Many-to-Many System

Field Guide*

with learnings, models, insights and tools

*for exploring and navigating complex terrains through observation, identifying patterns and understanding the environment. Focussed on learning to support making informed choices.
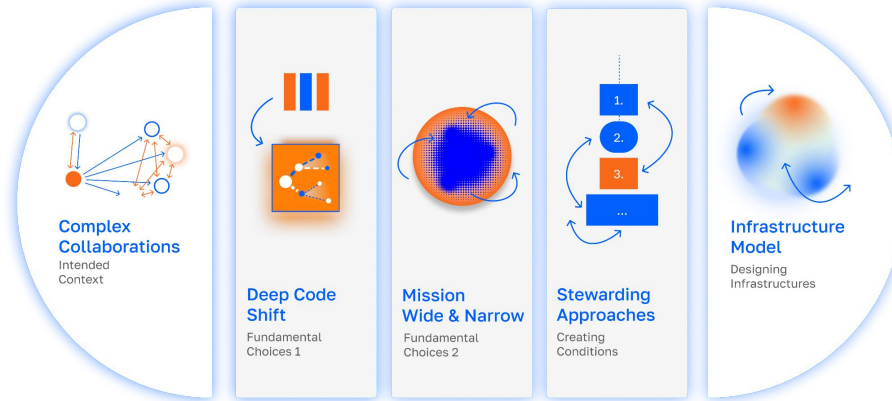
What You'll Find in this Field Guide

Introduction to Many-to-Many
to give a brief overview of the core idea and key conceptual foundations

The Layers of The Many-to-Many System
with high-level learnings and insights plus curated tools lists

System Blockers
our learnings about blockers in the current system and how they impact complex collaborations

Complex Collaborations
Intended Context

Deep Code Shift
Fundamental Choices 1

Mission Wide & Narrow
Fundamental Choices 2

Stewarding Approaches
Creating Conditions

Infrastructure Model
Designing Infrastructures

Instruments for implementation: Practical tools, examples, case studies

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Coming Soon

Many-to-Many System
Conceptual Foundations

The Many-to-Many System aims to support collaborations tackling complex, entangled challenges where disrupting norms around value, ownership, and power is essential.
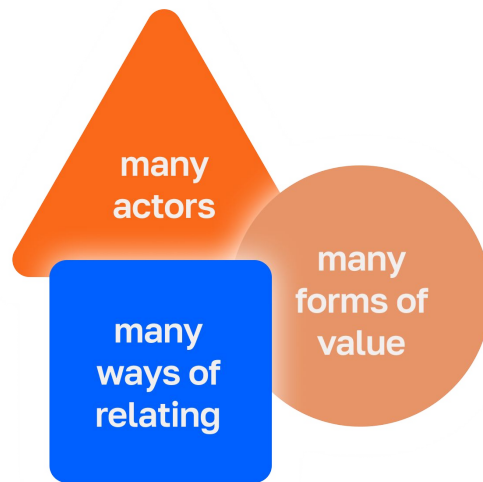
The Basic Idea

Stepping into today's complex, interconnected problems requires what we term "complex collaborations[*]" and will ultimately need to bring together **many** diverse groups (public, private, civic) with **many** new perspectives, including future generations and the natural world.

While many collaborations like this are already doing great work, we think that finding better ways to support how they are structured and organised them could unlock more effective, system-level change.

The Many-to-Many System is focussed on unlocking the governance, organising, legal, and learning structures of complex collaborations to enable **many** resources – not just money, but also knowledge and relationships – to flow more freely, and to foster **many** ways of working that embrace diverse value exchange.

[*] we use complex collaborations, but you may prefer other terminology or concepts - collaboration ecosystems, cross sector alliances, systemic partnerships, etc

The Basic Idea + Deep Codes

To unlock the governance, organising, legal, and learning structures of complex collaborations, we've focussed on reimagining what we term 'deep codes'.

For each and everyone of us, our fundamental understandings of the world are invisibly embedded within our structures, frameworks and rules, which in turn shape what we create and experience.

The Many-to-Many System explored how these codes shape collaboration and governance, aiming to understand if they could be reimagined and how those within complex collaborators themselves can embed them into their collaboration's infrastructures.

More intentional and visible shifting of deep codes for governance and organising could help collaborations to better align with their systemic missions and offer approaches for rethinking core concepts like value, power, risk, and ownership.

BALANCED POWER

HOLISTIC VIEW

UNFURLING

MINDFUL ENDINGS

Many form of Value

Evolution through learning

Balancing Risk and Harm

PROPORTIONATE

MISSION LED

RISK MITIGATION

RISK OWNERSHIP

The three core deep code shifts and eight governance deep code shifts we explored. We note these are not exhaustive and may evolve and change over time as we learn more.

Many-to-Many System
Introduction to this Field Guide

Introduction

The Layers

System Blockers

Why We Created this Field Guide

The Many-to-Many System distills two years of learning, prototyping, research, and practice. It was a labour of love, aiming to honor the contributions of many collaborators and offer something we hope is valuable to others.

Recognising that no single report can capture everything, and that comprehensive detail can be overwhelming, we embrace George Box's wisdom: "All models are wrong, but some are useful." We sincerely hope this Many-to-Many System (our version of a mega-model) proves useful. Being fully transparent upfront, whilst the System may look neat and tidy, it is very much a living organism. Some parts are far more developed than others and we are continually learning more by testing it in different contexts.

Our focus was to create a blend: a core framework, practical learnings and insights, illustrative models for complex topics, and tools developed along the way. The aspiration is that these elements will support others in embedding the Many-to-Many deep code shifts into their own complex collaboration work.

Who this Field Guide is for

We believe there are three key audiences for the Many-to-Many System, however this **Field Guide** was specifically designed for **Practitioners[*].** This means people who are **already working in complex collaborations.**

This Field Guide is most relevant for practitioners struggling to find or create suitable governance and organizing structures for their complex work and/or who want to disrupt norms around value, ownership, risk and power. Whilst the Many-to-Many System is not the only way to achieve this, we share this as an option for Practitioners to explore and to determine its relevance and resonance (or not!) We note that the System can be taken as a whole or in parts.

[*] we use Practitioners, but you may prefer other terminology or concepts - governance stewards, system convenors, network hosts, intermediaries

Others who may find this Field Guide interesting include:

Funders: Especially those seeking to disrupt these same norms or invest effectively in systemic change initiatives.

Legal and Financial Professionals: including lawyers and accountants, whose expertise is vital for societal transformation, particularly around governance, legal structuring, and contracting.

Many-to-Many System
How was this Developed?

How was this Developed?
Proof of Possibility

The Many-to-Many team worked with a set of diverse partners to create a "proof of possibility". This demonstrated how a collaboration can hold and strategically deploy varied resources towards a systemic mission, using an approach that shifts deep codes. We describe this process briefly below. The insights from this proof of possibility and related work were then distilled into the Many-to-Many System (and many other elements!) in an attempt to create something that was navigable and useful for others to use.

Stage One: Creating a Learning Network & initial Prototype

Our proof of possibility began by establishing a learning network of organizations with deep expertise in collaborative governance. This network was given £122k and a mission: "How do we collectively steward—with responsibility and care—a pool of assets to build the system's capacity for many-to-many governance?"
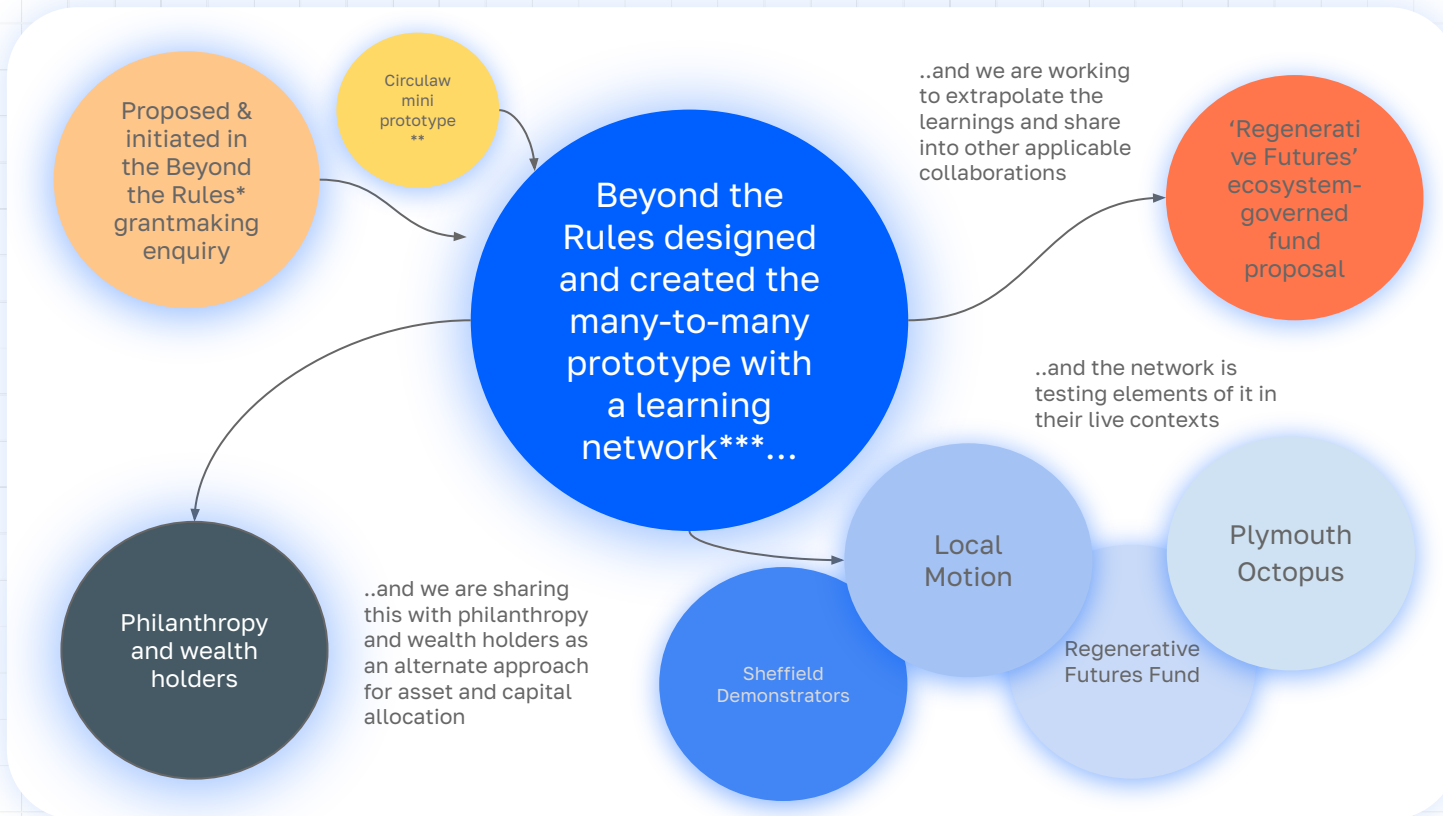
The core challenge was to develop a legally robust way to move money from multiple funders to multiple actors collaborating on a shared mission. The learning network then live-prototyped an initial many-to-many governance and organizing structure to allocate the £122k, designed for future use by other collaborations. This first prototype included a methodology, governance model, organizing structure, practices, funding methods, and a many-to-many contract.

Stage Two: Live Testing and Iteration

Next, we tested this prototype in real-world contexts. Learning network participants experimented with components of the prototype, identifying what worked and what didn't, allowing us to learn by doing. Key insights were continuously woven back into the prototype, refining it through iteration. This live testing is ongoing, meaning the Many-to-Many System will continue to evolve.

Proof of Possibility - History and Broader Context

Proposed & initiated in the Beyond the Rules* grantmaking enquiry

Circulaw mini prototype **

Beyond the Rules designed and created the many-to-many prototype with a learning network***...

..and we are working to extrapolate the learnings and share into other applicable collaborations

'Regenerative Futures' ecosystem-governed fund proposal

..and the network is testing elements of it in their live contexts

Philanthropy and wealth holders

..and we are sharing this with philanthropy and wealth holders as an alternate approach for asset and capital allocation

Local Motion

Plymouth Octopus

Sheffield Demonstrators

Regenerative Futures Fund

HISTORY

*Beyond the Rules is an initiative that is interested in the deep, thoughtful and highly creative work required to rewrite, reinvent or reimagine rules, norms and laws that hold us in the current system.

**Annette Dhami, Calvin Po and Angela Tang under Beyond the Rules started developing the first concepts for the many-to-many governance system while partnering on a mini prototype with CircuLaw, a multi-sector initiative based in the Netherlands.

***A Learning Network was established in June 2023 and includes - Dark Matter Labs, Angela Tang, Local Motion, Huddlecraft, Plymouth Octopus Project, We are Opus, Foundation Scotland, Lankelly Chase. It has been supported by Arising Quo, Lankelly Chase and Laudes Foundation.

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Limitations of the Proof of Possibility

While an ideal first proof of possibility aims to be encompassing, reality often dictates a more focused approach. The inherent complexities of innovative work, combined with practical constraints like time, resources, and evolving understanding, made it impossible to test every desired variable simultaneously. We consider this proof of possibility a good start for exploring our core hypotheses and to generate key learnings, that will help inform where to go next in subsequent iterations. Below we outline two key limitations.

Limited Actor types

We believe that today's interconnected challenges need complex collaborations across sectors (inc public, private, philanthropic, civic). Our Proof of Possibility involved philanthropic and civic actors; it did not involve public and private actors. Our aspiration is to work with other collaboration practitioners, who do work with these groups to iterate our learnings into these new contexts.

Simple Governance Framework

Due to the limited size, scope and risks of the prototype the governance framework that we prototyped was relatively simple, only involving those directly stewarding the partnership, rather than wider stakeholders in a layered approach. It also was based in one jurisdiction (England and Wales) and a context of relatively low risks in relation to more complicated areas such as data protection and safeguarding.

Many-to-Many System
The Layers

Many-to-Many System
Overview of the Layers

The Many-to-Many System distills key learnings from our two-year exploration involving numerous partners who contributed insights through building, prototyping, and testing.

It's important to note the System simplifies a highly complex landscape, aiming to make these interconnected elements digestible and navigable. in practice, these layers aren't sequential steps with clear starts and stops; they are often messy, iterative, and entangled.

The Many-to-Many System has six key layers:

1. **Complex Collaborations:** Explores the kinds of complex collaborations that the Many-to-Many approach was designed for, acknowledging that insights from it will be less relevant for other contexts.

2. **Deep Code Shifts:** Dives into the core hypothesis: that shifting underlying governance and organising 'deep codes' could unlock more effective, system-level change.

3. **Wide and Narrow Missions:** Suggests an approach to navigate tension between 'wide' (aspirational, long-term societal transformation) and 'narrow' (specific initiative) missions, specifically for collaborations aiming for broad systemic transformation.

4. **Stewardship Approaches:** offers insights and learnings, intended to provide collaborations with ideas and insights for how they might consider hosting, navigating and sensing into governance for their complex collaborations.

5. **instruments for Implementation:** Sharing of specific resources, frameworks, or learnings gathered to support collaborations to implement 'deep code' shifts within their own structures.

6. **System Blockers:** Highlights conditions we observed within the current system that seem to hinder collaborations attempting different ways of working. *Coming soon*
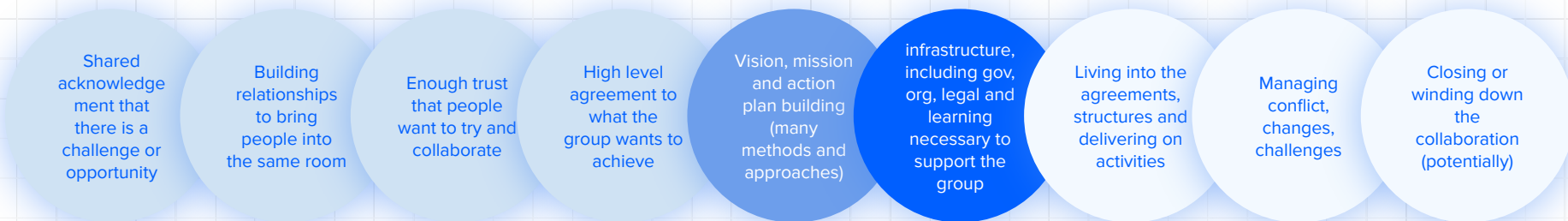
Overview of the Layers *(cont...)*

The image shows the different layers of the Many-to-Many System and how they interact with each other.

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers
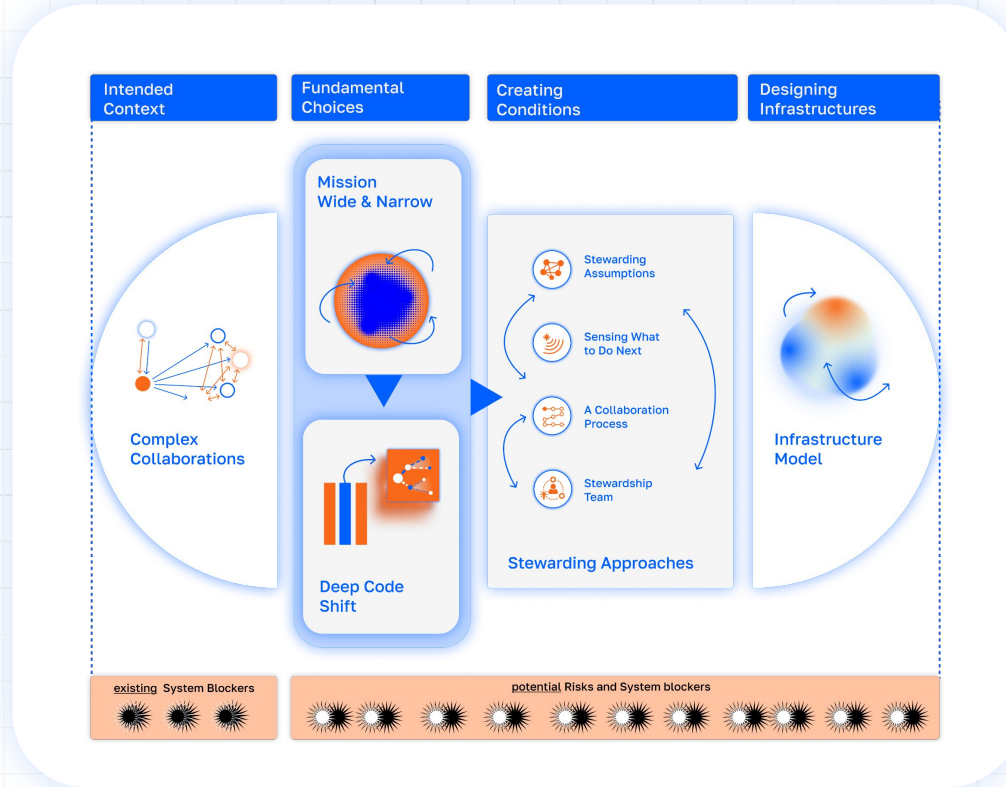
Many-to-Many System
Infrastructure Supports Culture

Our work focused on building governance and organising infrastructures for complex collaborations that have a goal aimed at broad systemic transformation. We pursued this because existing options often felt misaligned or inappropriate for such endeavors. While our focus is on infrastructure, we firmly believe it's how we collectively form and then live into these structures truly shapes our actions and outcomes. Our aim is to show that more intentionally aligned infrastructures can support the other critical elements of what it takes to do complex collaborations.

Our central question was: Can we collectively shape collaboration infrastructures to better enable us to live into our full potential? The Many-to-Many System is what we created. We hope this aids governance practitioners in creating aligned infrastructures for their complex collaborations, and we look forward to understanding how these structures work alongside nurturing everyday practices. Our hope is to continue to iterate and evolve these structures as we learn more by working alongside others.
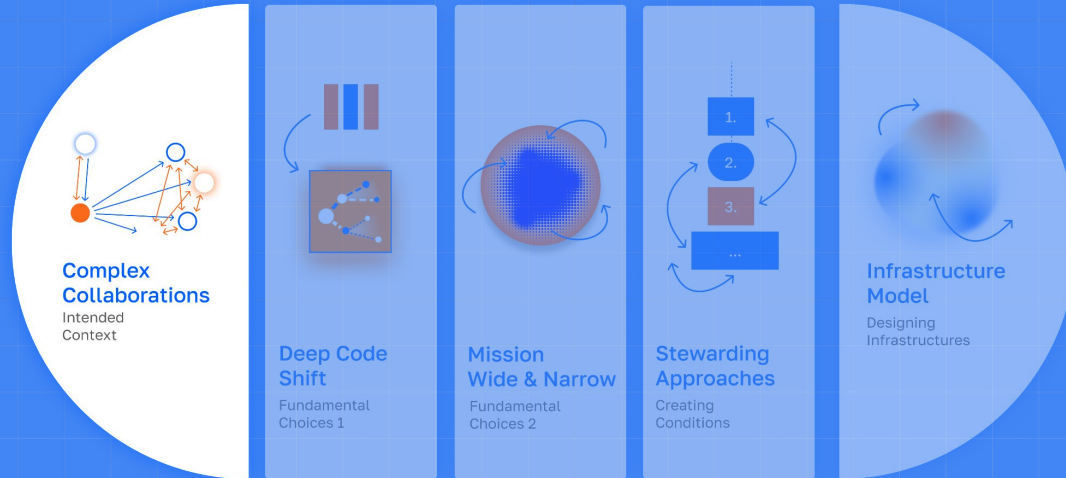
Shared acknowledgement that there is a challenge or opportunity

Building relationships to bring people into the same room

Enough trust that people want to try and collaborate

High level agreement to what the group wants to achieve

Vision, mission and action plan building (many methods and approaches)

infrastructure, including gov, org, legal and learning necessary to support the group

Living into the agreements, structures and delivering on activities

Managing conflict, changes, challenges

Closing or winding down the collaboration (potentially)

Types of activities necessary for complex collaboration, and where the Many-to-Many has focused it's effort (shown by intensity of colour)

Complex Collaborations

You are here →

Complex Collaborations
Intended Context

Deep Code Shift
Fundamental Choices 1

Mission Wide & Narrow
Fundamental Choices 2

Stewarding Approaches
Creating Conditions

Infrastructure Model
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Navigating this Section

We focused on complex challenges that inherently require diverse actors and perspectives. This focus highlighted the need for a clear, concise way to describe such endeavors. While no terminology felt perfect, we adopted "**complex collaboration**." [*]

Through our work with others in the field, and learning from different scholarship and practice, key features of these collaborations began to emerge. It became clear that there are many types, and their design significantly impacts their behavior, potential, and their specific needs for governance, organization, and learning.

Understanding these distinctions helped us identify which types of complex collaborations we had designed the Many-to-Many System for, and thus are most likely to find these resources relevant and beneficial. in particular, we noticed that the 'deep codes' of established governance practices and legal structures and instruments of the complex collaborations we focused on were often mismatched to their inherent traits.

The following pages offer an overview of what we mean by '**complex collaboration**', include the type of complex collaboration that the Many-to-Many System was designed for.

It also offers a more detailed description of which **types** of complex collaboration are most likely to need alternate ways of governing, organising and coordinating (and therefore might be interested in Many-to-Many).

[*] we use complex collaborations, but you may prefer other terminology or concepts - collaboration ecosystems, cross sector alliances, systemic partnerships, etc

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

What is a Complex Collaboration?

There are many different types of "complex collaborations." We focused on collaborations that are most likely to need **ways of governing, organising and coordinating effort that are appropriate for tackling system-level change.**

Our Focus: When we say complex collaboration we mean collaborations that have the following four key features and three traits:

1. Nature of the Collaboration:

- **Diverse Actors:** Comprises multiple participants, often cross-sectoral and/or transdisciplinary.
- **Systemic Goal:** Shares a co-created goal aimed at broad systemic transformation.
- **Action-Oriented:** Seeks to implement projects, initiatives, or programs.
- **Resource intensive:** Generally requires significant commitments (including funding) to progress.

2. Inherent Traits (due to their nature):

- **Retrospective Causality:** Cause and effect are often clear only in hindsight.
- **Dynamic Systems:** The whole is more than its parts; the system may be in constant flux.
- **Emergent Practices:** Effective approaches are discovered through experimentation, not predefined as "best."

Many-to-Many invitation:
Reflect on your collaboration using these points.

Does this description resonate? If yes, do you see / want to create opportunities in your governance and organising structures to embed changes to the way it functions (and hopefully reimagine how concepts like value, power, risk, and ownership are managed)?

Context Insight One

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Types of Complex Collaborations and Implications

A collaboration's origin and focus significantly influence its behavior. Below, we explore two frameworks that illustrate different types of complex collaborations and their characteristics:

1. **Policy Lab Framework:** This framework analyzes "communities" (which we see as akin to complex collaborations) based on two attributes: **diversity** (diverse vs. similar members) and **access** (open vs. closed). These attributes shape community behavior. For example, an open, global community (like TED) excels at inspiring and sharing new ideas but would likely struggle with on-the-ground project delivery in a local setting.

Our Focus: We centered the Many-to-Many System on what Policy Lab terms 'communities of purpose' – those focused on collective action (for example vs inspiration) towards systemic transition.
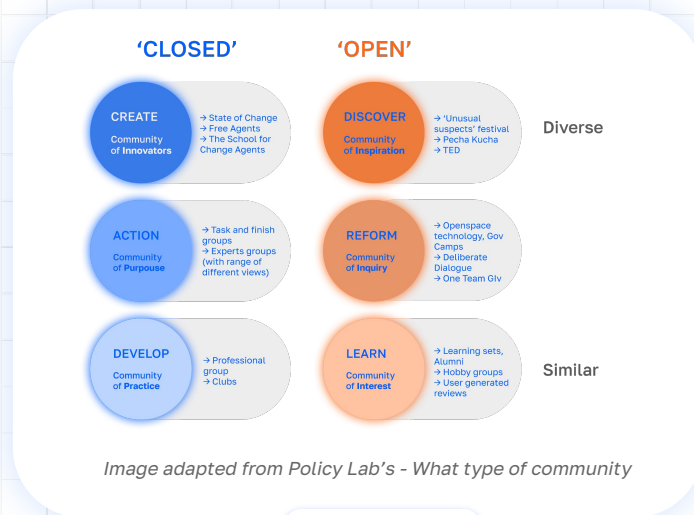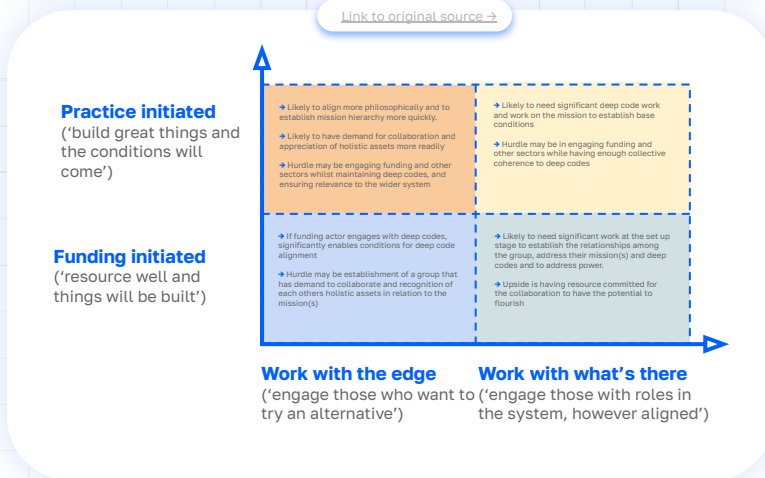

'CLOSED'   'OPEN'

CREATE — Community of **Innovators**
→ State of Change
→ Free Agents
→ The School for Change Agents

DISCOVER — Community of **Inspiration**
→ 'Unusual suspects' festival
→ Pecha Kucha
→ TED

Diverse

ACTION — Community of **Purpose**
→ Task and finish groups
→ Experts groups (with range of different views)

REFORM — Community of **Inquiry**
→ Openspace technology, Gov Camps
→ Deliberate Dialogue
→ One Team Glv

DEVELOP — Community of **Practice**
→ Professional group
→ Clubs

LEARN — Community of **Interest**
→ Learning sets, Alumni
→ Hobby groups
→ User generated reviews

Similar

Image adapted from Policy Lab's - What type of community

Link to original source →

Context Insight Two

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Types of Complex Collaborations and Implications *(cont...)*

2. **Our Emergent Frame:** Developed from our experiences over the past two years, this model looks at two different characteristics: **locus** (working at the edge vs. within the current system) and **initiation** (funder initiated vs practice initiated). It suggests that these starting conditions lead to distinct collaboration characteristics and behaviors, and may be approached with different processes.

Our Focus: Our proof of possibility was initiated by practice and funding in tandem, and worked with the edge. We have since been testing in places to see how it applies to 'work with what's there'. We believe it has application in all contexts but that the applications differ in order and focus (see more in Collaboration Process).

Link to original source →

Practice initiated
('build great things and the conditions will come')

→ Likely to align more philosophically and to establish mission hierarchy more quickly.

→ Likely to have demand for collaboration and appreciation of holistic assets more readily

→ Hurdle may be engaging funding and other sectors whilst maintaining deep codes, and ensuring relevance to the wider system

→ Likely to need significant deep code work and work on the mission to establish base conditions

→ Hurdle may be in engaging funding and other sectors while having enough collective coherence to deep codes

Funding initiated
('resource well and things will be built')

→ If funding actor engages with deep codes, significantly enables conditions for deep code alignment

→ Hurdle may be establishment of a group that has demand to collaborate and recognition of each others holistic assets in relation to the mission(s)

→ Likely to need significant work at the set up stage to establish the relationships among the group, address their mission(s) and deep codes and to address power.

→ Upside is having resource committed for the collaboration to have the potential to flourish

Work with the edge
('engage those who want to try an alternative')

Work with what's there
('engage those with roles in the system, however aligned')

Many-to-Many invitation:
Consider your collaboration: What type is it? What are its key features and behaviors? To what extent does it need aligned infrastructures, and when will those need attention?

Context Insight Two

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Collaboration Evolution Cycles

We learned that governance in complex collaborations is ongoing, but often occurs in "cycles" with varying intensity. Some aspects, like relationship tending, require continuous attention, while others, like deciding who will formally mediate disagreements between people, might only be reviewed periodically and ideally never at all, if relationally all tensions can be resolved informally. Crucially, as collaborations enter new phases—as described in network theory (e.g. the transition of fragments to hubs)—governance often needs significant review.

Our focus was on the concentrated governance activity required during these phase changes. We prototyped approaches that aimed to be realistic about the typical constraints of time and energy that are often also present in these moments. We also designed with the understanding that any governance established would need to be iterative and adaptable for future phases.

Fragments → Single-Hub → Multi-Hub → Core/Periphery
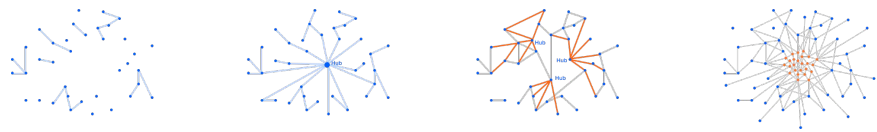
Network Theory - how networks can evolve and change, David Ehrlich
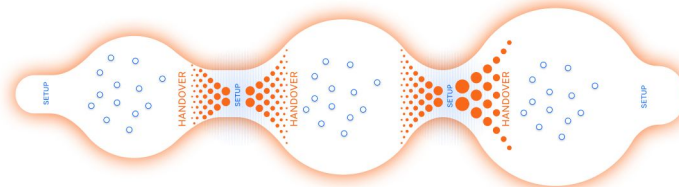
Many-to-Many representation of governance cycles over time

Context Insight Three

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Many-to-Many System - The Layers
Deep Code Shifts

Complex Collaborations
Intended Context

Deep Code Shift
Fundamental Choices 1

Mission Wide & Narrow
Fundamental Choices 2

Stewarding Approaches
Creating Conditions

Infrastructure Model
Designing Infrastructures
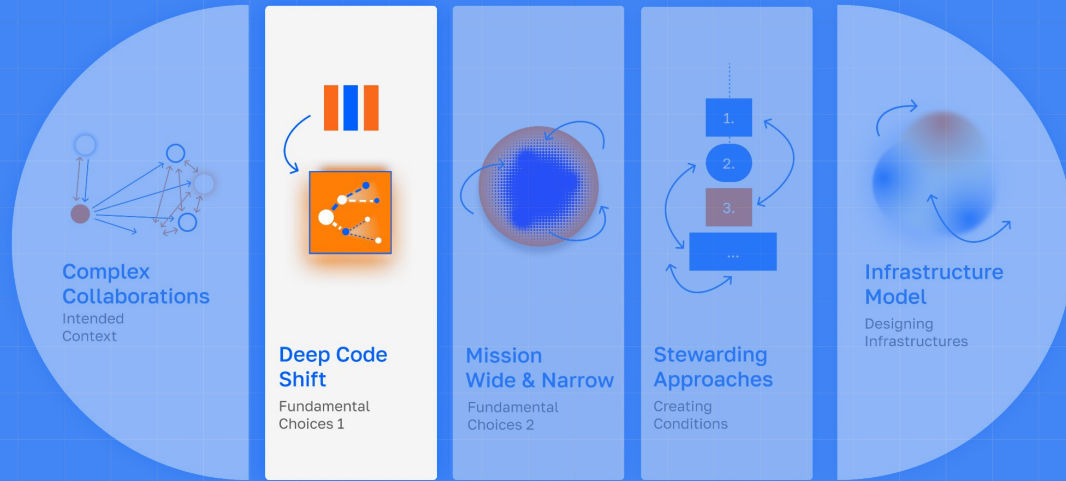
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Navigating this Section

The way we govern our organisations and collaborations is never neutral. It's subtly shaped by often unconscious, deeply embedded assumptions, values, and mental models that code our operational norms and decision-making frameworks. We call these 'deep codes'.

Embedding new or reimagined deep codes into governance means consciously considering which assumptions are appropriate or inappropriate for our mission. We then weave these into the very fabric of how our collaboration is directed, shaped, and held accountable. These codes might concern, for instance, what we value, the power dynamics we employ, how we relate to one another, or our theories of how change happens.

For this reason, our experiments aimed to shift deep codes within collaborative infrastructures and processes, aligning them with a mission for a world designed for interbecoming. This was initial testing, and we hope others will experiment further.

in **this Field Guide**, we outline three core deep code shifts and eight wider governing and organising deep codes that we have worked with (these deep codes are indicative, not exhaustive).

The following pages provide an overview of these critical deep codes, how we've tried to reimagine them, and ways we've embedded these shifts into our complex collaboration work.

The three core deep code shifts and eight governance deep code shifts we explored.

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Many Forms of Value

in the traditional collaboration governance logics that we reviewed, there was a notable overemphasis on financial capital and 'priceable' value. That which was priced, commercially exchanged and capable of being taxed was noticed and named, and that which was not was largely ignored. intangible forms of value that had not been formally recorded for accounting purposes (like relationships, craft, attention and reputations of trust) and non-commercial ways of relating (like gift, barter or exchange) were notably under-recognised and/or undervalued. This created dynamics which presumed that those that contributed financial capital (regardless of the means of how that capital was obtained) had more skin in the game than others.

The shift:
Our aim was to weave a "multi-capital"[*] approach - recognising all tangible and intangible forms of value - throughout the logics of a collaboration's considerations and, in turn, their infrastructures.

[*] we use multi-capital, but you may prefer other terminology or concepts - Multiple Value Streams, Human, Social, and Natural Capital, Broader Value Framework
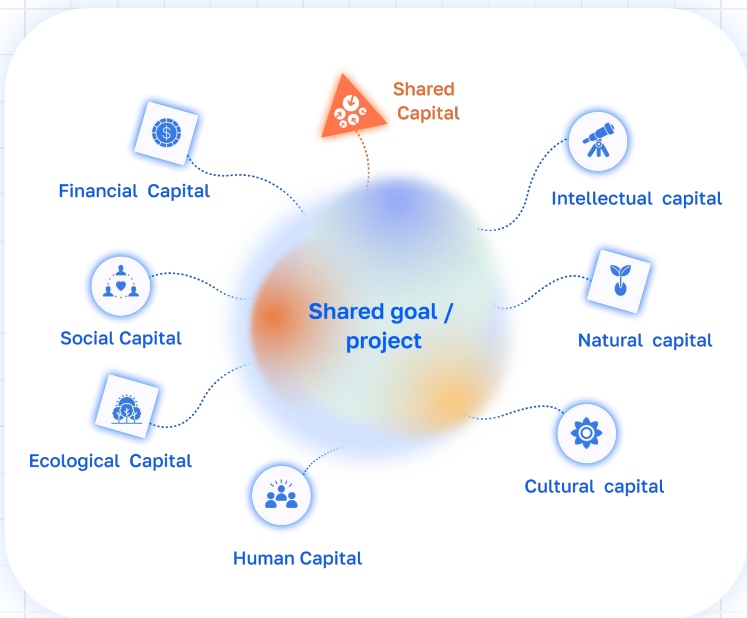
Image: recognises many forms of value and the relationality between them. We have drawn extensively from the permaculture eight forms of capital work.

Insight One

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Many Forms of Value *(cont...)*

What we tried and learned:
In our proof of possibility, we experimented with embedding many forms of value, relationality exchange and risk-holding into our process and infrastructures:

PROCESS:

As a group we spent time considering and mapping each collaborator's multi-capital contributions beyond what is priced and visible and where such capital arose from and by what means. We explored how this value is exchanged including reciprocity, gift and barter. We noted what it took for them to be accrued and then witnessed this together, noting the duties that this might require of us. See the asset mapping tools for more info.

GOVERNING:

As part of creating a contract, we felt it was important to explicitly state the importance of taking a holistic view to contributions by all parties. Recognising the plurality of contributions helped to further center the mission of the group in the contract - i.e. 'why' everyone wanted to take part in the work and what they were sacrificing to take part. This truer representation of the group's dynamic logically led to a more pluralist and mission centred approach to decision making and risk holding in the contract as well. If you would like to see more on how this showed up in the contract, look out for the 'Holistic View' icon in our contract example.

We learned that deeply embedding this 'multi-capital' approach fundamentally shifted liability-holding in the governance of the group, and also created shared recognition of traditionally under-recognised capitals in the collective conscious. We would next time ensure that the process also actively recognises and honours multi-capital contributions beyond the collaborators (including contributions from the wider living world and those before us). We think that there is more scope to embed this deep code in other areas and invite others to explore this further.

Many-to-Many invitation:
What types of value are being brought to the table in your collaboration? How can your group practice uplifting traditionally under-recognised value and resisting the financial and other tangible capitals dominating? What would occur in your collaboration if this type of multicapital approach was embedded within your infrastructures?

Insight One

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Evolution Through Learning

in complex systems, effective practices emerge via experimentation and retrospective learning, as cause and effect are often clear only in hindsight. Pathways are thus non-linear and unpredictable - what we think we might need to do at the outset may change significantly over time as we learn and adapt.

However, in the collaboration infrastructures we reviewed, this embedded evolution was often absent from assumptions about how work would happen. Fixed project plans, roles, and budgets, alongside accountability to pre-set deliverables, were commonplace.

These norms were often particularly driven by unchallenged fears and concerns of risk-owners within institutions, and further entrenched by legal advisors of institutions, whose job it is to advise on legal risks and who would code client-focused protections into contracts.

The shift:
Our aim was to create an alternative to these forms, one with built-in scope for learning-led evolution. We wanted learning feedback loops to help the collaboration build on each other's work in a mutually reinforcing way, rather than operating separately side-by-side. The aim is that learning is constantly shaping and being shaped by the work.

Living into the design, doing the work in practice

How we're structured and oriented to do our collaborative work

Insights are curated from learning by doing

Learning Systems create feedback loops designed to promote iteration
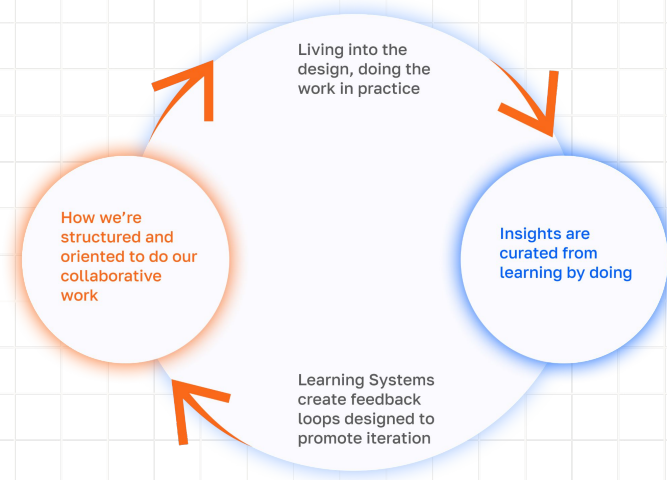
Image above shows how the Many-to-Many System was designed to enable governing, organising, legal and other elements to evolve as they are lived into and learning by doing occurs.

Insight Two

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Evolution Through Learning *(cont...)*

What we tried and learned:

GOVERNING:

We created a 'mission space' where the mission itself was constant, but collaborators could flow in and out. We sought proportionate and legitimate governance that would adjust with context, understanding that the mission's impact would always exceed the immediate participants and that the collaborating group would never fully encompass all necessary perspectives.

LEGAL ARCHITECTURE:

We prototyped a legal structure that was 'iterative by design', alongside a contract that was flexible enough so that certain governance artefacts could be continually updated without the contract itself needing to be re-signed or terminated. We also ensured that the principle of phasing was embedded throughout the contract. If you would like to see more on how this showed up in the contract, look out for the 'Unfurling', 'Mindful Endings' and Mission Led' icons in the contract example.

PROCESS:

We worked with institutions that understood the posture of traditional lawyers and the importance of counter balancing their legal opinion with wider harm considerations, providing a fertile environment for their risk-owners to confidently embody the deep code shifts. Our collaboration process included discussions on what it meant to be collaborators in an evolving system, and the necessary limits of power and influence for the original collaborators. The principle of phasing was surfaced and then embedded throughout the contract.

Insight Two

Evolution Through Learning *(cont...)*

ECOSYSTEM STRATEGY:

Our collaboration process included discussions on what it meant to be collaborators in an evolving system, and the limits of power and influence for the original collaborators.

ORGANISING:

We adopted a 'role card' approach that enabled roles to change over time without core functions being dropped, and adopted Loomio to enable ongoing digital decisions.

We learned it's possible to embed uncertainty and evolution into both governing and legal architecture. We also learned the importance of continuously living into and adapting the learning system. Time constraints, however, prevented us from fully testing and practicing the learning-driven adaptability once live.

Many-to-Many invitation:
How does your collaboration's governance evolve with learning? Do your feedback loops guide strategy and structure, not just post-project reporting? Could learning truly drive your collaboration's evolution?

Insight Two

Balancing Risks and Harms

We wanted to recognise that it is deeply impractical and disproportionate for any collaboration to assess and mitigate every possible risk, and yet many contracts offered by funders expect blanket indemnities to be given so that funders are shielded by every possible risk that the law allows. This behaviour not only perpetuates the false narrative that funders are the 'sole' contributors to a project and therefore are the only ones that 'deserve' to be shielded by any risk absolutely, but such habitual practices can also create other harm - the harm of not doing the right thing because of a theoretical legal risk.

The shift:

We wanted to test a different ways of relating risk - 1) ensuring the risk of doing was counterbalanced with the risks of not doing, 2) prioritising which risks are the most important to for the group to manage to try to prevent them from crystallising (risk mitigation) and 3) experimenting with different ways of allocating risk liabilities when they do crystalise with the aim that these would be more equitable (risk ownership).

We aimed for a process where partners could actively talk about risks, both expected and unexpected, and the consequences of acting versus not acting (which has a much wider reach). This would open up a richer conversation about who holds responsibility for risks, covering both preventing issues and dealing with their fallout.

Link to original source →

SOCIAL AGREEMENT (flaws)

LEGAL (Flaws)

What our approach encourages

Focus on:
positives of societal risks that might be mitigated through care and liabilities.

What we tried:
to do involvement bringing more balance both sides - recognising in relational and legal agreements to risks of not doing as well as of doing and bringing in active agreemts on risks mitigation and liability-holding.

Focus on:
the immediate possible risks of doing and management of those, ignoring the wider societal risks what the work addresses.

Image showing key flaws of taking a social only or legal only approach to agreement making, and how we tried to balance both sides.

Insight Three

Balancing Risks and Harms *(cont...)*

What we tried and learned:

PROCESS:

We worked to bring considerations about risks and liabilities directly into the collaboration process so protocols were actively agreed upon. We think there are many other ways to do this beyond what we tried, including of centering the risks of inaction into conversations.

GOVERNING:

We noted that what's often overlooked are the responsibilities and abilities to handle risks in a way that truly serves the mission. Given this, the contract was designed to centre the wide-boundary mission, including in all decision making, tension resolution and informal risk management. in certain circumstance, a mediator—contractually required to adopt a mission-led, multi-capital, risk-absorption capability approach—would have the final say. This aims to provide guardrails for risks to be resolved in line with the mission. We also identified risk mitigation and communication protocols as acts of mutual care, weaving them into both legal and social responsibilities as appropriate. If you would like to see more on how this showed up in the contract, look out for the 'Proportionate', 'Risk Mitigation' and 'Risk Ownership' icons in the example contr

Insight Three

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Balancing Risks and Harms *(cont...)*

LEGAL ARCHITECTURE:
The group not being an incorporated legal form was an intentional choice as it enabled the group to experiment with whether this legal form provided sufficient flexibility to determine where risk liabilities could be allocated without being restricted by implied laws and duties (that arise from incorporated legal forms) relating to risk ownership.

Our Proof of Possibility was conducted in a sandbox environment where risks were limited and unlikely to materialise. As such, we haven't yet truly stress-tested these mechanisms for robustness. However, we did find that openly bringing these questions into the collaboration acknowledged the plurality of risks held across the group, and supported other trust building exercises - something we have observed traditional agreement making processes tend to rupture.

Many-to-Many invitation:
How does your collaboration think about risk-holding? Are you openly discussing your expectations and protocols? Are there simple and easy things you can do individually or collectively to minimise the biggest risks to your project? Is there an acknowledgement of who has the labour of risk management if the group does not assess and manage it collectively? How might you embed considerations such as accountability to mission, a multi-capital view, and capacity to absorb risk into how you assess liability holding? Are there other factors that would be critical to consider in relation to the wide-boundary mission?

Insight Three

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Deep Code Shifts in more Detail

What we tried: From the three central deep code shifts, we broke these into eight codes specific to governance and organising. We aimed to embed these throughout our infrastructures to unlock complex collaborations' ability to drive greater systemic change. These are detailed below.

UNFURLING

The need of the work can be emergently discovered over time, through a process of learning by doing. Governance, organising and assets are not fixed at the outset, but rather enabled to evolve as the conditions change.

BALANCED POWER

Power and autonomy is balanced to who holds responsibility, accountability and risk in the system. This includes decoupling power from weath holding.

HOLISTIC VIEW

What is considered an asset goes beyond the tangible (such as money, equipment, land) to include the intangible (such as relationships, care, reputations, skills, craft, knowledge). Risk approaches recognise all of these assets.

MINDFUL ENDINGS

Recognising that transitions and endings are natural parts of evolving systems, people are enabled to (responsibly) leave without rupturing the ability of the group to manifest the mission.

MISSION LED

The mission is the key accountability for all collective decisions and directions and goes beyond negotiation for self-interests.

RISK MITIGATION

Enabling individuals and the collective to behave in ways that can prevent risks from crystallising and reduce the potential negative impact of risks that do materialise, regardless of who legally owns (see next box) the risk.

RISK OWNERSHIP

Holistic view of risk ownership which enables a more visible and equitable distribution of the financial, relational and other debts and can manage these if and when risks materialise.

PROPORTIONATE

A governance, organising and contractual approach that is proportionate to the context and can be scaled and/or unfurl to best address the complexity, size, scope, capacity, risks, demands, constrains (etc) - which may all evolve over time.

Many-to-Many invitation:
Could you imagine these deep code shifts being embedded into your complex collaborations? Which deep codes do you think could be the easiest to apply in your context? What challenges would you foresee? From your perspective, would they create any meaningful change to the way your collaboration operates?

Insight Four

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Implementing these Ideas in Practice

Across this Field Guide we curated different instruments to support implementing these ideas into practice:

- We share tools that are designed to help you to consider how deep code shifts flow through collaboration infrastructure.
- We also share examples that show how we shifted deep codes in our proof of possibility, and the approaches that we tried to do so. We hope that they may support others who wish to implement these ideas into their own complex collaborations.
- Additionally, we share a case study(ies) to paint a more vivid picture of turning these ideas into practice.

Tools and examples

Title	Format	Readiness	Availability
Deeply coding governance structures: A flow map	Digital Tool	Low	Demand Led →
Taking a multi-value view in governance - example	Deck	Medium	Coming Soon →
Asset mapping to reveal and witness multi-value - example	MIRO	Medium	Now →
Role cards as a way to fluidly distribute responsibilities - example	Deck	Medium	Coming Soon →

Instruments for Implementation

Introduction The Layers System Blockers

What to Watch Out for

Here, we outline key lessons from our "Proof of Possibility," presented as "alerts" or "things to watch out for." These highlight areas we found particularly knotty and difficult to navigate, and which we suspect will frequently appear in complex collaborations across various contexts.

We invite you to share your own learnings or potential solutions to these areas on our website's Community page. Looking ahead, we aim to develop an open-source directory and be part of a broader movement working to address these persistent challenges.

Alerts

Alert	Description
Learning deprioritisation	While a governance approach can design a great container for the work, it is the practice of showing up together that most shapes the collaboration. insufficient focus on practicing the behaviours, processes, capacities and methods to be in governance together can lead to poor governance cultures, whatever the beauty of the design.
Institutional deep code blockers	If the actors with the most power in the system don't have alignment to the deep code in their internal structures then they can override possibility for the whole collaboration.
Misaligned legal relationships to social agreements	If the agreements that you make in conversation together are then overridden by misaligned legal agreements, the group dynamics can be affected to the point of hindering effective collaboration.

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Many-to-Many System - The Layers
Wide and Narrow Mission

Complex Collaborations
Intended Context

Deep Code Shift
Fundamental Choices 1

Mission Wide & Narrow
Fundamental Choices 2

Stewarding Approaches
Creating Conditions

Infrastructure Model
Designing Infrastructures

You are here →

Wide and Narrow Mission
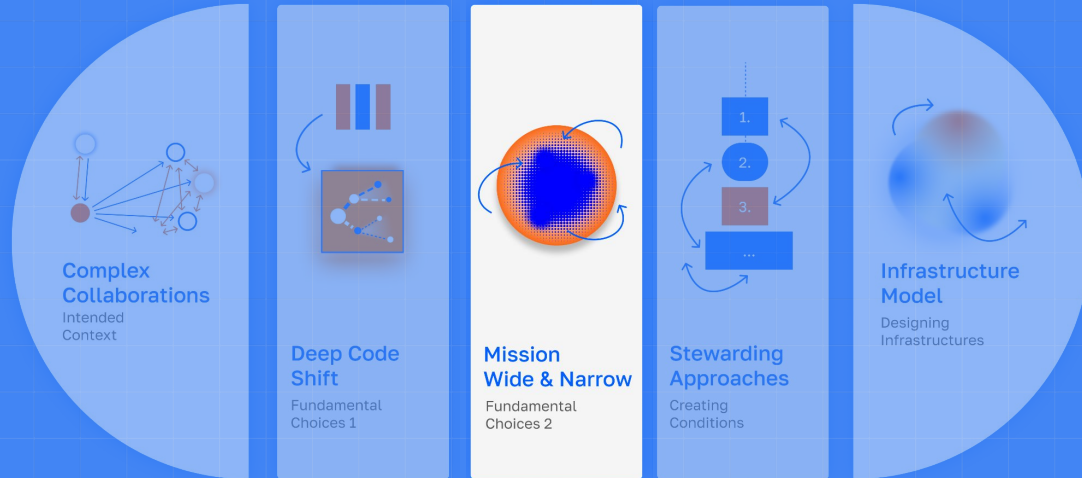
Navigating this Section

The basic principles of a 'mission' [*] in the Many-to-Many System context is in many ways very similar to what many of us will have experienced before in prior collaboration efforts, initiatives or within organisations. We use this term to mean the purpose or intention of the collaboration (and if you don't resonate with the word 'mission', please interpret it with this instead).

However, we found some important distinctions and nuances regarding both the mission itself and how it's woven through different parts of the Many-to-Many infrastructures. We've articulated these in the upcoming pages.

[*] we use mission, but you may prefer other terminology or concepts such as intention or goal

We hope to share our learnings about setting wide and narrow boundary missions, and show that if these can be embedded into your governing, organising and learning it can begin to unlock new ways of reimagining power, risk and ownership.

Identifying Mission Hierarchies

By mission [*] we mean the collaboration's core purpose.

We noticed that in complex collaborations, short-term objectives (or a 'narrow-boundary mission') sometimes unintentionally conflict with the longer-term intent (or the 'wide-boundary mission').

- **Narrow-Boundary Mission:** This is the specific goal of the collaboration, such as "reduce pollution by X in Town Y". It focuses on the more immediate, limited metrics and outcomes.
- **Wide-Boundary Mission:** The broad, long-term societal transformation goal[*], such as "a world which is designed for interbecoming[*]". It considers a broader range of factors, stakeholders, and long-term consequences.

For example, we noticed that a hyper-focus on addressing social challenges can lead to environmentally extractive practices, and vice versa. We also observed that when things go wrong, accountability to the mission often gets de-prioritised or sidelined. We noticed that the wide-boundary mission is also frequently absent in formal governance agreements. in our prototype, there was a recognition that this is sometimes caused by a misgiving that a group's wide-boundary mission would conflict with the charitable purposes of certain institutions.

The shift:
We wanted to make the wide- and narrow-boundaries of the work explicit and visible, and to clarify what takes priority when these are in conflict. We wanted to code deep accountability to the wide-boundary mission into the governance, organising, learning, ecosystem strategy and legal architecture of a collaboration in order to give them lasting power and make them 'sticky.' We wanted the infrastructures to provide stronger conditions for the collaboration to 'live into' this accountability in practice.

[*] here we've used the concept of a societal transformational goal, but you may prefer other terminology or concepts such as mission, intention or goal
[*] additionally we draw from scholarship around interbecoming but this could be substituted with many others such as just and regenerative, life-affirming, life-ennobling, safe and viable futures

Insight Five

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Deeply Embedding the Mission(s)

What we tried and learned:

GOVERNING:

in our Many-to-Many "proof of possibility", we specifically structured the governance to ensure that the wide boundary mission takes precedence over the narrow boundary mission. This stops narrow goals unintentionally undermining the wider mission. We wove our missions throughout numerous aspects of our governance, and crucially, into multiple sections of our formal agreement. This shifts traditional decision-making—often concentrated with specific individuals or groups—by requiring that a significant portion of decisions explicitly consider and align with the mission. Further, we built in a mechanism where, in cases of major relational breakdown, an appointed mediator's resolution process is also ultimately guided by the wide-boundary mission. If you would like to see more on how this showed up in the contract, look out for the 'Mission Led' icons in our m2m contract.

Many-to-Many invitation: *You might consider adopting a wide and narrow boundary mission for your complex collaboration. If so, perhaps structuring your mission so the wide-boundary goal explicitly overrides conflicting narrow-boundary goals could protect your ultimate purpose. If any collaborators are regulated by the charity commission, consider how the wide-boundary mission can be framed in a way which manages 'charitable purpose' risk proportionately (noting that it is in the interests of the collective for this regulatory requirement to be met otherwise all funding may have to be rescinded under law). How might this impact your collaboration's decision-making processes, particularly at key decision points and in tension resolution clauses? For example, do these points refer back to your mission(s)? You could also consider how you might deeply embed your missions into various parts of your collaboration's governance and contracting.*

Insight Six

Implementing these Ideas in Practice

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- Additionally, we share a case study(ies) to paint a more vivid picture of turning these ideas into practice.

Tools and examples

Title	Format	Readiness	Availability
M2M contract: example	Pdf	Ready	Coming Soon →

Instruments for Implementation

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What to Watch Out for

Here, we outline key lessons from our "Proof of Possibility," presented as "alerts" or "things to watch out for." These highlight areas we found particularly knotty and difficult to navigate, and which we suspect will frequently appear in complex collaborations across various contexts.

We invite you to share your own learnings or potential solutions to these areas on our website's [Community page](). Looking ahead, we aim to develop an open-source directory and be part of a broader movement working to address these persistent challenges.

Alerts

Alert	Description
Forgetting that practice trumps design	While a governance approach can design a great container for the work, it is the practice of showing up together that most shapes the collaboration. insufficient focus on practicing the behaviours, processes, capacities and methods to be in governance together can lead to poor governance cultures, whatever the beauty of the design.

Alerts

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Many-to-Many System - The Layers
Stewardship Approaches

Complex Collaborations
Intended Context

Deep Code Shift
Fundamental Choices 1

Mission Wide & Narrow
Fundamental Choices 2

Stewarding Approaches
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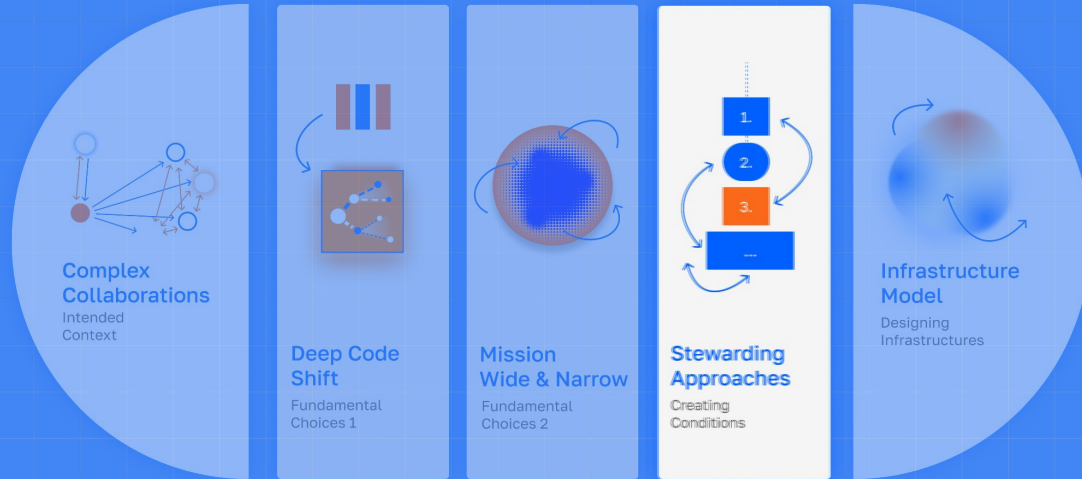
You are here →

Navigating this Section

Complex collaborations often require some people to take a more active and explicit role in stewarding organising and governance, especially in the early stages. This role is inherently difficult because it operates in unpredictable environments where cause and effect are often unclear until later. The diverse actors involved bring varied perspectives, power dynamics, and competing priorities that require constant tending to relationships. Traditional, linear planning and management often fails here. Rather, stewardship calls for adaptive learning, building trust amid uncertainty, and guiding collective sense-making, all while making sure the collaboration remains true to its evolving, systemic mission—a delicate and continuous balancing act.

We have tried to distil learnings and insights into these Stewardship Approaches. This isn't meant to be prescriptive, with a clear starting point and structured next steps. Rather, it's a loosely organised set of considerations you might make if you have a role in stewarding a complex collaboration.

Our Stewardship Approaches have the following elements:

1. **Stewardship Assumptions:** Shares headline lessons learned from stewarding complex collaborations, which inform the elements below.
2. **Sensing What to Do Next:** Explores methods for perceiving and understanding the nuanced dynamics, relationships, power structures, and emergent patterns within the collaboration's operational environment to determine next steps.
3. **A Collaboration Process:** offers a flexible, non-prescriptive example with adaptable steps and tools to help collaborations navigate from mission definition to operationalisation.
4. **Stewardship Team:** Suggests the skill combinations, adaptive mindsets, and ways of working we've observed that enable effective stewardship.

Stewarding Assumptions

Sensing What to Do Next

A Collaboration Process

Stewardship Team

Stewarding Approaches

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Stewardship Assumptions

Stewarding the governance and organising of complex collaborations is profoundly difficult due to plural stakeholders, systemic problems with no clear roadmaps, and unpredictable ripple effects. Here we share some of the lessons we've learned when stewarding complex collaborations.

1. **The crucial role of early stewards:** initiating or early stewards tend to play a critical role. They co-convene the collaboration, steward processes, weave information, and hold space for governance, helping the collaboration become an active, relational network. These stewards frequently lack formal authorisation for this role early on, requiring them to take risks and make judgements to initiate action and ensure they have legitimacy for taking on this role relationally. They hold responsibilities for how this agency is used, bounded, and made accountable. This role may be held by one person or many.

2. **Sensing what to do next is a key challenge of early stewardship:** A key challenge for early stewards is developing appropriate ways to understand the live dynamics of the complex system in order to determine what to do next.

3. **Stewardship needs some systemic design:** Good intentions alone are normally insufficient for good collaboration. We need to nurture a system that notices perverse incentives and externalities and accounts for them to create progressively better incentives and more capable deterrents, which in turn can better align different people with the whole.

4. **Mutually-reinforcing cycles occur**: When things go well, contributions amplify in a positive, virtuous cycle. Conversely, when dynamics tip and begin to deteriorate, a rapid, vicious cycle of withdrawal can take hold. A key part of the work is stewarding this balance to prevent the tip into a vicious cycle.

Insight Seven

Stewardship Assumptions *(cont...)*

What we tried and learned:

PROCESS:
We designed an early process that considered group dynamics, such as the 'mutually-reinforcing cycles [*]' we wanted to create, giving us the best chance to move into the operating phase with strong enabling conditions.

GOVERNING:
We designed governing systems specifically to address dynamics like 'multi-polar traps'[*], by ensuring that in worst case scenarios there wasn't a route to 'win' through maximising self-interest.

TEAM:
in our Proof of Possibility, we formed a curated multi-disciplinary stewardship team for the early collaboration stage, allocating appropriate resources for this. They brought philosophical, legal, facilitation, governance and process design skills.

While most of these efforts led to positive group dynamics, a key observation was that our early stewardship group didn't sufficiently prioritise distributing the sense-making processes and relational bonds. This meant that when the collaboration shifted into its operating phase, there weren't enough conditions for distributed organising, and a dependency on the stewards to coordinate the collaboration remained.

Many-to-Many invitation:
Do these assumptions resonate with you? Do any reflect (or not) your own experience? Are there any others you would add? How can you factor them into how you steward your complex collaboration?

Insight Seven

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Sensing What to Do Next

Our experience suggests that diagnosing 'what to do next' when stewarding a complex collaboration is primarily a sensing activity based on what has come before, what is live in the moment, and what can be born in the future - there is no uniform process or approach. This involves perceiving the nuanced web of relationships, unspoken power dynamics, soft assumptions, historical undercurrents, and emergent patterns that shape the operational landscape.

This is an art, not a science, and a skill developed through practice. Sometimes, there's no way forward other than getting it wrong. in such cases, the best you can do is be humble, hold space, commit to listening together, learn and iterate, and equip yourselves to try another way.

That said, frameworks and tools can, of course, help us understand our context to sense what might be appropriate next, and guide us in building practice as we go.

1. How far can we go (and when)?
2. With whom and in what order?
3. With what to equip us?

Insight Eight

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Sensing What to Do Next *(cont...)*

What we tried and learned: We've used several approaches for sensing into governance, some we created and some adapted from others. Details for these can be found in 'Tools'.

- **Three guiding questions**: We used three core questions, supported by sub-questions, to reveal a way forward: How far and when can we progress? Who should be involved, and in what sequence? What resources do we need?
- **Collaboration features**: We analysed collaborations based on their locus (working at the edge vs. within the current system) and initiation (funder vs. practice-initiated) to understand the process implications.
- **Deep code micro-tests**: We explored the potential to shift deep codes within collaborations. This involved inviting collaborators to test small interventions and share their results to gauge receptiveness.
- **Mutually-reinforcing cycles**: We identified desired "mutually-reinforcing cycles," determined the conditions needed to enable them, and then mapped the necessary work.
- **Mapping Collaborations**: We mapped collaborations according to:
  - Legal relationships and financial flows.
  - Portfolio of work and interdependencies, highlighting collaborator relationships.
  - A grid showing collaborator responsibility versus participation capacity.

Using diverse methods to understand collaborations provided valuable insights for future focus. We observed that sensing can be particularly challenging in complex collaborations when direct access to people or relevant information (your "sensors") is limited. We also learned the importance of considering the emotional state of the group, giving it adequate attention and space when determining next steps.

Many-to-Many invitation:
Does this resonate with your experience? Have you used different methods to understand your collaboration? What approaches might help you gain insights and determine your next steps?

Insight Eight

A Collaboration Process

in our Proof of Possibility, we created a process for an early group to move from initial Introductions to becoming an operational collaboration to a shared mission. We call this our 'Collaboration Process' (diagram on the next page). Our specific aim was to provide as many opportunities as possible to embed "deep code shifts" more effectively into the collaboration's relational and structural core. This included by 'rehearsing' how the collaboration wants to be together in the way it creates its own infrastructures. Our process was specific to our context; we share it as an example, not a model.

What we tried and learned:

PROCESS:

Our Collaboration Process guided the collaboration through semi-sequential steps—from defining missions, principles, and strategy to establishing infrastructures. The process was supported by a digital stack. This was structured in two main phases: the first on building key infrastructures for governing and organising complex collaborations, and the second on living into these infrastructures (we have only partially completed the 'living in' phase).

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A Collaboration Process *(cont...)*

Image below shows the overview of the Collaboration Process. More details can be found in the examples section. The aim of the process was to create the conditions for the group to 'live into' the way of being they wanted together throughout the journey - so that the process itself built relationality, governing capabilities and learning evolutions of the group.

Many-to-Many invitation:
Does this resonate with your experience? Have you used different methods to understand your collaboration? What approaches might help you gain insights and determine your next steps?

Insight Nine

First Phase

Approach to build fit-for-purpose governance and organising

- Introduction
- Initiation
- Setting conditions
- Context sensing
- Design
- Reach Agreement

Governance, Organising and Strategic Learning (infra)structure

which consists of:

- Ecosystem strategy
- Governance model
- Operational guide
- Learning approach (and platform)
- Contract
- Digital portal

Examples of each can be found here

Second Phase

Approach to steward fit-for-purpose governance and organising

- Setting up roles
- Build team space and comms channels
- Establishing regular meetings and in-person sessions
- Learning framework activation
- others..as we learn

Link to original source →

Stewardship Team

Stewarding governance in a complex collaboration is an interdisciplinary activity, requiring facilitation, design, and legal knowledge. It involves holding ambition and direction for the mission, engaging and weaving people, upholding the desired deep code, and developing enabling systems for the collaboration. We noticed that in complex collaborations, nominated stewards aren't always equipped with the resourcing, capacity, and skills needed to perform that role well.

TEAM:

in our Proof of Possibility, we convened a small 3-4 person (together circa 1 FTE) stewardship team whose expertise spanned relational and project holding, governance stewardship, ecosystem strategy, deep code design, legal design, legal expertise, facilitation, visual design, and strategic design. This team worked in close collaboration to sense-make and build across disciplines.

Our Proof of Possibility particularly emphasised prototyping alternative infrastructures, which demanded more intense, multi-layered stewardship than usual. We learned that this combination enabled us to create a 'full stack' approach to governance and organising stewardship, working on all structural and as well as relational layers in tandem. We also learned that it wasn't just the skills but also the postures of the team (e.g. curiosity for other disciplines, ability to hold uncertainty and complexity, commitment to the deep codes, active communication) that were critical to the work's efficacy.

Many-to-Many invitation:
What capabilities and postures are needed to steward your complex collaboration? Are there gaps between what's needed and what's present? Are the conditions needed to steward well (such as resourcing and attention) present? If not, how might that impact your process and your expectations?

Insight Ten

Stewardship Team *(cont...)*

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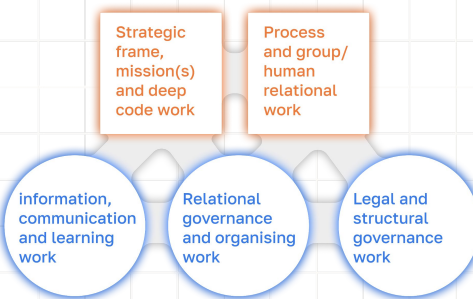
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What capabilities and postures are needed to steward your complex collaboration? Are there gaps between what's needed and what's present? Are the conditions needed to steward well (such as resourcing and attention) present? If not, how might that impact your process and your expectations?

Insight Ten

Stewardship Team *(cont..)*

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Infrastructural design

Strategic frame, mission(s) and deep code work

Process and group/ human relational work

information, communication and learning work

Relational governance and organising work

Legal and structural governance work

execution skills

Postures

Image showing types of skills needed in complex collaboration work

Many-to-Many invitation:
What capabilities and postures are needed to steward your complex collaboration? Are there gaps between what's needed and what's present? Are the conditions needed to steward well (such as resourcing and attention) present? If not, how might that impact your process and your expectations?

Insight Ten

Implementing these Ideas in Practice

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Tools and examples

Title	Format	Readiness	Availability
Spotting patterns in your context: A diagnostic	Digital Tool	Low	Demand Led →
Collaboration Process - example	Image	Ready	Now →
M2M digital stack - example	Image	Medium	Coming Soon →
Asset mapping to reveal and witness multi-value - example	Deck	Medium	Now →
Offer canvas and use - example	MIRO	Medium	Now →

Instruments for Implementation

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Implementing these Ideas in Practice

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Alerts

Alert	Description
Centralised sensemaking	in the process of designing governance structures, if sensemaking is too centralised then the system's capacity to 'live into' the intentions are thwarted.
Ignoring group dynamics	Group dynamics are a huge shaping factor in what the group can create together - insufficient attention can create a false economy where the actions we take can't fulfil their possibility.
Not inspecting the relational capacity of the system	Beware of going too hard and fast into polarising topics such as money before there is the relational capacity across the group to hold them.
Insufficient capacity, time and resource given to collaborating	It is often significantly underestimated how much time and attention is needed for the organising, governing, learning, operating, practising, embodying and other systems needed in order to do good work collaboratively. When this is not given enough attention the conditions erode over time.
Insufficient team configuration	If your task will involve stewarding the complex collaboration to set governance agreements, legal agreements and organising and learning systems together then not having the skill sets in the team to enable this can inhibit what is possible.

Alert

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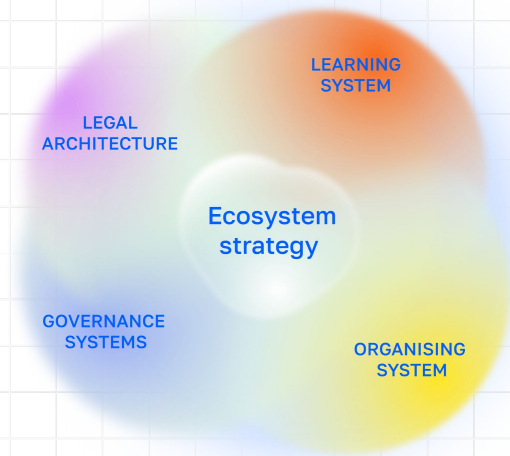
Infrastructure Model
Designing Infrastructures
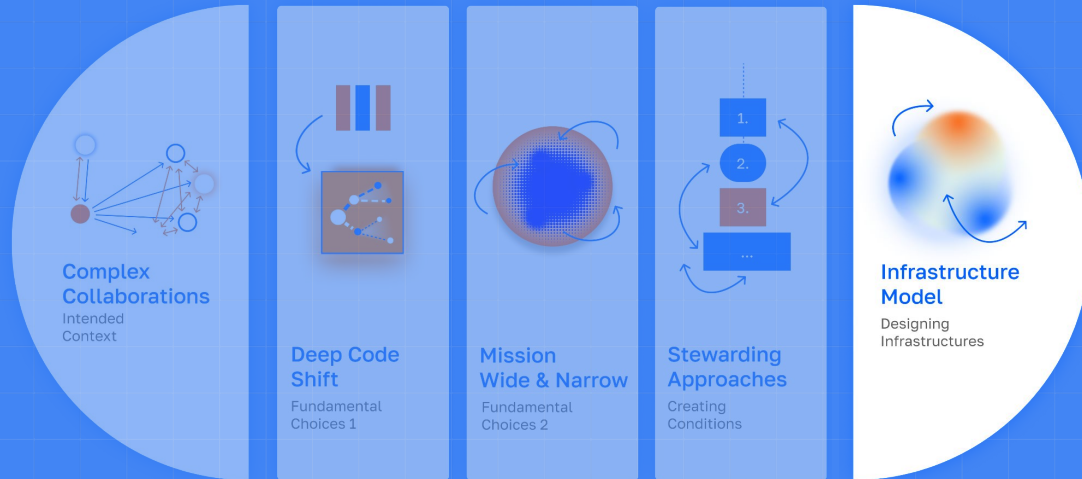
← You are here

Overview

So far, we've referred to the 'infrastructures' of a complex collaboration. Here, we explore what we mean by these and how they might look when deeply coded to your mission.

We've distilled Insights from our learning into a Many-to-Many Infrastructure Model for complex collaborations, aiming to offer a useful resource for practitioners. At a high level, this Model outlines essential structural elements that should look familiar from other governance systems. Our particular emphasis in the upcoming pages is on highlighting how we've explored embedding fundamental "deep code shifts" into these infrastructures.

The Infrastructure Model consists of:

The Ecosystem Strategy

The Governing System

The Organising System

The Legal Architecture

The Learning System

Many-to-Many Infrastructure Model

Sometimes people refer to all of these parts together, and how they are lived into, as 'governance' - we split them out to enable more detail to come through. Our aim is that the infrastructures are created in a way that enables this 'living in'.

Stewarding a complex collaboration involves tending to these elements in harmony, recognising and nurturing their intricate interrelationships.

Ecosystem Strategy

By Ecosystem Strategy, we mean how the collaboration collectively defines its strategic focus and approach within the broader system it seeks to influence. We noticed that in complex collaborations, the core strategy (and associated plans, budgets, and roles) would often be set entirely upfront, receiving only light edits, if any, once the collaboration began operating.

We wondered if a collaboration could begin working – and be funded to do so – with a tentative strategy, possessing 'just enough' certainty to hold the collaboration together. This would allow learning to more truly inform its evolution over time. Such an approach involved inviting the funder into a different funding posture in partnership (based not purely on deliverables, but on the collaborative potential and rigour of the collaboration), and the collaborators into co-creating the strategy over time.

What we tried and learned:
We aimed to test a process where the collaboration developed shared sense-making to understand the complex landscape, identify key leverage points for intervention, and co-create a dynamic strategy guided by the overarching wide and narrow missions. This involved:

- Collectively exploring the mission and its understandings, discussing collaboration challenges, opportunities, needs, and possibilities.
- Then exploring how to manifest the mission, through specific approaches and activities. Ideas were captured on templates, then clustered into themes with activity details.

Insight Twelve

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Ecosystem Strategy *(cont...)*

The Ecosystem Strategy

What we tried and learned [continued]:

- inviting offers (using a template) for contributions towards these possible activities from the collaborators. This prompted people to practically consider commitments, timelines, and conditions.
- Discussing money flows to unpick what forms of funding might be appropriate for different activity types.
- inviting nominations for 'tuners', whose role was to synthesise all points above into a proposed initial plan and budget that could best work from what we had surfaced. This was then tweaked and agreed by the group (note: this part of the plan was rushed due to time pressures).
- That strategy, plan, and budget were subsequently reviewed throughout the collaboration, though this was only partly tested due to capacity and attention constraints.

This activity in Phase One of the process was designed to enable ongoing shared sense-making for pathways to emerge dynamically in Phase Two. The reality was often a balancing act - we under-scheduled regular spaces of updates, learning and strategy review. We learned that creating the conditions for strategic intelligence to fully emerge from a network requires regular time together, dedicated capacity and intentional processes. We also learned that these spaces benefit from a focus on the *interdependencies* between areas of work.

Many-to-Many invitation: How does your collaboration currently approach strategy? Is it a fixed plan, or a more dynamic process of shared sense-making and adaptation? Consider how you might foster conditions for strategic insights to emerge collectively, allowing your approach to evolve in response to learning and a changing ecosystem.

Insight Twelve

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers
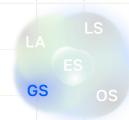
Governing Systems

We think of the governing system as the meta-structure that forms the blueprint for everyday organising systems. Governing systems clarify not only what broadly happens when things go well, but also where permission and authority ultimately lie during disagreement or rupture. They clarify questions such as liability types and where they're held; other responsibilities relating to risk mitigation; who owns value created during the work; categories of roles and their associated powers and permissions in the wider structure; and how groups, circles, or departments relate to one another.

While 'governing' largely comprises daily behaviours that shape how we interact, infrastructures like those above are still important. They fundamentally shape the balance of responsibility, accountability, risk-holding, autonomy, and power among collaborators. These infrastructures are typically formalised and reviewed periodically.

We aimed to align the deep codes in governing infrastructures to cohere with the mission. This meant removing the primacy of financial capital; adopting a 'stewardship' approach over ownership; exploring accountability beyond traditional control mechanisms; and taking a fluid approach to roles, allowing collaborators to enter and exit without breaking the agreement.

We wanted to test whether shifting these deep codes within our infrastructures would enable group dynamics and daily behaviours conducive to the mission.

Insight Thirteen

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Governing Systems *(cont...)*

What we tried and learned:

- We created a ‘mission space’ where the constant was the mission(s), not the collaborators (who could enter and exit). The space allowed plans and actions towards the mission to change significantly over time and explicitly incorporated criteria, policies, and processes that allow the "space" itself (its structures, rules, roles, focus) to change and adapt. A digital portal for the mission space was created so all collaborators could view it's live status at any point.
- We embedded phasing that would trigger reviews to the infrastructures when certain conditions changed, in order to curb power of the early collaborators and ensure proportionality to the moment (note: this is only partly tested this in practice so far). We limited the power of early stewards to avoid dominance (they could not be the only Activity Orchestrator; could not play the Governance Custodian role or the IP Custodian role card and could never make up more than 1/3 of the Steering group)
- We assigned a set of custodianship roles so that stewardship of critical health functions like IP, GDPR and governance protocols would not be dropped (these have been part-tested in practice). We also explored Champion role cards (Living World, All Forms of Value and Human-care champions), although the collaborators chose not to include these in the final system.
- We agreed a set of Mutual Many to Many Commitments to mitigate risks and embed care. We limited claims for liabilities between the parties to the sum of the insurance held by the other party.

Insight Thirteen

Governing Systems *(cont...)*
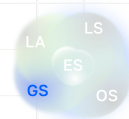
The Governing System

What we tried and learned (continued):

- We created a mechanism where collaborators would agree on unforeseen liability holding by centring the wide-boundary mission, taking a multi-capital view, and considering each party's capacity to absorb risk. If agreement wasn't possible, a mediator – contractually required to adopt this approach – would have the final say.
- We took the principles agreed by the group to form the design for these features and then explored headline concepts in shared spaces together, and used tools like loomio to sign off agreements

We learned that it was possible to deeply code infrastructures in line with the mission when there was the will and commitment among the collaborators (and their institutional backing) to do so. Going through the process built confidence and alignment in us as a group, although we would have benefited from much more time exploring and interrogating in group together (constraints included time, capacity and lack of in-person space) so that it could be truly co-owned by the collaboration. Phasing created a useful vector and meaningful timeline to the collaboration based on wider accountability. Not all of the mechanisms have had the opportunity yet to be fully tested, and so there is still more to learn about their efficacy.

Many-to-Many invitation:
Consider your own collaboration's governance. How might your infrastructures be deeply coded in service of the mission(s) you are collaborating for? How aligned and bought in are the collaborators in seeking to put time, effort and possibly resource to try?

Insight Thirteen

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers
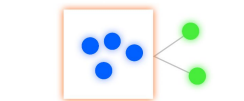
Legal Architecture

The Legal Architecture

Complex collaborations bring together various institutions and individuals through diverse legal forms, roles, and relationships into what we call Legal Architecture.
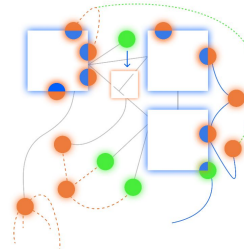
- **Legal forms** refer to any form recognised under law, including companies (e.g., CICs, Limited Companies), non-companies (e.g., Unincorporated Associations), and sole traders.
- **Legal roles** refer to the formal capacities individuals hold within a collaboration (e.g., Director, Trustee, independent), which can sometimes be multiple.
- **Legal relationships** refer to the formal links between these forms and roles, which in this context may be via partnership agreements, MoUs, or contracts.

The legal architecture in any complex collaboration will be distinct, depending on the number and nature of partners, institutional norms, geographical spread, and more. There will normally be a range of interrelating forms and relationships, with people holding various legal roles within them, creating a more complex environment than a traditional legal form.
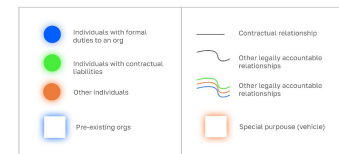
Our observation was that many readily available legal forms and relationships impose 'deep codes' that misalign with a collaboration's intended governance, particularly concerning risk and power. While collaborations may democratically design many operational aspects, the underlying legal architecture—crucial for how governance is lived—is rarely discussed in the same detail. We particularly observed that significant resourcing for complex challenges is channelled through bilateral philanthropic grant agreements, which are often not visible to other collaborators and embed deep codes which stem from society's framing of charity from the 1600s to mid 1900s rather than for contemporary system transformation.

The legal architecture of a standard legal form (example)

The legal architecture of a complex collaboration (example)

- Individuals with formal duties to an org
- Individuals with contractual liabilities
- Other individuals
- Pre-existing orgs
- Contractual relationship
- Other legally accountable relationships
- Other legally accountable relationships
- Special purpose (vehicle)

Link to original source →

Insight Fourteen

Legal Architecture *(cont..)*

We aimed to create a Legal Architecture that invited all partners into transparent, mission-aligned legal relationships, avoiding separate or deep code-misaligned agreements. We called this 'Many-to-Many Contracting'.

What We Tried and learned:
- We began prototyping a new route: a multi-party legal architecture with mission-centric governance, coded to the collaboration's agreed deep codes. This differed from:
  a.   Contracting through numerous bilateral relationships accountable to one another; and
  b.   Setting up a new legal form for the collaboration, which would then inherit governance deep codes.
- We are in the process of testing the contract created as part of the legal architecture prototype within a low-risk sandbox context. It's exciting for us, because it means that we've prototyped a legal architecture for organisations to collaboratively work together without needing to follow the common routes - we have a real life proof of possibility. We are however cautious, because it has not been fully validated or pressure tested.
- We also experimented whether it was possible to nudge deep codes shifts in 'brown field' environments where existing legal architecture would prevent the use of a 'new route'. This included testing how the deep codes we identified could be brought into existing legal forms and relationships.

We recognised that most complex collaborations wouldn't be able to fully redesign their legal architecture. While our Proof of Possibility prototyped a mission-aligned legal form, this route was only feasible under specific conditions, such as highly aligned deep codes from all partners and few system-level restrictions (what we term 'system blockers'). Yet, even where collaborations cannot change their legal architecture due to system blockers, they can still identify and nudge the deep codes present in their legal relationships.

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Legal Architecture *(cont..)*

Link to original source →

1-to-1

Fig.1.1. In a 1 to 1 partnership without funds, the terms are normally mutually agreed. Eg: Non-profits

Fig.1.2. In 1 to 1 funding relationships, the funder normally sets the terms

1-to-Many

Fig. 2.1. In some 1-to-many relationships the funding party pre-sets the terms for all actors. Eg: grant contracts, employment contracts, public service contracts

Fig. 2.2. In some contexts, such as crowdfunding, donor models and community shares, the actors receiving funds can set the terms with all actors.

If one party enters into agreement with multiple actors, they can hold the power to set terms across the actors.

In some contexts, they are subject to multiple terms set by different actors.

Fig. 2.3. In some contexts, such as grant-funded not-for-profits, the actors receiving funds are subject to varying contractual terms set by different actors.

Many-to-Many
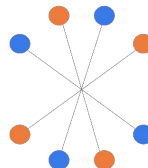
A many to many approach forms a more open contracting space, where all parties have powers to contribute and receive resource, governed by mutually agreed protocols and stewarded by rotating custodians.

Many to Many Contracting
When moving funds in a system

——— Contracting flows   ● Holding & Distributing funds   ● Receiving & Converting funds to action

Image showing different types of relationships that can commonly exist in legal contracting, and the aspiration of the Many-to-Many to open new possibilities.

Many-to-Many invitation: How does your current legal architecture (for example, your legal form, existing legal relationships, and contracts) support or hinder your collaboration's mission and desired 'deep codes'? Reflect on when these components were set up and why they were chosen this way. Do those initial reasons still hold, or can you now shift your existing legal architecture, or even set up new structures, armed with new learnings? To what extent are you 'stuck' with your current legal architecture, and what compromises does that require?

Consider whether your current challenge is more about legal resourcing or deep code shifts. Does more work need to be done in sense-making and deep code shifts before productively engaging with changes to your legal framework?

Insight Fourteen
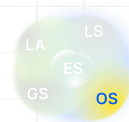
Organising System

The Organising System focuses on how deep codes cascade into the day-to-day operations and coordination of work. It addresses how the collaboration plans, distributes roles, forecasts and manages diverse (multi-capital) budgets, structures agendas, holds spaces, makes operational decisions, shares information, and communicates in ways that reinforce collaborative and equitable practices.

Our Proof of Possibility focused less on this area. This was because we'd seen more consistent deep code-aligned practice in organising elsewhere, and the group already had strong practice here. Still, we aimed to embed the deep codes in the organising system and observe their impact on relational quality.
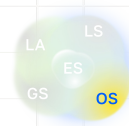
What we tried and learned:
- A shared digital space where the mission, partners, and all governance, strategy, organising, and learning agreements (and their deliberation history) could be seen and updated.
- Draft agendas for key meetings and detailed role cards for key roles, alongside onboarding materials.
- Loomio, a digital decision-making platform, for ongoing proposals and decisions.
- An iterable shared budget and plan, allowing each collaborator to view their budget and role.

A notable failure of our collaboration was that when the initial stewards' energy and attention decreased, the collaboration's activity dwindled.

Second Phase

Approach to steward fit-for-purpose governance and organising

Setting up roles

Build team space and comms channels

Establishing regular meetings and in-person sessions

Learning framework activation

others..as we learn

Insight Fifteen

Organising System *(cont...)*

What we tried and learned (continued):
We suspect this was due to several reasons: 1) sense-making being too centralised by Phase One stewards; 2) poor handover from Phase One into Phase Two; 3) collaborators participating as a side activity to their main roles (with comparatively low time and resourcing); 4) the collaboration's purpose being the Proof of Possibility itself as much as its aligned mission—meaning the mission's scope and nature may not have received enough attention before Phase Two; and 5) no doubt other reasons.

This made us wonder whether organising systems that are less intuitive (e.g. different types of role cards or meeting setups) can be inhibiting when collaborators have limited attention and time. We also learned that using organising systems collaborators aren't fully practised in requires intentional onboarding and practice, especially for new joiners.

Many-to-Many invitation:
Reflecting on your collaboration's current or intended "Organising System":

- How do (or will) your day-to-day practices for planning, distributing roles, managing resources (including non-financial capitals), and making operational decisions reflect (or conflict with) your core mission and desired 'deep codes' around equity, transparency, and shared power?
- Are there opportunities to (re)design how you organise your work to better support distributed leadership, clear communication, and genuine co-creation, so that your organising truly supports your systemic aspirations?

Insight Fifteen

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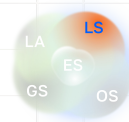
Learning System

The Learning System

We noticed that learning in collaborations was commonly seen as an evaluative activity, done at the end of the work, often as an outsourced report. in contrast, for complex collaborations, learning needed to be a system embodied and practised by collaborators to guide ongoing direction. This system would need to help interpret whether and where change is happening and why, adapt strategies, and enable the continuous evolution of all other governance and strategy elements, allowing the collaboration to emergently live into its mission over time.

What we tried and learned:
- The Many-to-Many "Proof of Possibility" originated as a learning network, designed to "learn by doing" through live prototyping on ourselves. The initial three sessions were exclusively dedicated to peer-learning, with network members presenting on topics like governance structures and the flow of money and time, based on their expertise in complex collaborations.
- This learning network then met regularly, both in-person and online, throughout the Collaboration Process to generate ideas and inputs that shaped the design of the infrastructures. Early drafts were shared with another network of "edge actors" for feedback. An interview series later gathered reflections from learning network members on what worked well and areas for improvement.
- Network members then tested elements of the Many-to-Many approach in their own contexts (some with our support). Meanwhile, a learning programme brought some collaborators together to compile insights into governance practices they'd learned in their work.
- As the work progressed, we communicated via email and Loomio to continue evolving the infrastructures, and held another in-person day to explore how the strategy would emerge. We created a digital learning capture portal and a collaboration governance portal, although these were not fully operationalised.

Insight Sixteen

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Learning System *(cont...)*

The Learning System

What we tried and learned (continued):

Despite these activities, the process of digesting learnings concurrently with building the prototype meant our overall learning system remained quite ad-hoc in how it shared information and guided strategy. Systematically capturing, synthesising, and feeding the full breadth of these diverse learnings back into the evolution of our infrastructures in a timely, structured way proved challenging, and capacity was a key constraint.

As a next step, one member of the learning network will conduct a thorough learning exploration with the entire network, which will generate case studies, tips, and deeper insights. Once completed, we aim to use this to create a more formal, overarching Learning System. The goal is for future collaborations using the Many-to-Many model to understand learning requirements upfront and have supporting tools and practices from the outset, rather than needing to invent them mid-process.

Many-to-Many invitation:
How does your collaboration currently capture and utilise learning to drive genuine evolution, not just for reporting? Could you imagine small, iterative experiments you could run to embed more active learning loops into your daily work and decision-making, ensuring insights genuinely shape your strategy, governance, and how you organise?

Insight Sixteen

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Infrastructure Model

The interplay between the parts

A key part of our learning involved not just the individual elements of the Structuring Model, but also their interplay. Some lessons we've learned include:

- Unpacking deep codes and mission(s) provides *direction* for the infrastructures. For example, before asking 'how will we distribute money?', we first explore 'how do we understand money and its relationship to other forms of value, and what is our relationship with it?' and 'what does this mission require as conditions, and how can our money flows help create them?'. These deeper questions then shape the ideas brought to the distribution question, whilst also deepening relationships.
- The mission(s) and ecosystem strategy provide *motivation* for the other parts. If collaborators lack a strong connection to the mission and strategy, energy for other elements often wanes. The nature and extent of the strategy will also inform the required learning system.
- The governing and organising systems creates *requirements* of the Legal Architecture. To avoid the legal architecture dictating your governance (what is commonly known in legal structuring circles as 'tail wags dog'), you'll want a shared understanding of the deep codes appropriate for your context. From there, you can determine how these might manifest in your governing and organising systems, and then (if possible and appropriate) code your legal architecture accordingly.
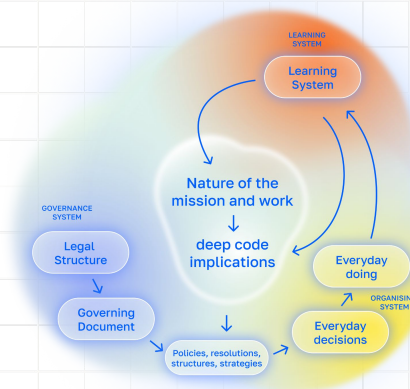
The idea is to have an image / interactive tool here that shows the interplay between the different parts

Insight Seventeen

Implementing these Ideas in Practice

Across this Field Guide we curated different instruments to support implementing these ideas into practice:

- We share tools that are designed to help you to consider how deep code shifts flow through collaboration infrastructure.
- We also share examples that show how we shifted deep codes in our proof of possibility, and the approaches that we tried to do so. We hope that they may support others who wish to implement these ideas into their own complex collaborations.
- Additionally, we share a case study(ies) to paint a more vivid picture of turning these ideas into practice.

Tools and examples

Title	Format	Readiness	Availability
Deeply coding governance structures: a flow map toop	Digital Tool	Low	Demand Led →
M2M contract - example	PDF	Ready	Coming Soon →
M2M digital stack - example	Image	Medium	Coming Soon →
Role cards as a way to fluidly distribute responsibilities - example	Deck	Medium	Coming Soon →
Offer canvas and use - example	MIRO	Medium	Now →

Instruments for Implementation

What to Watch Out for

Here, we outline key lessons from our "Proof of Possibility," presented as "alerts" or "things to watch out for." These highlight areas we found particularly knotty and difficult to navigate, and which we suspect will frequently appear in complex collaborations across various contexts.

We invite you to share your own learnings or potential solutions to these areas on our website's Community page. Looking ahead, we aim to develop an open-source directory and be part of a broader movement working to address these persistent challenges.

Alerts

Alert	Description
Learning deprioritisation	Once operating, the learning infrastructure is often the part that becomes de-prioritised when capacity and time is scarce. Beware! As this can drive fragmentation over time.
Institutional deep code blockers	If the actors with the most power in the system don't have alignment to the deep code in their internal structures then they can override possibility for the whole collaboration.
Ignoring group dynamics	Group dynamics are a huge shaping factor in what the group can create together - insufficient attention can create a false economy where the actions we take can't fulfil their possibility.
Forgetting that practice trumps design	While a governance approach can design a great container for the work, it is the practice of showing up together that most shapes the collaboration. Insufficient focus on practicing the behaviours, processes, capacities and methods to be in governance together can lead to poor governance cultures, whatever the beauty of the design.

Alerts

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

What to Watch Out for *(cont...)*

Alerts

Alert	Description
Missing the art of onboarding and exiting	In any fluid system, having a means to help people to enter and exit well can be key to maintaining a healthy, coherent and functioning system . This can be easily overlooked in complex collaboration, especially if roles are not clear.
Misaligned legal relationships to social agreements	If the agreements that you make in conversation together are then overridden by misaligned legal agreements, the group dynamics can be affected to the point of hindering effective collaboration
Too much emphasis on one area out of balance with the others	When stewarding governance processes part of the craft is in navigating the balance between focusing on the mission and the work planned, with attention to the governance, learning and organising - too much emphasis one side or the other can topple the group dynamics. The mission and work provides momentum and a vector for the work whilst the governance, learning and organising enables us to hold difference, risks, tensions, disagreement and learning. Each necessitates the other and if the balance is significantly off then the collaboration can start to dysfunction. The order of the attention we place depends on the type of collaboration and its context.

Alerts

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Many-to-Many System
System Blockers

Overview

More detail to come soon

What system blockers are you facing when trying to orient your complex collaboration towards viable futures?

Are they due to legislation, or regulatory requirements, or normative interpretations of regulation (or otherwise)?

What sort of approaches could offer an alternative to these rules?

Introduction   The Layers   System Blockers

Many-to-Many System
**Thank You and
Continuing the Journey**

Thank You and Continuing the Journey
Evolution Through Practice - an Invitation

Thank you for joining us on this exploration of complex collaborations. Engaging with these ideas requires dedication, a willingness to navigate uncertainty, and—let's face it—making it this far into the document! We see this Field Guide not as an endpoint, but as a set of starting points for an ongoing conversation with you.

Our invitation & Next Steps:
This work can only evolve through practice. We'd love to work with you to help bring it to life in three ways:
- Reflect & Discuss: Use the frameworks and questions in this guide to spark conversations within your own collaboration. Where do you see resonance? What challenges feel most familiar? Which parts didn't you like? We welcome all your insights.
- Start Small & Experiment: Perhaps one or two elements feel particularly useful or timely—a different way to discuss risk, a new practice for your 'Organising System', or a deeper look at one 'deep code'. We'd love to know what you learn if you try something out.
- Connect & Share: This is a collective learning journey. We plan to build a community of practice around these ideas and invite you to share your insights, challenges, and adaptations. Stay tuned through our newsletter, the community section of our website, or feel free to reach out to us via email.

Together, we hope to continue building the new systems, structures, and relationships needed for a more collaborative and equitable future.

The Many-to-Many System | **Field Guide**

Thank You and Continuing the Journey

Who Created this Field Guide

The Field Guide has been conceived and led by **Michelle Zucker**, written by **Michelle Zucker** and **Annette Dhami.** Designed by **Arianna Smaron**, with advisory from **Angela Tang** as part of the **Beyond the Rules** **initiative** hosted by **Dark Matter Labs**. It draws upon learning from various collaborations, particularly athe **Many-to-Many Learning Network**, along with insight and support from many peers in the field. More details about the team, the journey and the collaborators can be found on the **website**.