Chapter 1: Collaborating Is Not The Best Option

A "writing out loud" excerpt from the working draft of "Collaborating with the Enemy: An Open Way to Work with People You Don't Agree With or Like or Trust" by Adam Kahane, forthcoming in 2017 from Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Since my first experience in South Africa in 1991, I have focussed all of my professional energies on supporting tough collaborations in different parts of the world. My premise has been that the best way to deal with complex challenges is to collaborate. I have written three books that make the case for collaboration and outline frameworks and methodologies to support it.

From time to time over these years, though, I have been in situations that shook my confidence in this premise. On and off from 2000 to 2012, I tried to help some Venezuelan colleagues organize a broad multi-stakeholder collaboration to address the severe economic, social, and political challenges of their country. But time after time our efforts ran up against the unwillingness of the radical socialist government of President Hugo Chávez to participate in our project, and so it never got off the ground.

A congressman from a Venezuelan opposition party once told me a story about the extraordinary level of political non-collaboration. "The government and the opposition members of Congress used to be able to work together in certain committees," he said, "but now the government refuses to talk with us at all. The only conversation I have had recently with a Chavista was in a men's room in the Congress, where one of them standing at the adjacent urinal whispered to me, 'If you guys get into power, don't forget that we're friends, right?'"

What I eventually understood was that the refusal of the Chavez government to participate in our project was not because they didn't understand the principles or opportunities offered by collaboration. We didn't need to explain it again, more carefully and enthusiastically. They refused because their strategy was based in part on the opposite premise: that demonizing their political opponents as capitalist elites helped them retain the support of their popular base. In this case, then, from the perspective of the Chavistas, collaboration was not the best option: it was not the best way for them to get where they wanted to go. It might be nice of collaboration was always the best option—but it isn't.

At a crossroads

The challenge I experienced in Venezuela stayed in my mind, but it was not until I worked in Thailand in 2013 that I was able to understand precisely the role of the collaboration option. My colleague Steve Atkinson and I were supporting a collaborative effort by a team of leaders from across Thai society: politics, business, academia, the military, the aristocracy, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, and youth. They were all worried about the ongoing political conflict in their country, and frightened that the unrest, polarization, and violence could spiral out of control—in the worst case into civil war. They represented many factions in the conflict and mostly blamed each other for what was going wrong. But the question they

had come together to work on—"What kind of Thailand do we want to leave for our children?"—mattered to all of them. They therefore persisted in engaging through many meetings over many months, to try to construct a shared understanding of could happen and what they could do about it.

I participated in many of their meetings and found the experience both fascinating and frustrating. In its particulars, Thailand's history and culture and values—the roles of the monarchy and Buddhism; the social and class structure; the commitment to harmonious Thainess—are unique and for me were unfamiliar and bewildering. In a more general sense, though, Thais are wrestling with societal dynamics that are present around the world, and so working with this team enabled me to learn general lessons about what it takes to deal with these dynamics.

The team spent many days between April and August 2013 trying to make sense of what was going on in their country. They shared their varied experiences and understandings and met with academic experts and ordinary people. Out of this they described three inter-related, complex challenges that Thailand was facing: social and cultural tensions, economic and environmental pressures, and political and institutional constraints. On further deliberation, though, they reached the conclusion that which future scenario would unfold in Thailand would depend not so much on the specifics of what Thais did to address these challenges, as much as on *how* they addressed them.

The team said that there were three basic approaches or stances that Thais could take. They named these approaches "We Adapt," "We Fight," and "We Collaborate."

In "We Adapt," the dominant approach that Thais take to dealing with the challenges the country faces is simply to get on with their own lives and leave addressing these challenges to others, and especially to the government and elites. This was the approach that most people and businesses were used to taking. In "We Fight," many people choose to get involved in political movements to push forcefully for the top-down solutions that they think are needed. This was the approach that people had taken from time to time, most recently during the political unrest of 2008-10. And in "We Collaborate," the dominant approach is for people to get involved in cross-factional and cross-sectoral efforts to develop a multitude of top-down and bottom-up solutions. This approach had the least precedent in Thailand.

The primary conclusion that the team reached from their deliberations is that Thais would be unable to address their challenges if the dominant approach they took was either of the two most familiar ones: "We Adapt" or "We Fight." The challenges were too complex and the society too polarized for a successful way forward to be dictated from the top down by any particular faction of experts and authorities. The only way they would be able to address their challenges would be if the dominant approach they took was the less familiar and less controlled "We Collaborate." The team then decided to create a movement in Thailand that they called "Collaborate We Can." I liked these conclusions because they fit into my long-held belief that collaboration was best.

In November 2013 I returned to Thailand to help my colleagues there finish writing up our team's report. Our thinking about what could happen in the country was, however, quickly

being overtaken by what was actually happening. The government had attempted to pass a law to give amnesty to politicians for offenses committed during previous periods of unrest, and hundreds of thousands of anti-government protesters who thought that this law was corrupt had organized mass rallies, pushed their way into government buildings, and demanded that the elected parliament be replaced by an appointed council. The worst fear of the Thai team, that the country would descend into civil war, now seemed possible.

I was alarmed and disappointed at this collapse of efforts to enact a "We Collaborate" scenario. Even more, I was surprised that so many of my Thai colleagues, convinced that at this juncture collaboration meant capitulation, were working to enact different variations of "We Fight" through their energetic support for either pro- or anti-government factions.

Throughout the first months of 2014, the political conflict in Thailand continued in the parliament, the courts, and the streets. The anti-government protestors occupied parts of central Bangkok, seized government buildings, and forcefully prevented the election of a new government. The government declared a state of emergency, arrested protestors, and tried to close down occupied sites. The two sides held talks to try to resolve the conflict, but these failed. Finally, in May 2014, the army implemented their own "We Fight" option: they staged a coup, established a junta to govern the country, declared martial law, arrested politicians and activists, and censored the media.

Over these months of Thai history, then, the three options the team had described had all been in play. As the national crisis mounted, many people abandoned "We Adapt" and "We Collaborate" for "We Fight." They saw collaboration with their opponents and enemies as too unfamiliar, unpredictable, and unpalatable. It was not their best option.

Over the months that followed, I talked a lot with my Thai colleagues about what had happened and what it meant. The more we talked about the thinking of the team, the more valuable I found it. I came to think that the team had uncovered an archetypal framework for the options that are available, not only to Thais but to all of us, to deal with the complex challenges we face.

Three archetypal approaches

We try *adapting* when we believe that we are not able to have much influence on the world outside of our immediate sphere of influence. We observe what is happening in this external context but leave it to other actors to try to influence it. Instead we focus our energies on doing the best they can within our own smaller world. We ignore or avoid or fit in or adapt to what is happening in our context.

The strength of this adapting approach is that we can simply get on with the task of doing their own thing and living our own life—which may well be challenging enough—without expending any attention or time or energy on trying to change things that we think we cannot. Many, perhaps most people normally take this approach.

When we are within a stable, secure, supportive context, this approach can work fine. But if we are within a context that is unstable, insecure, or unsupportive, then we might be unable

to adapt and will struggle to thrive or even survive. In this case the adapting approach will not work: it will be inadequate.

Figure 2: Three Archetypal Approaches to Dealing with the World

Approach	Assumption	Strength or opportunity	Weakness or risk
Adapting: doing your own thing and ignoring, avoiding, or fitting in with what is happening in your context	You cannot influence your context	This approach requires working just within your own sphere of influence	Your context may be too dangerous to adapt to
Fighting: pushing for what you, and your colleagues and friends, think needs to be done to change your context (includes and transcends adapting)	You must influence your context and, by yourself or with your colleagues and friends, you can know what needs to be done and can get it done	This approach is in alignment with common habits, mindsets, and structures	This approach can produce paralysis or violence
Collaborating: working together, not only with colleagues and friends but also with opponents and enemies, to discover and enact what you need to do to change your context (includes and transcends fighting and adapting)	You must influence your context but, by yourself or just with your colleagues and friends, you cannot know what needs to be done or get it done	This approach has the greatest potential for influencing your context	This approach is the most difficult to implement

We try the second possible approach, *fighting*, when we believe that adapting is inadequate. We are unwilling to simply observe and adapt; we think that we must try to influence our context. We think that we, alone or together with colleagues and friends, know best what needs to be done: that we are right and others are wrong. We also think that we must and can get this done by fighting and winning over others. There are many different ways we can do this fighting: peacefully or violently; by enticing or imposing; using ideas, skills, votes, supporters, authority, money, or weapons.

The strength of the fighting approach is that it accords with a way of thinking that for many people is obvious, natural, and habitual. Many people believe that in many contexts fighting is the best, perhaps even the only feasible way to change their context. Furthermore, in principle it is right to fight for a just cause; not to fight would be wrong and cowardly. And beyond these general justifications for fighting, this approach looks particularly good to people who

are inclined to think that they know best: who are powerful, confident, or egotistical, or who are part of paternalistic, authoritarian, expert, or elitist social structures.

The risk of the fighting approach arises from the fact that when we try to push through what we think needs to be done, most of the time others who think differently will, sooner or later, push back. This is why fighting often does not achieve the outcome we intend. Often it simply produces polarization and paralysis. In extreme cases, it produces enemyization and even war, and destroys the outcome we are trying to secure. A politician from Northern Ireland once warned me of the danger of wanting, on principle, to win at all costs: "The Irish Republican Army would prefer to have one hundred percent of nothing." Many people recognize this risk of fighting and therefore think that fighting needs to be moderated or suppressed.

We try the third approach, *collaborating*, when we don't think that either adapting or fighting can work. Collaborating is therefore a second-best option.

We try collaborating when we believe that we must try to influence our context, but that we cannot do so alone or only with colleagues and friends. We either think that we cannot by ourselves know what needs to be done or that, even if we can know, we cannot by ourselves succeed in getting it done.

The opportunity presented by the collaborating approach is that by working with others, not only colleagues and friends but also opponents and enemies, we can find a more effective way forward and can have a larger and more sustained impact on our context.

The risk of the collaborating approach, however, is that it will be too difficult to achieve and so will fail. The reason collaborating often feels frighteningly difficult or impossible is the converse of the reason fighting often feels obvious, natural, and habitual: fighting involves asserting (with colleagues and friends), in control, what we already know needs to be done, whereas collaborating involves working with others (including opponents and enemies), without being in control, to discover a way forward that we do not yet know.

We always have these three options as to how we can approach the challenges we face. Adapting and fighting are the most familiar and straightforward and so, for most of us, are our default modes. Collaborating is the most uncomfortable and difficult.

How to know when to collaborate

Working together with your opponents and enemies only makes sense when working apart from them—adapting or fighting—does not make sense. It is therefore a mistake to view the choice to collaborate as a matter of general principle—as a decision as to whether collaborating is always right or always wrong. In fact it is a choice based on an assessment of your options in a specific context.

You choose to try to collaborate with specific others to deal with a specific issue if you judge that collaborating will, on balance, work better than adapting or fighting. In making this judgment your experience with these others and this issue will be important, as will the

feelings—frustration, doubt, fear, excitement, curiosity, hope—you have about each of these options.

Sometimes you and others may agree that adapting or fighting are not working now or that they cannot or might not work in the future, and so you agree to try to collaborate. But often one party, let's say you, wants to collaborate and the other party doesn't. In this case the other is making the assessment that either adapting (not dealing with you) or fighting (defeating you) is a better option than collaborating (working with you).

Now you have three options. You can wait for their frustration, doubt, or fear about the viability of adapting or fighting, and hence their interest in collaborating, to increase. Or you can take action to increase their frustration, doubt, or fear about the viability of adapting or fighting, for example by demonstrating that you will fight back. Or you can take action to increase their excitement, curiosity, or hope about the viability of collaborating, for example by proposing a neutral convenor.

Most of the time, for most actors, collaborating is a second-best option. This means that it requires a particular confluence of conditions, which can be obtained by patience or by effort, for the actors to choose to collaborate. Once they have made this choice, the next daunting challenge arises: What does it take to make collaboration successful?