

# Collaborating with the Enemy

*Second Edition*

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

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## Preface

Most of us find it difficult to work with people we don't agree with or like or trust—so we don't. Instead we try to work apart from or against them—to avoid or defeat them. Sometimes these alternative approaches work, but often they don't (at least not for long), or they come at a high cost. We wrestle with this tough challenge of collaborating across difference in all spheres and at all scales: with family members, colleagues, and neighbors; in business, politics, and community affairs; in cities and countries and internationally. How can we deal with this challenge?

I used to think that collaborating across difference was more of a straight road—more straightforward—than it is. But I've learned, mostly through finding myself in places I hadn't expected to be, that it actually involves many forks and choices. This book doesn't tell you what road you should take, and in particular doesn't tell you that you must collaborate with your “enemies.” What it does is offer you a way to understand what roads you *could* take, with whom, and how, to get where you want to go. It explains your choices and how to choose wisely.

I first got involved in “collaborating with the enemy” thirty-five years ago when I supported an extraordinary group of South African leaders—politicians, businesspeople, trade unionists, academics, activists; Black and White women and men; from the left and right, opposition and establishment; people who'd been engaged in long, bitter, violent conflict—to work together over four weekends at the secluded Mont Fleur conference

center to help their country make the historic transition from apartheid to democracy.

This experience was a revelation for me: I was amazed that this group, with so many deep differences among them, were willing and able to be together with such patience and equanimity and to work together so passionately and productively.

The straightforward story I used to tell about what I'd learned from this experience was that diverse people, including those who don't agree with or like or trust each other, from across a given social system—be it a country, an organization, a family—can and should collaborate to make that system better.

This story was true and important as far as it went—but it didn't go far enough.

The experience I had in South Africa inspired me to take up a vocation of helping people collaborate across their differences to make progress on their most important and difficult challenges. I found this work fascinating and fulfilling, and also challenging: it required me to stretch. Since then, my colleagues and I have supported hundreds of such groups—within and across governments, companies, and civil society organizations; in every part of the world; from individual organizations and communities, to whole sectors and countries, to international coalitions—to work together intensively, over days and years, in many areas: education, health, food, energy, mining, climate, justice, safety, security, democracy, and peace. Some of these efforts have dealt with extraordinary and dramatic (even armed) conflicts and others with ordinary and muted (although not necessarily easier) ones. Some produced great progress and some didn't. These experiences have given me many opportunities for trial and many opportunities for error and so many opportunities for learning, which have enabled me to write six how-to books about this work.

The more experience I've had collaborating across difference, the more I've come to understand that it's not straightforward,

and that if we simplistically expect it to be, we'll keep being surprised and frustrated, and we will fail. I keep relearning the truth of Immanuel Kant's observation: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made."<sup>1</sup>

Our conventional, straight understanding is that we can only collaborate with people who are on the same team with us (whether that team is within a single organization or across multiple organizations), who put the interests of that team first, and who share our understandings and values—whom we agree with and like and trust.

But this isn't true or adequate. Often, to get where we're trying to go, we must work with people who aren't on the same team, put their own interests first, and have differing understandings and values—whom we don't agree with or like or trust. And such "stretch" collaboration is possible.

This unconventional way of thinking about and "doing" collaboration means that, compared to the conventional approach, we can get more done with more people.

To succeed in collaborating across difference, we must understand collaboration as it really is: possible but not straightforward; human rather than mechanical; offering both opportunities and risks; demanding that we be open to changing ourselves; and involving many twists and turns and so requiring many choices.

I wrote the first edition of this book a decade ago, and I've now rewritten it, almost completely, for two reasons. First, the world has, alas, caught up with the book, and we're all now part of a pandemic of virulent, vicious, violent othering, polarizing, dehumanizing, demonizing, and "enemyfying." I now see the challenge of "collaborating with the enemy" as even more fundamental, universal, crucial, and challenging than I did then: important in every aspect of our lives, and often a matter of life and death.

Second, my experiences over the past decade have pushed me to understand differently than I did the basics of collaboration

and the choices these present. I've come to understand that black-and-white thinking about the people with whom we can collaborate blocks progress; that making collaboration work requires integrating love, power, and justice; that conventional and stretch collaboration are each useful in certain contexts; and that the foundational choice lies in how we *are*—how we abide—with others, our situation, and ourselves. These new understandings have required me to substantially revise every chapter.

In summary, I've come to realize that collaborating across difference requires making ten fundamental choices—not only once but over and over. I've therefore reworked the book to center these choices, and added new chapters, examples, frameworks, and illustrations. I've also added extensive material throughout the book to help you work through these choices.

Collaborating across difference isn't straightforward, but it's necessary and possible. This book offers you, for whatever roles you're playing—sibling, spouse, neighbor, team member, manager, official, activist, politician, president, ordinary person—a fresh way of thinking about and doing collaboration, including with people you don't agree with or like or trust. It offers new, practical, hopeful options for getting where you want to go.