Knowledge in Action – Issue 35

Enhancing collaborative partnerships through gamification

Collaboration is a vital competency – especially when it comes to effecting change within an organisation. And, although such collaboration can be challenging, individuals and teams can become better at it, as previous Henley Forum research has shown. Seeking to help organisations to better access the collaboration lessons from such research, a Henley Forum Action Research project employed gamification techniques to encapsulate these lessons in a game – The Collaboration Maze. The result: fascinating insights into how gamification and storytelling can help to build collaborative bridges.

Creating change in organisations is difficult, and complex. And on their own, it is difficult for individuals or even teams to effect organisational change. They need help – help from other individuals and teams, working to the same broad objective, albeit perhaps for different reasons, and in respect of their own agendas.

But how best to create and build those partnerships, and how best to locate the right people with whom to partner? An Action Research project, carried out by members of the Henley Forum in 2015, explored the dynamics of building successful internal change partnerships, looking at how such partnerships established bridges of understanding and commitment between individuals, between teams, and between organisational silos.

> "The word 'game' can come across as implying that the activity is a bit flippant, just playing. But as soon as we saw the board and the cards, it was clear that it was a serious bit of kit. So, while I wasn't quite sure what to expect at the start of the game, I could instantly see that it was definitely a serious exercise."

The result: the development of a number of practical tools, check lists, diagnostic questions, and tips – which together built into a body of guidance intended to be of value to anyone wanting to instigate change within their organisation.

A game is born

But having access to a body of guidance isn't the same as being confident in the use of that body of guidance – or even the same as actually realising the need to use it in the first place.

And yet, the members of the Action Research project team recognised that the value of that body of guidance was undoubted: developing internal partnerships in a changing organisation is inherently difficult. It was, they realised, rather like being in a maze that is always evolving: it can be hard to find your way around, and no one can see the whole picture. Obstacles and dead ends often appear without warning, and yet persevering to achieve successful change can bring rewards.

How, then, to make it easier for people to both recognise the need to tap into change-specific internal partnering guidance – and then actually explore, learn from, and embed the lessons from such guidance in their day-to-day activities?

And so, one year on, the Action Research project team gathered together to consider how best to share the lessons of internal partnering more widely. And in the discussions that followed, an intriguing idea emerged. Drawing on thinking from areas such as storytelling, organisational development, gamification and structured learning, the group wondered if it might it be possible to distil these insights regarding developing collaborative partnerships into a game.

The answer, after careful deliberation: yes, it would be possible. And so, a game was born—The Collaboration Maze.

Serious fun

Gamification is a powerful tool. Games are systems that help us to learn patterns, and the fun we get from playing games is a neurochemical reward that encourages us to keep trying. Gamification, it has been demonstrated, increases engagement through immersion and intrinsic rewards.

Storytelling adds to the power of gamification. Games with a storytelling element can facilitate sensemaking, and help people learn to deal with ambiguity. Tales of labyrinths and mazes provide a sensemaking tool for understanding and explaining organisational complexity and for slowing us down.

And games can work best when associated with physical objects – because, simply, stuff matters, in organisation life as in everyday life. Learning involves the material world, as much as the mind, and so learning through games is enhanced when artefacts and objects are involved – a phenomenon known as sociomateriality.
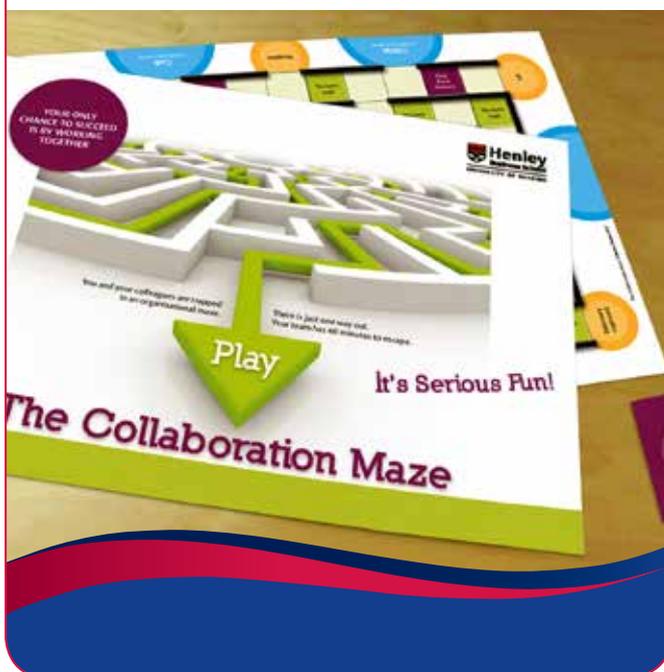
Six best practices in gamification

Designing a game can be fun. But designing a game that works, that engages people, and that adds genuine value can be challenging.

Collaboration, insight... practical value

Coordinated by Dr Sharon Varney of Henley Business School, the Action Research programme described here involved Henley Forum members drawn from Citizens Advice, the Financial Conduct Authority, Linklaters, Lloyds Banking Group, Surrey County Council, and United Utilities.

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"Navigating a maze is a good description of the workplace, and of organisations and teams. Because there really are decisions to make, and there really are checkpoints where you have to collaborate in order to make progress. So the analogy works well. People get in the way, structures get in the way, and you've got to find ways around them – it's a complex process."

Using games in the workplace: key insights

Games are popular. So don't be surprised if lots of people volunteer to take part in testing, or if people are disappointed if they can't take part. Correctly developed, a game will genuinely engage people, and bring together people who don't normally come into contact with each other.

How players learned from The Collaboration Maze

Playing The Collaboration Maze created a natural context for learning and sharing knowledge. Even without a formal reflection session being a part of the game, players treated it as a reflective activity. It provided a 'container' for learning – providing time, place, and fellow players – and opened up an opportunity to discuss challenging questions ('Is it acceptable to fail?') about behaviours that emerged a part of the game. It was fun, but fun with a very evident serious aspect, which was something that was important for those people who wouldn't normally take part just for fun.

12 top tips for developing successful internal change partnerships

1. Begin with a positive attitude – it can be catching – and aim to get others into the same positive state of mind.

2. Develop clarity about who you need to partner with, even though this takes time and effort.

3. Make the most of existing connections. Reach out to them first and build out from there.

4. Keep talking – ideally in person – in order to create clarity. Ask questions to draw out tacit understanding.

5. Get yourself a good backer: someone that people tend to trust already.

6. If you want to change your world, get started and accept the imperfections. Don't wait for things to settle – because they rarely will.

7. Your attitude matters. Become an 'attractor', because of your energy, openness, passion and honesty. Use this to build trust and a shared vision with partners (although without imposing your vision).

8. Timing matters, so choose yours. Take the time to do things properly.

9. Say hello face-to-face, which builds social capital and trust.

10. Develop shared objectives, or at least try to get your differing objectives on the same page.

11. Think about 'what's in it for me?' Partners all want a share of the cake.

12. And last, but not least: Model the Way. Lead by example to show others in your organisation how to develop successful internal partnerships.

Put another way, gamification isn't a game. Having clear, coherent content matters. Constructing clear, engaging visuals matters. Constructing a clear, compelling story matters. And, yet again, stuff matters: the game is a physical construct, not a mental thought experiment.

What was learned about gamification in the context of organisational development and learning? Try these six best practices:

- Take time to establish the game's objectives, and its constraints – such as time limits, and cost. The fun can be added later!
- Keep the game simple – the simpler the better.
- The right degree of challenge is vital. There's a fine balance between too easy, and too hard.
- Start testing and learning as early as possible. And then keep testing, listening, questioning and learning.
- Development is an iterative process. But content is crucial, and so is the story.
- Keep revising until the game feels right: the goal is a game that's simple and fun, but which is also challenging, and which adds value.

Use this framework to develop partnerships across internal boundaries in your organisation.

Finding the right partners	Forming productive working relationships	Performing to meet goals
Who are the right people to partner with?	How can you build understanding of each others' perspectives and goals?	How will you clarify mutual aims and objectives – which may not be shared – and jointly develop an action plan to realise (multiple) delivery goals?
Who can help you to find these people?		
What existing relationships can you build on?	How can you develop trust between partners?	How will you maintain pace and momentum?

Birkinshaw, J, Bessant, J and Delbridge, R (2007) 'Finding, Forming, and Performing: Creating networks for discontinuous innovation'. California Management Review, 49 (3): 67-84.

Want to play The Collaboration Maze? You can!

The game website, **collaborationmaze.com**, offers different options for accessing The Collaboration Maze. Henley Forum members can simply download The Collaboration Maze from the project page on the Members' website.

The game kit includes a full set of resources, requiring just the addition of dice and a timer. In the kit you'll find:

- The complete game, including cards, tokens, rules, and a 'how to play' guide
- A Facilitator's Guide
- A video, showing how to set up and play The Collaboration Maze
- Publicity materials, in order to attract players

How players experienced The Collaboration Maze

Simple to play, The Collaboration Maze nevertheless has a readily apparent deeper meaning. Players can't see where they are going, and don't know if they will get out or not. And – quite deliberately – the underlying metaphor of a maze was exploited to maximise the sense of confusion in the game, in order to foster collaboration.

How players contextualised The Collaboration Maze

The Collaboration Maze is a board game, readily downloadable as a 'kit' of printable cards and documents, requiring only the addition of dice and a timer. As such, there's instant familiarity with the metaphor: the people playing it automatically know how to play, and what to expect – or so they think. But it's a game that is taking place in the workplace and, as such, playing it feels a little subversive and 'edgy'.

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