

Leadership in conversation with Jon Stokes, Nigel Ball and Ian Taylor interview transcript

The Ordinary Hope project, delivered in partnership between UCL Policy Lab and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, argues that the big change needed to tackle the growing social and economic issues facing millions will not come from government or civil society alone. It will require deep collaboration across sectors and need leaders who can respond to this challenge. The project is supported by a core group of individuals – from movement builders and journalists to researchers and pollsters – who all believe in this vision and are working together to scope and deliver this work. Here, co-project manager, Yasmin Ibison, speaks to three of them about the changing landscape of cross-sector collaboration, what defines collaborative leadership and how to balance questions of power, trust, and ethics. Below is an edited extract from that conversation.

Yasmin Ibison

So, let's start with you all introducing yourselves...

Jon Stokes

So, I'm a clinical psychologist. I previously worked in the Tavistock Clinic before getting interested in leadership and management. The approach to coaching I take is systemic, but also combined with the psychoanalytic understanding of groups and individuals – so unconscious as well as conscious factors. We call it working below the surface with leaders. I was also a Senior Fellow in Management Practice at Said Business School in Oxford, where I'm now an Associate Scholar. And I co-founded a leadership advisory firm called [Stokes and Jolly](#). My co-founder, Richard Jolly, and I have run that business for more than 20 years and it's ended up with me now working with many heads of organisations on a one-to-one basis.

Nigel Ball

I've just joined University Arts London to run the [Social Purpose Lab](#), where we're trying to turn the university into a social purpose organisation. Prior to that I was the Executive Director of the Government Outcomes Lab in Oxford; we researched cross sector partnerships for better public outcomes. Whilst there, we felt like we needed a better theoretical understanding of the current state of knowledge on cross sector collaboration. Then we thought that we might as well turn that research into something that could be useful to practitioners. So, Ian and I created '*The Collaboration Playbook: A Leaders' Guide to Cross-Sector Collaboration*'; it's part manifesto for cross sector collaboration, making the case for it, and part how to do it.

Ian Taylor

I'm a researcher at the [Government Outcomes Lab](#) where I research cross sector collaboration and co-authored the playbook with Nigel. I used to work for 10 years in industry; I was in engineering in various management roles where we worked with the energy industry. It was interesting to think about my business experience and connect it to my government research when looking at this cross-sector collaboration playbook - to think about the disjointed thinking and the different cultures involved in that.

Yasmin Ibison

Thanks everyone. So, the core argument for the Ordinary Hope project centres on the need for collaboration between mainstream politics and community groups to enact change in the lives of ordinary people. I thought it would be interesting to start off with how you all think the landscape for collaborative leadership and collaborative partnerships has changed.

Jon Stokes

Well, to start with there's more radical uncertainty, which means that we're not just dealing with complex environments, but chaotic environments. Before, we had relatively more placid environments and we've now got turbulent ones, which means the whole conception of leadership must change to take account of that. Traditional concepts of leadership, which are hierarchical and power-based, no longer suit the current environments that we work in. You can't simply control or direct people; you must shape the context in which people operate. Instead of focusing on the individual virtues of the leader, the focus should be on the leader's capacity to shape and influence the ecosystem within and beyond the organisation. As part of my research paper '*From Ego to Eco: Leadership for the Fourth*

¹ Ian Taylor, Nigel Ball (2023), 'The Collaboration Playbook: A Leaders' Guide to Cross-Sector Collaboration' <https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/knowledge-bank/resource-library/collaboration-playbook/>

*Industrial Revolution*² we interviewed lots of leaders and two big themes emerged – today’s leaders told us they’re still accountable, but they’re not in charge in the old way. Therefore, they lack control.

Yasmin Ibison

And on radical uncertainty and complex and chaotic environments, does that speak to how you both think about the landscape of cross-sector collaboration?

Nigel Ball

I think we framed it around complex problems, wicked issues, that sort of thing. The field of challenges to tackle societally is so broad and so complicated that it's foolish to think that any single institution can do it alone. In some ways it's the government's job to tackle these sorts of problems, but they don't have all the answers. They can't do it alone. And civil society equally has a really important role to play. But they can't do it single handedly either. The way that governments usually face industry, or the commercial market, is to regulate it or transact with it. The idea of collaborating with it is unusual, and people don't know quite how to do it. We've got these complex problems which demand cross-sector collaboration, and to do that requires some hard tools - different kinds of contracts and different kinds of regulation and stuff like that. We don't go into those in the playbook. We focus on the much softer stuff - the relational stuff, the leadership qualities, the cultural shifts.

Ian Taylor

In addition, leaders are in an information rich environment; they can access so much information, but they don't always have the capacity to deeply understand it. Sometimes accessing the knowledge from certain information requires you to engage different perspectives and work with different actors. That is contrasted with the previous era of information scarcity, where leaders were forced into environments of command and control, because they didn't have as much information on what was going on.

Yasmin Ibison

Within the playbook, you describe the conditions for cross-sector collaboration as a 'positive chemistry'; in the Ego to Eco paper, collaborative leaders are compared to farmers who nurture the conditions for crops to grow. How do you define that positive chemistry? What are the capabilities needed in leaders that support this nurturing?

Ian Taylor

When we looked at empirical research on same-sector and cross-sector collaboration, same-sector collaboration was more productive in the analysis. But it wasn't understood exactly why that was the case. You would assume that cross-sector collaboration should be very productive because each partner brings complementary strengths. But some collaborations don't work well together; the theory is that their cultures and their chemistry don't really align. We chose to focus on the idea of 'positive chemistry' across five themes: leadership, trust, culture, power, and learning. We didn't try to produce a procedural A-Z of 'On day one, you'll do this, and on the last day, you'll do that'. Instead, we identified different recommendations that could be applied to different scenarios, like a sports playbook with different tactics to achieve your end goal. And we mapped these across the five different themes.

Yasmin Ibison

Building on that theme of power and trust, both of your work touches on the need to lead and learn in the open, but I imagine this can be difficult for collaborative leaders and partners. How do you navigate power dynamics, the need to build trust and learn in the open?

Nigel Ball

One thing we say is that conflict is inevitable in collaborations; it's something you have to expect from the start, plan for, and actively manage and navigate throughout. This conflict can't be resolved, it must be managed, which is quite a hard thing for people to understand because we're used to fixing conflict.

Ian Taylor

We also talk about the necessity to face how difficult cross-sector collaboration is. I think that's one of the barriers that leaders need to confront. When putting together the playbook, we were bouncing some of our content off practitioners and they were saying that they wanted to do things quickly and

² Jon Stokes, Sue Dopson (2020), 'From Ego to Eco: Leadership for the Fourth Industrial Revolution', <https://oxsbs.link/2KByl0s>

easily, and it was slightly challenging to say that to do things well in the long run, you need to look at quick and easy as a false economy. I agree that if you don't have conflict, you don't really have genuine collaboration, and so you need to embrace it. When I worked in industry, I was used to forging a consensus; bringing people into a room and just getting everyone to agree. That approach often involved power dynamics that suffocated the expression of different perspectives and views, which is fundamentally opposite to collaboration.

Jon Stokes

On that power point, one could distinguish power over, from power with, and power to, and even power within. And all those kinds of power play out everywhere in the world. Yet power is a word which generally has a bad press, but it doesn't really make sense, because we need power to do anything. In terms of the capabilities that collaborative leaders need, we identified five: shape the conversation, cultivate collective intelligence, shape the context - nudge the context might be even more realistic -, co-create the structures and pluralise participation. There's no rocket science in that; but it *is* rocket science to do them well. I must have worked intensively with over 500 leaders and, out of those 500, there are probably 10 who might be good at all these things.

Nigel Ball

Was there a pattern, Jon, in those ten people?

Jon Stokes

Ah, good question. I think a big bucket term would be emotional intelligence. You've got to be able to read other people and you also need to be able to read yourself. But the combination of these factors is unusual in one person; there are good empathisers, but they don't tend to be good drivers of other people. The management guru Jim Collins talked about fierce humility³. Leaders with fierce humility have a strong sense of themselves, but they don't need to impose it on others. They also have a fierceness and ambition. Those things also don't typically go together. You've got people who are humble, but they may not be fierce enough to get things done. And you've got fierce people who have got big egos, which is the sort of classic combination.

Nigel Ball

This is interesting because one of the things that we spent time thinking about was the ethical dimensions to all of this - because you can collaborate to negative ends. So, what's the additional ingredient that brings the ethical dimension in? Ian landed on this concept of wisdom⁴, which I was initially quite resistant to because it made me think of Gandalf and old men with long white beards. But basically, this idea of wisdom that goes back to Aristotle really brings in the ethical dimension. So, it's not just the skills of fierce humility or emotional intelligence but it's something else as well.

Jon Stokes

I very much agree. On the ethical dimension, people tend to think of values as a good, whereas in fact, they are a polarity. When we talk about values, we are talking about things with two ends to them. And that makes it hard for us as human beings because we don't like thinking two things at the same time. We don't like the tension involved. But holding a value is holding a conflict - it's a balancing act.

Nigel Ball

When you put this balancing act to people in the context of their everyday lives, they go, 'Of course I can do this.' But in the work context, people hate being asked to do it. We need to resolve these tensions for ourselves every day and get comfortable with the fact that we've got to choose a path and whichever path we choose is sub optimal. We're going to have to make a judgement on which one is least sub optimal. We can do it, but we find it really uncomfortable, don't we?

Jon Stokes

I sometimes say when people are faced with a problem at work, 'If you were at home, what would you do?'

Ian Taylor

³ Jim Collins (2005) 'Level 5 Leadership. The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve.' Harvard Business Review

⁴ Jane Gaukroger (2020), 'Cultivating Wisdom: A collection of essays for leaders and organisation developers', Cultivating Wisdom, p. 16.

There are frameworks in the playbook that should help people unearth those different perspectives and manage them. For example, aim analysis, which Professor Vangen⁵ came up with in the 90s, is a framework of 6 dimensions of aims. You can sit down with your collaboration partners and think about all the different aims that you have as a collaborative entity and as separate entities and individuals. You can look at the results and decide whether there is an alignment of aims. Tools like this will help surface any underlying tensions and help build trust and transparency.

Nigel Ball

I think very closely linked to the concept of trust is the idea of reciprocity. If you want to build trust, you need to build a sequence of escalating, positively reciprocated actions. That's the kind of practical route to building trust. We talk a bit about quick wins - looking for that low hanging fruit, doing some easy stuff, even if it seems a bit trivial or unambitious as a way of starting to build trust.

Jon Stokes

It's also useful for a group to have a check in somewhere in a meeting, possibly at the start, where they ask, 'How is everybody doing?' because people will come with all sorts of emotional states. Then again in the middle, 'Are we making progress? What are our criteria?' And at the end, 'What went well? What went less well? What can we learn from it?' Yet, there is tremendous resistance to that – people will say 'Do we really need to do this? We're clever, we don't need to bother with that airy fairy stuff! We haven't got time.' But if you're going to trust, you have to be vulnerable. And that's painful, especially with people you've never met before.

Nigel Ball

On intimacy, instinctively, most people are good at it. Most people have friends. Most people understand that in their workplace they get more done if people like them. This is something that people understand and do intuitively. And yet, somehow, I think they struggle to put it to the service of collaboration. It can feel airy fairy to people sometimes, but it really shouldn't because it draws on a lot of natural skills and capabilities.

Jon Stokes

I think that's true. A way to start is to ask how far people are doing these things already? People are most likely doing these things already and, in that sense, it's building on existing knowledge.

Nigel Ball

Yeah, totally. It gives people a language to talk about and describe what they're doing. When we've shown some of this material to some people who are working in collaborations, it totally resonated with them. They were doing it, but they just didn't have the language or the frameworks to describe what it is that they were doing because it's not embedded enough yet.

⁵ Vangen, S., and Huxham, C. (2010), 'Introducing the theory of collaborative advantage', In Osborne, S. (Ed), *The New Public Governance?: Emerging perspectives on the theory and practice of public governance*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 164-184