



**Collaborative  
Leaders  
Network**

**Tools for**  
*A Collaborative Strategy Grounded in  
Polynesian Values*

*This document is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.*



# A Collaborative Strategy Grounded in Polynesian Values

## Strategy-Wide Tools

### Worldview

Given the diversity of the human experience, it is only natural that people come to the table with different values, assumptions, and beliefs. On the surface, individuals appear to be islands, separate and apart from each other. Accordingly, Western strategies for working with a group of people are often built on the assumption of their separateness and isolation. By reframing the context to look below the surface, individuals lose their singularity and become one with the greater whole; from this perspective, the design and experience of cross-sector collaboration is quite different.

The conventional focus of a collaborative process is tied to deliverables that advance organizational goals and can be arrived at efficiently. Processes that engage the intellect and follow a structure that is efficient and controllable continue to dominate the way collaboration is taught and designed. A far cry from these models of leadership and facilitation is one that sets about addressing the intangible needs of people to be treated with respect, compassion, and kinship.

Borrowing from the ancient practices of traditional Polynesian cultures, the starting point here is conjuring a spirit of collaboration among the stakeholders; this element needs to be in place prior to launching into the group's agenda and before engaging the more tangible goals that drive an organizational process.

Indigenous Polynesian cultures approach group work with a mental template that is organic rather than mechanistic. Farmers and gardeners start the growing process by cultivating; similarly, a collaborative process should start with cultivating relationships. By meeting with key stakeholders one by one, the leader gains a sense of who each person is and begins to build a foundation of mutual trust and respect that will be necessary for working well together in the future. On an energy level, it involves gathering and channeling each person's *mana* and then disbursing that energy so that the group is imbued with *faaaloalo* and *aloha*; only then are participants truly ready to collaborate. When this transformation happens, productive thinking and a sense of wholeness are likely to follow.

According to Samoan beliefs, the highest goal is to be at peace. A person has peace when he is aligned with all four harmonies: with the cosmos, with nature, with fellow man, and with himself. Each harmony is based on a covenant; the covenant between oneself and one's fellow man is based on *faaaloalo* and *alofa*.



Each person has a different capacity to receive and deliver *faaloalo*. The highest form of *faaloalo* is unconditional, where someone gives it naturally and willingly. For some people, *faaloalo* can only be earned through reciprocity; it must first be extended before a person can respond.

If an individual's *faaloalo* is low, it does not mean that he or she should be excluded from a collaboration; in fact, it may be more important for this person to participate. When this is the case, efforts are made to extend *faaloalo* and *aloha* to the person throughout the process. The individual who is the recipient of this trust, respect, and love, has the potential to be transformed by the experience, and become more capable of giving back in return.

At the heart of this collaboration model is the belief that all people have an internal sense of relationship and connection. The process is conceived as a way to help people recognize their sense of kinship with others and with life in general. As the awareness of connection and relationship is awakened in each individual, so is their *feagaiga*, or "covenant with others." In the course of working with a group that reflects *malu alii*, individuals gain access to their own spirit of collaboration ... which, in reality, has always been there.

### **Stage 3 Tools**

#### **Hosting protocol**

The design of a hosting experience is built on cultural practices that infuse every element with significance. Highlights of the experience include:

- **A sacred space.**  
Hosting in a space that is neutral to the power and political structure (a "place of aloha") helps to create an environment that is sacred and spiritual.
- **A welcoming ceremony.**  
Multiple generations of family are involved in welcoming guests, including children and elders, who represent purity and wisdom and add to the significance of the greeting.
- **Royal treatment.**  
Every individual is specifically acknowledged from the moment they arrive and all are treated with great deference, as if they were alii. Guests are waited on in the way that alii are traditionally treated, and with *vii vii* (exaltation).
- **Seating by protocol.**  
In accordance with tradition, the highest-ranking of the visitors will sit directly opposite the highest ranking of the hosts (namely, Tusi), and subsequent seating locations follow along the same line.
- **Sharing of kava.**  
The spiritual meaning of sharing kava from the same bowl has an origin story. The story is explained before the kava is served to give people a context for the ceremony and encourage them to experience themselves as coming together for collaboration. Guests are invited to make a statement about their purpose in attending, and/or how they feel about their experience.



- **Serving of the meal.**  
Guests are served as if they were nobility.
- **Entertainment.**  
People are more relaxed when they feel happy and entertainment helps to bring about joy. The spirit of collaboration is enhanced when people can laugh together.
- **Gift giving.**  
Each individual receives a personal gift with an explanation of the story behind it. The stories point back to the importance of collaboration and collective effort. The presentations follow the protocol that ranking chiefs use: The giver of the gift sits down in front of the guest and lays the gift at his or her feet. Then the giver gets up and leaves. A second person follows, usually one of the children, with a woven basket of food to take home. Woven mats have the highest material value in Samoa and are imbued with enough power to end war or forgive murder. Special carvings that have traditional and spiritual significance are also high-power gifts in Hawaii. The second-highest-value gift is the unfinished paddle, which symbolizes an unfinished journey.
- **A farewell from hosts.**  
Just as the whole family welcomed its guests, the whole family sends them off with a song. They often sing a song that symbolizes the connection between the USA and the Samoan Islands, which in turn goes back to connectedness.
- **A farewell from guests.**  
Individuals take turns offering farewell remarks; their words describe how they have been affected by the experience. Self reflection is built into the process and can sometimes evoke strong emotions. When that occurs, it is thought to bring blessings to the occasion and power to the process.

### **Kava origin story**

One of the kahunas accepted a challenge from a spiritual priest. The son of the priest had gone to a special altar where food was placed for a deity. The son's presence there was a sacrilege. Tagalo Lagi sent down lightning and clove the boy in half, from his head to his legs. The grieving priest beseeched God to take into account that he had faithfully executed his ceremonial duties all his life, and that this was his only son. Tagalo took pity on him, and instructed the priest to fetch a plant that grew near a river, crush its root, mix it with water, pour it into a coconut cup, and spill it along the seam where the boy was cut in two. When he'd done that, the boy came back to life, and the priest was joyous. The act of bringing discordant sides together into one body became the basis for the kava ceremony.

