Collaborations: Tips for Success and Avoiding Pitfalls

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To Collaborate

• To work, one with another; to cooperate; to work with others on joint project; to work with

• Synonyms: collude, join, assist, abet, get together, join forces
Why should we collaborate?

• For enhanced productivity:
  – Collaborative efforts >>> +++ papers

• For potential safety net
  – Collaborative efforts may help you when you’re in a pinch for funding, because you have an olive branch or two to hang on

• For tangible evidence you’re a team player for your supervisors
  – To be able to play in the sandbox well may be a boon to your career trajectory
Why should we collaborate?

• To accomplish more than you could alone
  – To get big projects done, you need people with other forms of expertise to accomplish your goals, e.g., EFRI project

• For enhanced creativity (potentially)
  – Collaborators form a network within which you can operate
    • given your combined strengths, knowledge and connections, only the sky may be the limit in terms of where you end up
  – Further, you have potential to contribute mostly an *intellectual* effort, instead of efforts devoted to practical activities of daily research (ADR)
Tips for success

• How do you find collaborators?
  – Through contacts, advisors, mentors, friends, colleagues, internet searches, sending inquiries to people who do work that you like
  – Don’t be shy
  – Toot your own horn

• As a junior investigator, if you’re REALLY interested in increasing your scientific collaborator network, you may have to do something counterintuitive to advice given from well-meaning more experienced individuals...
Always Say “Yes”

• In the beginning, to build your network (EX: you just moved somewhere new)
  – even if project seems a bit far afield
  – even if your advisor/mentor says no
  – even if you have ALL the reasons one usually gives to say “no” .... *(but not if your own heart says ‘no’)*

• Saying “Yes”, at least through a grant’s development stage, allows you:
  • to determine how much time and energy will truly be devoted to this endeavor
  • to figure out if you can work with these people
  • *usually* there is an available [Exit Strategy](#), if things don’t seem to be working out
For success with saying ‘Yes’ to everything...

• When you truly collaborate on a project, (and with investigators with students), the pursuit may be **predominantly one of intellectual engagement**:
  – remarkably refreshing
  – real relief from admin issues you must focus on when you are the *only PI*

• Doing things with others can make even the unpleasant tasks, which seem to comprise more and more of what we call ‘standard research procedure’, much more tolerable
For success with saying ‘Yes’ to everything...

• Be honest with the amount of time you really can devote to this project
  – Are you in the midst of resubmitting a career development award?
  – Is it honestly not the best time in your life, personally?
  – Sometimes it may be best to wait before involving yourself in earnest, but – make sure to keep the door open...
If you can’t say yes or need to employ that exit strategy…

• Keep the Door Open
  – let potential collaborators know you are still interested and hope to work with them in future
  – Ask to be kept in the loop through invitations to group meetings, and even through small contributions (e.g., consultation, read-throughs, etc)
  – Keep your foot in the door
Some Pitfalls of Collaboration

• You feel your ideas are not valued:
  – Mostly I’ve had wonderful, fun experience with collaboration –because of environments that spawn creativity through respecting ideas that can freely flow & I feel friendly with collaborators
  – However, if you start feeling you can’t speak up, or your ideas aren’t recognized, you might want to take a step back and ask why
    • Try being quiet a while, and see how collaborators react
    • Bring up the issue (can be tricky to do)
    • Conduct an extensive literature review on the topic and “prove” to them that you know your stuff (could be futile!)

• Be careful of a group process that kills nascent ideas before they’ve even surfaced - this can be one pitfall of group work

• Expect that group dynamics will change over time
Some Pitfalls of Collaboration

• You’re doing all the work!
• Form an accurate idea of the role you play in a collaboration, in terms of expectations your collaborators have for you, and those you have for yourself
• In theory, collaboration should be less work...
  – Are your collaborators fully funded investigators with students who can do a lot of the grunt work?
  – If your collaborator is more junior with less staff, does she/he have the time and initiative to do their share?
  – What about the skill set of the individuals you are working with?
    • What if you find yourself trying to write a grant with someone with very little experience? (MJ Fox proposal)
Some Pitfalls of Collaboration

• This isn’t what I expected!

• Know what you want to get out of the collaboration
  – Will you be satisfied if said collaboration turns out to be a “learning experience”, (e.g., how to play in sandbox, a golden opp to learn from your mistakes)?
  – Be clear with yourself about what you want to get out of the relationship
  – Realize:
    • New collaborative relationships take time to develop
    • You don’t know how things are going to turn out- so be open to what does happen
    • This relationship may never develop into a productive working relationship.....it’s just like dating
You’ll never know till you try