Here in the twenty-first century we are confronted by all kinds of difficult problems: things like global poverty, HIV/AIDS, climate change and environmental conservation, immigration reform, and religious and ethnic conflicts, just to name a few. These are what scholars call “meta-problems” or “wicked problems” because they are beyond the scope of any single group, organization, or government; they seem increasingly intractable; and there is no technical solution to resolve the problem.

And unfortunately, our cultural climate doesn’t seem well-suited to address these sorts of problems. We live in a time of hyper-partisanship and media sensationalism, where so many issues become entrenched battles, and every comment is exaggerated in a 24-hour news cycle and the endless connections of social networking. Trust in our leaders and institutions is at an all-time low. If there was ever a time to think differently about how we do things, this is it.

In order to tackle the pressing issues of our day we need to improve our ability to **collaborate** and make quality decisions **together**...decisions that are ethical, sustainable, and involve diverse people in meaningful ways. Let’s call this our **collaborative challenge**: the ability to work together to develop agreements about the best ways to address difficult problems.

But before we charge ahead, we need to understand the complexities of our modern times that influence our ability to collaborate.

First, a hallmark of today’s global society is the extensive **interdependence** that exists between economies, nation states, local communities, and other relevant groups. Everything is connected, so our actions often have far-reaching impacts and unintended consequences. Just look at the strange and unpredictable domino effect of the recent economic crisis.

Second, this interdependence means there are an increasing number of **relevant stakeholders** who can affect—and are affected by—these difficult issues. When you work on any particular problem, you realize that there are many players involved who have legitimate claims to the issue. Education reform, for example, isn’t just about schools and teachers...it’s also about parents, communities, people who pay property taxes, businesses that develop textbooks and curricula, nonprofits that provide supplemental programs, and a host of other stakeholders...all of whom have different values and beliefs about how best to solve problems.

And finally, the complexity of our modern society is underwritten by unprecedented **access to information, technology, and new ideas**. Of course this has led to tremendous advancements, but it has also exposed how fragile and arbitrary much of our society is because everything seems to be up for continual negotiation. Established traditions and institutions are often
revised, long-standing relationships and agreements are constantly rearranged, others simply dissolve overnight. Assumptions about “the way things are” are frequently questioned because things certainly could be otherwise. Our traditional foundations of consensus have eroded into a sea of pluralism where few underlying beliefs and values transcend our various subcultures.

In short, we face a number of difficult problems that involve a lot of different people and everything is connected. Things we used to take for granted are now open to negotiation. What used to seem like isolated, manageable issues now involve so many diverse people and values, and the slightest “wrong” move has far-reaching ripple effects.

All these realities point to one overarching challenge for us in the twenty-first century: Our ability to collaborate and make quality decisions together…decisions that are ethical, sustainable, and involve relevant stakeholders in meaningful ways. Whether it’s in our local communities or our national politics, this collaborative challenge will underwrite virtually all our public policies, shaping our future and our ability to meet the pressing social issues of our day.

Now, by collaboration I’m talking about a group of people who represent different aspects of an issue, working together to explore their differences and come up with solutions that couldn’t be achieved on their own. Of course collaboration may not always be the best approach. But when problems are characterized by complexity…because of their interdependence and the diversity of stakeholders and interests involved, collaboration might be the best approach to help us make progress.

But of course anyone who has actually been involved in collaboration knows that it can be incredibly frustrating and problematic: unproductive meetings, endless discussions, political maneuvering, free riders who don’t do their fair share, hoarding of information, and lowest common denominator “agreements” that no one really likes. That’s because the complexity that make collaboration necessary—the interdependence and the diversity of stakeholders—also makes collaboration very difficult.

But the problem isn’t collaboration per se, it’s how we think about and practice collaboration. And unfortunately our thinking is often filled with unhelpful and counterproductive assumptions about collaboration and human interaction. So let’s try to develop a better understanding of collaboration so we can meet our collaborative challenge more effectively.

To do this, I’d like to borrow a framework from two researches in the UK, Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen, who came up with a really helpful way of thinking about collaboration…and I’ll round out their framework with some additional ideas from my research and others.

Huxham and Vangen show us that we need to understand the competing forces that are always present in collaboration. That is, we need to appreciate the realities that are part of any collaborative effort. Consider all the good things that can come from collaboration: new ideas, new relationships, shared resources, innovative solutions, strengthened networks, increased legitimacy, etc…they call this collaborative advantage. Now conversely, think of all the bad stuff that can happen in collaboration we mentioned before: endless discussion, stalemates, unproductive meetings, lack of participation, etc…they call this collaborative inertia.
So we need to think about collaboration in terms of two opposing forces that are always present and need to be managed. Collaborative advantage is what we’re hoping to achieve, but collaborative inertia is the “natural” state of affairs, the default position we fall into if we’re not vigilant.

Think about it like this. Picture an airplane trying to fly. There are two forces at work...the laws of gravity and the laws of aerodynamics. Now, the laws of aerodynamics are strong enough to overcome the laws of gravity so the plane can fly, but the laws of gravity are always in play, so if you lose focus gravity will quickly take over and you’ll be in big trouble. Because of gravity, the “natural” state for airplanes is staying on the ground. But if you understand the laws of aerodynamics and work hard to apply them well, you can fly.

The same is true of collaboration. Collaborative inertia is a “natural” state of human interaction...it’s the default position when people work together if they aren’t focused on the common good. But there are also things we can do to overcome collaborative inertia and achieve collaborative advantage. So this is our framework...we need to understand the competing forces of collaborative inertia and collaborative advantage so we can develop systems that enable us to work together productively and make better decisions.

First let’s talk about collaborative inertia, and some of the “gravity” that keep collaborations stuck on the ground, so to speak. People from different organizations and different sectors of society literally speak different languages, and they have different values and beliefs that often seem incompatible. People have interests they want to protect and advance; they have resources and information they want to control. Plus it’s tough to get momentum...most collaborative work is voluntary, so collaborations are always competing with other responsibilities and commitments...the work is often difficult and ambiguous, and unfortunately people can lose interest or just go through the motions.

This is the inertia that can keep collaboration stuck on the ground and unproductive; this is the gravity that needs to be overcome if we are to achieve collaborative advantage. A daunting challenge, to be sure, but given the realities of the twenty-first century and the difficult social issues we face, we need to rise to the occasion.

So what are the laws of aerodynamics for collaboration that can help us achieve collaborative advantage? Well, unfortunately social systems are not as clean-cut as the world of physics. Collaboration is too context-specific, too reliant on the complexities of human interaction to develop a straightforward list of rules and laws. But there are some basic principles we should keep in mind, and some questions we should continually ask ourselves throughout any collaborative endeavor.

First, we need to focus on collaboration design, or how it is that we develop the capacity to have successful collaboration. To do this, we need to think about collaboration as both a structure and a process. By structure, I’m talking about the arrangements of people, logistics of meetings, etc. Who’s at the table, and how is the table is set? By process I’m talking about all the ways in which people interact. And of course structure and process are reflexive, meaning
they influence each other. How a meeting is structured, for example, will shape how processes unfold, and how people interact can alter the structure of a collaboration. So we need to think about collaboration design in terms of both structure and process.

Now, too often people emphasize structure over process...as if all we need to do is get the right people at the table and they’ll figure it out. But if we don’t pay attention to how people actually interact at the table we’re missing a key piece of the puzzle. Other times we emphasize process too much...we get lost in the minutia of procedures and policies and lose sight of the big picture.

And as you might imagine, there is no one structure or process that is right for every collaboration. But there are some key considerations for each we need to keep in mind. For structure, the big issue is representation. What interests are being represented, by whom, and how? It’s important that relevant stakeholders have an opportunity for meaningful participation—more than just a chance to speak—and that those involved have the authority to speak for others and make decisions.

For process, the main issue is patterns of interaction, and whether or not the ways people interact create a favorable environment for cooperation. Do people in this collaboration trust each other, for example? People who trust each other are more likely to overcome differences, give each other the benefit of the doubt, and make better decisions together. How can we interact so that we build the levels of trust in a collaboration? Do people have the freedom to bring up conflicts and have honest dialogue, or do we squelch debate to achieve an artificial consensus? Collaboration doesn’t require unanimity or perfect alignment of values and beliefs, but rather a sufficient understanding to have coordinated action. When conflicts are articulated and divergent interests are surfaced, we’re more likely to develop respect for alternative perspectives and create a trajectory of progress that can accommodate different ideas—we can still take meaningful action despite some of our differences.

And as long as we’re talking about collaboration design, I should also mention how important it is for us to resist the tempting alternatives to collaboration, which generally involve ways of excluding certain stakeholders so we don’t have to deal with the “messiness” of different perspectives...like controlling information and decision making to create the perception of unanimity while actually marginalizing alternative viewpoints...or framing an issue in such a complicated way so that only the “experts” can understand what’s really going on...or anything else we might do to keep relevant stakeholders out of the conversation because we think we can do it better by ourselves (if only others would just stay out of our way). These alternatives to collaboration may provide some short term “success” or momentary compliance, but are not likely to foster the kind of long-term, sustainable agreements we need.

Finally, let me discuss one more aspect of collaboration I think is essential for collaborative advantage. This has to do with how we think about communication. Now of course good communication is central to any collaborative effort...I think everyone agrees with that. But we don’t always agree on what actually qualifies as good communication, and more importantly, we often have a very simplistic view of communication that is unhelpful (and even counterproductive) in light of the complexities of collaboration. See, we tend to think of communication as a relatively straightforward process of message transmission—what scholars
call an informational view of communication—that is focused on expression. You know, exchanging information, expressing your opinion, making a point, giving feedback, etc. But recent scholarship demonstrates the importance of an alternative, more complex perspective—a constitutive view of communication—which is focused on production. When we communicate we are doing so much more than merely expressing ideas and exchanging information (although we are certainly doing at least that). But more importantly, we are literally constituting our social reality and producing ideas and meanings and interpretations that shape how we live and work together...what scholars often call “social construction.”

Let me give you an example from some of my research with a collaborative group working to address the issue of affordable housing in our city. A common first step in a group like this is to define “the problem,” like affordable housing in this instance. But when this happens, people are not merely expressing a pre-defined reality, as if the issue of affordable housing just exists naturally “out there” and all we have to do is observe and describe it. No, everyone involved has a different perspective—the private developers, the city housing authority, the nonprofit housing providers, the community activists, the housing residents, and the politicians who oversee the city’s affordable housing program. What constitutes the “affordable housing problem”, then, is the intersection of all their divergent perspectives and the common understanding that emerges through their communication. In this way, communication produces—not merely expresses—the problem of affordable housing...and the continual negotiation of this understanding will shape subsequent collaborative efforts.

This approach to communication—a constitutive view—has important implications for collaboration. It means that central aspects of a collaboration we often take for granted—the existence of the group, the criteria for making decisions, the interests that we and others represent—aren’t just given or “natural,” they are constituted and socially constructed through our communication, and thus subject to revision and multiple interpretations. It means, for example, that our identities (how we see ourselves and others, and how others see us) are open to continual negotiation as we interact with each other and make sense of different situations and experiences—we have to be more willing to attribute meaning based on circumstances and contextual factors than what we think are fixed personality traits. Communication is how we develop a collective identity with our collaborators that transcends our individual interests. This also means that what we say is often less important than how we say it—we need to focus on what we want to accomplish or produce through our communication, not just what we want to express.

So now we have a framework for meeting the collaborative challenges of our day. Of course there are many other good ideas and practices that go into successful collaboration. But if we can recognize the forces of collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia, if we can think critically about collaborative design—both in terms of structure and process, and if we can expand our understanding of communication—based on a constitutive view and social construction, we’ll have a good foundation for meeting the collaborative challenge of our day and confronting the difficult issues that are a prominent feature of our complex society.