

Talking Through the Numbers – Episode 7

Collaborating Across Difference

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

This episode of Talking Through the Numbers is available online at <https://www.wilder.org/featured-media/collaborating-across-difference>

Transcript

[soft piano music]

Paul Mattessich: Welcome to Talking Through the Numbers, a podcast produced by Wilder Research. Our goal is to provide insight on significant issues, combining sound information with expert knowledge to enrich our understanding of things that affect our communities and our world. I'm Paul Mattessich, executive director of Wilder Research. In this episode our topic is collaborating across difference. Two experts have come to the studio for our conversation.

Vanne Owens Hayes is a cultural consultant and health educator serving the Twin Cities African American community. She works with African American churches, nonprofit and community based organizations, health care providers and government agencies to strengthen their relationships to community through culturally informed strategic planning, policy development and service delivery. Her clients include the University of Minnesota Brain Aging Research Collaborative, Minnesota History Center, Open Cities Health Center, St. Paul, Ramsey County Department of Public Health and Act on Alzheimer's. Vanne earned her baccalaureate and law degrees from the University of Minnesota. She's cofounder of the Ivy Foundation, which annually provides scholarships to outstanding students of African descent, and she's cofounder of the Minnesota Association of Black Lawyers. Prior to retirement, she served as assistant dean at the University of Minnesota Law School and executive director of the Minneapolis Department of Civil Rights.

Kirsten Johnson is the director of community engagement and systems change at the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation where she manages a portfolio of community driven projects aimed at creating equity. Her work focuses on engagement, collaboration and systems change, addressing complex challenges impacting the communities that Wilder Serves. Kirsten brings the lenses of emotional intelligence, intercultural competence and network weaving to all of her work. She studied political science and women's studies at the University of Minnesota and has worked in the nonprofit sector on collaboration and

community development for over 15 years. Prior to coming to the Wilder Foundation, Kirsten's work supported a variety of nonprofit organizations, including the Street Works Collaborative, VEAP and Arc Greater Twin Cities.

So welcome.

Kristen Johnson: Thank you.

Vanne Owens Hayes: Thank you.

Paul Mattessich: Today's topic, as I said, is collaborating across difference and this discussion today reflects work that the three of us were involved in, namely developing the third edition of *Collaboration: What Makes it Work*. And that book comprises or reports research that looked at all of the studies of collaboration among organizations and distilled the findings down to 22 factors that influence success. And over time from the first to the second to the third edition, more research came out, the number of factors increased. But in publishing the third edition we in particular, and, actually Kirsten primarily, led an effort to see how those factors related to collaborating across difference. And that was featured in particular in the third edition of the book. And that's the part of the book that we're focusing on today.

Kristen Johnson: Exactly.

Paul: Yeah. As we get into this, it might be good to define what we mean by collaboration and I'll do that quickly by actually reading right from page five of the book.

Kirsten: All right.

Paul: So when we talk about collaboration, we're talking about the way that organizations partner with one another and our specific definition is that collaboration is a mutually beneficial well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. And it has a number of important features. It includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals. It includes a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility. It includes mutual authority and accountability among all the organizations for success and a sharing of resources and rewards. So it's more than just saying, "Hey, I might call you up every once in a while and we might be friends." It's something that's pretty, pretty serious. Is that right?

Kirsten: That's definitely right. Yeah.

Vanne: Definitely.

Paul: Okay. So when we take that definition of collaboration, and we add onto it, collaborating across difference, why is that important? Why is it important to look at collaborating across difference?

Vanne: I think it's important because you're incorporating new voices in a more effective and important way to get something that's really useful and applicable.

Kirsten: Yeah, I mean, and I think when we, when we think about the communities we live in and all of the different elements of difference that exist in those communities, whether it's racial and ethnic differences, whether it's socioeconomic differences, language

differences. I mean there's so much rich difference in our communities. And so I think often we are collaborating across difference. Sometimes those differences are more visible and sometimes they're less visible. But we're often doing our collaborations with folks who are different than us in many ways. And so thinking specifically about how we do that effectively, I think is important.

Vanne: And usually we're collaborating to solve something.

Kirsten: Correct.

Vanne: And our nation has a hard time having the difficult conversations. So this is instructive and how to work across differences so you can really get to a solution that's mutually beneficial.

Kirsten: Yeah, yeah. That was one of the things I thought when you were reading the definition off Paul, I thought, "Yeah, it's that mutuality that's so important, right?" That we actually really all have a sense that, this is for us, that it's for our communities, that we're in it together. And that is not simple or easy to achieve. And I think what we were trying to do in the book and what we're trying to think about together is how do we build the skills to do that more effectively?

Vanne: And it's more about doing with than doing for. And that's significant when it comes to community work. Because a lot of times communities feel like this is sort of trendy or you're not really seriously interested and this is a method that will help them feel that their participation is key.

Kirsten: Yeah.

Paul: And all of it intended to address the most critical things in the community for the well-being of everybody who lives there.

Kirsten: Right.

Paul: Is that right? Okay.

Kirsten: Exactly.

Paul: So the book identifies 22 ingredients for successful collaboration. We're not going to go through all 23.

Kirsten: You can get the book for that.

Paul: Yeah. What are the most important things to consider for collaborating across difference?

Kirsten: Well, I think that a lot of the same things that are, I mean the research showed that all of those things were significant, but there certainly are ones that come up a lot when we talk with folks about what's impacting their collaborations. And I think there are similar ones that come up, with any collaboration as would come up when you're talking about collaborating across difference. And one that comes to mind right away is mutual respect, understanding, and trust. Right?

Vanne: I agree.

Kirsten: And I think-

Paul: Really, really important.

Kirsten: Right? And I think part of why that is so significant when we're collaborating across differences that when we are very similar, we often have an easier starting point to build trust, right? When we've had a lot of similar experiences or were coming from a similar background, we, we speak the same language, we have the same cultural norms. It's easier to build that understanding. It's easier to build trust, perhaps. But when we're collaborating across difference perhaps with communities where a lot of harm has been done in the past or where harm is presently being done, it's a different, set of things to take on. To really actually build that trust and to build true like mutual understanding about what it is we want to accomplish together. Like you said, Van, that's really for all of us, not kind of on behalf of.

Vanne: And we don't come together as a blank slate. The history of our experiences comes with us and so a lot of times for community that history says, "I don't trust you. You have a hidden agenda. I'm not going to benefit." And so this is a chance to work through those things and see the common ground that we have to work together.

Kirsten: Yeah.

Paul: So, what are examples of the types of organizations we're talking about with this collaboration? And I don't mean necessarily specific names, but types. When we see organizations that are collaborating across difference, what types of organizations might those be?

Kirsten: Right. Well, I think a lot of times, like I can think of collaborations where there are, like for instance, maybe health organizations that are then collaborating with culturally specific nonprofits. So you know, a health care organization that's trying to reach specific communities and provide better health care to those communities might collaborate then with a culturally specific nonprofit who has more knowledge and expertise about what their community needs. Can you ... what examples do you think of Vanne?

Vanne: Well, we have the educational system, we've identified gaps in methods of teaching and things that work and don't work. And to resolve that is going to take a broad participation and collaboration.

Paul: Okay. So schools would have to work with community groups.

Vanne: School systems.

Paul: Universities might have to work with a parent groups and schools and so on to get whatever it is that we need to get, happening, okay. Yeah.

Kirsten: I think another factor that comes to mind too, is members sharing a stake in both the process and the outcome. So I think that's another one that comes up a lot when we're thinking about collaborating across difference, right? So that we really are genuinely co-creating both how the collaboration is going to operate, right? How are we going to run our meetings? How are we going to make decisions? Because again, I think those things are so impacted by our cultural norms and we might sort of assume there's ... Well of

course we're going to do it like this, right? Well maybe that's not how everyone would assume that we would do it, you know? And so-

Vanne: Or that we've always done it this way, and so why do it any differently?

Paul: You know, I think you mentioned agreement on process and outcomes and I think that's really important from what I've seen, that oftentimes when we get into a collaborative activity, we think, "Okay, let's let everybody contribute to the goals. And we're going to do that by having a couple meetings where we brainstorm and decide on goals." But we never step back and say, "Well, is a couple meetings to define goals? Is that the right process?" Maybe there's some other way to do it right? You really have to step back. Is that your feeling?

Kirsten: Yeah, definitely. And I think even just sometimes when we start a conversation about goals, we already have a preconceived idea of what the problem is. And so maybe our collaborative partners don't even all see the problem the same way, right? Because we're coming at it from different lived experiences, from different vantage points and maybe we have to back up the process a bit, you know? And really say, "Why did we come together this table?" I think there's a lot of like foundation building that you have to do when you're collaborating across difference.

Vanne: And cultures come to the table differently, you know? Some people want to start their process, right off. We're here to meet at 9:00, so let's get started. And the relationships, are important in working with community and cross culture. We need to be aware of how do we start, how do we connect? How do we invest enough time to get that trust and respect established?

Kirsten: Yeah.

Paul: How about another word that sounds a lot like collaboration, communication. How does communication fit in? It relates to some of those 22 facts.

Kirsten: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. We definitely have a factor that's around-

Paul: Open and frequent communication.

Kirsten: Thank you. I was like, open and frequent feels like ... what exactly is the link-

Paul: Then there's formal and informal channels of communication.

Kirsten: Right. I mean, I was just going to say, Vanne, when you were talking about the relationship building, one of the factors in the book talks about, how do we make time for a sort of informal relationships? That it's not even just that we need to connect as professionals when we're collaborating, but yeah, we also have to just build relationships as humans and we have to make time for that.

Paul: I know a number of years ago I was working with a group in Minneapolis and they were having some formal meetings. It was some health care organizations and neighborhood. And things weren't going very far. And then a couple of them just happened to meet up at a coffee shop, a few blocks away, one day after a meeting, and that led to them a week or two later inviting some other people, "Hey, join for coffee outside the meeting." And it seemed like whatever happened at that coffee meeting jelled and then fed back

and really helped them in their formal relationship. And they pointed to that as saying, "You know, if we never had those coffee meetings, we might not have ever gotten as far as we did." Yeah.

Kirsten: I know, it makes me think of Golden Time, which is a coffee shop in our community that I feel like much of those kinds of things happen in a coffee shop like Golden Time, important conversation.

Vanne: And I think it's important also to be seen other than just at the meeting. If you're interested, show you up or have you show up more often than we're just here to meet. And then other than that, I'm not involved in the community at all.

Kirsten: What do you think about communication though, Vanne? I mean, I don't feel like we totally spoke to that just now. I'm like-

Vanne: Well, communication, it's not just verbal.

Kirsten: Yeah.

Vanne: It's how you say what you say, choosing your words, what meanings are important and are attributed. Because some things people think, "That's just something funny," and it may not be funny or "That something that's true," and it may not be true. So with that communication is that sense of honesty and transparency.

Paul: So what do you think are the major challenges to successfully collaborating across difference nowadays?

Kirsten: Yeah, I think you named one of them early on Vanne, which is that we have a sort of a society at large that doesn't really want to have open and honest conversations about difference. And so it's hard to open those conversations up, in a collaborative space. And especially, a collaborative space is often a work space. It's often a space where our organizations have, you know, they have a financial investment in what's happening. But I really feel like it's just essential. It's essential if we're going to collaborate effectively across difference, we have to ... There's so much that needs to be named and acknowledged and talked about. And so how do we have those open and honest conversations?

Vanne: Well, this may go back to communication, but listening is very important because you really hear what somebody has to say, and respond to that. Because a lot of times the inequity in terms of the size of the group, their experience and participation, if they feel like they're valued and they are really a contribution that's going to be considered in the final solution. To make that person feel like it's worthwhile for them to come to the table. And often we come with assumptions about behavior and all and we have to get rid of all those.

Kirsten: Yeah, no, I think ... Yeah, I totally agree. And I think because part of what's happening is like we talked about earlier, is that those, even if we try and create a space within our collaborative that's really respectful and equitable, the power dynamics that exist in the larger society are still impacting how our relationships operate. And so how do we be mindful of and try and address those power dynamics? I mean I would even go further like what you said Van, I totally agree. It's like how do people feel respected and valued,

but how do we actually show that? How are our actions backing that up to? And how are we really ... I think there are things that organizations that are larger, a lot of the examples we've given so far have been of like universities or health care, big organizations, right? Partnering with smaller organizations. And when that's happening there's going to be a power in balance.

Paul: Can it work? I mean I think that's a question that comes up a lot. Collaboration and equity, big organizations, small organizations. The city government with its millions of dollars, a neighborhood group that's run by volunteers, can they collaborate effectively across difference?

Vanne: If they lay their cards to the table and are honest and what's at stake and what they can do. No empty promises. Discussing all the elements are there and what everybody is investing in. What you can do, what you think you can't do. Sometimes you think he can't do things that you can do, but just laying it out on the table. And sometimes it's just simple things that help us come together. I know I did a workshop-

Paul: Vanne, maybe, do you have an example of that?

Vanne: Well, I did a workshop on healthy brain. And we were trying to figure out how to get people receptive and we played, "I'm Happy", you know? And people were coming in the room and they felt positive and they greeted each other in a positive manner. It was just so simple. It's not always that simple. But it was a lesson learned that you don't have to do something very complex, sometimes. Just welcoming people, like kids being greeted at school when they come might make them feel better about sitting down and really paying attention when they learn. So little things.

Kirsten: Yeah, yeah. That makes me think ... I mean, yes, I think it can happen. I think that was your ... but I think it takes a lot of like intentionality. It takes really being thoughtful and I think it takes more time sometimes than we would like to spend. I mean, I think like you said, Vanne, you got to lay all your cards on the table and doing that means we have to slow down and really listen to each other and really have the meeting time where we're going to work through all of that. But I think if we do that, it can really pay off.

Paul: Do you have any examples where it's worked well, we're a big organization and a small organization?

Kirsten: Yeah. We recently were working on a project actually in Winona, Minnesota where a health care organization there was partnering with community organizations. And I think part of what really ... a big shift that happened in that collaboration happened when the health care organization was able to say, "Oh, you know, people might feel like they have to show up at this table because we have a lot of power in this community, and we don't want people to just show up because they have to. We want to really know that people are here because we have a shared interest. We have that mutuality, that we're really in it." And I think they really kind of shifted how they were approaching the collaboration, how they were thinking about it and started to really try and build more shared leadership. And it really, it made a difference, I think, for them to have more awareness around the power dynamics and then to try and really, engage differently with the collaborative partners.

Paul: And that would really promote community wellness. Let me ask you a question. You're the practitioners, I'm just the researcher. But what ... is doing this, is it a step by step process? Can people just learn the process? It's somewhat linear or is it more ... How does it develop?

Vanne: It's definitely not linear, because linear is cultural. One aspect of culture. So there's many ways of interacting. It's greeting, it's doing some research of your own, too. Not just walking in unprepared but having some knowledge so you have some common ground to establish a relationship.

Kirsten: Yeah, I mean I think I'm just in the process right now where we're forming a new collaborative around community engagement and systems change and the book is not a step by step process, but it has been helpful to sit down and think like what are the factors that we think are going to be most important for us to think about as we build this collaborative? And really then to slow down. That's been the other piece. Like we've really been spending a lot of time, like some people might say we haven't actually really been doing any work, right? Because we haven't really started the actual sort of content work that the collaborative is going to do. And we've been meeting for a number of months already, and that's because we've been doing the work of like, how do we want to work together? And what are we really trying to accomplish? And, and it's been really ... it's led to some contentious conversations. So it's taking that time is good.

Paul: Because you need to build some bonds maybe during that early phase?

Kirsten: Right, exactly. Especially because in this case ... I mean one of the things I was thinking as you were talking too, Vanne, it's like part of that research perhaps that we do. I mean it's also like relationship building, you know? Like we have relationships with some of the people on this new collaboration we're building. They don't all have relationships with each other. And some of them are newer relationships to us. So again, yeah, building those bonds, helping people get to know each other. One of the people in our collaborative, I really appreciated. She said, "I think if we hear each other's perspectives and where we're coming from, then when we find ourselves in those moments of tension, we'll be more willing to kind of hear someone out." You know, like we'll understand more why they're saying what they're saying. And it might help us to stick in there during those, those conflict.

Paul: Well that, that makes me think of a question I wanted to ask both of you. If people are coming together from two or three organizations to collaborate for the first time, what's a tip that you would give them as they get started? What wisdom would you impart?

Vanne: I'd laugh because the first thing I think of is serve food.

Paul: Yeah, right.

Kirsten: That's a good tip.

Paul: Yeah, no.

Vanne: Serve food, you know, sometimes it's playing music as they enter the room so that they feel, you know, there's an awkwardness when you don't know anybody and you walk

into the room and if you hear something that's soothing, you can at least say "Wonder who's playing that?"

Paul: Again, it's that building of the bonds.

Vanne: Building of the bonds. Yeah.

Paul: Meeting.

Vanne: I start with food.

Paul: Food, okay.

Kirsten: Yeah. I think my tip would be, be open, you know? Don't feel like you already ... If you go into a collaboration thing and you like already know everything and you've already got it all figured out how it's going to play out, then you're not like really open to collaborating. You have to be open to, maybe you have a general idea, but you're open to like, we're going to build this together and it's going to maybe evolve in ways I didn't expect.

Vanne: One of the things I've learned too about working with communities is a lot of times it's a deficit model. And building on the assets, when you start saying "Your community has this," or "Your organization is this, and it really works." Feeling appreciated and someone being knowledgeable about what you have to offer or what is really working helps make those bonds and connections because so often I know in the communities I work with they feel like you want to do for them that with them. You don't see some of the things that are really positive in the community. So emphasizing those things helps accelerate the opportunity to come together.

Paul: Sure, okay. Any other tips? How about resources? Where can people find good resources? Obviously our book.

Kirsten: Yes, exactly.

Paul: They should read that as you said, that will give them some good principles, some good background. Something, a base to work from to think about what they want to incorporate in collaboration. Are there other good resources that people can find if they want to learn how to collaborate better?

Vanne: Well, I know you have a list of them in the back of the book.

Paul: Sure. So the book in the back of the book?

Kirsten: It's true. Right, exactly. And we have an accompanying website. Oh, I'm trying to remember. So one of the things that I draw on a lot as well, which isn't exact, it's a little different because it's about network weaving and you mentioned that in my bio but ... Which is slightly different than collaboration, but I think there's a lot of similar concepts around building networks as there are around building collaborations, and there's a great website networkweaver.com that I would highly recommend. It has great e-newsletter and good information that I find really valuable in my work.

Vanne: One of the things I've found valuable, and people that I think sometimes look at me like I've lost it. But the books on happiness and well-being, you know? Talk about what things bring people together. Like if you smile, somebody else smiles, it's your natural

response. So incorporating some of those things, some of those behaviors gives you an opportunity to build on the relationship. And so I think those resources, and meditation and of course one of the things the dementia friends, conflict resolution education helps people understand across difference. Because some of the things that worked for people who are in cognitive decline worked for other groups just as well.

Paul: That's interesting.

Vanne: So there's broad application.

Kirsten: And conflict resolution is so important. I mean I think we're naive if we think we won't encounter conflict as we do this work. So having good tools for conflict resolution has really great.

Vanne: That's right.

Paul: And that will get us to collaborating across difference. And unfortunately that's about all the time we have to chat right now. So thanks again to our guests, Vanne Owens Hayes, cultural consultant and health educator and Kirsten Johnson from the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. Please visit our website www.wilderresearch.org for more information on this topic. And if you have any suggestions for a future podcast, please let us know. I'm Paul Mattessich from Wilder Research and I look forward to talking through the numbers with you on other topics.

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