

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Communicative Accomplishment of Collaboration Failure

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This study develops a communicative model of collaboration failure to address one of the key challenges of collaboration theory and practice: the discrepancy between the promise of collaboration and the reality of persistent failure. A theoretical framework is developed based on notions of dialogue, discourse, and coorientation, which informs three key aspects of collaboration: knowledge production, shared identity, and collective agency. This theoretical framework is then combined with analytic themes from an empirical case study of a failed civil society collaboration. Themes of communication practice that constitute collaborative failure are detailed, while also contrasting these with alternative practices that can enable more successful collaboration. Further implications are discussed, specifically in terms of rethinking common collaboration dualisms of structure/process and talk/action.

Keywords: Collaboration, Civil Society Sector, Dialogue, Discourse, Coorientation.

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Collaboration is a hallmark of contemporary organizing, especially in the civil society sector where there is widespread recognition that the complexity and interdependence of many social issues necessitates some type of collaborative response among relevant stakeholders (Lewis, Isbell, & Koschmann, 2010; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Civil society collaboration encompasses a host of interorganizational relationships among governments, nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations, private businesses, and/or local communities and citizens. Collaboration is also an important site for communication research because collaboration magnifies issues of trust, identity, power relations, network configurations, boundary spanning, agency and authority, negotiation, and other key aspects of human interaction. Consequently, communication scholars are increasingly directing their attention toward various forms of collaboration across the civil society sector (e.g., Cooper & Shumate, 2012; Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2007; Lewis et al., 2010; Walker & Stohl, 2012). Yet despite its prevalence and significance, civil society collaboration is incredibly complicated and frequently ineffective (Gray, 2000; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Thus the forms of civil society organizing that appear to hold the most promise are also some of the most problematic.

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Unsuccessful collaboration is ubiquitous in practice, but scholarly analysis of failed collaboration is far less common. Previous collaboration literature is replete with lists of best practices and conceptual models of ideal collaboration (e.g., Gray, 1989; Hardy et al., 2005; Heath & Frey, 2004; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Innes & Booher, 2010; Lewis, 2006). Missing, however, are in-depth analyses of collaboration failures that investigate the specific features of unsuccessful collaboration (see Keyton, Ford, & Smith, 2008, and Milam & Heath, 2014, for rare exceptions). Failed collaboration refers to any collaborative effort that is unable to make a substantive difference within a given problem domain especially in terms of the stated goals and objectives of the collaboration. This does not entail a complete lack of positive effects, such as improved trust and better relationships among collaborators (Gray, 2000; Lange, 2003), or increased value for member organizations and individual stakeholders (Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007). Still, there is widespread agreement in the scholarly and practitioner literatures that collaborative endeavors ultimately should be evaluated in terms of their measurable impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) and tangible outcomes (Morris, Gibson, Leavitt, & Jones, 2013). Yet previous research generally does not examine failed collaboration directly, instead treating it as the absence of inputs or outcomes that characterize successful collaboration, or merely reporting that certain collaborative efforts were ineffective. Consequently, we know very little about one of the most common features of civil society collaboration: unsuccessful or ineffective efforts that fail to accomplish their objectives and have a meaningful impact within a given problem domain.

To enhance our knowledge of the important phenomenon of civil society collaboration, we need a much better understanding of collaboration failure, and communication scholarship can help us make this valuable contribution to advance the collaboration literature. Accordingly, in this study, I seek to investigate and explain collaboration failure from a communication perspective. By “communication perspective” I mean an approach that regards communication as an explanatory framework to understand all social phenomena; an overall orientation toward the social world where communication is the lens we look through, not just a thing we look at. This goes beyond seeing communication as something that happens *in* collaboration, but rather understanding collaboration *as* communication. I conceptualize collaboration failure as a communicative accomplishment, something that is achieved in interaction through certain communication practices. My argument is that communication is not simply a regrettable site of human error for collaboration, but rather has constitutive force of its own to create a state of failure that transcends the intentions of their members and cannot be reduced to individual people involved.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Civil society collaboration

Civil society involves the public at large, representing a social domain apart from the state or the market. Lacking the regulatory power of the state and the economic

power the market, civil society derives its influence from networks of people and their collective action. Today the civil society sector is dominated by numerous collaborative arrangements among nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, private businesses, and various community associations. Some collaborative arrangements are more formal, such as cross-sector partnerships (Selsky & Parker, 2005), business-nonprofit ventures (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012), or multiparty alliances (Zeng & Chen, 2003) that exist as distinct legal entities with paid staff and standing committees. Others collaborations are much more informal, involving ad hoc meetings and largely voluntary labor, what Heath and Frey (2004) broadly refer to as “community collaboration” (see also Heath, 2007; Milam & Heath, 2014). Whatever the arrangement, all civil society collaboration entails relevant stakeholders organizing around focal issues to achieve some measure of cooperation and joint outcomes they could not (or should not) accomplish on their own — what Vangen and Huxham (2003) simply call “collaborative advantage.”

With an emphasis on participation, interdependence, representation, cooperation, nonhierarchical relationships, and mutual accountability, collaboration is seen as an ideal form of civil society organizing (Heath & Frey, 2004). This optimistic attitude toward collaboration is reflected in much of the collaboration literature, which tends to be laudatory rather than critical (Schneider, 2009). However, in practice, civil society collaboration is incredibly complicated and frequently ineffective. Civil society collaborations often produce limited results, involve members with contrasting goals and motivations that are difficult to manage, are prone to gridlock and fragmentation, often do not produce intended outcomes, and can even exacerbate the problems they are trying to solve (Koschmann, Kuhn, & Pfarrer, 2012). Furthermore, Hardy et al. (2005) report that many collaborations do not create innovative solutions or balance stakeholder interests, and some collaborations fail to generate any collective action at all (even if there are positive relational outcomes and improved trust among collaborators; see Lange, 2003, and Gray, 2000). This is especially puzzling because many collaborative efforts are motivated by good intentions to be effective and follow much of the advice and best practices from the extant literature. Hence, there is a notable discrepancy between the positive connotations of collaboration throughout society and the difficulties and disappointments of actual collaboration practice.

Communicative approaches to civil society collaboration

Although there is an extensive body of research on civil society collaboration, only a limited amount of this work comes from a perspective we could call “communicative” or “communicational” (Craig, 1999). That is, an approach where communication is fundamental to the analysis and explanation of civil society collaboration. This involves more than studying information exchange or message transmission “in” collaboration, but rather seeing communication as an explanatory framework from which to understand all aspects of collaborative work—especially in terms of collaboration outcomes, effectiveness, and overall value creation. A handful of studies provide an initial foundation for communicative approaches to collaboration,

including Keyton et al.'s (2008) mesolevel communicative model of collaboration, Lewis's (2006) theoretical model of collaborative interaction, and Stohl and Walker's (2002) bona fide group perspective. The main theme across this literature is the centrality of communication for understanding collaboration inputs, processes, and outcomes. Building upon this general premise, subsequent communicative research highlights three distinct yet complementary concepts to understand civil society collaboration: *dialogue*, *discourse*, and *coorientation*. My purpose is to marshal these theoretical resources into a framework to investigate the communicative accomplishment of failed collaboration. Furthermore, civil society collaboration always happens within a specific *political context* that influences stakeholder interactions, so this key aspect of the collaborative setting is included to round out the theoretical framework.

First, a *dialogue* approach argues that conceptions of civil society collaboration should be based on dialogic theories that emphasize creative outcomes and participatory democracy (Heath, 2007). Dialogue, rather than mere information exchange, is how communication practices can enable creative and innovative solutions, and how collaboration participants can share power and negotiate contrasting agendas. A dialogic approach stresses the reciprocity and symmetry of interactions, as well as setting aside authority relations and the opening of stakeholder positions and knowledge claims to contestation (Milam & Heath, 2014). This means fostering stakeholder interactions that give rise to "dialogic moments," which are generative, grounded in diversity, and critical of power (Heath, 2007). The key insight is that these aspects of dialogue are attributes of the interaction itself, not the collaboration structure. In this regard, dialogue is not just a way of communicating, but also a way of knowing (see Bakhtin, 2010; Barge, 2002). Ineffective or unsuccessful collaboration is therefore rooted in efforts that overemphasize the structural elements of representation, membership, or forums to speak at the expense of dialogic interactions, which go beyond sharing existing information and push participants to the realm of knowledge production.

Second, *discourse* approaches to collaboration focus on collections of interrelated texts, plus the practices of text construction and distribution that bring social realities into being. The research team of Hardy, Lawrence, Phillips, and Grant has developed a notable body of literature on the discursive foundations of collaboration, highlighting the negotiation of the issues to be addressed, the interests of relevant stakeholders, and the actors who represent those interests (see Hardy, Lawrence, & Phillips, 2006; Hardy et al., 2005; Lawrence, Phillips, & Hardy, 1999). They depict effective collaboration as the product of conversations that draw upon existing discourses, thereby creating a shared identity that is an impetus for cooperation, problem solving, and decision making. The primary contribution of a discursive approach is showing that the potential for successful collaboration lies in the participant's ability to negotiate a shared perspective on issues, interests, and identities that provides an adequate context for understanding and action (Lawrence et al., 1999). Thus failed collaboration can be understood in terms of discursive resources that are drawn upon to perpetuate contrasting individual identities and hinder the development of a shared identity.

A final communicative approach to civil society collaboration comes from scholars associated with the Montréal School of organizational communication (see Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014). This line of research provides an alternative ontology of organization rooted in a constitutive model of communication (see Craig, 1999), emphasizing communication as a mode of being for organizational forms such as collaboration. Central to this approach is the notion of *coorientation*, a process whereby people align their actions in relation to common objectives through an ongoing dialectic of conversations and texts (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Conversations are observable interactions—the “site” where collaboration is accomplished and experienced; whereas texts are the symbolic “surface” upon which conversations develop, forming a self-organizing loop as texts and conversations operate recursively. Over time conversation-text dialectics gain distance from their original circumstances and “scale up” (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009) to distinct organizational configurations that become reified through the abstraction of subsequent interactions. Koschmann et al. (2012) draw on this idea of coorientation to develop a model of collaboration value creation and assessment. Their model is based on two main premises. First, effective collaboration is not simply a matter of gathering interested stakeholders at the proverbial table, but rather the ability of collaborative groups to act and make a difference in a given problem domain; that is, to exercise collective agency. Second, if collaboration is constituted primarily through communication—not resource flows, economic efficiencies, markets, or hierarchies—then the effective collaboration should be understood in terms of communication practices that give rise to higher-order systems with the capacity for collective agency. Consequently, a coorientation model helps us understand failed collaboration as organizational forms that have not constituted themselves as collective actors with the capacity to exercise agency within a given problem domain.

Finally, civil society collaboration always happens within a specific *political context* that affects how stakeholders interact with each other and make decisions. Scholars such as Mumby (2001) and Deetz (1992a) have demonstrated that political power is a communicative phenomenon, and struggles over meaning are constitutive of organizational life. Thus, any analysis of collaboration should consider the ways in which political interests shape communication and organizing. Sometimes the political aspect of collaboration can be very immediate and imposing, especially for high-profile initiatives that involve substantial resources and contested turf; other times politics plays a smaller role with less direct impact on day-to-day operations. Regardless, civil society collaboration commonly involves some facet of resource allocation, policy change, or power realignment so politics are always present somehow. Therefore, we need to pay attention to how various stakeholder interests might be influencing dialogue, discourse, and coorientation. This involves identifying the various “stakes” that each participant brings to the proverbial table and examining how the articulation of these stakes affects the collaborative process.

In summary, these concepts from the communication and discourse literature provide a conceptual foundation for understanding civil society collaboration in terms

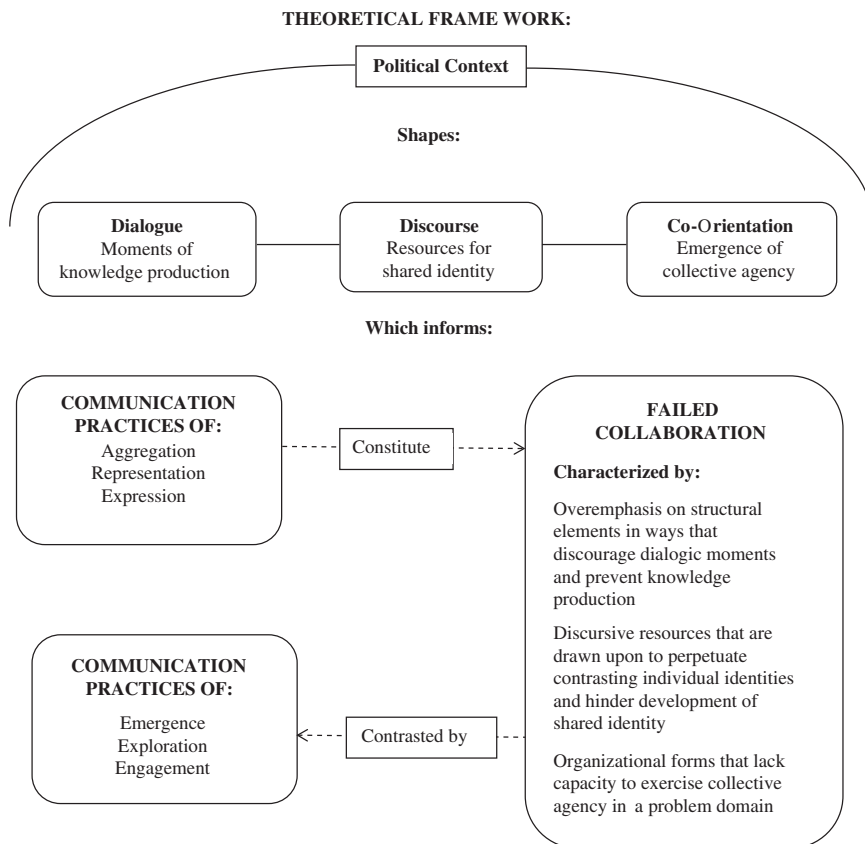


Figure 1 Communicative model of collaboration failure.

of dialogic moments of knowledge production, discursive resources for shared identity, and the emergence of collective agency through coorientation, all of which happen within a specific political context and are underwritten by a general orientation toward collaboration as a communicatively constituted phenomenon. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this theoretical framework. Next I turn to a case study of a failed civil society collaboration to demonstrate how this theoretical framework can explain the discrepancy between the conceptual promise and the practical realities of civil society collaboration. My empirical investigation was guided by this overarching research question: How can we explain failed collaboration from a communication perspective, especially when collaboration appears structurally sound and follows accepted communication norms, yet still is unsuccessful?

Methods

The following case study focuses on a 2-year taskforce related to affordable housing in a mid-sized American city. Taskforces are a particular type of civil society

collaboration that bring together concerned citizens, professional experts, and government representatives to discuss issues and make decisions that shape local municipal policies—thus, a relevant and appropriate context to investigate communication and collaboration. Studying failure is also an important, yet underutilized, approach that can provide novel insights and helps avoid the “success bias” (Miner, Kim, Holzinger, & Haunschild, 1999) that is common in much of the empirical organizational literature.

Research site

The Westmount Affordable Housing Taskforce (hereafter “the taskforce”) is a civil society collaboration that formed to address the city’s affordable housing problems and make policy recommendations for the city’s new comprehensive housing strategy. Because of its geography, climate, and overall quality of life, Westmount (a pseudonym) has become a desirable place to live and work, which led to a substantial increase in housing prices over the last 30 years. Additional zoning policies to preserve open space surrounding the city restricted growth and further increased the value of real estate and housing prices. These trends make it increasingly difficult for Westmount to sustain a middle-class population (e.g., teachers, health care providers, police and fire department employees, child care workers, etc.) and provide affordable housing for low-income residents.

In response the Westmount City Council commissioned a community taskforce to review the city’s housing policies and make new recommendations to shape a forthcoming comprehensive housing strategy. The taskforce consisted of 15 people representing a variety of interests and organizations, organized into six different categories. This included two people classified as “public housing providers/developers,” one “private developer,” one “affordable housing consumer,” one “architect/planner,” four people representing “community groups,”¹ and six other “at large”² members. The hope was that the taskforce’s final report would represent a collaborative response to the city’s housing problems and influence new, innovative initiatives for the city’s comprehensive housing strategy. However, to the disappointment of nearly everyone involved this did not happen.

After 14 months and nearly 90 hours of deliberation, the taskforce did not reach anything near consensus about how to address the city’s affordable housing problems. They did submit a final report, but this was more of a compilation of individual ideas rather than a decisive statement about the direction of housing policy for the city. In fact, three members of the taskforce were so dissatisfied with the final report that they submitted their own “minority report” to the city council that criticized the makeup, process, and outcome of the group, and listed alternative policy recommendations that were not included in the final report. The taskforce and its final report had relatively no impact on the City Council and its comprehensive housing strategy—to this day, housing policies remain unaffected and few substantive changes were enacted as a result of their efforts. Nearly everyone involved was unsatisfied with the overall result. “People are pretty disappointed and disgruntled about the whole thing,” one member

told me. “Expectations were so much higher than what we delivered,” said another. Others referred to the work of the taskforce as “a big flop,” “a total waste of time,” “very unsatisfying,” and serving “no useful purpose.” One member explained how “disillusioned” he was by the whole process, while another said “it was truly the worst public process I have ever experienced.” To date, the City Council’s work plan (the official document that lists the Council’s priorities for the year) has only two modest items related to affordable housing. And as one City Council member told me, “Both of these are minor zoning changes we were probably going to do anyway regardless of the outcome of the taskforce.” Despite some positive relational outcomes and informational outputs, everyone involved with the taskforce agreed that this collaborative endeavor was an overall failure.

Yet the taskforce began with so much promise: They convened key stakeholders in the housing industry—major players who volunteered a considerable amount of time; they were given ample time for deliberations; they had professional facilitation and administrative support; they had the political backing of the City Council that created the group; they had clear goals and direction; and they had the necessary resources to complete their task—even catered meals at most of the meetings. They developed an extensive final report that was officially accepted by the City Council and they were publicly commended for their hard work. The taskforce certainly appeared to have the necessary expertise, goodwill, time, resources, and political support to be successful. So what happened? The following case study seeks to answer this question from a communication perspective to enhance our understanding of civil society collaboration and improve future practice.

Data collection

Data for this study came from two primary sources: field observations of taskforce meetings and in-depth interviews with taskforce members and other relevant stakeholders. First, I observed 32 taskforce meetings (of 34 total). This included the bimonthly taskforce meetings, as well as a number of City Council study sessions and retreats where Council members discussed affordable housing and the work of the taskforce. The taskforce met twice a month for 2–3 hours each time. The meetings were run by a professional facilitator and supported by three members of the City’s housing staff. Detailed field notes and follow-up conversations after meetings enabled me to capture key ideas and the spirit of interactions. In all I logged 83 hours of field observations. I also interviewed everyone involved with the taskforce, including all 15 taskforce members, the three city staff members who coordinated the taskforce, and the facilitator. Additionally, I interviewed the city manager and six of the seven City Council members (one Council member did not respond to repeated requests for an interview). Of the 25 interviewees, 14 (56%) were males and 11 (44%) were females. Each interview was semistructured and built around an initial set of open-ended questions. Interviews averaged 46 minutes and were audiorecorded for transcription. The combined fieldnotes and interview data resulted in 372 pages of single-spaced text.

I also reviewed a number of taskforce documents to supplement my observations and interviews as a matter of interpretive validity. These include the meeting minutes taken by the city staff at all the taskforce meetings, the subcommittee reports filed by taskforce members, various handouts and background material provided to the taskforce from the city housing staff, memos sent to the City Council to update them on the progress of the taskforce at various points during their deliberation, and materials provided for the various City Council retreats and study sessions. This supplemental material amounted to an additional 251 pages of textual data. After two and half years of observations, interviews, and preliminary analysis, I concluded that my investigation had reached the point of “theoretical saturation” (Bowen, 2008), which meant that additional data collection and analysis was reaching a point of diminishing returns and thus justified my departure from the field. Additionally, the City Council’s announcement of their comprehensive housing policy signaled an important milestone in the City’s affordable housing efforts and provided a reasonable time to turn my attention fully toward further analysis and writing.

Data analysis

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, so I explain my analytical procedures in this section separately only as a matter of clarity. I employed a “pragmatic iterative approach” (Tracy, 2013) where I alternated between emic readings of the data and etic use of theories and concepts in the extant literature. I developed my case study using thematic analysis to identify key themes in the data based on their forcefulness, recurrence, and repetition (Owen, 1984). I used a qualitative computer program called ATLAS.ti to organize and code my field notes, interview transcriptions, and supplemental documents and to help recognize patterns in the data. I classified the data following Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) three-stage process for coding qualitative data (open, axial, and selective coding) and used the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to go back and forth between data and coding schemes until I decided on an interpretive framework for this case study, which revealed a set of communication practices that constituted this failed collaboration.

A case study of communication and civil society collaboration

Aggregation–Emergence

The first theme relates to the final report developed by the taskforce that details the outcomes of the taskforce, which suggests an underlying logic that guided their interactions and decision making. Participants, staff members, and City Council members repeatedly explained their disappointment with the taskforce’s final report in terms of a lack of innovation, creativity, and new ideas. Most people had expectations that this group would do something that “moved the needle” and “changed the game” on affordable housing in Westmount. Instead, the final report was a loose collection of ideas and suggestions that did little more than summarize current thinking and perpetuate the status quo. “We got to the point where this was just collection of various

interests; that the final report was just kind of a summary of everybody's perspective," explained one participant. Another said: "It basically resulted in a kind of sum of the parts, everybody's individual statements kind of compiled and put together." Thus, we can understand the taskforce's final report as reflecting a logic of *aggregation* that influenced their communication practices.

Although a compilation of ideas in a final report is useful, it does not achieve what civil society collaborations like the taskforce are created for, and it does not require extensive meetings and deliberation. Rather, the hope of collaboration is the emergence of something that transcends the individual contributions of the component parts, not the mere aggregation of existing ideas. The people involved with the taskforce recognized this was a fundamental problem in their work. "There wasn't anything generative from our group," explained one member; "Nothing organic that came from our work," said another. One member put it this way: "For some reason we didn't have the right ingredients to make the cake rise." Another said, "Nothing in our work transcended our original disagreements." Notice how these comments—generative, organic, rise, and transcend—all point to a quality of something that exists beyond the individual positions and stakes of people who composed the taskforce. Therefore, *emergence* is put in contrast with *aggregation* as a way to understand contrasting notions of collaboration and what constitutes success or failure.

A communicative framework of collaboration based on dialogue, discourse, and coorientation helps explain this *aggregation-emergence* contrast in terms of knowledge production, identity formation, and collective agency. The report did not show evidence of generative knowledge or shared identity, and it lacked the capacity to make a difference within the problem domain of affordable housing. As one taskforce member said, "There was no oomph behind our report . . . it didn't do anything and it won't change anything." Even though the final report contained useful information, most ideas could be attributed to specific individuals or at least particular interests. Rather than being authoritative, the final report could be dismissed on the grounds that it did not portray a collective. Nothing substantive gained distance from its provincial interest, no abstraction emerged that represented the collective, and nothing became reified or taken for granted such that it had an authoritative presence. Instead the taskforce never got beyond the sum of its parts. This was further evident at a follow-up City Council meeting I attended months after the taskforce concluded its deliberations where taskforce members were invited to reflect on their work. To a person, taskforce members went around the table and simply restated their individual positions about various issues, thus perpetuating the logic of aggregation that plagued the final report.

Shared identity and collective agency cannot happen through mere aggregation because one can still decipher individual contributions—the constituent parts are still visible. I suggest this is a key reason why the taskforce had no meaningful impact in the affordable housing problem domain. It never developed an authoritative representation that could impose itself upon outside stakeholders. Furthermore, collaboration seeks novel and innovative solutions to complex problems, but this sort of knowledge cannot be accomplished through the mere aggregation of present thinking. Instead,

collaboration calls for generative knowledge that emerges from “dialogic moments” that open existing positions and knowledge claims to contestation and negotiation (Milam & Heath, 2014). But the potential for these moments in the taskforce was often thwarted in favor of merely summarizing all the different ideas and getting everyone’s ideas “on the table,” as was often mentioned in taskforce meetings. Thus, one aspect of explaining the unsuccessful outcome of the taskforce is in terms of a contrast between practices of aggregation and emergence, which hindered knowledge production, identity formation, and collective agency.

Representation–Exploration

This theme involves the taskforce’s membership and how its design shaped interaction. Although taskforces in general are less interdependent than other forms of collaboration that are more integrative and transformational, this particular taskforce was still quite far along the collaboration continuum (see Austin, 2000). Most participants referred to their work as “collaborative” or “a collaboration.” The taskforce application even required potential members to sign a pledge to exhibit “collaborative behavior.” Several members told me that taskforce outcomes could have a “direct impact” on their work and it was “in their interest” to work collaboratively and develop new ideas. Yet despite these intentions and recognition, the makeup of the taskforce hindered the interactions that could foster successful collaboration.

The taskforce was initially set up to have broad participation from key stakeholders related to housing. The City Council wanted to “get everyone in the room” and figure out the affordable housing problem. Some people were invited to apply because of their involvement in city housing issues; others pursued the application process on their own. Roughly 40 people applied to be part of the taskforce and 15 were eventually selected. Originally the group was smaller, but additional members were handpicked by the City Council and added to the taskforce to make sure certain stakeholders—especially community groups—were not excluded. Although this achieved a broad composition, it also ensured that *representation* would be an underlying premise for the taskforce and its meetings. Consequently, everyone involved was eventually dissatisfied with the configuration of the group, although for different reasons. Some were upset that the goal of representation sent an implicit message that people needed to “protect their turf and defend their positions.” Others felt the “deck was stacked” in favor of interests other than theirs—the minority report claimed that “11 of the 15 TF members have a vested interest in development industry.”

I asked all the taskforce members why they joined the group and what they wanted to accomplish. Most claimed to come in with an “open mind” and a “willingness to compromise” and find “common ground.” Many talked about their work as a developer or realtor or nonprofit housing provider and the desire to connect with others working on housing issues—but also to make sure they did not miss anything that could impact their work. As one member put it,

I wanted to be on the [taskforce] because so many of our employees don’t live in Westmount, and I wanted to know why. I’m not a housing expert, but I’m a CEO and I know

about business and employment in this community, so I thought I could help bring that perspective, but also learn something about housing for our labor force.

Others were more explicit about their goal of defending their positions. “Protect [our business]. Grow [our business]. Figure out where housing subsidies and spending priorities are going. Advocate for what we do, and depending on who is there, make some contacts,” said another member when asked about her motivations for joining the taskforce. Regardless of what people’s intentions were or how reasonable they saw themselves, it was evident that most taskforce members thought many of their fellow participants were there to advance their own interests and protect their turf, revealing the political realities that are always present in this sort of collaboration. “A lot of people came in wanting a preconceived outcome, and they spent the whole time at the meetings trying to get that outcome,” explained one taskforce member. Another said, “Most people were defending the issues that motivated them around housing.”

Other members confirmed my observations about interest representation in taskforce meetings. For example, several meetings involved discussions about the city’s inclusionary housing ordinance, which required new developments to dedicate 10% of the development to affordable housing or make an equivalent cash-in-lieu payment. This was a key source of funding for the city’s affordable housing program. During these discussions, the taskforce member who was a private developer made several comments about limiting the inclusionary housing restrictions on new developments—especially for rental properties—and reiterated that this was the key policy change needed to improve the affordable housing program. His insistence on this position appeared to undermine possibilities for collaborative outcomes, especially since there was no further discussion of this issue in the meeting after he made his point. A taskforce member affiliated with a public housing provider recalled:

Every time [member] opened his mouth I was like “Geez, you’re really arguing for your own interests there.” And I like [member] and get along with him. But he would talk about relaxing inclusionary housing requirements on rental housing. Well, that’s because that’s where the market is now. The home ownership market is down. He’s actively in the rental game, so that’s a very self-interested thing to argue for.

In another meeting taskforce members discussed the possibility of utilizing the extensive amount of open space that surrounded much of the city. This land is currently off limits for any kind of development, but several taskforce members thought they should at least explore the possibility of rezoning the open space to help address affordable housing needs. “I’m unequivocally opposed to doing anything with open space,” interjected one of the taskforce members representing a citizen’s environmental sustainability organization. “And that pretty much killed the conversation,” recalled another member in an interview a couple weeks after that meeting. “I remember we were having a pretty good conversation until he jumped in and said that. Ok, but you can’t be so dogmatic about your interests or we’re never going to make progress,” she continued.

Even people who came to the taskforce with (what they claimed was) an open mind and a willingness to collaborate realized that things were quickly moving from

consensus and cooperation to defending self-interested positions. “I think I can honestly say I went in with an open mind,” explained one member. “But after a while you see how the game’s being played and you realize you need to stick up for your interests.” Others admitted that defending turf and advocating personal interests was probably inevitable, given the makeup of the group. “We are all too much identified with our issues,” said one member; “We were like the most entrenched people, and I don’t know if that’s wise,” stated another. This revealed a paradox of representational practices: Those most qualified to represent specific interests may also be the most unpromising, yet their involvement appears necessary for the credibility of the collaboration. This is similar to the “mainstreamer paradox” identified by Lange (2000, 2003), where collaborative processes paradoxically necessitate the inclusion of participants who may actually subvert the process. As one person involved with the taskforce put it, “It’s tricky, because on one hand these are the people that are least likely to change, but they are also the people you need on board to make any lasting decisions.”

The point is not simply that people disagreed about the issues and wanted to advance their own interests—that is common to any collaborative effort. Instead, the bigger issue was how a logic of representation permeated the taskforce in ways that made positional bargaining almost inescapable, even encouraged. For example, in a meeting about income levels that should be addressed by affordable housing policies, the taskforce member from the chamber of commerce concluded her comments by saying, “That is my line in the sand. If you don’t agree I’m not going with you.” The facilitator commented on this meeting:

After a while it was clear that some people in the group were not there to find an agreement, as opposed to being there to actually advocate for a position. And positional bargaining can get you a lot of things, but usually not an agreement with other positional bargainers.

The design of this group—likely influenced by the political dynamics of affordable housing policy in the city—had the unintended consequence of privileging strong voices and sent the message that people would be rewarded for defending their turf. As the facilitator observed, “The extreme positional people saw no reason to move off their positions because there was no risk to them for maintaining those positions. And so they did that and they did it very well.”

In contrast to an emphasis on representation is the notion of *exploration*. By this, I mean a willingness to look for something new and innovative among collaboration participants as opposed to merely trying to rearrange or reassemble the interests and positions that are already being represented. Exploration also involves a level of vulnerability, where people are willing to adjust and be persuaded through this process of discovery. However, most taskforce members said that involvement in the taskforce did nothing to change their perspectives about affordable housing and what sort of policies should be pursued. “I really didn’t change my mind on anything, even after the whole 14-month process. I exited where I started,” explained one taskforce member; “After a while it occurred to me that values weren’t up for negotiation, so I certainly didn’t change any of my values,” stated another. Most did acknowledge that they learned more information about affordable housing and how certain things

worked in the city, but the clear consensus was that very little changed in how people fundamentally saw the issue of affordable housing and what policies they would be willing to support.

The interactions and makeup of the taskforce frequently undermined the possibility for exploration. For instance, one meeting involved a group activity where taskforce members voted on various ideas that were written on large paper tablets throughout the room. "I think it would be wise to talk about this, not just vote," appealed one member. This was overruled by the city staff in favor of making sure the vote captured the will of the group and was not derailed by further discussion. In a similar voting exercise at a subsequent meeting, the facilitator tried to engage one of the members regarding an idea he submitted:

Facilitator: What I'm hearing is that you want a diverse community, affordable housing policies that address AMI (area median income) from 0–100%, is that correct?

Taskforce Member: No, and I don't think it's up to you to interpret what we think. We need to vote, that's the only way forward.

Notice the missed opportunity here to explore meaning and interpretation in favor of simply voting to ensure a proper representation of ideas. Another time some taskforce members discussed the idea of forming a smaller committee so certain members could discuss various issues in more detail, but they were discouraged from doing this because it would "upset the representational balance" of the group, further reinforcing the value of representation over exploration.

Certainly one approach to collaboration is to get all the interests on the table, find the common ground, and put together win–win scenarios that benefit all (or at least most) parties involved. But this assumes a level of shared values and beliefs that is rare for collaborative groups. Collaborations form around complex issues where stakeholders often have contrasting values, thus preventing the kind of straightforward "solutions" that are sought after through mere representation. Representation is also more likely to result in the aggregation of interests discussed above in the previous theme, whereas exploration is necessary to achieve the emergence of new ideas and agreements. Therefore, one way to understand the complications and ineffectiveness of the taskforce is that the interaction of the group privileged representational practices over exploration.

A communicative approach to civil society collaboration helps explain this contrast between representation and exploration in several key ways. First, an overemphasis on representation hindered the flexibility of interests and identities needed to manage the centripetal and centrifugal forces of collaboration (Koschmann et al., 2012) and foster a shared identity (Hardy et al., 2005). This involved how taskforce members perceived both their own interests and identities, as well as the interests and identities of others. Often conclusions about motivations and intentions were quickly drawn based on someone's professional identity or the political stakes they might represent, which made it easy to dismiss their ideas as mere attempts to advance self-interested positions instead of encouraging a willingness to be flexible

with identities and strive to develop the shared identity that is necessary for successful collaboration. Both Hardy et al. (2005) and Koschmann et al. (2012) theorize that successful collaboration depends on the flexibility of interests and identities, as well as the receptivity of intertextual influences. Certainly a degree of representation is necessary so that people know the relevant positions that make up a given problem domain and the issues that need to be addressed to reach a consensus. But the case of this taskforce demonstrates how an overemphasis on representation hinders the ability of group members to coauthor an authoritative text with the capacity for shared identity and collective agency, instead constituting a state of contrasting identities and competing texts, with no ability to act authoritatively as a group.

Expression – Engagement

The final theme of this case study focuses on the contrast between the kind of communication practices needed to accomplish successful collaboration and the actual deliberations of the taskforce. Communicative perspectives on collaboration argue that it is insufficient to merely convene key stakeholders and assume that will somehow result in collaboration—we also have to focus on how people actually interact with each other and the results of those conversations. It was clear from both field observations and interview comments that an overarching theme of *expression* permeated taskforce deliberations. That is, much of the talk at their meetings was devoted to articulating different perspectives, hearing statements from members, and getting various ideas and positions “on the record,” as was often mentioned in taskforce meetings. Following the work of Milam and Heath (2014)—and echoing Deetz (1992b)—I understand “expression” as nonparticipatory structures and monologic practices that involve conveying information and stating personal viewpoints and interests. Lacking, however, was consistent evidence of taskforce members engaging with each other in extensive conversation, especially regarding key differences and contested issues. Thus, I put *expression* in contrast with *engagement* as a way to understand the inability of the taskforce to develop the necessary knowledge, identity, and agency to influence in the problem domain of affordable housing. Here, my understanding of engagement differs slightly from similar concepts like “voice” that are discussed in the collaboration literature (see Milam & Heath, 2014). Voice entails the inclusion of various interests in decision-making processes and outcomes, whereas engagement turns our attention toward the actual encounters among participants. We often speak of voice as something people “have,” while engagement is something people “do.” My point here is that the term “engagement” draws us closer to the notion of *encounter* that is central to dialogic and communicative modes of interaction, while also complementing the concept of voice that is already established in previous literature. Generative knowledge and shared identity can only be achieved through the interactions among constituent parts of a system, not the mere accumulation of ideas that happens through expressing individual positions; and without the emergence of higher-order system properties, a collaboration cannot achieve the abstraction and reification needed to exercise agency and convey authority.

One area where this overemphasis on expression was evident was in the rules established for taskforce members to participate in the meetings. All 15 members (plus 2–3 city staff and the facilitator) sat at tables in a large circular or rectangular shape, depending on the room. Each member had a triangular name card to display at each meeting and they were instructed to turn this name card on its side when they wanted to speak. As people would make statements about various issues, other members would turn their name cards and leave them standing on their sides as they waited for the facilitator to call on them. The facilitator would keep track of the order of people who turned their cards sideways and occasionally check in to remind people of the speaking order. This strategy certainly helped mitigate some of the political pressures in the room and kept the peace among some of the stronger personalities, but it also had the effect of stifling interaction among taskforce members who certainly recognized this shortcoming. “We didn’t have deliberation, no back and forth,” explained the taskforce member from the university research institute.

For example, in one meeting a taskforce member offered a statement about how homeowners association fees impact housing affordability throughout the city. A few people jumped into the discussion to offer relevant points or clarifying comments, even though other people had their name cards up. The facilitator interrupted the conversation to bring everyone back to the order of the name cards. “But this is a good exchange,” objected one taskforce member. “That doesn’t mean those comments are more important than others waiting to talk,” the facilitator responded. Another member recalled, “We never kept any momentum. We’d have a good conversation going but it would stop because someone had their [name] card up for a while and wanted to go back and say something about a previous issue.” Several members felt the structured nature of most taskforce meetings often stifled important engagement among the members. In one of the final taskforce meetings, a member from a public housing agency said, “We just aren’t talking with each other. I think we need to modify the card thing . . . let us really talk, debate, stay on one point.” Eventually the group insisted on a different format and the name card system of participation was abandoned in favor of more unstructured conversations. But by then it may have been too late—the taskforce was running out of time to complete their final report for the City Council, and even the unstructured discussions at subsequent meetings were often about the logistics of writing the report, not exploring new ideas.

Some taskforce members thought this particular group needed more unstructured interactions if they were going to make progress, even if this meant some uncomfortable moments:

People wanted to argue. And to let them argue right away would have been really helpful. Let people yak and yell and complain and point out all the differences and that stuff. And then do some education and argue some more. But the arguing never happened, and there was no way we were going to get anywhere unless some people had at it.

Other times taskforce members themselves talked in ways that reinforced structured discussion and favored the practice of expression. During a meeting where members were going around the table listing their initial recommendations for city

council, a conversation broke out regarding the ratio of home rental versus ownership throughout the city. But before the exchange got very far another taskforce member jumped in: "I'm hearing discussion; we need to stay on task with just ideas." Although this kept the meeting "on track" so everyone could express their ideas, the group appeared to miss an opportunity to engage on an important issue that may have led to new insights.

In addition to the way participation rules at meetings may have stifled interactions, individual members often did not take the initiative to engage each other when they had the chance. This was difficult to assess in meetings — many times we do not know what the absence of interaction signifies — but interviews revealed that members were aware of missed opportunities. Consider this reflection from a taskforce member:

There were deeper conversations I wanted to have had with some of the members, just to more fully understand where they were coming from. Like [member], one of the developers. He was a very articulate guy and I think genuinely wants us to create more affordable housing, but he would speak of certain things as if they were the law of gravity, you know? Like—that you must make this much money. . . . And I'm not saying a guy shouldn't make money, but he would say, "Well, this would never work," and it was because the margin wasn't high enough. But why does the margin have to be that high? I couldn't quite get to as deep a level of understanding with someone like that as I would have liked to and so that still nags at me a little bit.

When I asked this member why he never engaged the other member to ask these things, he said it just never felt right, that everyone was focused on making their policy statements and it never appeared like there was an appropriate time or place to have an open conversation, ask dumb questions, and explore ideas, reinforcing my interpretation that the norms for the taskforce (both explicit and implicit) favored *expression*, such that *engagement* actually felt out of place.

In addition to limited interactions among taskforce members, there were also issues with the way the taskforce engaged with the City Council. The taskforce met without any direct involvement from City Council, but there were two instances where City Council held "study sessions" to hear from taskforce members about the progress of their work. On the first occasion, four taskforce representatives expressed brief statements about the main categories of their meetings to date: affordable housing goals, funding, inclusionary housing and home ownership, and land use tools and mobile homes. These statements were followed by commentary from each City Council member about the merits of each idea and their personal thoughts on various housing issues. The meeting ended with no further discussion. At the subsequent taskforce meeting, everyone who attended the study session voiced disappointment in Council's response. "Total lack of conversation," complained one member; "No back and forth with Council," someone added; "Why put together a panel of experts if you're not willing to listen and discuss?" lamented yet another taskforce member. Notice how this study session emphasized the expression of prepared statements from both taskforce and Council members but did not encourage substantive interaction among them. A second study session with the City Council was held three and a half

months later because the first study session was deemed “not conversational enough” and the Council wanted to have more discussion. However, even though most taskforce members were in attendance, it quickly became apparent that Council wanted to have the conversation among themselves, not with the taskforce members. At one point, a taskforce member stepped up to the microphone to add some clarifying information to the discussion but was told to sit back down because Council would only be talking amongst themselves. This upset some of the taskforce members:

I remember that meeting. I sat between [member] and [member] and I looked at both of them and said, “Why are we here? We’ve been here for 2½ hours and they haven’t asked us one question. They don’t want to hear what we have to say.” I was like, “I’ve got better uses of my time. I’m leaving.” I mean, what was that? What call it a study session and ask us to come? If you want to talk behind closed doors then do it, but don’t invite all of us like we’re having some conversation.

This meeting had the pretense of engagement but ended up being merely a forum for expression—and only for City Council members.

All these examples point to a contrast between expression and engagement. A certain level of expression is undoubtedly necessary for any collaborative effort—stakeholders need a forum to convey their ideas to other people. However, mere expression is insufficient to achieve the emergence of insight and creativity needed for collaboration to be successful. At issue is the need for conversations that overlap or *imbricate* (in the language of coorientation; see Taylor, 2001) such that they provide scaffolding for the emergence of new ideas and innovations. Several taskforce members lamented that new and creative ideas never could “get traction” in the group because they often had to “circle back” to someone who had been waiting with their name card up, so they kept “losing momentum” before getting to any “big ideas.” One member put it succinctly: “I was always frustrated. I wanted to have smaller conversations, not just all these statements for the whole group.” Another stated: “If you want new solutions you have to let us really talk to each other.”

Discussion

This study was motivated by a need to better understand the discrepancy between the potential and promise of civil society collaboration versus the disappointing outcomes that frequently characterize this form of organizing. The case of the Westmount Affordable Housing Taskforce provides a rich empirical example to illustrate this discrepancy and demonstrate the value of a communication perspective to explain collaboration failure. Themes of aggregation, representation, and expression defined the communication practices that constituted a failed state characterized by accumulated information, disparate identities, and the inability to act authoritatively as a group—even when so many of the “right” pieces appeared to be in place. Contrasting notions of emergence, exploration, and engagement are offered to guide alternative communication practices that constitute generative knowledge, shared identities, and collective agency.

What is especially puzzling about this case is how much effort and intention were put into trying to achieve effective collaboration, yet how unsuccessful the actual outcome was—and their failure was often related to the very things they thought would make them successful (e.g., equal representation of interests, forums for expression, structured conversation to ensure balanced participation, etc.). Yet despite all the complications, many of the people involved saw this failed outcome as fairly normal. “That’s the way it works sometimes,” said one taskforce member; “just didn’t happen,” said another, as if the best we can do is put the right pieces in place and hope for a good outcome. Rather than accept this as inevitable, I sought to develop a better explanation to understand failed collaboration. I developed a theoretical framework rooted in dialogue, discourse, and coorientation that relates to key collaboration aspects of knowledge production, shared identity, and collective agency. Combining this theoretical framework with the analytic themes of the empirical case study yields a communicative model of collaboration failure (Figure 1), which complements and extends our knowledge of communication and civil society collaboration in several important ways.

Theoretical and practical contributions

A key implication of this study is moving toward a better conceptualization of the relationship between collaboration structure and process. Keyton et al.’s (2008) review of the collaboration literature shows that collaboration is understood as both a *structure for* and a *process of ways* in which people work to resolve problems and develop new ideas. Yet a structural perspective dominates the literature at the expense of communication processes, which is a shortcoming of collaboration research more broadly (Walker & Stohl, 2012). This often leads to an overemphasis on stakeholder representation, forums for expression, equality of voice, documentation of events, formal channels of communication, public accountability, and distribution of information—yet overlooks important dynamics of process, meaning, interpretation, and interaction. Extensive efforts to convene relevant stakeholders, document key decisions, adhere to voting procedures, and record a summary of outcomes may offer the appearance of effective collaboration but do little to address how people actually communicate with each other and whether or not those communication practices enable successful collaboration. As Deetz (2008) observed, “Many have taken seriously the need to get people together in the room, but most have not attended well to what we do once we are there” (p. 294). Hence, the black box of collaboration process remains the “least understood” aspect of this important form of organizing (Thomson & Perry, 2006, p. 21). Knowledge production, shared identity, and collective agency are essential for successful collaboration, but they are not structural properties that can be imposed or necessarily planned into a collaboration ahead of time. These characteristics are not “in” a structure or the members of a collaboration, but rather are properties of the interaction itself and emerge through communication processes.

The present study also challenges the talk/action dualism that is common in popular discourse about collaboration. A frequent criticism of collaborative groups

is that they are “all talk and no action” (Lubell, 2004). Certainly collaborative groups like the taskforce form to accomplish something and should eventually be assessed on their tangible outcomes. But privileging action over talk presumes a false dichotomy, as if they are discrete phenomena rather than mutually constitutive (Kuhn, 2012). It is not the case that collaborative groups can simply “stop talking” and “start acting,” but rather that talk and action are simultaneously present in all collaborative endeavors—talk is a form of action and actions give shape to talk (cf. Boden, 1994). The issue is not whether a collaborative group is “just talking” versus “actually doing something,” but rather what kind of talk is being practiced, how this talk constitutes certain actions, and how various actions in turn shape subsequent talk. This also relates to Hardy et al.’s (2006) work on collaborative conversations, which shows how a preoccupation with talk can become an end in itself, whereas an overemphasis on action prevents the sort of relational work needed for successful collaboration. Similarly, the case of the affordable housing taskforce shows how action (or inaction) is directly related to communication practices and vice versa, such that it is impossible to treat them separately.

Practically speaking, this study has implications for how participants form collaborative groups and how they interact with each other in meetings. The affordable housing taskforce selected members based on the interests they represented and their standing in the community, but with little consideration of their communication skills or ability to collaborate with other stakeholders. The assumption was that you just have to “put people in a room” or “get them to the table,” as several people mentioned, and they should be able to “make it happen.” But as the case of the taskforce demonstrates, emphasizing interest representation puts a collaboration on a clear path toward positional bargaining and protecting one’s turf. An alternative approach could explore ways to incorporate communication skills and collaborative abilities into the selection process for groups like the taskforce, and to build more collaborative skills practice into group meetings. The point here is not to blame participants for being unskilled in alternative approaches, but rather to encourage a broader consideration of theories and concepts that inform collaboration practice. Similarly, facilitators and organizers could do more to move away from procedures that encourage participants to stake claims, magnify differences, and assert their interests, versus techniques that encourage more exploration and interaction to produce new forms of knowledge. For example, instead of one taskforce organizers might consider concurrent planning groups that work simultaneously on many of the same issues, with some members potentially rotating among groups. This would increase the requisite variety needed to address complex civil society issues—not just variety of representation, but variety of interaction.

Finally, practitioners should resist the urge to start collaboration meetings with too much information or “education,” as it is often called. This issue plagued the taskforce, which began with months of meetings about housing data, zoning restrictions, tax rates, funding statistics, and the like. The assumption is that people will not be prepared to deliberate until they are sufficiently informed about the issues.

However, this underestimates the expertise of taskforce members and sent the wrong message about the purpose and function of the taskforce, that affordable housing is primarily an *information* problem, and if people were just educated properly, they would find the “right” answers (versus create innovative solutions). Of course a certain level of knowledge and understanding is necessary for any collaborative effort to get off the ground, but that can be addressed during the application and selection process. Information should support — rather than be a prerequisite for — deliberation. In the taskforce, it probably would have been better for people to engage on the issues much sooner in a variety of interaction formats to surface points of divergence where new information might provide a path forward. For example, the facilitator conducted individual interviews with all the taskforce members outside the meetings to discuss their ideas about affordable housing policies in Westmount. A summary of these interviews was even displayed at one of the initial meetings. Yet no further discussion about these individual perspectives happened for months; instead the organizers continued with information about foreclosure rates, down payment assistance programs, rental markets, etc. They may have missed an opportunity for valuable interactions, instead settling into a pattern of information dissemination that contributed to the problems of aggregation, representation, and expression described above.

Conclusion

Civil society collaboration is essential to address the complex social issues of our day, but failed efforts are all too common. Oftentimes emphasis is placed on convening key stakeholders and ensuring representation of relevant interests and positions. Yet, mere convening is insufficient to achieve the kinds of higher-order, emergent outcomes needed to address the complex social issues that collaborations are created to address. This was evident in the case of the Westmount Affordable Housing Taskforce, a collaborative group that formed to address problems of affordable housing but was unable to influence policies or impact key decision makers. The taskforce was composed of competent people who were professional and cordial and followed many existing best practices. But, despite their good intentions they were caught up in a way of interacting that appeared “correct” but actually undermined the possibility for successful collaboration. My argument is that this is not simply bad luck, but rather an explainable process of constituting a state of failed collaboration. A communicative framework of civil society collaboration helps us understand this unsuccessful result in terms of communication practices that did not facilitate the emergence of dialogic moments, shared identity, and collective agency in relation to contrasting themes of aggregation – emergence, representation – exploration, and expression – engagement. If we want to get beyond the status quo of collaborations that convene key stakeholders and offer the appearance of legitimacy, but do not make a substantive difference and create value in a given problem domain, we need to think differently about collaboration and communication. This study helps shape that thinking. It provides a model of collaboration failure that is distinctly communicative and offers an in-depth look at contrasting communication practices to inform future research and practice.

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Notes

- 1 Representing the executive roundtable, a local realtors association, the urban land institute, and a citizen's environmental sustainability organization.
- 2 A member of the chamber of commerce, a board member of a nonprofit housing developer, a mobile home resident, a realtor and board member of a nonprofit housing organization, a researcher from a university economic development institute, and another representative from the citizens environmental sustainability organization.

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