The Toxic Node

SIMULATION[1]

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is often a strategy for solving a complex problem in which several organizations – or communities – have a stake. Although the challenges of collaboration have been documented by both researchers and practitioners, the literature tends to assume a positive bias towards collaboration. That is, we often believe that collaboration can solve problems and, despite the challenges inherent in collaboration, we tend to believe people are motivated to work together in pursuit of a common goal. However, what if those assumptions are challenged and the collaboration is threatened – not because the logistics of the collaboration are difficult to manage or resources are limited, but because a person or party is actively trying to undermine the partnership? Is it possible that collaboration could bring out the best instincts in some partners, and the worst instincts in others? How do collaborators respond to a "toxic" node - a person who is intentionally at odds with the goals of the collaboration?

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[1] *The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of Janice Popp, University of Calgary, who provided background information and materials for the case in addition to having a role in formulating the concept of the toxic node.*

The term "toxic" is centuries old and a familiar concept across various contexts. Lately, the term has been widely used to reflect a fractured socio-political climate as well as interpersonal relationships; Oxford Dictionaries named "toxic" an international word of the year in 2018 (Schuessler, 2018). The term "node" comes from the study of networks and refers to an entity – in this case, an individual person – with linkages to other nodes in the network. A toxic node refers to an individual or entity connected to a broader network that has an interest in undermining that network.

Although conflict is typically a part of any collaborative effort - and may serve a valuable role in clarifying expectations and contributions among collaborators - this simulation challenges the assumptions that all conflict is productive and that all collaborators want their efforts to succeed. In this scenario, collaborators have the means to secure resources to their broader community, but the real question is whether they have the will to work together.

The Toxic Node simulation gives participants experience in negotiating resource allocation amidst conflict. Individuals or small groups role-play seven stakeholders at the creation of a new network. As the terms of the network are specified, conflicts emerge between parties and alliances are formed. To secure organizational resources and serve their shared community, partners must collaborate.

Common instructions for all participants provide an overview to the simulation, based on a real-life case, as well as an introduction to all participants. Additional, confidential instructions provided to each individual provides further insights on each participant's motivations and interests in the collaboration. The accompanying teaching note includes further discussion questions, directions for debrief, and implications for collaboration and network management.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Background

The city of Polyharmony has been awarded a $1 million government grant to improve student educational and socio-emotional outcomes for children enrolled in Polyharmony schools over a three-year period. The grant was jointly awarded to the Polyharmony Public School District, Polyharmony Parochial Schools, and the City of Polyharmony. It is intended to provide funding for more special education programs, additional training and interventions for school social workers, and to better improve the infrastructure that allows partners outside the school – such as the city of Polyharmony and local nonprofit agencies – to serve Polyharmony students and their families. The grant requires the cooperation of *all* partners; that is, no single agency can claim the money for its programs. Instead, the grant money is meant to support programs and interventions that will be implemented across Polyharmony schools and its partners.

Because Polyharmony has never received a grant of this size and scope before, the network of city, nonprofit, and school representatives will be overseen in the beginning by a network manager, a consultant with extensive experience in project management. The network manager has been brought on board to facilitate the first several meetings of the grant, during which partners will create an overall budget that determines how the funding will be allocated. The network manager's job in these meetings is to keep the partners on task and facilitate conversations in which the partners make decisions together about the grant funding. In the event that the partners cannot decide how to allocate the money, the network manager does not have the authority to make decisions for them. Instead, the money will go unused.

Instructions

The network manager has plans for three meetings: In the first meeting, the network manager introduces the terms of the grant and the goals for the meeting, with only minimal time for the participants to interact with one another. In the second meeting, partners will have more time to directly interact with one another as a group and discuss some potential plans with respect to allocating the money. In the third meeting, the participants have to make a final plan as to how the money should be allocated. In between meetings, however, any of the participants – including the network manager – are free to speak with each other. However, network participants may choose to be unavailable to the group or to specific participants in between meetings. All participants are required to attend the network manager meeting under the terms of the grant. *Participants "win" if they can agree on a plan to allocate the money to the various programs across all partners/programming in the time allotted.*

Structure (Two-hour simulation):

- **Meeting 1**: Network manager introduces terms of grant. Participants may make "opening statements" to introduce their affiliation and suggest how they think the funding should be used, but there is minimal time for participant interaction. (15 minutes)
- **Breakout 1:** During this time, network participants are free to talk to other participants about their goals for the grant or their thoughts as to how the money should be allocated. Network participants might also choose to be unavailable in between meetings, either to the whole group or to specific participants. (15 minutes)
- **Meeting 2:** The network manager facilitates a discussion in which partners outline their plans for the grant and how they think the money should be allocated. (20 minutes)
- **Breakout 2**: During this time, network participants are free to talk to other participants about their goals for the grant or their thoughts as to how the money should be allocated. Network participants might also choose to be unavailable in between

meetings, either to the whole group or to specific participants. This is the last time that participants are able to talk to other network participants in an informal session. (20 minutes)
- **Meeting 3:** The network manager calls the participants together to facilitate the final discussion. During this time, participants must make a decision as to how the money will be allocated, or they will be unable to move forward with the grant – and no one gets the money. (20 minutes)
- **Discussion and debrief.** The instructor facilitates a discussion with students – now out of character – in which they debrief the exercise. Additional resources are provided in the teaching note. (30 minutes)
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Programs to be Covered in the Grant

The grant money may be allocated towards the following program areas, all of which must involve Polyharmony schools and local partners. For each program, participants must determine a) what percentage of resources it should receive, b) how those resources should be divided among participants, and c) who should lead the initiative.
- Special education programming to serve public and private school students.
- Social services training and programming to serve public and private school students.
- Infrastructure that facilitates collaboration between Polyharmony schools and external partners, such as the City of Polyharmony and Polyharmony nonprofits.

Participant Introductions (available to all participants)

Sarah Ingraham, Polyharmony Public School District. Sarah represents the Polyharmony Public School District, which serves K-12 students and is the largest local school district in the region. Historically, Polyharmony public schools have received strong local support – affluent residents make up a large tax base and an active volunteer corps. In addition, the school district has made it a priority to pursue government funding to develop local projects and have been successful in doing so. The school district has a record of innovation and financial stewardship – but in the past, they have not had to collaborate with other partners to accomplish their goals.

Father Jaime Ferrante, Polyharmony Parochial Schools. Father Jaime represents the Polyharmony Parochial Schools, the city's private schooling options for grades K-12. The school has a small but passionate following in the community, as fewer than 10% of Polyharmony's children attend parochial schools. However, in recent years the schools have diversified, receiving students of different socioeconomic backgrounds as well as additional students who identify as having special needs or requiring accommodations.

Hank Bassett, Special Education, Polyharmony Public Schools. Hank is affiliated with Polyharmony's public schools, though his role in the network is to advocate for students with disabilities, special needs, and accommodations.

Elsa Ito, City of Polyharmony, Health Department. Elsa is formerly a registered nurse and currently works with City of Polyharmony's public health department. Elsa's work typically happens outside of the local schools, but her role in the network is to ensure that students can access health services they need.

Andy Tveit, Social Work, **Polyharmony Public Schools**. Andy is a social worker who works with students in Polyharmony's public schools, though his role in the network is to advocate for students to get the social services they need.

Ruby Casey, Nonprofit Coalition. Ruby represents a local coalition of nonprofit organizations that serves at-risk youth. Ruby's work typically happens outside of the local schools, but she often works closely with the public schools to obtain referrals and to ensure that students get the out-of-school support that they need.

Kelly LaCroix, Network Manager. Kelly is the network manager, brought in specifically to manage the logistics of the grant. As network manager, Kelly's role is not to make decisions for the involved stakeholders, but to manage the logistics and infrastructure of the partnership so that the partners are free to work together. However, Kelly has an interest in how successful the partnership is because its success is related to her job performance.

CONFIDENTIAL Instructions for Sarah Ingraham, Polyharmony Public School District

You are very pleased to have received this grant, which you and your colleagues at the public school see as a culmination of some of your recent efforts to improve educational and socio-economic outcomes for your students. In the past, you have not needed to collaborate with other organizations – the school district is large enough and often well-resourced to the point that you don't need to bring in additional partners. This grant, which requires you to work with local nonprofit organizations, the city of Polyharmony, and local parochial schools, provides the first opportunity for you to work with these agencies in an official way. But you're not all that interested in partnering.

Frankly, you feel that you deserve much of the credit for pursuing and securing this funding, and, given that you represent a large school district, you feel entitled to allocate that funding for the programs and personnel that you select. The parochial schools don't need much funding – they serve only a fraction of Polyharmony's students – and their students don't reflect the diversity of needs that public school students have. Elsa and Ruby, the city and nonprofit representatives, are included as a courtesy, but the real work is happening in your schools, and you intend to make that clear.

You are not interested in working with the other partners. You plan to go to the network meetings so that it's clear who is in charge, and to continue to push for the public schools to retain control of the funding and of the partnership itself. You also expect Hank and Andy, as employees that work within the school district, to further support your efforts.

Your goals:

- To secure as many of the financial resources as you can for your organization, Polyharmony Public Schools, and to ensure that any programming is managed through the public schools
- To undermine the partnership, so it will appear easier to just work with Polyharmony Public Schools
- To control network meetings
- To keep Hank and Andy on your side, and to interact with the remaining stakeholders as little as possible

CONFIDENTIAL Instructions for Father Jaime Ferrante, Polyharmony Parochial Schools

You are pleased to be included in this partnership. Historically, the parochial schools haven't collaborated much with other community partners, but you would like for that to change. You have several reasons for this – although the parochial schools make up a smaller percentage of students overall, enrollment is steadily growing, and your students out-perform those of the local public school. You believe that the parochial schools are doing something right, and you would like for your schools to be seen as the community asset you believe they are – and to have some influence in your community.

But you also need this partnership. The student body is changing, and the parochial schools need to be more responsive to student needs. You're interested in the financial resources that will result from this partnership, but you hope that these partners will provide you with the expertise you need to serve your students.

Your goals:

- To work collaboratively with all stakeholders
- To represent Polyharmony Parochial Schools as a significant player in the community
- To learn from your collaborators – particularly Sarah, Hank, Andy, and Ruby, whom you perceive as having expertise that is particularly important as your student body changes

CONFIDENTIAL Instructions for Hank Bassett, Special Education, Polyharmony Public Schools

Your job is to advocate for students with disabilities, special needs, and accommodations. You're aware that the parochial schools have an increasing number of students with special needs, and Father Jaime seems interested in working with you. You're typically happy to provide your insights – to a point. You are aware that the public schools have most of the students, including most of the students with special needs, and you expect the public schools to receive the majority of money available in the grant. You want to secure as many resources for special education programming as you can, and you anticipate this money coming from the public schools. Additionally, in the past, you've had a close working relationship with Sarah and the public schools, and you'd like to maintain that relationship. You work closely with Andy in his role as a social worker, and you expect that the two of you typically fall on the same side of things – the side of the public schools.

Your goals:

- To be an advocate for special needs students in Polyharmony
- To stay on the good side of Sarah and the public schools

CONFIDENTIAL Instructions for Elsa Ito, City of Polyharmony, Health Department

The city was invited to be part of the partnership because the grant focused on both educational and socio-emotional outcomes. You think the city deserves to be included and that health should be part of the conversation – after all, how can students be expected to do well in school otherwise? – but you suspect that your collaborators don't seem that interested in working with you. You feel like a little bit of an outsider alongside the school districts, and you wonder if Ruby, who represents nonprofit organizations, might feel the same way. You also are concerned that the public schools – and particularly Sarah – might wield too much control over the network, and you expect Kelly, the network manager, to keep her in line.

Your goals:

- To advocate for health initiatives to receive funding through grant programming that improves the infrastructure between the schools and the city
- To work collaboratively with the public schools (Sarah, Hank, and Andy) as well as the private schools (Jaime)
- To build a coalition with Ruby to make sure that no one school district dominates the network

CONFIDENTIAL Instructions for Andy Tveit, Social Work, Polyharmony Public Schools

Your job is to advocate for students' socio-emotional needs, and your team serves hundreds of students through the public schools. Typically, you work with community partners, and you and Ruby have had a good working relationship in the past in which you refer students and families to her nonprofit coalition for additional support outside of school. However, you anticipate that the bulk of this grant is going to go through the public schools, and you think that's fair. You'll be happy to keep working with Ruby and making referrals, but your main loyalty is to the public schools and to secure resources for your students through the schools.

Father Jaime seems interested in working with you. You're typically happy to provide your insights – to a point – but you serve many, many more students than he does, and the allocation of the grant funding should reflect that. Additionally, in the past, you've had a close working relationship with Sarah and the public schools, and you'd like to maintain that relationship. You work closely with Hank in his role with special education, and you expect that the two of you typically fall on the same side of things – the side of the public schools.

Your goals:

- To be an advocate for students in Polyharmony public schools
- To stay on the good side of Sarah and the public schools
- To maintain a working relationship with Ruby and the nonprofit coalition

CONFIDENTIAL Instructions for Ruby Casey, Nonprofit Coalition

You have long advocated for better cooperation between the school districts and nonprofits serving youth and families in Polyharmony, and you see this as an opportunity for everyone to come together. You've worked with a number of these people before, particularly Sarah and Andy at the public schools, and you know that the public schools tend to like to control things. You're used to that – but you don't want to miss this opportunity to collaborate more broadly across the city.

Your goals:

- To advocate for better referral exchange between the school districts, the city, and nonprofits
- To work collaboratively with the public schools (Sarah, Hank, and Andy) as well as the private schools (Jaime)
- To build a coalition with Elsa to make sure that no one school district dominates the network

CONFIDENTIAL Instructions for Kelly LaCroix, Network Manager

As a network administrator brought in to manage the grant, some of the dynamics of Polyharmony are new to you. You don't see it as your role to make decisions for the partners; however, given that the network's success is tied to your job performance, you do want them to succeed. You perceive that some of the participants might be less inclined to collaborate than others, but you know that the success of the grant depends on it – so you want to do what you can to serve the partners without getting too involved in the local politics.

Your goals:

- To help the partners come to a shared agreement about how the grant funding should be allocated across partners and programs
- To build trust with all participants so that they have confidence in the network
- To understand the motivations of the partners so that you might serve them better
- To have minimal conflict in the network – specifically, to manage the "toxic node," or the school district that is trying to undermine the partnership
- To make sure participants understand what is at stake – if they can't come to an agreement, they will not be able to access the money
- To complete a final written contract

Meeting Instructions for Kelly La Croix, Network Manager

For each of the three "official" meetings, refer to the opening scripts that reminds the participants of the goals of the meeting. You can also speak to coalition participants during the formal meetings and informal breakout sessions, keeping in line with your goals.

Meeting #1 Opening Script: *"Hello, I'm Kelly, the network administrator appointed to manage this grant. You all have been awarded a $1 million grant that can be used for any of the following purposes: special education programming for public and private schools, social services training and programming for public and private schools, or infrastructure that facilitates collaboration between Polyharmony schools and external partners, such as the City of Polyharmony and Polyharmony nonprofits. Your job is to decide together how the money should be spent, specifically what percentage of resources programming should receive, how those resources should be divided among participants, and who should lead the initiative. As you are aware, the grant will only be awarded upon signed agreement on all three of those issues per program area. In today's 15-minute meeting, you each have the opportunity to introduce yourself and to begin the decision-making process. I will keep track of time. Who would like to begin?"*

Meeting #1 Closing Script: *"That's all the time we have for today. However, if you wish to continue speaking to one another or begin working on the contract, you are free to do so now. I will call us together for our next official meeting."*

Meeting #2 Opening Script: *"Hello, and welcome to our all-coalition meeting. We now have 20 minutes to further discuss the plans for the grant and work towards completion of our contract. Have we come to any decisions regarding the grant?"*

Meeting #2 Closing Script: *"That's the end of today's meeting. However, if you wish to continue speaking to one another or continue working, you are free to do so now. This is the last time you have to informally interact with one another before our last official meeting."*

Meeting #3 Opening Script: *"Hello, everyone, and welcome to our final coalition meeting. We now have 20 minutes to finalize the plans for the grant and complete our contract. Have we come to any decisions regarding the grant?"*

Meeting #3 Closing Script: *"That's all the time we have for today. Do we have a completed contract for how this coalition plans to use the money?"*

The Case of the Toxic Node: Negotiated Agreement Template (available to all participants)

Participants should use this template to indicate their agreement on the three questions for each program area.

Program Areas	What percentage of resources should the program receive? (Percentages should total 100%.)	How will the resources be divided among participants in this program area? (Percentages should total 100%.)	Who should lead the program area? (May be an individual, organization, or partnership.)
Special education programming to serve public and private school students			
Social services training and programming to serve public and private school students			
Infrastructure that facilitates collaboration between Polyharmony schools and external partners, such as the City of Polyharmony and Polyharmony nonprofits			