



Above, seesaw Scotland 1919 (photo credit: William Reid/National Geographic).

## The Childhood Seesaw — A Collaborative or Competitive System?

By Stephen Willis, Ph.D.

I am accustomed to the confusion around collaboration that frequently jumps out during pivotal business activities and personal relationship interactions. Recently, I encountered a fun example involving the childhood seesaw, also known as the teeter-totter. A well-known artist had painted a piece he titled “Collaborate.” He enthusiastically depicted it as perfect for the cover of my next book on collaboration, and offered to let me use it. My initial reaction was one of delight and

Based on: "Power through Collaboration: The Formula for Success in Challenging Situations."

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appreciation. However, upon seeing the painting, my delight turned to dismay. I thought, “How am I going to tell him that his painting was not illustrative of collaboration?”

His painting depicted two children on a seesaw, with the one close to the ground leaning way back to maximize his leverage in order to keep the other child up in the air. The artist described his satisfaction as a child at keeping the other child high up in the air and preventing them from coming down. For him the seesaw was a game of win-lose and controlling the other player.

Additionally, in the painting a “fat cat” was on the side of the seesaw that was lower to the ground. The child who was high up in the air was beckoning to the cat to come onto their side. The artist envisioned collaboration as the child high up in the air getting the cat to come over to their side of the seesaw, thereby gaining enough weight to descend and put the opposing child up in the air.

The overall image illustrated children competing within a game structured for competition. And the cooperative element of forming opportunistic alliances with the “fat cat” to gain a winning advantage reflected motivation to cooperate and negotiate, but not necessarily to collaborate. The image was an archetype of competition, not collaboration. And with the best of intentions it was being offered as the embodiment of collaboration to grace the cover of my next book in the “Power through Collaboration” series!

I started to share my perspective that this was an image of competition with one person being up and one person being down, one person being on top and one person being on bottom. Before I could finish my thoughts, the artist’s eyes lit up and a lightbulb seemed to go off in his mind. He eagerly exclaimed, “Oh yes, collaboration would be both of the people at an equal height.”

I was again surprised by his confusion about collaboration. If both seesaw players remained at the same level, then nothing was happening. The participants were not accomplishing anything. The seesaw system was not being utilized and was at a standstill. In contrast, Power through Collaboration is about making things happen and getting results.

Although the seesaw depicted a competitive system in the painting, it can also illustrate a collaborative system. I recall playing on the seesaw with a collaborative rather than a competitive purpose. The mutually shared goal was to have fun. And to have fun required collaboration because a seesaw does not work with just one person. Making the seesaw work requires two people, and sometimes more! No collaboration meant no fun.

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Above, jumping seesaw" Korea (photo credit: Bebouchard/Flickr).

The mutually shared goal was to have fun going up and down as vigorously and as energetically as possible. Instead of trying to keep the opposing child high up in the air, the child lower to the ground would propel upwards vigorously enough to bounce into the air off the seesaw as they reached the top. As they came back in contact with the seesaw, they would throw their weight down at the same time that the child near the ground would use their legs to shoot upwards.

When children synchronized their upward and downward efforts, the up-and-down seesaw motion was magnified and both players got an energetic and exhilarating ride. It was a very early lesson about the benefits of collaboration. The more we collaborated, the more fun and excitement we had. Interestingly, the synchronization of efforts emerged with little verbal input or planning, except the very reinforcing “wow” and “whee” and “whoopie!”

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Such fun collaboration required trust. Playmates needed to be trustworthy about not hopping off the seesaw while the other child was bouncing up into the air! Some kids did take pleasure in seeing their “playmates” freefall and collide with the ground. Trust is especially important when the risk of injury is elevated, as occurs with the “jumping seesaw” popular in Korea.

Ruthless competitor types would not warrant such trust. They would not idly let the cat ally with the opposing player to reverse their winning position, and power and control. Ruthless competitor types do not tolerate losing or being placed in a vulnerable position. If the cat moved to the other side, they would likely just slip off the seesaw and let the other player and cat crash to the ground, regardless of any injury caused. Competitor types may even take satisfaction at injuring an opponent who came close to outdoing them.

The seesaw shows how easy it is to misconstrue what collaboration is and is not. It illustrates how people can perceive themselves as collaborating while others see them as competing, or worse. It also shows how a person’s cooperation type and cooperation motivations shape how they use collaboration tools and participate in collaboration processes. Such Power through Collaboration types and motivations emerge and get reinforced from our earliest ages and childhood activities. People inclined toward competition perceive and utilize the seesaw process for competition purposes. People inclined toward collaboration perceive and utilize it for collaboration purposes.

In the rural Columbian town of Gaviotas the preschool uses a seesaw for a water pump. As children play on the seesaw, their up and down motion pumps well water into a holding tank. Thousands of such seesaw pumps in rural schoolyards use the power of collaboratively playing children to provide clean water to villages without the laborious hauling of buckets of water from muddy rivers.<sup>1</sup>

The simple seesaw has been used in many different cultures from at least the 1700s. Yet it offers a modern day lesson that determines the success of our collaboration technologies. It illustrates the varying ways people can define, approach, and use modern day collaboration technology and tools, as well as operate a company or an economic system.

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<sup>1</sup> John (August 9, 2003). “Gaviotas,” *Social Design Notes*. Retrieved from: <http://backspace.com/notes/2003/08/gaviotas.php>