Collaborating with the Enemy

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

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Drawings by Jeff Barnum

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Conclusion: How to Learn to Stretch

This book is a call both for more collective action and for more individual responsibility. It argues that increasingly, in all spheres—at home and work, on local and national and global issues—if we want to get things done, we need to collaborate, not only with colleagues and friends but also with opponents and enemies. And it argues that to be able to collaborate in such complex and conflictual and uncontrolled contexts, we need to stretch.

Up to now, this book has offered ideas about how to stretch. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to help you take these ideas and put them into practice.

Stretch collaboration is an unconventional way of working with others that involves three basic shifts:

The first stretch, embracing conflict and connection, requires you to employ two complementary drives rather than choosing only one: power, the drive to self-realization that is expressed in asserting; and love, the drive to reunification that is expressed in engaging. You need to employ these drives alternately rather than simultaneously.

The second stretch, experimenting a way forward, requires you to employ dialoguing and presencing, which enable new
possibilities to emerge, rather than only downloading and debating, which reinforce the status quo. This means opening up your talking and especially your listening.

The third stretch, stepping into the game, requires you to plunge into the action, willing to change yourself, rather than remaining outside and above it, only trying to change other people.

Most people find these stretches unfamiliar and uncomfortable because they demand changing ingrained behaviors. The way to learn new behaviors is to practice them over and over. And the way to start practicing is to try out a few simple new actions, pay attention to what works and what doesn’t, adjust and repeat, and build from there. This practicing requires acting with curiosity and openness: as in theatrical improvisation, to say yes and allow yourself to be changed by what then happens. It also requires unflinching self-reflectiveness in observing what you are doing and the impact you are having; enlist a colleague or friend who knows you well and is willing to help you by providing feedback.

Here is a six-week program of exercises you can do to begin to practice the three stretches. You will need the following:

- A willingness to try out new actions
- A sense of humor
- A notebook and pen (or another way to take notes)
- A colleague or friend

These exercises are presented on the assumption that you will do them alone, with your colleague giving you feedback. Alternatively, you can do the exercises together with another person or a group, which would enable you to learn from their experiences as well.

A key practice in doing these exercises is taking time each day to write down your observations and reflections. This journaling can be in a notebook or on your phone or computer—whatever is easiest. What is crucial is that you take the time to reflect every
day, since becoming consciously aware of your present behaviors is essential to creating new ones. Some people find it useful to write in a journal at the same time every day, say in the evening. If you want to see the whole picture before you begin, you can read through all of the exercises before you start the first one. Or you can dive right into the first exercise and allow the whole picture to become clear as you go along.

**Week 1: First Stretch**

*Establish a baseline for your use of power and love.*

1. Consider all the time you spend collaborating (working with others), at home and at work and in the community. Estimate how much of this time you spend primarily employing power and asserting and only secondarily employing love and engaging, and how much you do the reverse (these two numbers should add up to 100 percent). Be honest in this self-assessment, which concerns how you are acting now, not how you wish you were acting.

   » When you are working with others, what percentage of your time are you primarily employing power and asserting?

   » What percentage of your time are you primarily employing love and engaging?

   » Which of these two ways of acting feels most comfortable to you?

   » Is your use of these ways of acting different in different settings, for example, at home, at work, and in the community?

2. Ask your colleague to write down his or her assessment of you by answering the above questions (and to do this before you share your self-assessment).

3. Meet with your colleague.

   » Share your self-assessment.
» Listen to your colleague’s assessment of you.

» Discuss the differences between these two assessments.

» Take notes.

» Agree on a time to talk again at the end of the week.

4. For one week, observe your actions as you work with others. Take time each day to write down your observations and reflections.

5. At the end of the week, compare your observations with your and your colleague’s initial assessments. Write down your insights.

6. Talk with your colleague and share your observations and insights. Ask for his or her feedback.

**Week 2: First Stretch**

*Balance your use of power and love, not by weakening your stronger drive but by strengthening your weaker one.*

1. List the actions you took during Week 1 that expressed your weaker side: the way of acting (either engaging or asserting) that you employed less and that felt less comfortable.

2. Choose three of these actions to practice this week. Your objective is to employ and strengthen your weaker side, especially when you feel you are at risk of overemploying your stronger one.

3. Tell your colleague the actions you will be practicing this week. Ask for his or her feedback.

4. For the rest of the week, while you are working with others, practice these three actions. Take time each day to write down your observations and reflections.

5. At the end of the week, talk with your colleague, and share your observations and insights. Ask for his or her feedback.
Week 3: Second stretch

Establish a baseline for how you are talking and listening.

1. Consider all the time you spend collaborating (working with others), at home and at work and in the community. Estimate how much of this time you spend employing each of the four ways of talking and listening (these four numbers should add up to 100 percent). Be honest in this self-assessment, which concerns how you are acting now, not how you wish you were acting.

   » When you are working with others, what percentage of your time are you downloading: saying what is true or safe or polite, and not listening to others?

   » What percentage of your time are you debating: saying what you really think, and listening to judge what is correct?

   » What percentage of your time are you dialoguing: saying where you are coming from and listening to where others are coming from?

   » What percentage of your time are you presencing: saying and listening to what you perceive to be emerging in your situation as a whole?

   » Which of these ways of acting feels most comfortable to you? Which feels least comfortable?

   » Is your use of these ways of acting different in different settings—for example, at home, at work, and in your community?

2. Ask your colleague to write down his or her assessment of you by answering the above questions (and to do this before you share your self-assessment).

3. Meet with your colleague.

   » Share your self-assessment.

   » Listen to your colleague’s assessment of you.
» Discuss the differences between these two assessments.

» Take notes.

» Agree on a time to talk again at the end of the week.

4. For one week, when you are working with others, pay attention to how you are talking and listening. Do this by using the following precise sentence stubs. When you are downloading, start your sentences with the words “The truth is . . .” When you are debating, start with “In my opinion . . .” When you are dialoguing, start with “In my experience . . .” And when you are presencing, start with “What I am noticing here and now is . . .” Take time each day to write down your observations and reflections.

5. At the end of the week, compare your observations with your and your colleague’s initial assessments. Write down your insights.

6. Talk with your colleague and share your observations and insights. Ask for his or her feedback.

**Week 4: Second stretch**

*Shift your talking and listening away from downloading and debating toward dialoguing and presencing.*

1. For one week, while you are working with others, employ only dialoguing and presencing. When you notice yourself downloading or debating, shift to dialoguing (“In my experience . . .”) or presencing (“What I am noticing here and now is . . .”). Take time each day to write down your observations and reflections.

2. At the end of the week, talk with your colleague and share your observations and insights. Ask for his or her feedback.
Weeks 5 and 6: Third stretch

Step from the sidelines into the game.

1. Think of a collaborative project or initiative (at home or at work or in the community) that you are involved in and that seems stuck.

2. Write out descriptions of what is going on in this project from two different perspectives:

   » The first description is as if you are observing or directing this situation from the outside. Describe in detail what other people are doing that is contributing to the situation being as it is now, and what they need to do differently to enable the situation to get unstuck and move forward.

   » The second description is as if you are participating in and cocreating this situation from the inside. Describe in detail what you are doing that is contributing to the situation being as it is now, and what you need to do differently to enable the situation to get unstuck and move forward.

3. Now list all of the actions, large and small, that you are currently taking that relate to this project. Go through this list and decide, for each action, whether you are taking it primarily from the first perspective (as an observer or director) or primarily from the second (as a participant and cocreator).

4. Share your two descriptions and your list of actions with your colleague. Ask for his or her feedback. What does he or she think is clear and insightful? What does he or she think might be inaccurate or missing?

5. Choose two actions from your list that arise from the first perspective (as an observer or director). Decide, for each action, whether you will abandon it (stop doing it without replacing it) or adapt it (so that it still fulfills its function), in order to strengthen your role as a cocreator.
6. Choose another action from your list that arises from the second perspective (as a cocreator). Decide how you can strengthen it, in order to strengthen your role as a cocreator.

7. Over the next two weeks, implement these three changes to your actions. Take time each day to write down your observations and reflections.

8. At the end of each week, talk with your colleague and share your observations and insights. Ask for his or her feedback.

The way forward

As you practice these new behaviors for a while and become more comfortable with them, you can try them out in more complex and conflictual situations. Sometimes your actions will produce the results you intend, and sometimes they won’t. Your goal is not to collaborate impeccably—in such a social endeavor, this would not be possible—but to become more aware of what you are doing and the impact you are having, and to be able to adapt and learn more quickly. This is how you will move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence to conscious competence to unconscious competence.

The primary obstacle you will face in learning to stretch is overcoming the familiarity and comfort of your habitual way of doing things. You will need to move away from a declarative “It must be this way” toward a subjunctive “It could be this way.” You will need to loosen your attachment to your own opinions, positions, and identities: to sacrifice your smaller, constricted self to your larger, freer one. These stretches can therefore feel both frightening and liberating.

Tai chi teacher Wolfe Lowenthal says this about the martial art of push hands:
No matter how hard and unyielding your opponent, our inability to deal gently with him is indicative of our own stuckness. It is the exploration and eventual dissolving of the stuckness—not winning—that is the point of push hands. The “game” we really should be playing is with ourselves; we are coming face to face with the physical expression of the issues we hide from in our lives. In this confrontation with the self there lies the possibility of progress. We thank our opponent for providing us with this opportunity.2

So in learning to collaborate, the people you think of as your enemies can, surprisingly, play a helpful role. Stretching requires you to move toward rather than away from different others. You will learn the most in those situations you find most difficult: when others do not do as you want them to and so force you to pause and find a fresh way forward.

Your enemies can be your greatest teachers.