
Editorial: Commentary: connected autonomy

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For over 50 years, the concept of “collaboration” has dominated the attention of educators looking to build collective efficacy. We believe that as a concept, collaboration directs attention too quickly to the *processes* of working together and not explicitly enough to the thinking *disposition* that must precede the process of collaboration itself. Thus, collaboration is too often built on flimsy footings, prone to the danger of becoming a practice too quickly (or for that matter abandoned prematurely). We also contend that societal forces have changed radically through COVID and other disruptions to the point that more dynamic capacities are required by individuals and groups seeking to survive and thrive in current and future societies. We have come to understand that working together requires a stronger set of conditions that we think are best developed through the premises and actions associated with a dynamic that we call “connected autonomy” (CA). CA is a humanistic concept that captures the dynamic equilibrium of being simultaneously autonomous from and connected to others. CA is not a continuum but rather a single dynamic state that is always navigating the forces of connection and autonomy.

We also contend that collaboration has become stuck in trying to improve the existing system and thus fails to create the conditions for systemic change itself. Unwittingly, current change strategies end up treating deep problems with surface solutions failing to recognize and develop the structural or systemic solutions that are required. To foreshadow our solution, we see the need for a fundamentally different model that we call the “humanity paradigm” in contrast to the existing model which, despite its purported goals, ends up perpetuating the status quo – a model which we have called the “bloodless paradigm” (Fullan, 2021). It is not bloodless by intention but is in terms of outcomes (as evidenced, for example by over 40 years of ever accelerating dehumanizing inequality).

Beset as the current system is with speed and surfacing, there is little time for serious linked thinking. We think that this is why systems grab at ideas like “collaboration” and do not pay sufficient attention to initiating conditions on which collaboration must be founded. Means (collaboration) become ends (equity) without ever changing the system in ways that would actually generate better outcomes (greater actual equality for example). We argue in this commentary that “CA” gives us a better chance of pursuing deeper system change. We propose a clear definition of CA and a set of “five convictions” that must underpin it.

Connected autonomy

The idea of “CA” evolved from Fullan’s (2019) book on *Nuance* and was further developed after the publication of the book in work with Spillane within two large school systems. We think this work provides a new lens on understanding and guiding change in ever complex organizations and society. These concepts include “contextual literacy,” “mutual empathy” and the role of “power” as essential to CA in practice.

Let us start with a simple analogy. To connect communities living on opposite sides of a river, you build a bridge. But if the people living on either side of the river live in isolation from, indifference to or suspicion or fear of each other, the bridge will be there, but it will not be freely used. The two sides might even put up border checkpoints and



Journal of Professional Capital and
Community
Vol. 7 No. 4, 2022
pp. 329-333
© Emerald Publishing Limited
2056-9548
DOI 10.1108/jpcc-10-2022-105

restrictions to ensure that those coming from the other side are controlled and supervised. It will still be a bridge, but it will not connect these two communities. For the people who live on either side of this river, are they actually better off than when they were separate and not connected by the bridge? There would be a new structural *capacity for connection* but still the old dispositional reasons for staying apart. The engineers have done their job, the border officials will do theirs, etc. but the *stance* of the two populations towards each other has not changed. The leaders on each side have not convened the future, bringing the sides together in mutual respect and for the benefit of all. So while the bridge itself is evidence of an improved *capacity for connection*, it will be the flow of traffic on the bridge that gives evidence of the improved connection actually *happening*. To put it another way, the bridge signals an intention, the traffic signals an impact.

In systems that have the CA dynamic in place, the bridge is built, *and* the people are using it to connect, discover innovative options, uncover shared truth and concerns, formulate new shared actions and so forth. But the bridge itself, though important, is not the critical indicator of the existence of CA. Rather, it is in the *flow of traffic* on the bridge that CA can best be seen. This notion of the living, experienced reality of connection and autonomy in dynamic harmony is a new concept that we bring to the table. Working together in these ways allows people to accomplish more in these complex times. CA is a form of “systemness” where people increase mutual empathy and commitment to solve difficult problems facing them. The metaphor of traffic on the bridge represents the nature of new relationships whereby groups interact in new ways to accomplish things hitherto not possible.

Within the dynamic of CA, there are three additional concepts that have evolved in our work: “contextual literacy,” “mutual empathy” and alterations in how “power” operates under conditions of CA.

Contextual literacy is defined as follows:

- (1) The competency of understanding deeply the people and culture in your own organization or setting and engaging effectively with internal systems. Accompanying this is the development of greater “mutual empathy” including compassion (empathy plus action).
- (2) Being an apprentice and an expert along the way (always learning)
- (3) Realizing that every time you change jobs or when context changes, leaders become to a certain extent “deskilled”.

Mutual empathy is required in order to understand and learn from each other’s context as well as to develop new common ground. Finally, power becomes recalibrated. Especially since complex change involves “joint determination” of solutions with those living in the situation, effective solutions require ongoing contextual literacy, mutual empathy and corresponding alterations in the dynamics of power.

For contextual literacy to develop and for mutual empathy to be established, the group has to explicitly and openly identify and agree on norms that will govern their culture of interaction. Under conditions of CA, there is a conception of power that fundamentally honors *power for rather than power over*. When power is held *over* an individual or a group, it either controls behavior through fear and surveillance or results in a tug of war between requirements and various forms of resistance. For us, CA is a marker of group health because

it emerges only when power is held by and for the group. In this view, leadership is seen as a service and not a status, with new leaders stepping forward and not up. Power as a dynamic cannot be avoided when people congregate to progress. Power defined as “the ability to do or accomplish something” is not inherently bad. It depends on whether it is exercised with and through the individual and the group for a cause that humans deem to have collective value. Power without empathy is exploitation. CA asserts that power can be a force *for* empathy; and moreover, that in the absence of empathy, power is not merely unethical, but tactically ineffective in complex situations.

CA interfaces well with *accountability*. Elmore (2004) nailed the problem almost 20 years ago: “No amount of external accountability will be effective in the absence of internal accountability.” External accountability cannot get at causal detail (or if you like can never be nuanced enough to capture meaningful reality). We have already made the case that external conditions and internal human systems constantly change. The question becomes what tools and techniques will help leaders to lead in this complex environment? And, how can you tell what is happening in an organization or system of organizations that are genuinely nuanced?

Our answer is that CA, as we portrayed it below, is the best “assurance accountability” around. It gets at daily nuance; it generates clarity without dysfunctional judgment; it builds mutual empathy; it generates greater transparency and specificity; it reconciles cognitive and social matters and above all it generates trust. CA generates more “daily truths” about the organization than other approaches. There are a range of associated questions that branch from this depending on the context as it unfolds. Leaders *sound different* when they are guided by the convictions of CA as evidenced by questions that participants ask under these conditions such as the following that we have generated in working with groups:

- (1) What is commanding our attention right now?
- (2) What is our central rallying point, our noble purpose?
- (3) Does everyone have narrative clarity?
- (4) Is our language skillful enough to be able to acknowledge worthwhile intent while still challenging unhelpful impact?
- (5) Can we manage this as cognitive friction without collapsing into social friction?
- (6) How do we nurture constructive dissent as an enhancement while challenging the kind of dissent that leads to derailment?
- (7) Are we as leaders unflinching in the face of the truth?
- (8) Does everyone know what the one thing they need to improve on is?
- (9) Is our leadership oriented towards status or service?

Implications

We can apply the concept of CA to a perennial problem in school districts/local authorities: how to achieve dynamic cohesion (see the figure below). We discuss these in relation to four dynamics commonly faced.



All four are essential for CA to work for system change. All are equally important and are hographically coherent. Pathway one refers to “intra-school” CA – sometimes called school collaboration. In the actual work, schools must constantly work on the dynamic of CA between and among individuals, groups and subgroups. It is possible for individual schools to have strong within school CA despite the district, but in our model, it is not likely that they could *stay* highly connected without the district being committed to CA across the district.

Second, further strengthening of system connection is derived by schools in the local authority or network knowing about each other’s work and indeed working across schools on common problems.

Third, system CA is enabled or hampered by the degree of “teamness” at the district level. In the absence of central teamness, schools experience inconsistency, ad hoc or episodic relationships with the center, and with other schools. Eventually, interaction between schools and the center atrophies or becomes atomistic or even antagonistic.

Fourth, if the first three dynamics are healthy, the system can foster a sense of “we-we” spirit relative to the overall mission. Or, put another way, all four dynamics serve to create an overall and multi-dimensional sense of common mission. Thus, *the system is us!* It is not those at the center or top.

The five convictions of connected autonomy

Finally, CA will not be secured by mechanical coverage of the four dynamics. System CA must be powered by certain beliefs or underlying convictions by all individuals and groups. For us, this is the philosophical base and theory of action that promotes cohesion among individuals and the group as a whole. This requires the cultivation of what we call *convictions*. There are five convictions that describe the organization’s “action disposition” that are held individually and collectively; and they are oriented to definable and measurable improvements. The conditions represent the guiding theory with respect to CA in action.

Conviction 1: Without “empathy for context,” change will be ineffective and unsustainable.

Conviction 2: “Empathy for context” begins with those in positions of power –those with more power must *lean first* towards understanding the experience of those with less.

Conviction 3: The flow of “traffic on the bridge,” and not the existence of the bridge itself, is the true indicator of real system connection.

Conviction 4: A genuine commitment to protecting the autonomy of individuals and individual units within a system is actually a significant factor in that system being truly connected.

Conviction 5: Changing “the system” towards greater dynamism and sophisticated problem-solving requires increased capacity for CA.

Conclusion

In current society, we see the daily dangers of either too much connection (where we lose focus and control) or too much autonomy where we become cut off from others. In both cases, we lose our humanity. Relative to the former (swallowed by the forces around us), [Williams \(2018\)](#), former Google strategist and now Oxford-educated philosopher, drew the following conclusion:

“Something deep and potentially irreversible seems to be happening to human attention in the age of information.” Williams’ work at Google was “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” But one day, he states, “I had an epiphany: there was more technology in my life than ever before, but it felt *harder* than ever to do the things I wanted to do” (p. 7, italics in original). In Williams’ words, he said he was in a permanent state of “deep distraction”. Williams claims that technology “drains words of their deeper meaning” (p. 8). In short, technology in its ubiquity “consumes all our attention.” As humans, we become less and less autonomous with respect to our individual and collective challenges and more and more superficial in the quality of our decisions. In short, too much undirected connection buries autonomy.

Through COVID, we have also seen the opposite where autonomy becomes prolonged isolation with deadly effects. For us, “CA” is a single concept. It is held in a form of dynamic equilibrium where healthy individuals are constantly aware of their prized autonomy and their benefits and responsibilities in relation to the group.

In sum, “CA” requires individual reflection and collective deliberation of the dynamic relationship between the two elements. All and all CA represents a powerful and we would say attractive framework (to those who want to get things done) for revamping the culture of organizations toward co-determined unity of purpose, continuous development and collective accountability. At the end of the day both the individual and the group benefit.

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