



# **RADICAL COLLABORATION TO ACCELERATE CLIMATE ACTION**

**A Guidebook for  
Working Together with  
Speed, Scale, and Justice**



**RADICAL CLIMATE  
COLLABORATION**

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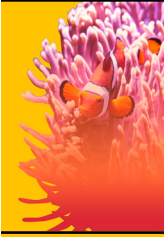


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# INTRODUCTION

“We need everyone because everything is impacted. And that’s why we have to bring people into the movement and connect them and work together.”



The global climate movement is an unprecedented collective response to an unprecedented global challenge. Everywhere people are stepping forward to take climate action, including as part of many thousands of different types of collaborations—coalitions, campaigns, partnerships, platforms, and alliances. Some of these collaborations are producing extraordinary results, but in aggregate they are not yet big or fast enough to achieve the economic and societal transformations necessary for a safe and just future.

Within the movement, people have different ideas about what actions are required and which pathways to take: some are aligned, some contradictory, and some opposed. At the same time, those involved are dealing with different daily realities and are in different states of mind: comfortable and distressed, confident and defensive,



excited and angry, assertive and bewildered, charging ahead and dragging their feet.

Amidst rapidly worsening climate impacts, these differences are making it difficult to build trust, and they are being deepened by ongoing stress, fear, grief, competition, and well-organized opposition. The resulting conflict is impeding the advance of the movement with the requisite speed, scale, and justice.

Many more diverse people and organizations need to collaborate. And many more will be willing to, if they believe their efforts, and the results they are producing, are fair—that justice is not being sacrificed for speed and scale.

This guidebook on radical collaboration is for everyone who is engaged in climate collaborations, from all backgrounds, in all



sectors, at all scales. It will help you work more effectively with diverse others to produce better results. The book itself is the result of an international collaboration among thirty-six experienced practitioners (direct quotes from interviews with these practitioners are included throughout), sixty-five reviewers, and a team from across Reos Partners, the Climate Champions Team, TED Countdown, and Leaders' Quest.

For more information and additional resources, visit:

**[www.radicalclimatecollaboration.com](http://www.radicalclimatecollaboration.com)**





**RADICAL  
COLLABORATION**



“Strategy comes from the Greek word *strategos*, the general standing on top of the hill looking out over the whole battlefield, and tactics comes from the *tactitas*, which means soldiers. So within a strategy you can use multiple tactics that are the right fit for a specific short-term outcome. Collaboration should be the strategy and opposition a tactic.”



*Radical collaboration* is a pragmatic and proven approach to working together across differences to move forward with speed, scale, and justice. It is radical in the sense that it is unusual and gets to the root of the challenge of collaborating. It *can* be used to address many complex challenges and *must* be used to address the climate crisis.

Radical collaboration is not new—many people are using it and it works—but now many more people must learn to use it, quickly. We do not have time for incremental change, to keep getting stuck, or for everybody to re-invent the approach.

“If you want to go fast, go alone,” the saying goes, “but if you want to go far, go together.” The climate crisis demands that we go faster *and* further, *and* more fairly, together.



“We need to balance the very real urgency and time pressure that we face from a scientific perspective with the recognition of how fast change can be made. We need to see it as a film, not just as a static picture, and recognize the speed of the change that has happened and that will continue to accelerate, even though at some moments it just doesn’t feel fast enough.”



So how can we collaborate to produce climate action with the requisite speed, scale, and justice? The ‘*how*’ really matters: better processes produce better results. This guidebook defines the ‘*how*’ of radical collaboration as working with seven practices (dos and don’ts).

The seven inter-related **don’ts**, taken together, define an insular, competitive, rigid approach to collaboration that produces persistent conflict and stuckness, and therefore slow, small, and unfair results.

The seven inter-related **dos** define radical collaboration as an inclusive, cooperative, responsive approach that produces movement and learning, and therefore the potential for fast, big, and fair results.

If you intentionally and consistently employ the seven dos—and avoid the seven don’ts—you will be engaging in radical collaboration.



# SEVEN PRACTICES FOR RADICAL COLLABORATION

## Do

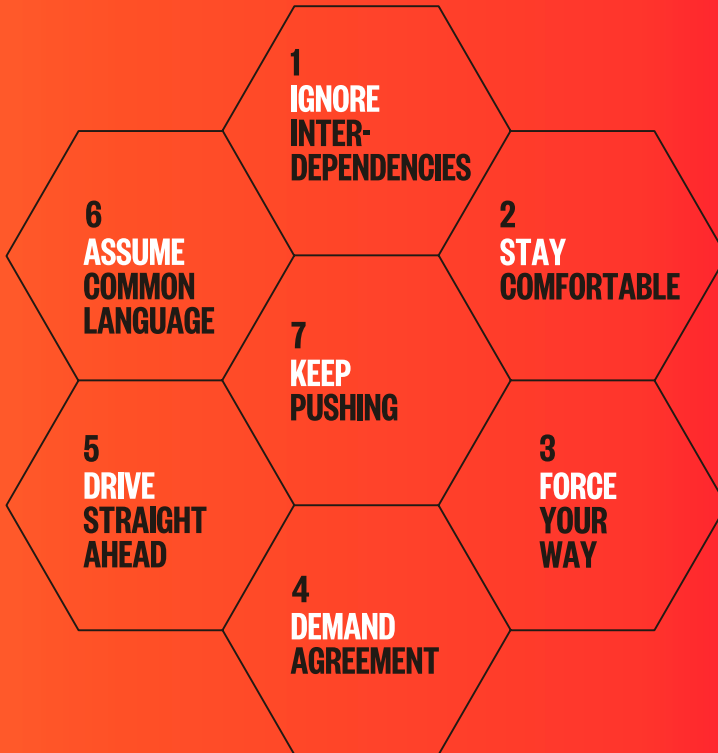
inclusive  
cooperative  
responsive





# Don't

insular  
competitive  
rigid









## Practice 1

**PLAY**

**YOUR**

**ROLE**



“Every problem in the climate and development conversation would benefit from collaboration, but it is a resource- and time-intensive process. Before you set up a collaboration, test the appetite for it.”



Scan the landscape. Many types of actors are taking many types of actions—political, economic, social, cultural, technological—to address the climate crisis. You can't and don't need to do everything. Look at what others are doing to see the most useful role your collaboration can play as part of or in connection with existing efforts. Consider your ambitions and capacities to discern how your collaboration can enrich and strengthen this complex ecosystem. Being clear about your role will help your collaboration and the larger climate movement advance with greater speed, scale, and justice.



“What exactly is it in any given partnership that you’re trying to achieve? And how do you break it down into something specific enough that you can actually do something with it, that’s also systemic enough to make a difference?”

“It’s far too easy to start something new. Doing so can tick all the reputation boxes, whereas the really important work is often fixing existing but broken or underperforming initiatives and organizations.”



Decide how your collaboration will play its specific role—and how you will play your individual role within this collaboration—using your head (your strategic and systemic assessment), your heart (your passion and commitment), and your hands (your learning, from your own experiences and those of others, about what works in practice).

Don't start a new collaboration just because you prefer to do things your way or under your brand. Egotism, duplication, fragmentation, and competition limit quality and impact.

Don't ignore your inter-dependencies with what others are doing. Unite when you can and differentiate when you must. Don't get distracted by what you think others ought to be doing. Focus on playing your role well.





## Practice 2

**FIND**

**NECESSARY**

**ALLIES**



“Be realistic about the hard work a collaboration takes, and how relationships are utterly essential to make any kind of collaboration happen.”

“Bring in the disruptors, the non-incumbents: the people that have something to gain from change.”





To be able to overcome the many inevitable obstacles along the way, you'll need to collaborate with people who share the same goal *and* have diverse and complementary capacities. Include people who are living with and understand the problem you're trying to solve, *and* who have the will, energy, and capacity to deliver solutions.

Working only with the people you are comfortable with—whom you know and like—won't get you far. To be able to act with speed, scale, and justice, you need to work with different and disruptive others (often including people you might see as opponents or even enemies) and to centre marginalized and impacted people.



“Marginalized and impacted people are not victims and consumers and beneficiaries of development. They are critical drivers of transformation, provided they have the support, the resources, and the knowledge to do that. They can be very hard-nosed people who look at change, only taking it on when they believe that it works for them. And they have the right to adapt, adopt, transform, or do whatever they want with the original idea to make it work for them.”

“Form a collaboration that surprises or even shocks people: an unlikely alliance that has a shared objective.”



You can't and don't need to work with everyone: choose the allies you need to be able to play your collective role. As you gain momentum, you will be able to enrol a broader group of allies. And as your collaboration grows, you'll need to recognize and manage the permanent tensions among speed, scale, and justice.

Collaborating requires you to agree on some things but not on everything. You need to agree on the direction you are heading and the minimum standards for travelling together, but not necessarily on the path you will take. Don't waste time trying to collaborate with people who don't want to advance or who want to head in a different direction.



“Radical collaboration is not just about representativeness. It’s about having the important conflicts and divisions on the table. Otherwise, the process will be discredited later on and the whole thing will collapse because people don’t trust the process that happened.”

“Many processes get bogged down with inclusiveness being the end game, and others are fast and get rejected because they lack buy-in. There’s a sweet spot in the middle.”



Negotiate pragmatically with your allies about the value of allying. Discuss explicitly and openly what you are aiming to accomplish together; what each of you, given your particular resources and constraints, can contribute to the collaboration, and what each of you needs from the collaboration to be able to make this contribution. Don't expect selflessness or purity.





## Practice 3

# BUILD

# COLLECTIVE

# POWER



“What has worked is when we have remained really engaged with the different partners, convening them, deciding things as a committee together, creating a central core representative of all the partners, and working together: not sending half-cooked things and just saying, ‘please endorse.’”





Your collaboration needs collective power to play its role in effecting systemic transformation. This requires recognizing and bringing together the different types of assets that each of you can contribute—authority, money, technologies, ideas, followers—to grow your individual and collective capacities. Exercising power together, fairly, is required for speed and scale.



“Often there’s a very strong push from the North to do things their way, and the power dynamic is often in that direction. We need to acknowledge that the power dynamic is there and then take time to equalize it.”

“What has really helped is a sense of mutuality, equality, and win-win—and not that we are dictating. The biggest lesson for me was how to dissolve boundaries of power relationships when we’re working in collaboration, because if the organizations we work with had felt that we were trying to teach them something, then nothing would have worked.”



Expertise and hierarchy can help you decide what to do and to get it done. But when some powerful allies use their power over others—forcing things to be the way they want them to be, whether through imposition, exclusion, co-option, or divide and rule—they undermine the collaboration. If you push people around, they will be resentful and angry and will push back, and you will get slowed down or stuck.

For your collaboration to build power and to hold itself accountable, you must make decisions fairly, involving not only the allies with more power but also those with less.



“Spend time developing the decision-making model, membership model, theory of change, allocation of resources, and payment plan (if any) that’s associated with participation. All of that takes enormous time and investment from all participants, and often they feel like that’s wasted time because it doesn’t feel like action. But we’ve seen that when that time is not spent, then collaborations can be a flash in the pan: they come out with a big splash and then they fall apart quickly and become zombie partnerships. Along with that misconception is the demand for speed, which should be a demand for quality relationships so that the collaboration has a strong foundation to then build momentum and partnership together over time.”



Invest in building a transparent and equitable governance process and a strong and resilient team.





**Practice 4**

**WORK**

**YOUR**

**DIFFERENCES**



“You don’t need all of your collaborators and partners to want the same thing out of a partnership, but you need to understand that different partners are there for very different reasons. They want different things out of the partnership; they have slightly different interests; they have different assets or experiences that they can bring to the table. And that’s a good thing”.

“If the folks who are leading the initiatives aren’t actually willing to open up to the views and challenges of others and to incorporate some of these into what they’re doing, then there’s not going to be any success. If you’re doing your job, that conflict will come out in a constructive way.”





The primary reason collaborators get stuck and do not achieve speed, scale, or justice is that they aren't able to work productively with their differences and disagreements.

Your collaborators face different realities, opportunities, and constraints, and so have different positions, perspectives, and powers. This diversity can help you see more clearly and navigate better through complex and confusing terrain.



“Be ruthlessly candid directly in front of others in small settings, but never speak badly about the competition out there. Respect your enemies, be generous to your collaborators.”

“Respect the time and governance processes that Indigenous organizations need to take positions. They don’t have one leader that takes the decision: it’s the community that takes the decision by assembly, and that decision is translated by the leaders to us.”



These differences also produce disagreements and discomfort. Often people enter a collaboration convinced that they are right and others are wrong. You can't erase these differences and you don't have to: usually it is possible and necessary to advance together in spite of, even because of, such continued differences. If you insist on complete agreement and alignment, you will not be able to advance.

Acknowledge your differences openly, keep the role your collaboration is playing in sight, and continue to look for better ways to move forward. Agree on what you can and must, and keep moving.

Work together deliberately and patiently to build your relationships, understanding, trust, agreement, and impact.





**Practice 5**

**DISCOVER**

**WAYS**

**FORWARD**



“Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good: too often people in this space are worried that what they will come out with is not good enough yet, and so they keep working on it before it’s made public. Perhaps that’s symptomatic of the fact that there is a lot of criticism in this space. Whilst that’s vital, it has killed a recognition of the urgency that’s needed, of the need to put stakes in the ground and humbly improve from there.”



In playing your role within the complex climate ecosystem, the way forward will rarely be clear or straightforward. It is not a highway: you can't clear away the obstacles and make a straight road before you start. The only way to advance with speed, scale, and justice is through rapid, disciplined, iterative experimentation.

The climate crisis creates pressure for decisive and definitive action, but advances will not always be linear or predictable. Take small steps quickly to learn through trial and error what works, and to build your confidence, capacity, and momentum.



“Do your best to get to your goal in each moment, and then have cycles in which you will make improvements. Make those improvements public: don’t try to make it perfect before it goes public. People will react to your ideas and this process will make the ideas better.”





Transformations are usually messy and unclear, especially when we are in the middle of them. Be prepared for confusion, crisis, failure, frustration, setbacks, and disappointment. When these occur, pause, sense, and try something new. Be open to changing course. Share what you are learning to help others advance more quickly.

The weather affects your journey and you can't control it. Your context will keep changing and presenting new obstacles and opportunities. Seize the moment when you can.

You won't be able to know or agree on a perfect solution before you start. You can only advance through acting and building momentum, and so pragmatic progress matters more than perfect promises.





**Practice 6**

**SHARE**

**HOPEFUL**

**STORIES**



“What was important is that we identified a focused list where action could have a really big and tangible impact. We had a very clear goal that was data-driven and gave actionable guidance. It wasn’t hand-wringing and doom-laden predictions: it gave specific practical advice.”

“We spent too long trying to debate and align precise wording across the coalition—we got stuck in the details. We discovered it was much more important to find the common vision, where we want to make an important and systemic change to something, and allow each of us to talk about what we were doing to contribute to that in our own way.”



People won't move forward together without shared stories of realistic hope. They need narratives and maps about where they are, where they are trying to get to, and why it is important that they move.

People usually don't like being told what they must do, so share stories that your allies understand and want to be part of.

Recognize the diversity among the people you are collaborating with and those you want to engage: scientific and economic explanations will resonate with some people, and empathetic human narratives with others. Certain storytellers will be more credible with some people than with others. Don't expect one language to work for everyone.



“Show optimism about the possibilities that we have ahead. I get really frustrated when I’m confronting a group of people that are just pessimists. Those people are often working for the blockers and the people that really don’t want things to move forward: in the end, they do the same. The vector of their energy moves in the same direction: they don’t offer the possibility of the world being different.”



Demonstrate possibilities through examples and evidence of success and progress. Acknowledge risk and admit mistakes. Construct plausible scenarios of the future, bad as well as good, to enable people to see more clearly where they need to go and to act more confidently to get there. Adjust your narratives and maps as you advance.







**Practice 7**

**CARE**

**FOR**

**YOURSELVES**



“Nothing is ever big enough or fast enough. That’s the reality of working in the climate or environmental space for the last three decades. So if you want to set up an alliance and you don’t have the optimism, then you shouldn’t be working in the space, or you need to go and take a real break because you’re burnt out. We all get burnt out along the way and all have trouble with that.”



A healthy movement towards a healthy future requires healthy people. The way you show up affects what you can do. You won't be able to move with speed, scale, and justice if you don't take care of yourself and your companions. We all need support. This seventh practice enables the other six.

Acknowledge the uphill. The climate journey is long and hard. Many of your fellow travellers—especially those with less power and privilege—are suffering, traumatized, and frightened, torn between resignation and rage. Many face immediate threats to their livelihoods and lives. Collaborate empathetically and fairly, recognizing that different collaborators face different realities and have different resources and constraints.



“If you went into Durban after the floods and tried to do a multi-stakeholder collaboration process there, do you know what levels of emotional burden people would be carrying? Whether they have lost loved ones, their homes, or a business. I think this is a really important part of the process and you must be thinking really carefully about how you’re bringing people on board: what the experiences and vulnerabilities might be, and how you deal with it in a way that’s sensitive and caring.”



Progress requires purposefulness and persistence, but if you just keep pushing on and pushing others, you will produce burnout and breakdown. Build a network of mutual professional and personal support. Help one another through the rough patches.

Inattention to yourself—forgetting about yourself, or identifying yourself only with your work—creates defensiveness and rigidity. Self-awareness, humility, and generosity are required for openness and creativity and therefore for impact.



“The anxiety and depression always come back. There have been some huge insults, even racist ones, that I have received on social media. Never hide something in your heart because one day it might cause you to harm others. I always share. Most of the time when I’m going through a lot, I don’t post, I don’t do anything. First I email my friends: ‘I need some hope, I’m mentally disturbed, can we have a call?’ So I have three people that I’ve always run to, and these are the people who have kept me in line because sometimes I burn out. It’s normal: actually many activists go through this, but some of them don’t have therapists or don’t have friends to call.”



Take time to stop for refreshment, reconnection, relaxation, reflection, recovery, and renewal.

Celebrate your victories and honour your losses. Cultivate dignity and courage. Be kind to yourself and others.



# INTERVIEWEES

**Tasso Azevedo**, MapBiomas, Brazil

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resources to help you collaborate with greater  
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