Collaboration Toolkit

Creative Waikato
Toi Waikato

Whāia te iti kahurangi, ki te tuohu koe, me he maunga teitei

Seek the treasure you value most dearly, if you bow your head, let it be to a lofty mountain

Collaboration

The core of meaningful collaboration is in working with others to achieve a common goal. Drawing upon the strengths of everyone involved to reach an outcome that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Work with others

It should be a process of sharing, learning, growth and connection.

Collaboration is different to co-operation—Both can be beneficial, but include different processes and different expectations.

Co-operation can be working separately but alongside one another for positive outcomes

Collaborations are more intertwined—they draw upon strengths and require shared energies for a singular purpose

Some of the reasons we collaborate might be:

An opportunity to broaden and grow your audience through working with someone different

A way to stretch your creative practice in new and exciting ways

To engage with different funding opportunities

To enhance or expand your creative output

To reach new audiences or networks

To create greater social impact for the communities you serve

Collaboration is a creative process

Collaboration is a word that can mean many things.

The scale and scope of the interaction can vary through structure, intention, willingness and curiosity.

Yes, collaboration is at its core a process of working well together. But, understanding it as a creative process we see the potential for collaboration to be a space of growth, opportunity, innovation and sustainability.

The challenge is in setting a clarity of intention.

Collaboration through creativity is a flexible, but purposeful, people-centred process. It encourages us to embrace imaginative ideas, think boldly without limitation, navigate ambiguity, and then refine with purpose and clarity to work together to create an outcome that may be more than first expected.

This kind of creative collaboration is essential for solving complex challenges, and while it may seem confronting or unpredictable, there is a framework and process you can utilise to become more confident in bringing people on the journey.

Like many things, it will have ups and downs, and elements of a collaboration might not work, but if we engage in that creative process with a growth mindset, the possibility of any failure becomes a catalyst for future impact.

Why do we collaborate through creativity?

Some versions of collaboration require precise movements performed in unison to achieve refined results (see synchronised swimming, a football team, kapa haka or irish dancing). And, in a social and cultural. context that is more complex, more uncertain, and more subject to rapid change, we need to be utilising different tools and techniques to generate new ideas and examine problems and opportunities from a range of different perspectives.

Utilising an understanding of the creative process in the act of collaboration supports these outcomes. It is not just about working together well to achieve synchronicity and harmony; it is about shaping an imaginative open space for new thinking to emerge. To build unexpected connections between traditional silos.

It is about finding new ideas that no one person could have come up with alone.

Collaboration is as much built through active listening as it is through direct contribution. You need to be open to hearing new ideas.

Play like a child.
Edit like a scientist

The openness to actually hearing new ideas and responding positively, regardless of practicality, can be challenging in modern society.

We have been trained to be realistic and pragmatic and build ideas upon what we know will work. But the creative process requires us to embrace imaginative possibilities. To engage in the creative act as a form of play. This process can be seen as an improvisation with other collaborators looking to explore all the possibilities, whether familiar and realistic, or novel and unexpected.

The creative process is one that should occur in stages. It starts with play. It then becomes more refined as a pathway becomes clear. We start with a freedom of possibility. A childlike enthusiasm for everything everywhere all at once. It is in a different stage that we might then consider what we can practically do once we have a clearer picture of the resources and connections we can utilise.

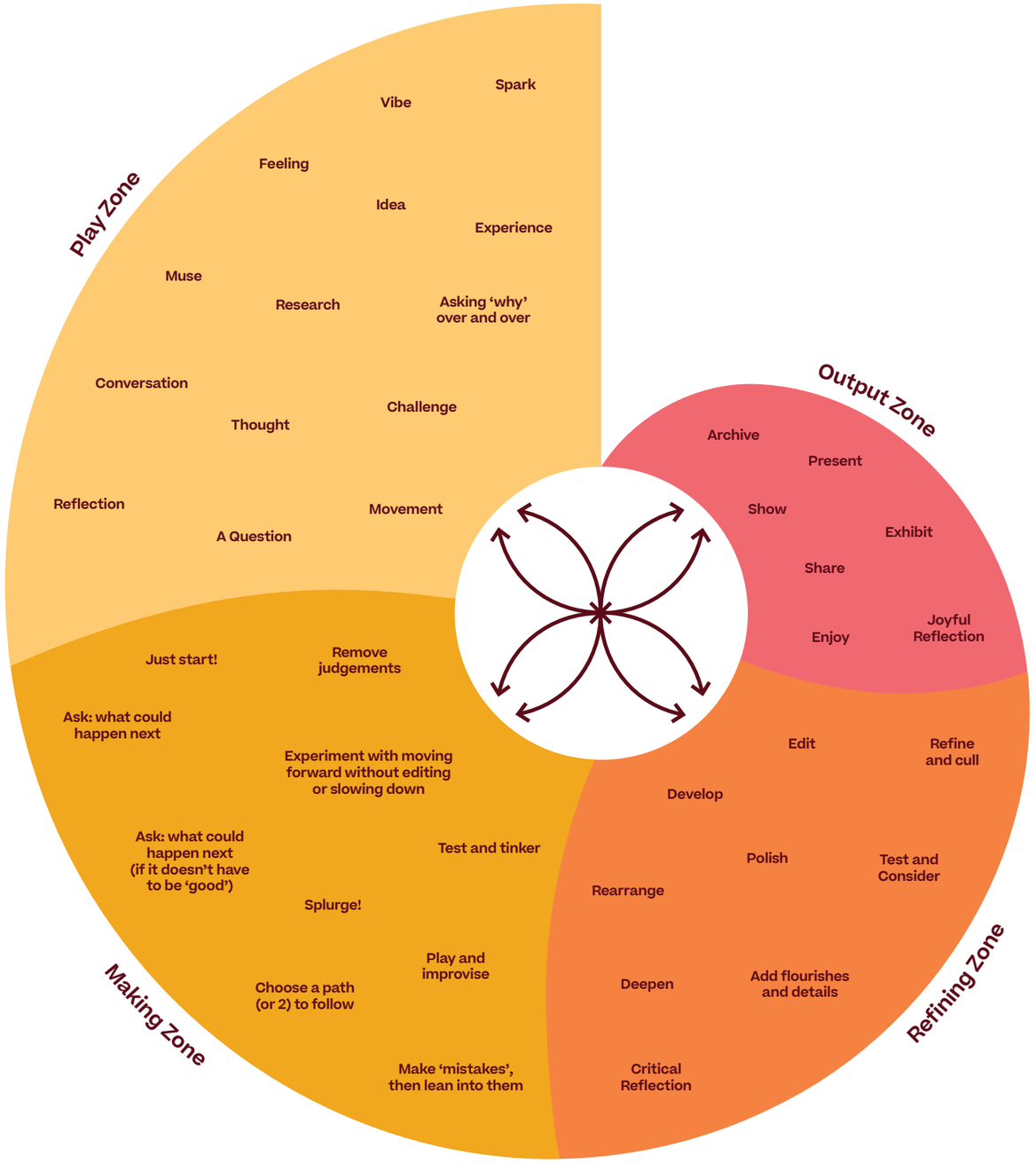
We have mapped four main zones. You might add your own, and mesh bits of each together as you go. You might hop between the zones in different orders.

You might think about the creative process as a constant state of play, and an iterative learning cycle of play and refining, making notes of what to discard or take forward to play with more.

For some folks, it may be fairly organic and free-flowing, changing and flexing with each project or season.
For others, it is very consistent and even formulaic, like following the steps of a recipe for creativity.

The Possibility Map

This is a map of how that process works:



When starting a collaboration it can help to bring a group of people together to increase the number of ideas you can generate. Some people are good catalysts, others are builders who respond better to the offers that are presented. But it is vital that this process uses a concept called “Yes, and...”.

“Yes, and...” is a process from improvisational theatre where the rule is you can’t say no, or but, the only option is “yes, and...” which forces you to build upon the idea—no matter how absurd. This process applied in collaboration, in brainstorms, in the creation of an idea, encourages ideas to flow and to be able to tap into unexpected ideas.

Encouraging an environment where a diversity of perspectives can have space to share. This will expand the kinds of ideas that will surface. It is vital that as a leader working to build a collaboration that a culture is enabled that encourages and welcomes new and different ideas. This greatly improves the likelihood that people will feel comfortable pushing beyond the familiar, proven, safe ideas and sharing the more risky, scary, and potentially genius ones.

Collaborations take **time**, **effort** and **resources**, so you want to be sure that there is a clear **commitment** and **understanding** in moving forward into unknown territory.

You could explore a written collaboration arrangement to be clear that you are all on the same page (outcomes, roles and responsibilities etc).

This provides some additional safety. Then, if the collaboration is successful and moves into future collaborations, the foundation you set will flow through into future activity.

Some key qualities to channel for healthy collaborations are: flexibility, trust, mutual respect, healthy communication, goal-oriented focus, honesty, resilience, willingness to work through issues, and a growth mindset.

Growth mindset and spirit of collaboration

It is vital to move into a collaborative project with an open mind and a growth mindset.

It is about seeing this as an opportunity to do something different. To not just tick a box, but to grow meaningful connections with new audiences.

You can create new experiences that add value and positive impacts to the communities you are a part of.

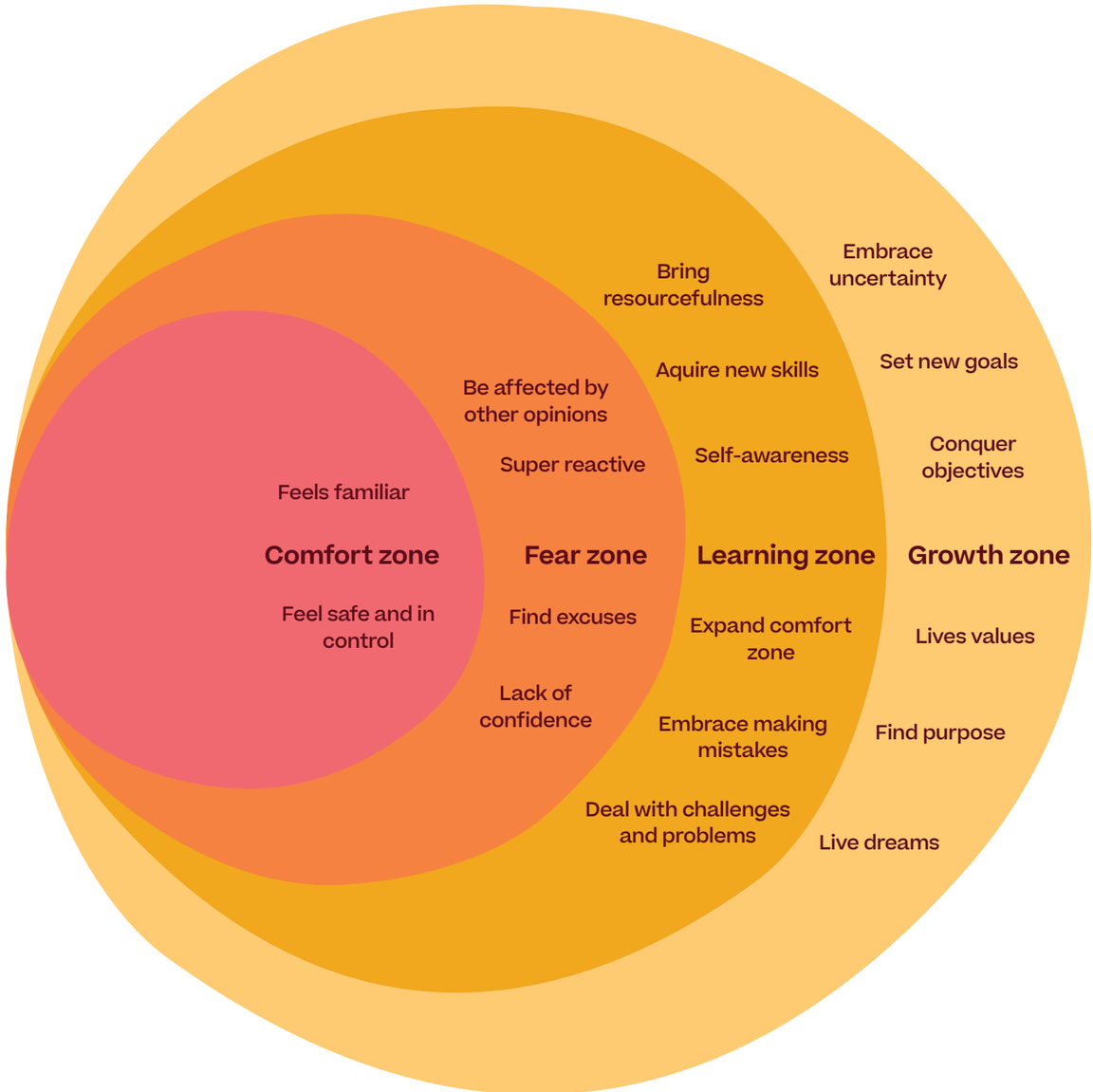
The collaborative activity, developed alongside maintaining a growth mindset, has the potential to enable the people involved to be open to the opportunities and possibilities that will emerge as you co-create this new work.

This type of mahi has the potential to really positively demonstrate the way your organisation can shift and change, whilst still staying true to your vision and values.

Leaving your comfort zone

When we are in a growth zone we can be embracing uncertainty, realising dreams, and finding connection with purpose. This is a space that embraces learning and encourages new possibilities.

If those involved in a collaborative effort can build a relationship of trust and understanding, hopefully they can hold one another in that growth zone to achieve exciting future outcomes.



How mindset can impact collaboration

Take some time and think about collaborations you have been involved in.

How have you experienced those different mindsets and zones?

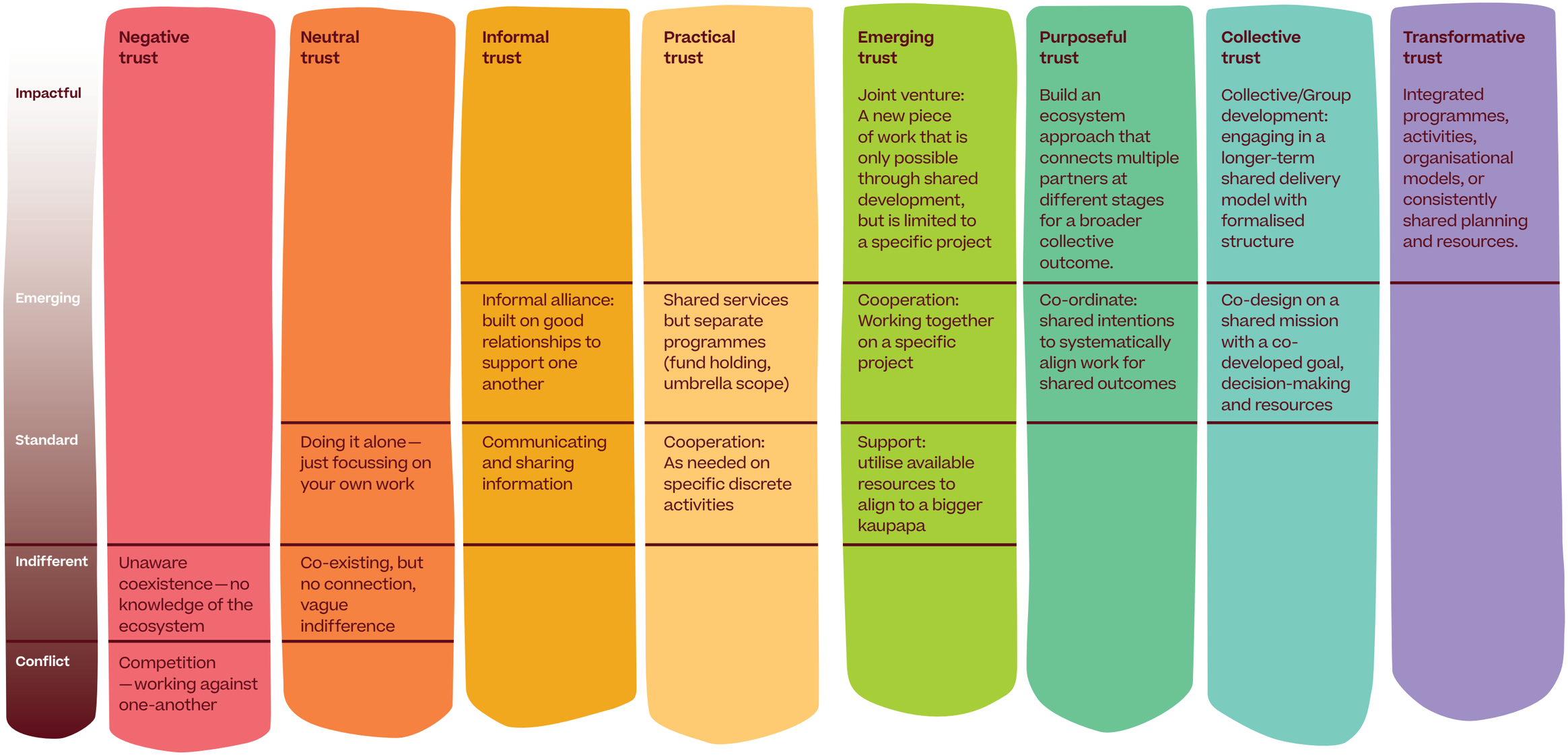
What are some ways you might ensure positive collaborative experiences in future?

Collaboration as a spectrum

Collaboration is a spectrum. Different connections work for different settings. Different relationships thrive better with different expectations.

If we see the spectrum of collaboration as a colour field we can understand that different colours will suit different requirements and we may require multiple different colours to create the outcomes we want to depict through our work.

We also know that not all structures suit our work in the current environment.



(From bottom to top: type of interaction from negative to positive)
(From left to right: level of trust and intensity of collaboration and interaction.)

Many organisations will have a range of different experiences that connect with different parts of the spectrum. These things don't need to be permanent shifts, but they can be. Temporary options for collaboration can be equally impactful and enable shared resources, while supporting other autonomy and purpose to also exist. Each collaborative process can also be informal and flexible or can be formalised to different extents.

Commonly, collaboration may be used to work on a particular project, to develop a structure for resource sharing, or to align with some specific outcome. Collaboration can be seen as a space to try new things and test new connections. It doesn't have to be a long-term thing.

Engaging in collaborative activity can help us to:

- Expand our reach
- Connect with new people and communities
- Learn new ideas around interconnected issues
- Build capacity for larger scale projects with broader impact.

Increase funding opportunities to support new cross-sector activity.

Work with trusted partners could support positive reputation building with communities, other entities and funders.

Collaboration as an ensemble

Often what makes a collaboration really work is having the right people together in the right space and time.

That combination of people with different personalities, skills, ideas and connections can make an idea take flight. Sometimes we fluke upon that perfect combination, other times it is a matter of some thoughtful curation.

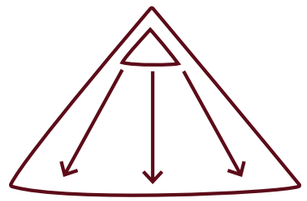
As someone bringing a collaboration together you might want to think about the mix of people who you want to bring together. What skills do they have? Do they see the world from a different perspective than you and will that help to explore the problem from a different angle? Do they bring an energy and communication style that would be really great to excite other people about the work.

For many people working on creative projects, getting the right people together in the room makes all the difference. Duke Ellington used to write his arrangements specifically for the people in his band to utilise their skills in the best way to support the performances of his music. It is a choice we need to make as part of the process. This is connected to making work with a communal purpose. If we are looking for collective outcomes, then finding the right, kaupapa-driven people who can hold that intention clear makes all the difference.

We need to embrace the 'Scenius'.

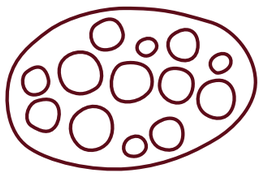
'Scenius' is a term, used by producer Brian Eno, and presented as the opposite of the 'lone genius', a narrative that is common around perceptions of great art, culture and innovation.

The model of the genius is more like a triangle.



The muse at the top, flowing through the composer as the most important, into the conductor, and from there to the musicians, and eventually to the audience who are there to listen.

The model of the scenius is more circular, or an ever-changing blob.



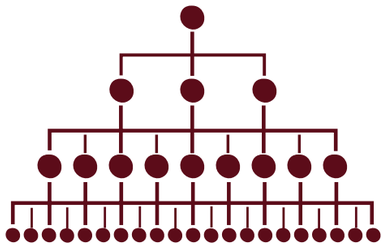
It has no specific directional hierarchy. In the scenius, ideas emerge through a group of creative individuals of all kinds who work together in an 'ecology of talent.'

And if we look back, often those people presented as “lone geniuses” were actually part of a whole scene of people who were “supporting each other, looking at each other’s work, copying from each other, stealing ideas, and contributing ideas.”[1] Being part of that Scenius doesn’t take away from individual effort and impact, but it acknowledges that we don’t actually live and operate in silos. Things are more connected than we often recognise. Creativity thrives through connection.

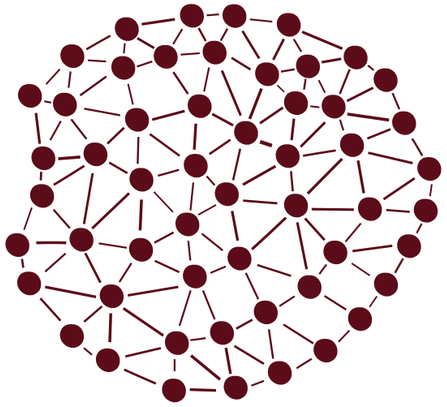
Being part of an ensemble can be an ever-changing and moving thing. The cast of collaborators may shift over a project, or from one kaupapa to the next. But ultimately being a valuable part of the ensemble that is a ‘scenius’ is not about how creative, or experienced, or smart, or well-resourced you are. It is about what you can contribute in the process of the collaboration. This is found in the ideas you share, and the bridges you can build and the connections you can make. It is as much about the conversations you start as the actions you complete.

This is an opportunity to “adjust our own expectations and the expectations of the worlds we want to accept us. We can stop asking what others can do for us, and start asking what we can do for others.”[2]

As artist, illustrator and writer Austin Kleon says: “Genius is an egosystem, scenius is an ecosystem”.



EGO System



ECO System

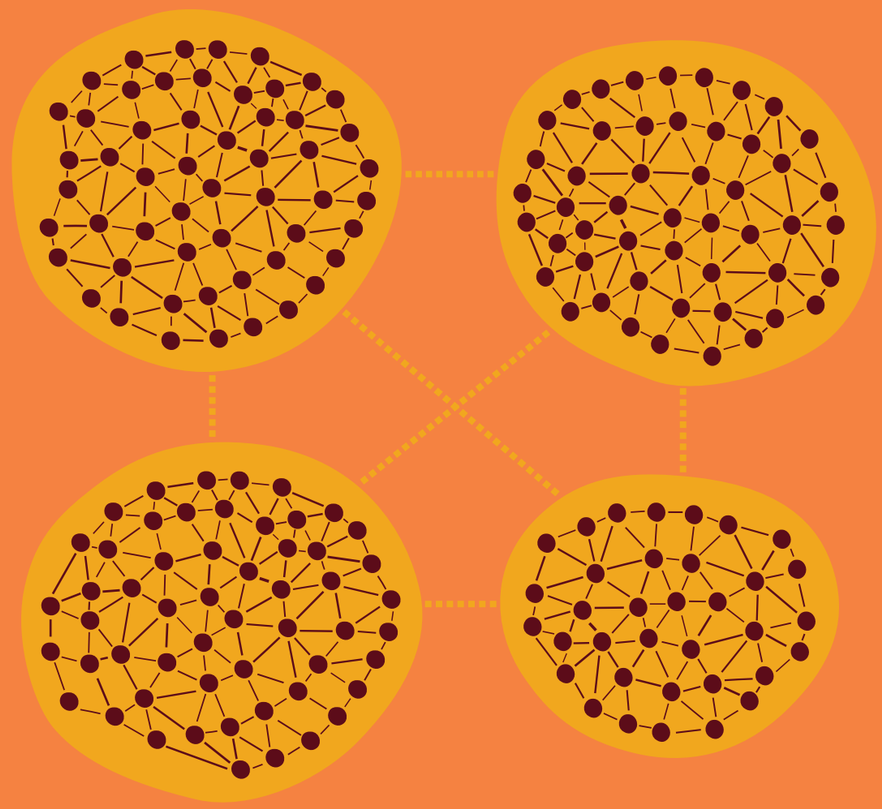
1 Austin Kleon, ‘Show Your Work’, Workman, 2014.
2 https://austinkleon.com/2017/05/12/scenius/

Ultimately it is all about how we build, maintain and understand our ecosystem.

How we structure the ensembles we are part of, helps us to thrive.

The ecosystem should be designed to enable cooperation, community, and care. This is the thing that we have to maintain, even when operating within a broader system that seems focussed on the competition, power and self-interest of the ego. Collaboration is a way to move away from that.

When embracing the possibilities of collaboration within our known ecosystem we can work together to utilise the resources we already have in different ways. Through positive collaborations we are able to build stronger working relationships and become islands of coherence in a sea of uncertainty.[3] Each island becomes a flourishing example of social change, and when each connected ecosystem starts to build connections with other collaborative ecosystems, we can collectively strengthen future networks of positive impact.



3 Ilya Prigogine, Chemist and Nobel Laureate, 2020, quoted in https://collectivechangelab.medium.com/how-islands-of-coherence-in-a-sea-of-chaos-changes-social-change-ff7a988a239e

As we think about the types of ecosystems we want and the ensembles we want to be part of, a musical model of ensemble collaboration can provide a useful way to visualise and listen to different outcomes. The performing arts are a powerful and long-lasting demonstration of collaborative practice. Even the smallest production will utilise a range of people to help make it happen.

	Type of collaborative framework	Structure	Examples for listening
Orchestra	Conductor as leader of a gathered formal group	Composer writes the music. Conductor selects the repertoire. Interpretation happens in the performance as follows: 1. Conductor 2. Concert master 3. Head of section 4. All musicians	LA Philharmonic (with conductor Gustavo Dudamel)
Bigband	Leader with a group of independent specialists with structure and freedom	Band leader is often also the composer and arranger. They set the intention and shape the sound. 1. Band leader 2. Vocalist (if applicable) 3. Featured soloists (with improvised elements of freedom) 4. Rest of the band	The Duke Ellington Orchestra
Quartet	Co-leading framework with equal contribution under structured settings	Four musicians working together. There may be a leader, but in performance there is more balance. (Often playing pre-composed work by a number of composers, but the repertoire is set by the group)	Kronos Quartet
Rock band	Co-creation with singular artistic outcome (in this example, despite personality clashes)	A group working together in a range of different combinations, sometimes with clear leader(s). (Playing original music written by members of the group)	Fleetwood Mac (listening to 'Rumours')
Producer	Leader shaping specialist contributions through purpose and relationship	A single person as co-ordinator working to enable the vision of an artist and bringing all the right pieces together to create the outcome. (Composition, arrangement, recording, and performance all occur together)	Quincy Jones (including his work on Thriller)
Improvisation	Trust-based creative momentum built through process and shared intention	A fluid group that creates on the spot. Probably has a leader who organises the activity, or sets the tone for the performance.	Miles Davis (especially 'Kind of Blue')

(Note: The listening examples provided come from international musicians because they might be more familiar, or easier to access with other detail and storytelling available. There are plenty of other local examples that could be showcased.)

Think about the different collaborative ensembles you have been part of in various projects and settings. How did they function?

What were the strengths and challenges of each structure? Could you utilise a different ensemble structure to support a different type of project?

Collaboration as shared function

With all the different ways of thinking about the ways in which we collaborate, it can be valuable to think about how we collaborate in relation to the function, and resources that are being utilised.

This can be helpful in understanding what resources you might be sharing or what might be needed to fill a gap in a project that is emerging.

A project may involve multiple collaborators engaging in multiple types of collaboration, and each partner brings their own willingness and availability to serve the broader vision.

Types of Collaboration	What this means	Examples
Resource-based	Sharing equipment, tools and things	Loaning a trailer or gazebo to support an event
Capacity-based	Sharing people to support delivery of outputs	Bringing your team to serve as volunteers for a tree planting event
Capability-based	Targeted delivery of specific project requirements	A community group is leading a project but they need some additional people with cooking skills to help with a bake sale
Skills-based	Driven by multiple people based on utilising and sharing high-level specialist skills	Different groups are brought together to meet targeted outcomes—a community group, with an event company and arts group to deliver an open market day with performances and workshops
Personality/ relationship-based	Built upon building ideas, values and visions together through shared imagination	People design a project in response to the skills, values and ideas of the people they want to work with

What is the right type of collaboration for me?

Ultimately the right collaboration structure will depend on a few things:

How much time and energy do you have to build the relationships?

What is right for the outcome you are trying to achieve?

What is possible with the resources and networks you have?

How do the people you are connecting with want to be involved?

We have shown that collaboration can be determined on:

A trust-relationship spectrum

A type of collaborative ensemble spectrum

A function-based spectrum

Think about which works right for you, and how to approach building the collaboration that would work best for the project and the outcomes you are looking to achieve.

Here is some space to map out what you might need:

Relationships

Resources

Skills

Co-creation

Relationships and Hospitality

Collaboration relies on trust. Trust is part of a relationship that builds over time. The more time invested, the more potential there is for bolder collaborative outcomes.

The time it takes to build those relationships needs to be reciprocal, consistent and grounded in manaakitanga. The building of this connection can be through something as simple as a cup of tea. Building a relationship takes time. And if mastery takes 10,000 hours, perhaps the strongest relationships are built through 10,000 cups of tea.

If we want our collaborations to be sustainable and purposeful, we need to be intentional with the way we build them. Embracing intentional hospitality as an ongoing act of manaakitanga. It acknowledges that everyone we interact with will come with a different set of circumstances, and that context can change with each interaction. Intention means every decision matters.

Intentional hospitality is kindness. We know not everyone will share the same view of things, but through our manaakitanga we can disagree with someone's perspective and still honor their humanity. It means we can control our intentional interactions, and be purposeful in what we do. We can actively listen to the context, determine our place alongside it, and know that navigating that is part of the work. It also means thinking about who is not at the table, who doesn't have access, and how we can work to enable that more in the future.

Ecosystem

What do we mean when we say ecosystem? Ecosystems are networks who we collaborate with, work symbiotically with, and perhaps at times compete with.

But, while it may seem that the system encourages you to focus more on competition... that doesn't have to be the case. If you're only focusing on competition, you're not seeing a whole lot of opportunities, sustainability, connection and community that potentially supports, promotes and enhances what you do.

We are all part of a wider ecosystem — that is the nature of being human and living in community — there are many parts, many different points of connection, and with that, many different pathways for collaboration.

Your ecosystem can potentially show you plenty of opportunities for exciting and innovative collaborations, particularly if you choose to look outside the box.

It is important to also remember that there is potential for failure. But it is through failure that we learn, and how we understand what can inform future possibilities.

We can choose to redefine how we understand and articulate success. We can choose to see the value in the exploration of ideas and the potential that collaboration can unlock.

All too often, an organisation might try something new, but then decide it didn't work or was a failure because it didn't work the first time at the box office.

But we need to remember that in that first trial, we might have been speaking to the wrong audience. If we are really looking to engage with new audiences, but we only share the new work with old audiences, then it is not really doing what we intended.

We need to be prepared for longer time frames, to redefine how we measure and understand success on new projects, and look at how we can draw from the collaborators to connect into different spaces. But make sure you allow the time and space for that to happen!

Start to map your ecosystem!

This process can take some time to unpack, and will continue to evolve and emerge over time. It is worth revisiting regularly. Follow the steps below:

Draw yourself in the middle of an empty page.

Think about the community and networks you operate in (in person and online), the existing suppliers, partners, supporters, clients/customers/audience members, volunteers etc. Write them on the page. This is your current ecosystem.

Who have you already got strong connections with? Draw lines connecting those you've already got relationships with.

What other people or organisations could you develop relationships with? If you're not connected, how can you be?

Where can you see potential synergy: where your combined value is greater than just one offering?

Who could you collaborate with?
Think outside the square here.

Come up with at least one completely innovative collaboration that you have never thought of before.

Friction creates momentum

In a world of convenience, friction is essential.

Friction creates the energy to respond differently. To develop different solutions. To embrace thinking that moves beyond pattern recognition, algorithmic predictions, and the gravitational pull of nostalgia and familiarity.

To operate effectively in an uncertain world, we need to embrace helpful friction.

Now, that is not to say that there isn't unhelpful friction. But that is better described as barriers, roadblocks, gatekeepers and chasms.

Things to embrace	Things to reject
Creative ideas are all around us if we are open, so be flexible and find the one that is most helpful, even if it feels uncomfortable. "Some ideas aren't for now"	Ego without openness is a gatekeeper
Having a clear 'why' and using that to guide all decisions, ensures our impact is meaningful, even when that means we need to undertake significant change. "Who is this in service of?"	Lacking clarity of the vision and purpose is a barrier
Remembering that sometimes we need to let go of something we are already doing in order to enable the change we want to see in the world. "Things have a season, and seasons change"	Repetition at the sake of impact is a roadblock. (it is okay to grieve the end of something in order to stop)
Not every opportunity is for us. Understanding what is essential for us in our vision and capacity and focussing on that. "Widen the river to move forward"	Building new projects just to chase funding is a bottomless chasm
Remembering that we all bring a little bit of what the world needs, but we can't do it all. Control what you can control and find others singing the same song. "Many voices in harmony inspire the world"	Wanting to manage everything we interact with is a chasm

By embracing helpful friction we understand that the creative collaborative process might make us uncomfortable, but that is part of the process. It might make us question ideas, and encourage us to reimagine the world we currently inhabit and explore how it could be. This might require significant change. It might also be that a little collaborative action can be the first step in a journey of discovery.

Friction emerges in any creative collaboration. Not all ideas resonate with people in the same way. But remember that ideas aren't people. We can disagree about a certain idea or next step, but after we share our views if we want the collaboration to continue we need to find a way to agree on the next step and embrace that challenge fully.

Collaboration is a waka we are on together. It only heads in one direction at a time.

Creative Collaboration and sharing ideas

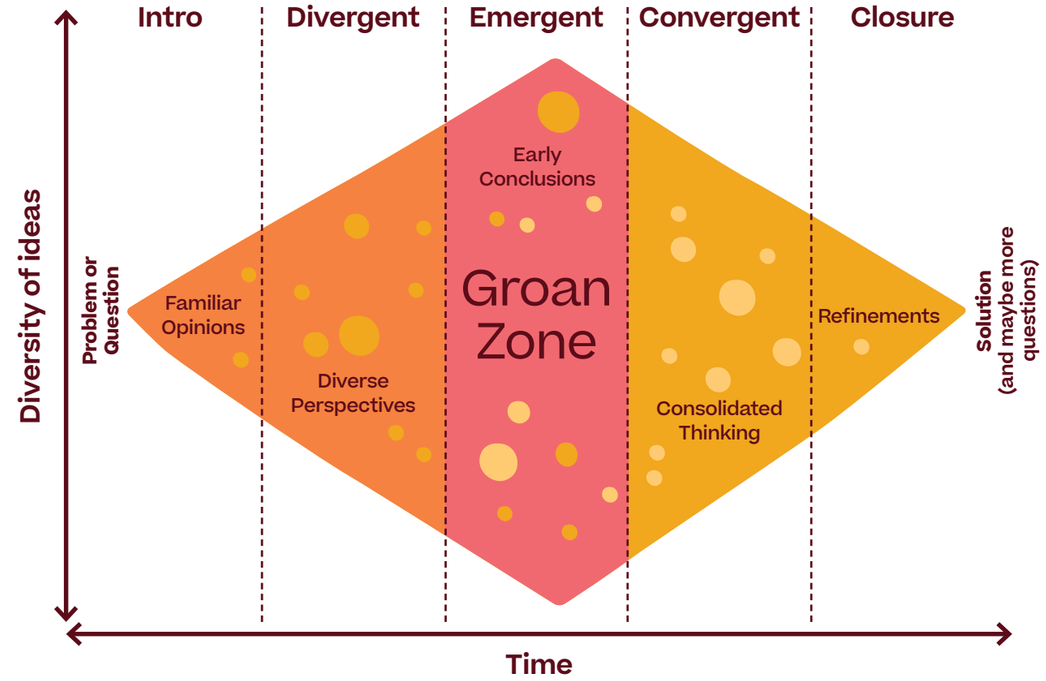
While that creative process can be hard enough as an individual, participation in group imagination and project development can be a process of continual navigation and working through uncertainty.

There is a concept called the “Diamond of Participation” developed by Sam Kaners. Essentially in any participatory process there is a divergent phase where people generate ideas (this is playing like a child) and then a convergent phase where shared understanding is found. The tricky piece is in the emergent “groan zone”. This is an area of conflict, confusion, uncertainty, and non-linear progression. This is where things get tested, and it is necessary to move through this to get into the space of growth.

We may start being polite and agreeable. We build an openness to sharing our bolder ideas as trust builds. As the diversity of ideas expands we have to navigate early conclusions, those who want to shut down different flows of possibility, and where people start to question one another or challenge the leader.

If we can keep this conflict task-based, not personal, we will be able to move forward. Shifting through the groan zone means allowing space for the testing, finding the edges, and challenging ongoing assumptions. It can be painful, but it is electrifying as well when things hit the right rhythm.

Sam Kaners Diamond of Participation



That groan zone is the work. That time in the groan zone shapes the outcomes and success of the collaboration.

Every activity tends to have a messy middle. It is that bridge that makes things find their way. It is the thing that moves from intent to progress. The way we navigate that demonstrates how we can move forward. This pattern of idea to enthusiasm to uncertainty and friction means if we can work through that middle we get impact and an opportunity to learn.

Learning to embrace uncertainty and move through it with a settled confidence is vital. Trust that the discomfort is the thing that gives us the vision for the outcomes to emerge.

Adapted from ‘Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making’, Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk, and Duane Berger

Unpredictable mess and failure as process

The collaborative process can be messy. It can be unpredictable and spontaneous. It requires the building of trust. It asks people to bring their values and clarity of intentions to a project, and to see what emerges.

While creative collaboration might look messy or spontaneous from the outside, gathering the right people is just the starting point. Enabling a team to generate bold, original ideas takes intention, structure, and thoughtful facilitation.

It is okay to approach collaboration in a small-scale process first. Reduce the risk, but still remain open to the possibilities. When trying anything new it is important to be open to the chance that it won't work. Research can result in a negative outcome, and provided we use that as a foundation for learning and future development we can get more from the next step.

Failure in any new process provides a space for reflection. This becomes a teacher with known feedback and the potential for solving problems with new ideas. Failure helps us to build strength and resilience in knowing how to create future success.

Something to remember: Strategic partnerships and collaborations might be seen or presented as a pathway for efficiency or savings. While these savings can be future outcomes, the benefits often take time to realise. Often the first move into collaborative activity brings additional requirements. It might make more work rather than less—particularly the first time you do it. This could take the form of project funding or in-kind support. This requires investing some forethought into your budgeting and workload structures.

The benefits of strategic collaborations expand over time: A deeper understanding of each organisation's work; building connections across the community; shared services; and additional outcomes. The first step is choosing to make the investment. Prioritising the investment of time, effort and resources into any partnership is crucial to its initial and ongoing success.

Some things to remember

Build trust first.

Different types of projects and different relationships may benefit from an agreement in place.

Be clear about the intention, purpose, vision and scope for any collaboration.

Engage in charitable assumptions throughout the process.

Remember that ideas aren't people. You can dislike an idea without being disrespectful to a person.

Curiosity is vital. An open mind will help things to work.

Hearing is not listening. Collaboration thrives with active listening.

Final Thoughts

Given what you now know, in what ways can you see a collaboration mindset impacting your mahi?

This is a process that will take some time, and is better woven into sustainable habits that become stronger overtime. Be mindful of this and try to embed these things into your regular practice.

We know that this is additional mahi, but we also know the benefits of this approach will be long lasting.

There are no strict rules or templates, just a range of possibilities that you can explore—deepening connection to make ongoing impact.