

Book Review

Kahane, A. (2017). *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work With People You Don't Agree With or Like or Trust*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Julian Humphreys
Toronto, Canada

As the title of the book suggests, Adam Kahane attempts to answer the question ‘How do people who are fundamentally different in their goals, values and beliefs work together despite their differences?’

The conventional view of collaboration, he claims, “requires us all to be on the same team and headed in the same direction, to agree on what has to happen” (p. 1). But what do we do when even that first step seems impossible? How do we move forward with others when we can’t seem to agree on even the most basic things?

As the lead facilitator on group processes aimed at resolving long-standing political impasses around the world, including in post-apartheid South Africa, Kahane has a vast wealth of experience with seemingly intractable problems. His text is sprinkled with fascinating first-hand accounts of his work with governments, NGOs and private corporations, all of which led him to develop his theory of “stretch collaboration” (p. 1), which he contrasts with conventional collaboration in the following ways:

Conventional collaboration	Stretch collaboration
Focuses narrowly on collective goals and harmony of team	Embraces both conflict and connection within and beyond the team
Insists on clear agreements about the problem, the solution and the plan	Experiments systematically with different perspectives and possibilities
Tries to change what other people are doing	Enters fully in to the action and is willing to change ourselves

Kahane's central claim in the book is that conventional collaboration may work when a team is homogeneous and agrees on desired outcomes, but in today's increasingly complex and uncontrollable world, such situations are rare. As a result, we have to learn how to collaborate differently.

Before addressing the question of *how* to collaborate, though, Kahane asks us to consider *when* to collaborate. Collaboration, he believes, must be a choice, informed by criteria, with four possible outcomes.

1. We *Collaborate* when we can change a situation but can't do so unilaterally
2. We *Force* when we can change a situation and can do so unilaterally
3. We *Adapt* when we can't change a situation and can bear it
4. We *Exit* when we can't change a situation and can't bear it (pp. 18-23)

The choice to collaborate, then, is a pragmatic one.

We adapt or exit when others are more powerful than us and so can force things to be the way they want them to be; we force when we are the more powerful; and we collaborate only when our power is evenly matched and neither of us can impose our will. (pp. 22-23)

In an increasingly complex, interconnected world, power is often limited by forces beyond our control, making collaboration necessary but difficult. Agreement about basic assumptions and desired outcomes is less likely and we consequently feel stuck, trapped by forces beyond our control, and unable to move forward.

We see these other people's values and behaviors as different from ours; we believe they are wrong or bad; we feel frustrated or angry. Although we know that we have to work with them, we wish we didn't. We worry that we will have to compromise or betray what we believe is right and matters most to us. In these situations, although we see that we need to collaborate with those people, we don't see how we can do so successfully. (p. 10)

The answer, Kahane argues, is a new form of collaboration that does not require agreement at the outset. Instead, it involves "finding a way to move forward together in the absence of or beyond such agreements" (p. 35). It requires giving up control, believing that by doing so we will ultimately get more of what we want and less of what we don't want – and where even what we end up wanting may look different to what we previously imagined.

To engage in this new form of collaboration we need to make three fundamental shifts in our approach to collaboration.

First, we need to recognize that there is no such thing as ‘the whole,’ and consequently no such thing as ‘for the good of the whole.’ Often collaboration is premised on this idea, that together we are serving the whole, and that’s what really matters. Instead, Kahane argues, there are multiple wholes – wholes within wholes – or *holons*. Recognizing that there are nested and overlapping *holons* within larger *holons* means multiple, often competing interests, not just the single interest of ‘the whole,’ must come together through the responsible exercise of power and love (for a more complete treatment of this idea see Kahane’s previous book, *Power and Love* (2010)). What is particularly interesting is Kahane’s emphasis on the generative cycle of power and love. It is impossible, he claims, to hold these two polarities at the same time – we must instead move between them, cycling or looping, being supremely sensitive to when we are over-invested in one or the other.

The second requirement is that we get comfortable with the idea of moving forward without a plan. When people don’t agree, like or trust one another, they are unlikely to commit to a shared, long-term, large-scale plan. Instead they *may* just be willing to take a small step in a shared direction and see how that feels. And then *maybe* one more. This modest, tentative, and ultimately realistic approach to shared action means resisting the natural desire to see doom and gloom when things go wrong and sunshine and light when things go well.

We need to maintain our equanimity in a conflictual, uncomfortable situation where we don’t know how things will turn out, or when, or even if we will succeed. (p. 81)

This ability to be comfortable with uncertainty is what the English poet John Keats meant by ‘negative capability,’ and is equally important when communicating with diverse others. Kahane distinguishes four ways of talking and listening, two of which reenact existing realities (Downloading and Debating) and two of which enact new realities (Dialoguing and Presencing). To co-create across difference requires getting comfortable with all four ways of talking and listening.

Finally, the third and perhaps most difficult requirement of all is that we focus less on changing others, and more on changing ourselves. In the absence of agreement and hierarchy we are simply one co-creator among many. We may be able to influence, cajole, or inspire others, but when we fail to do so the

temptation is to blame others for not being influenced, cajoled or inspired, rather than ourselves, for not being sufficiently influential, cajoling or inspiring.

Whenever we find ourselves distracted by others, we need to come back to the simple question, what must we do next? (p. 97).

And unless we are going the route of non-collaboration – forcing, adapting or exiting – our only viable option is to look for ways that *we* can be different.

Kahane concludes his book with a six-week, do-it-yourself course of exercises aimed at developing the reader's ability to meet the requirements of stretch collaboration. Coaches, especially those working with teams on seemingly intractable issues, will likely find these helpful.

References

Kahane, A. (2010). *Power and love: theory and practice of new social changes*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Author Contact

julian@philosophyofcoaching.org