

Managing Collaboration: Insights and Tips from U.S. Senior Executives

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Our Project

- Survey of both career and non-career Senior Executive Service (SES) members in U.S. federal government
- Focus: Their use of collaboration as a management strategy
- 15 questions (13 open-ended; 2 yes/no)
- Defined term:
 - *Collaboration means to work across boundaries and in multi-organizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved or easily solved by single organizations.*

Profile of 304 Respondents

- **Age:** 46-55
- **Gender:** 64% male; 36% female
- **Education:** Advanced degree (78%); college degree (20%)
- **Location:** Washington (69%).
- **Status:** Career senior executive service (90%); appointed 10%



Their Insights...

Why Collaborate?

- *Explicit* mandates from a boss, formal agency policy, or legislation
- *Implicit* mandates by organization culture or personal values
- A desire to improve outcomes
- An effort to improve the problem-solving process
- A goal of building better relationships and credibility

What Makes Collaboration Work?

- People and their relationships
- The need to achieve results
- A sense of urgency
- Directives from the top
- Organizational supports such as structure and culture

Challenges to Collaboration

- *Relationship challenges* including turf wars, lack of communication, and difficulty reaching consensus
- *Resource challenges* including time, effort, and money
- *Organization challenges* such as identifying and reconciling shared mission and goals, differing agency cultures, and inadequate incentives
- *Challenges with individuals* such as lack of leadership, lack of skills, lack of expertise, and lack of motivation
- *Political challenges*
- *Unanticipated consequences* that may make problems worse

When Not to Collaborate

- When there are no common goals and benefits
- When support structures are weak
- When there are people problems that cannot be overcome
- When there are process problems

Questions to Ask Before You Collaborate

- Is this the right issue, time, and place for a collaborative approach?
- Will this approach help us reach pivotal performance objectives and better serve the public?
- Is the process being proposed or developed likely to be fair and efficient?
- Are my organization and I suited for participation in terms of mission, expertise, and time?

The Skill Set of the Successful Collaborator

What we THOUGHT they would tell us...

#1 = Strategic management and visioning

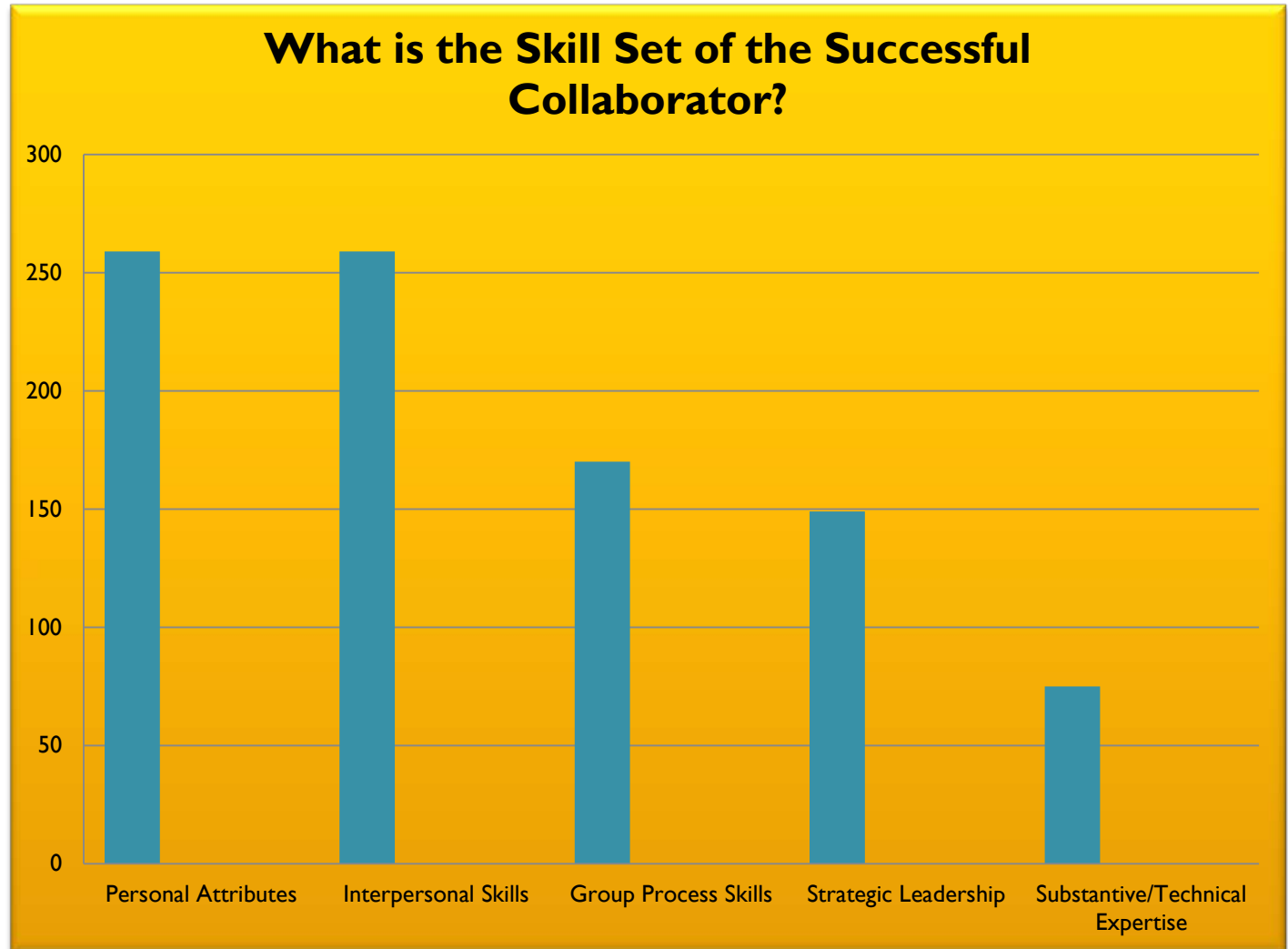
(Goldsmith & Eggers 2004; Milward & Provan 2006; McGuire & Silvia 2009)

#2 = Facilitation, collaborative problem solving

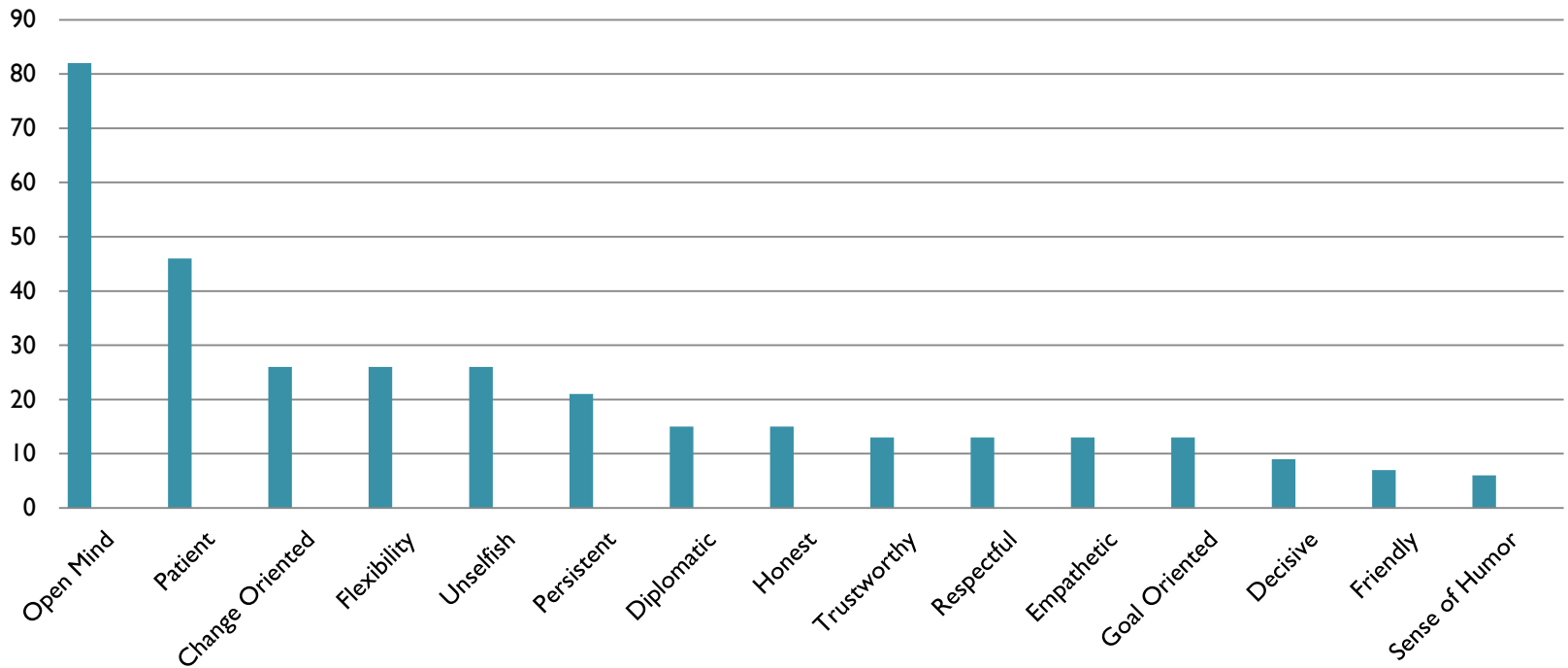
(Our “real world” work; Huxham *et al* 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2005; Williams 2002; Crosby & Bryson 1992, McGuire & Silvia 2009; Silvia & McGuire 2010; Getha-Taylor 2008; Emerson & Smutco, forthcoming)

#3 = Interpersonal skills (Our “real world” work; Getha-Taylor 2008 Silvia & McGuire 2010; Emerson & Smutco, forthcoming)

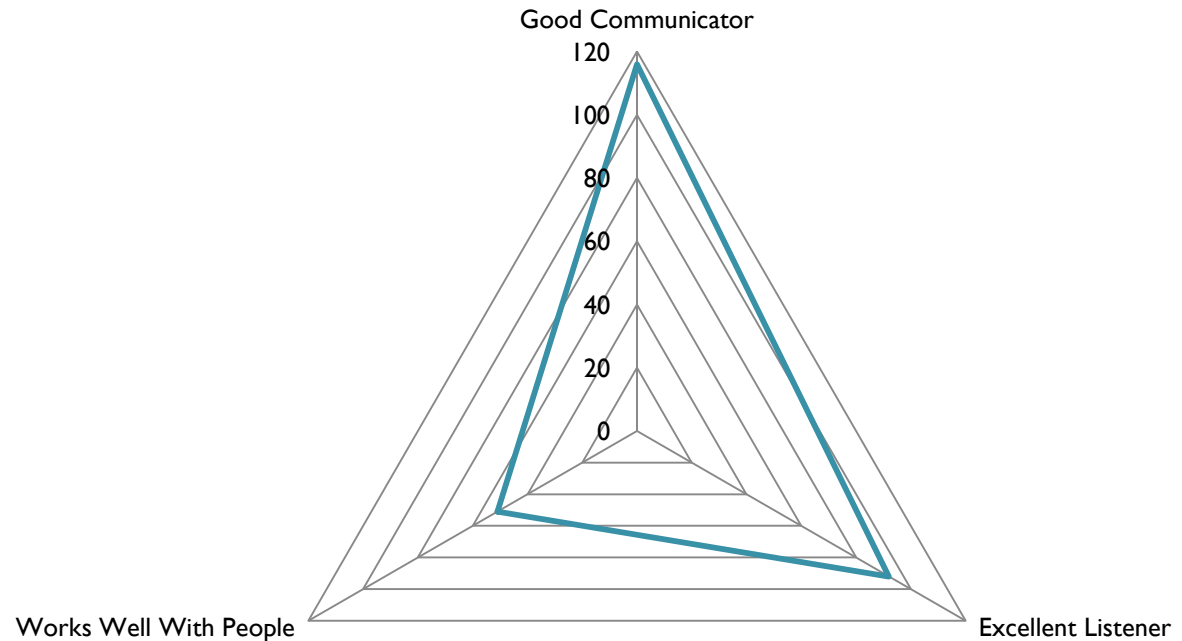
What They Actually Told Us...



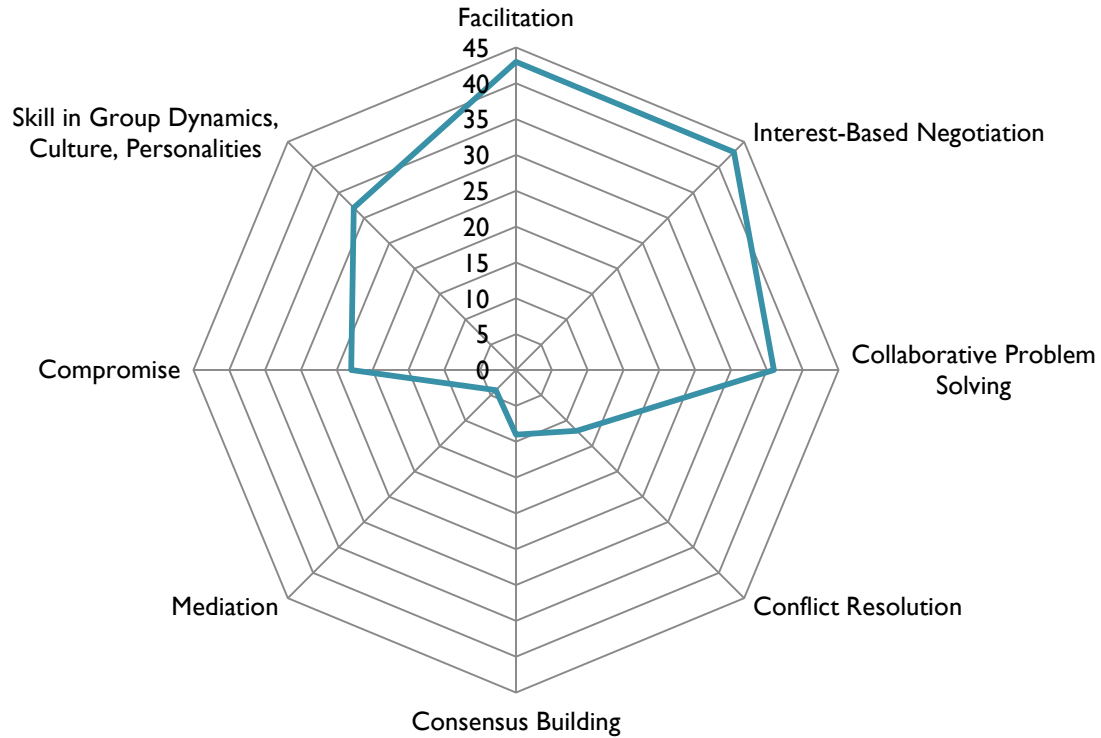
Skill Set for the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: #1 (tied) = Personal Attributes



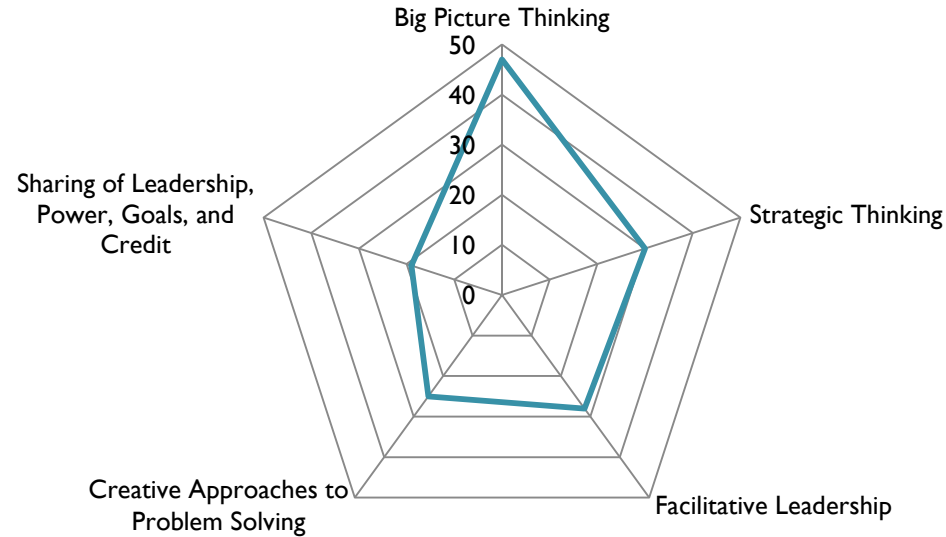
Skill Set for the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: #1 (tied) = Interpersonal Skills



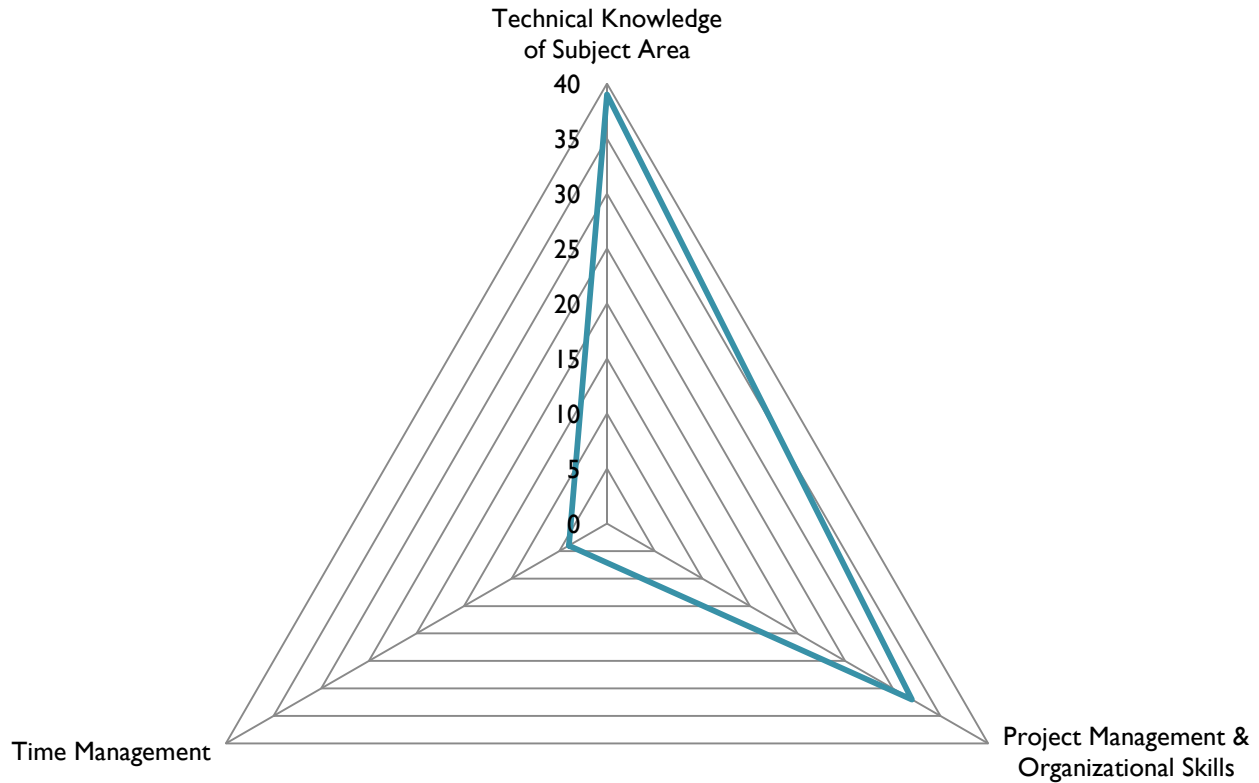
Skill Set for the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: # 3 = Group Process Skills



Skill Set for the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: # 4 = Strategic Leadership



Skill Set for the Successful Collaborator According to SES Respondents: # 5 = Substantive/Technical Knowledge





Advice from Our Senior Executive Collaborators

#1 - The foundation for success in collaboration is common purpose and shared benefit.

#2 - Learn interest-based, collaborative problem-solving.

#3 - Don't be afraid of conflict: expect it and learn to manage it.

#4 - Build in face-to-face meetings.

Advice from Our Senior Executives

#5 - Improvise: be flexible and open to whatever comes up, moment by moment.

#6 - Ask open-ended, thoughtful questions to build integrative solutions, break down cultural barriers, de-escalate conflicts, and provide feedback to the negotiating group.

#7 - Don't give up.

#8 - Focus on performance

Time to Hear from YOU

- What are YOUR most pressing collaboration challenges?