

# Introduction

In February 2010, a facilitator by the name of Dan Newman had just received disturbing news.

He was standing in the middle of a ramshackle, cluttered restaurant atop the Harmony Hotel in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It was morning, and the restaurant was filling with a group of more than 60 government officials, NGO representatives, herdsman, farmers, and village elders. Some were dressed in suits, some in uniforms and others in traditional robes. Many of the tribal representatives had never been to a city before. At eight stories, the hotel was one of the tallest buildings in Addis Ababa, and they stood gazing at the views overlooking the city in all four directions.

This group had been assembled for one purpose: to design an equitable, ten-year water-rights program in three water-stressed provinces of Ethiopia. Dan Newman already knew that most of them simply wanted to stake their claim on a diminishing piece of a finite pie. Many had prepared scripts and PowerPoint decks, expecting to address the gathering, formally state their case and await a government decree.

They were in for a big surprise. This was not what worried Dan at the moment, however. He was used to that sort of thing.

What worried him was that he had just been told, ten minutes before the two-day session was about to kick off, that there was no common language across the group. The expectation coming in was that all of them spoke English, meaning Dan would be able to communicate directly with them. But he had just learned this was not the case; most of them did not speak English. Instead, they would have to facilitate the session in

Amharic, which Dan and some of the participants did not speak. There would need to be translations throughout. This complicated things enormously, but it was too late to do anything but plunge ahead.

With no formal introductions or explanation about the process, Dan simply welcomed them and put them right to work.

Within the first hour, there was general annoyance and discomfort across the group that only deepened in the second hour. When would they be able to present their cases? Why were they split into teams drawing diagrams of stakeholder relationships?

Even though Dan did not speak any of the three native languages, he could tell from people's energy and body language that they were very upset. This was okay. He wanted to challenge and break down their usual patterns and expectations.

And it worked. Less than an hour later, the energy in the room was just as high, but it had shifted dramatically. Teams were hard at work, full of excitement as they told stories about a shared future. They were no longer defending what they saw as their right; they were collaboratively designing that future. They had let go of their constituency agendas and were focused on finding answers to the bigger questions. They were no longer visibly frustrated with the challenge of communicating to other language speakers. They were doing everything in their power and good humor to make themselves understood.

By the end of the next day, they had created a shared story about the future. And that future had come alive as they collaborated, not as a brainstorming technique or an abstract idea, but as something real they had created together and believed in. During the debrief at the end of the two-day session, one of the farmers compared the design session to how she makes butter, saying you have to agitate the milk forcefully, but then, with patience, it becomes sweet, rich butter.

This story was written and contributed by Bill Burck.

Finding out how this transformation happened is just one of the reasons you should read this book.

This book is about the kind of transformation that emerged in that group of 62 Ethiopians and that is increasingly emerging in groups around the world thanks to collaboratory practices. This book is about empowering ordinary people to make a difference in the world. It is about providing them with ways to collaboratively make sweet, rich butter out of breathtakingly complex problems.

Buckle up. It will be an exciting journey, full of bumps and hard turns and mysteries, some of which we hope you will solve and all of which we hope you will enjoy.

For some of you, this book will be full of magnificent insight. For others, it may be nothing more than magnificent poppycock.

We do not claim to have all of the answers. We make no claims or guarantees at all. We simply wish to share our approaches to collaborative co-creation and design.

We have seen the value of the approaches described in this book. People we work with tell us they have experienced that value. We hope to show you the many aspects of that value as you turn the pages. We hope to empower you to discover that value for yourself. Or even better, to realize that value in ways we have not even imagined and share them with us in return.

This book is a result of an engaged conversation on comfortable long chairs while on vacation in Sardinia. Thomas was sharing his insights of the reflection papers of his recently completed 12-week collaborative master's-level course at the University of St. Gallen: the breadth and depth of learning surprised us both and we started sharing stories of our 50+20 community friends who had been experimenting with the “collaboratory” idea we had introduced so colorfully at the United Nations Rio+20 conference in June 2012. We also reflected on the many emails we had been getting asking for help in how to successfully conduct collaboratories. I realized how curious I was to learn more about the ins and outs of the magic around the collaboratory, to understand the larger context of social labs emerging over the past decades and how these enabled the societal transformation so many of us are working for. Claire at Greenleaf was very supportive of the idea to bring together these stories and for better understanding the magic of the collaboratory and off we went.

## **The landscape of the authors: a mind map of social contributions**

It is astonishing to realize how different groups of people spread around the world are working on very similar issues, mostly in total ignorance of each other, until they discover amazing synchronicities and start learning from each other and collaborating, while cross-pollenating their fascinating insights.

The views of the group of authors presented in this book are to some degree a reflection of my own journey of discovering facilitation, my passion for transformative learning and enabling change, and my eternal curiosity of how to create powerful group dynamics and how to work with so many unrelated people on complex issues. I am immensely grateful to every single co-author of this book—many thanks to all of you for having contributed to this work.

The mind map at Figure 1 is a visual attempt to highlight the interconnections among the contributing authors and the related thought leadership.

**Figure 1** Mind map of authors

Illustration by The Value Web



## How to navigate this book: a mind map of chapter contributions

This book was designed as a practical handbook for those active in transformation change, irrespective of their fields of action: in society, in organizations of all kinds and in the field of education.

- Part 1 of the book sets the stage by explaining what a collaboratory is, where it emerges from, how it is defined and how it fits into the larger context of the social lab revolution that is happening all over the world
- Part 2 unpacks the many dimensions and considerations that contribute to the magic of a collaboratory experience. We offer nine unique insights and perspectives that need to be considered and form an integral part of a successful collaboratory. Certainly there are more dimensions that contribute to a collaboratory. Some of these are covered in the examples of Part 3
- Part 3 offers ten inspiring examples of how a collaboratory could be applied. We look at applications in the educational field (three examples), within organizations (two examples), among institutions (one example), and as movements (four examples in two chapters)
- Part 4 offers a pragmatic outlook on how to get started if you want to use the collaboratory in your own field of work. We do this by providing a narrative roadmap using a real-life example of a co-designed and co-created collaboratory in Norway ([Chapter 22](#)), linking it to relevant chapters of Part 2 and Part 3. We also look at how collaboratories differ from other group facilitation approaches and how to best use the methodology in different situations

The mind map here ([Figure 2](#)) is a visual attempt to help you navigate this book by pointing out the interconnections between various chapters.

**Figure 2** Mind map of contributions

Illustration by The Value Web.



As a closing comment, I feel it is important to be very much aware of the fact that there is no need to search for perfection when trying to design or co-create a collaboratory event. “Clumsy solutions for wicked problems”<sup>1</sup> are more than good enough as an ambition and outcome when attempting to resolve complex challenges of a systemic nature. The collaboratory is one way to design a co-creative space for stakeholders to engage in solving our current wicked problems. Please take this as an invitation and an encouragement to simply dive into the experience.

We are all here to help you if you need us.

Katrin Muff, Lausanne, March 2014

1 Thanks to Jonathan Reams for this expression.