

Aligning for Impact: A Recap

Recently I wrapped up a brief contract designing and facilitating a workshop for a great network of funders. The task was to model and explore what it would look like if this powerful and diverse community took steps to further align their work for greater impact in the field. Not only am I pleased to say the workshop went as planned, (we had clear success metrics that we hit by all counts), I'm extra pleased to say the act of co-designing this workshop was in and of itself a delightful experience; all of us who participated in the design found the collaboration energizing and rewarding. It's what we aim for as collaboration consultants: modeling the potential of well thought-out collaborative spaces in the way we do the work. Since trying and succeeding are two very different things, I wanted to pause and celebrate just what went so well in this instance.

1. Context

As with most successful projects, we had constraints. There wasn't enough time to prepare, and definitely not enough time to do the work. Frustrating? Of course. But as hard as it is to admit, constraints are often a key to success. They force us to be more focused, more disciplined, bite off less, and work smarter. We worked with these constraints to get really specific about the goal we were tackling, and as we all know clear focused goals are an important ingredient for success.

2. Space

We designed a space that allowed us to work transparently and asynchronously leading up to the workshop, making the most of our limited time. As a consultant, I think one of the scariest and most important things I do is model the value of working in a more open and transparent way. Even though we were short on time, we opened up the design team to include more diverse

perspectives which helped ensure we were designing a workshop which was relevant. I worked to keep all documents, thinking, and decisions available on a shared google site that the whole team could access. This invites everyone to engage with the design when and if they have the chance. We do this with all our projects, but have never had clients jump into the space and participate in the design work asynchronously as quickly as this group. I believe having that access and shared participation helped us all believe the work would be completed, despite looking a bit messy along the way.

3. Collaborative Mindsets & Behaviors

But most importantly, I have to say, it was an amazing group of women (with some great men behind the scenes, influencing the thinking and work), who participated, and exhibited a few key behaviors and mindsets creating a rich collaborative environment.

Curiosity. Everyone was hungry to learn. Every meeting, every conversation, and even the final deliverable were all taken as part of a larger learning experience. I think it's extremely difficult to maintain a learning mindset when the stakes are high. To keep that learning mindset, all the way through the many risks of putting yourself out there with a network project, is impressive.

Trust. It goes without saying it's challenging to work together if folks don't trust each other, and I was particularly impressed with this groups ability to trust everyone's good intentions and communicate through whatever uncertainties arose.

Clear communication. Of course, this trust was facilitated by clear, thoughtful communication. This group is extremely intentional and considerate in all forms of communication: from phone calls, to well-constructed emails, it made a huge difference.

Embrace Diversity. Folks listened, and built on the ideas of others. We didn't always agree and not every suggestion was incorporated. But when different ideas or disagreements came up, we treated them with respect and saw them as opportunities to strengthen the design. This seems to be one of the hardest piece for groups to master: actually embracing different ideas as strengthening instead of personal critiques. I suspect our early emphasis on clear, shared goals supported folks putting ego aside and embracing ideas that helped build towards these goals.

Flexibility of Roles. Even though roles and expectations were clearly defined, (Hint: I was the consultant and facilitator) everyone was willing to cross boundaries to support each other. I have never had a client ask me if I was having anxiety dreams and if I needed support in a meeting. That shows a clear understanding and commitment to the end goal by all parties, and a willingness to "[work the line](#)" to ensure we all crossed that finish line.

We're just kicking off a second phase of work: it's even more complex, with greater uncertainty, and a larger design team. It will be a test if these structures and mindsets can carry us through another successful project. We'll keep you posted.