ISO 44001. The end result is a set of scriptural handrails which if truly embedded into culture, behaviour and attitude will result in a successful collaborative relationship.



Collaboration

Photo: marketingdonut

## Does teamwork have a scriptural foundation?

From the outset, teamwork was the preference to which we were directed. In Genesis 2:18 (ESV) we read: Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him”.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (NLT) puts it like this: Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.

The teamwork God envisages for us is in partnership with him, not just with each other. 1 Corinthians 3:9 (ESV) puts it simply as ‘For we are God’s fellow workers’. (It is notable that Paul frequently describes specific individuals, such as Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25, as fellow-workers.) This really strikes me as important: to recognise where our discernment, experience and expertise start and stop and where we must lean on God’s understanding.

## Collaboration Defined

There are many definitions, but the one which resonates the most with me is:

Forbes.com (Credit: Carol Kinsey Goman):

*A collaborative team isn’t a group of people working together. It’s a group of people working together who trust each other. **Trust is the belief or confidence that one party has in the reliability, integrity and honesty of another party. It is the expectation that the faith one places in someone else will be honoured. It is also the glue that holds together any group, and it is the foundation of true collaboration.***

*Without trust, a team loses its emotional ballast. In an environment of suspicion, people withhold information, hide behind psychological walls, and withdraw from participation.*

Collaboration requires trust and a step into the unknown. The sheer reliance you have on each other is considerable: much like our faith, where we don’t have

all the answers, but take a journey of greater understanding each day.

## Collaboration brings benefits

Many, notably the Association for Intelligent Information Management, see collaborations as a ‘working practice, culture or system whereby individuals are enabled to work together to a common purpose to achieve [business] benefit.’ Done well, they will enhance performance, increase engagement, opportunity and productivity, reduce risk and build sustainable relationships.

The desire to embed this into relationship management is well justified. A long-term relationship (many consortias can be 10 years plus, with various changes to the core team) cannot rely simply on the behaviours and attitudes of a few people at the outset. I agree with ISO 44001 that there should be a culture of collaboration, founded on strong principles of business integrity, supported by the right processes, communication, shared objectives, system and mechanics, which in turn attracts people to participate with optimal collaborative behaviour. This is what ISO 44001 seeks to achieve.

Collaboration is everywhere. I cannot think of any transaction, team or project I’ve been involved in since 1997 which has not depended on effective collaboration. For example, at the present time, my activities include supporting:

- A three-way collaboration for a large public-sector procurement which entails drawing on their collaborative conscience. On a daily basis the team devotes their attention towards the behaviour and commitments that being in collaboration requires – in order to get intended added value that benefits all stakeholders.

- An impressive and agile business concluding negotiations with a merger partner, where buyer and seller, having shared goals and values, will get the deal over the line with the right foundation for going forward. In collaborations, there are (or should be) no ‘sides’.
- A management team looking at what’s next, where the personal and corporate contexts need to align – along with working out what needs to happen if they do not.

ISO 44001, by happy coincidence (or God-incidence perhaps?) embeds the Christian principles for collaboration, founded on what I term ‘Scriptural Handrails’. It has become a useful reference point and tool for my activities.

## ISO 44001 – what is it?

The British Standards Institute (BSI) Executive Briefing summarises ISO 44001 as being ‘a business tool that helps organizations implement a flexible and robust system of establishing, managing and even ending collaborative relationships involving two or more businesses. The international standard outlines collaborative relationship management practices that help to ensure that businesses of all sizes get the maximum value from working with others to achieve a common goal or outcome.’

ISO 44001 views each collaborative business relationship as an eight-stage journey (or lifecycle from cradle to grave) and sets out what organisations need to do throughout the process.

Part of ISO 44001 is the requirement for a fully documented Relationship Management Plan (RMP). Organisations seeking ISO 44001 accreditation and re-certification have to demonstrate, through an audit process, that ISO 44001 has been implemented and that it is supported by a tailored RMP, which all partners to a collaboration commit to.

**'Trust is the belief or confidence that one party has in the reliability, integrity and honesty of another party'**



The RMP covers:-

- 1) Relationship Principles Charter
- 2) Shared Objectives
- 3) Behavioural Management
- 4) Value Creation, Change Management, Progressive Benefits Management (including Tracking)
- 5) Personnel Considerations
- 6) Knowledge Management, Resource and Information Sharing
- 7) Contractual Aspects
- 8) Skills Transfer and Succession Planning
- 9) Continual Improvement
- 10) Risk Management in Collaboration and Opportunities
- 11) Issue and Conflict Resolution
- 12) Executive Sponsorship
- 13) Relationship Evaluation (including Relationship Maturity Matrix)
- 14) Stakeholder Management
- 15) Organisational Leadership
- 16) Governance Arrangements
- 17) Shared Communications
- 18) Exit Strategy.

RMPs can have a defining impact on relationships and outcomes. There is most certainly a Kingdom purpose to them. I see the scriptural foundation for much of the language used and commitments being made in an RMP. Both the preparatory work and the

necessary discussions with partners mean that really fruitful discussions take place. This is not always easy, but it supports the vision I believe God has for working in partnership. When the fruits of our faith are evident in the businesses we work with, it's a good day in Heaven!

ISO 44001 is unlike most other ISOs in that it really has personal depth to it – not surprisingly perhaps, given much of the success of the collaboration is dependent on the behaviours, attitudes and competencies of the team members.

To cement the importance of this, Annex C of ISO 44001 lists those Collaborative Competencies & Behaviours that ISO 4401 considers to be essential for any successful collaboration. These behaviours include: trust, honesty, empathy, patience, kindness, integrity, loyalty, reliability, accountability, shared goals, lack of self-interest, discernment, support, conflict management.

ISO 44001 urges that individuals are brought into the collaboration only if they have these attributes and behaviours.

Galatians 5 22-23 provides us with nine behaviours, the Fruit of the Spirit, which to me at least, feels like the 'long-lost twin' of Annex C:

'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law'. (NIV)

Two of the greatest risks to collaborations are I think:

- (1) Single-mindedness or self-interest, because this is at odds with the greater good for the collaboration and for stakeholders and
- (2) Conflict. Conflicts will happen, but how they are managed is all important.

The Theology of Work (TOW) Project, which provides a comprehensive commentary on how the Bible applies to the world of work, helpfully sets out the application of the Fruit of the Spirit in the context of the workplace. See <https://www.theologyofwork.org/auxiliary-pages/fruits-of-the-spirit-galatians-522-23>.

By way of illustration and linking to the two risks mentioned above, the Theology of Work Project writes:

'Generosity seems to be at odds with the goal of most businesses — to maximize profit — and with the goal of career advancement. But when everyone is simply looking out for

their own interests, the cut-throat environment stifles collaboration and creativity. Some businesses have demonstrated that generous return policies can actually improve the bottom line. Generosity can permeate an organization when it starts with the leader, but it can have a supportive impact no matter where it is practiced.'

'Gentleness is best seen in the hard conversations at work, such as during a sharp disagreement, difficult performance review or termination. It may be seen in the way a teacher

challenges a student. These tough conversations are done with a sense of humility in spite of a position of power, allowing for communication and trust, and avoiding the degradation of the individual.'

## A scriptural 'handrail' for collaborative behaviours

In addition to the Galatians perspective, here are some other key passages from the Bible which I find particularly helpful and supportive as: I seek

to support collaborative business relationships and their team members; I write RMPs and formal consortia documents; or I contribute by working as a collaborative conscience. Each collaborative principle is supported by one or more sections within ISO 44001 and its accompanying guidance. The table below gives a snapshot of how collaboration practised according to ISO 44001 mirrors biblical texts. You may find it useful to refer to the full passage from which each specific text is taken. Make use of the Bible translation of your choice!

Collaborative Principle	Scripture Handrail	Scripture
Silence is not golden; if something is amiss, speak up	Esther 4:14 (ESV)	'For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'
Bring comradery, understanding and compassion into the board-room or bid-room – we are in this together, win or lose.	Ephesians 4:16 (ESV) 1 Peter 3: 8 (ESV)	From whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart and a humble mind.
Pooling resources: It doesn't matter who is doing the lifting; we lift together, to reach the summit (closing a deal, winning a bid etc).	Acts 20: 35 (ESV)	In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'.
Have a shared objective from the outset, which works for all team members / organisations.	1 Corinthians 1:10 (ESV)	I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.
The person who leads the collaboration needs to have a servant-hearted mind-set towards the team members and organisations involved as a whole, regardless of who pays their salary each month.	John 13: 12-17 (ESV)	When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."
Have independent experts on-board who have experience in collaboration or transaction management	Proverbs 11:14 (ESV)	Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety.
Beware of and protect against the distraction and potential damage that self-interest can have in collaborative relationships and teams, using processes, binding agreements and wise choice of team members.	Philippians 2: 1-4 (ESV)	So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

## Christ washing the apostles' feet

Peter Paul Rubens, 1632

Musee des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France




### Commitment for 2021

Writing this article leaves me hungry to be more involved with the messiness of collaborations and partnering arrangements, to help bring forth God's intentions for these relationships.

We learn behaviours by practising them and by surrounding ourselves

with the right influences, mentors and experiences.

So, why not make it a personal commitment for 2021, that for any collaborative or team you are involved with, to seek to do God's work in this sphere? Be God's voice in the collaboration. ISO 44001 is a great

mechanism to achieve the full benefit from collaboration and embed, in a robust and practical way, some of the biblical material cited in this article. Do not underestimate the power that your influence and resolve can have, or the long-term positive impact that a successful collaboration, founded on Christ-like behaviours, can bring about. 



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