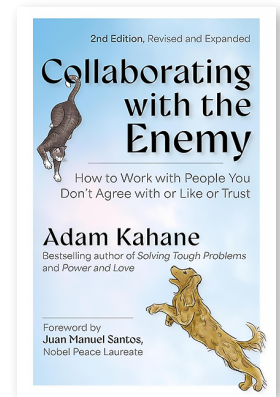


# Executive Book Summaries<sup>®</sup>

## Collaborating with the Enemy

How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust

by **Adam Kahane**



### Contents

When to Collaborate  
Page 3

With Whom to Collaborate  
Page 4

Conventional Collaboration  
Page 5

The First Stretch: Embrace Conflict and Connection  
Page 6

The Second Stretch: Experiment a Way Forward  
Page 7

Choosing to Collaborate  
Page 8

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

*Collaborating with the Enemy* examines the increasing necessity and difficulty of collaborating with people whose perspectives, interests, or behaviors conflict with one's own, particularly in complex and polarized environments. It identifies the central problem as the widespread tendency to “enemyfy” others—casting them as adversaries and thereby narrowing the possibilities for joint action—while traditional collaboration models depend on alignment, trust, and shared goals that are often absent. Adam Kahane argues that effective collaboration under these conditions requires a shift in mindset and practice.

He introduces “stretch collaboration” as a disciplined approach that accepts disagreement, uncertainty, and partial alignment as starting points rather than obstacles. Drawing on extensive facilitation experience, the book presents collaboration as a practice of engaging across difference through three core movements: embracing both conflict and connection among participants, experimenting through action instead of relying on predetermined plans, and assuming responsibility for one's own role in shared situations.

By framing collaboration as an emergent, participatory process shaped by tension and interdependence, it outlines how collective action can proceed in conditions of persistent disagreement and limited control.

### IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Distinguish collaboration from forcing, adapting, and exiting
- Reframe enemies as collaborators within a pragmatic gray area of relationships
- Integrate love, power, and justice to balance unity and self-interest goals
- Apply stretch collaboration by embracing conflict and experimenting iteratively

### Introduction

Most of us find it difficult to work with people we do not agree with or like or trust, so we do not. Instead, we try to work apart from or against them—to avoid or defeat them. Sometimes these alternative approaches work, but often they do not (at least not for long), or they come at a high cost.

We wrestle with this tough challenge of collaborating across difference in all spheres and at all scales: with family members, colleagues, and neighbors; in business, politics, and community affairs; and in cities, countries, and international contexts. How can we deal with this challenge?

### Collaborating with “Enemies”

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines an enemy as “a person who hates one and eagerly seeks one’s defeat; member of hostile army or nation; hostile force or ship or aircraft; thing that harms or injures.” Although this definition refers to the actions others are taking at a certain moment (they are *acting* as enemies), we often, problematically, conflate this with their permanent identities (they *are* enemies).

Usually, we do not want to work with people we think are enemies because we believe doing so would be difficult, dangerous, or wrong. Instead, we want to work away from, around, or against them. But sometimes we need to work with them, even if we do not want to, either in spite of what they are doing or to find a way to stop them from doing these things. In many such cases, we can collaborate with them if we choose to and know how.

### The Enemyfying Syndrome

Enemyfying—viewing the people we are dealing with as our enemies—paints with a broad brush, making enemies of:

- those who are seriously harming or injuring us
- those we do not agree with or like or trust
- those we feel threatened by
- those we are in conflict with
- those we differ with or from
- those we are uncomfortable with

The problem with enemyfying is that we label lots of people as enemies and thereby conclude that we cannot collaborate with them and must instead avoid or defeat them. It simplistically sorts people into friends and enemies, black and white, and thereby overlooks the larger, more complex gray area. It narrows our options, reduces what we can get done, and impedes us from getting where we want to go.

Rather than generalizing, we need to choose, carefully and consciously, whom we will view and treat as enemies.

### How on Earth Can We Work Together?

Collaborating across difference is becoming increasingly necessary because people, ideas, goods, money, movements, data, technologies, weapons, pollutants, and pathogens keep flowing across organizational and geographic borders, despite our on-and-off efforts to limit these flows.

Collaborating across difference is also becoming increasingly difficult. We always have differences and conflicts among us, which are sometimes violent and destructive and sometimes creative and productive. But these days, many people are more vocal about their opinions and identities and less willing to tolerate and engage with those who are different from themselves.

As a result of all of these trends, we are experiencing a pandemic of enemyfying and thereby creating a world of separation and violence.

### Two Ways to Address the Challenge

Collaborating across difference is neither easy nor impossible. It is not straightforward, and it does not always work, but it is often necessary, possible, and productive. Crucially, however, it requires us to dial down our enemyfying and find ways to live and work patiently with our differences.

There are two realistic and complementary ways to narrow the gap between the collaborating we need and the collaborating we are willing and able to do:

1. **Conventional collaboration:** we limit the scope of our collaboration so that it matches our current willingness and ability to collaborate.
2. **Stretch collaboration:** we expand our willingness and ability to collaborate so that it meets our need to collaborate.

Each approach works in different contexts. In any given situation, we need to choose which to use or how to combine them.

### Stretching to Collaborate Across Difference

We become more able to work with conflict and complexity and across larger domains by stretching in three dimensions:

1. **Engaging with our collaborators:** stretching away from focusing only on the collective goals and harmony of our collaboration, toward embracing both conflict and connection among us.

Enemyfying narrows our options, reduces what we can get done, and impedes us from getting where we want to go. ”

2. **Engaging with our context:** stretching away from insisting on clear, sequential agreements about the problem, solution, and plan, and who will do what, toward experimenting with different hypotheses and options.
3. **Engaging with ourselves:** stretching away from only taking directions from others and giving directions to others, toward taking responsibility for our own role.

To collaborate across difference, we need to stretch in all three of these dimensions: in conventional collaboration, we make limited stretches, and in stretch collaboration, we make extended ones. This approach is challenging because it requires us to do the opposite of what feels obvious and natural in working together.

These shifts enable us to move away from enemyfying others whom we differ with and from, toward living and working alongside them.

---

## CHAPTER 1

### When to Collaborate

The first and most basic thing we have to understand about collaboration is that we do not have to do it; it is a choice. Sometimes we think or sense that we need to collaborate, that it is our best option, and at other times that another way forward would be better.

#### Collaborating and Its Three Alternatives

Our potential collaborators are not neatly divided into black and white; they exist in many shades of gray, so we have more potential collaborators than we might think. We may make this decision rationally or intuitively, but in any case, we need a clear understanding of the opportunities and risks of each option.

##### Collaborating

We try collaborating when we want to change the situation we are in and believe we can do so effectively only by working with others. But collaborating is not a panacea: it risks producing too little too slowly, leading us to compromise too much, or even co-opting us and causing us to betray what matters most.

##### Forcing

We try forcing when we think that we ought to change our situation and may be able to without working with others. We think that we, alone or together with our colleagues and friends, know best what needs to be done, and can impose this on others, regardless of what they want.

##### Adapting

We try adapting when we think we cannot change or escape our situation and need to find a way to live with it as it is. Adapting may require intelligence, ingenuity, and courage, but we do this within our existing context. We therefore focus on doing the best we can, ignoring, avoiding, or fitting into what is happening around us.

##### Exiting

We try exiting when we think we cannot change our situation and are no longer willing to live with it. We can exit with fear, determination, or dignity by quitting our job, divorcing our spouse, severing trade ties, emigrating, going off the grid, or tuning out. Sometimes exiting is easy, but often it requires us to make significant sacrifices.

#### Choosing When to Collaborate

Most of us use these four options at different times in different situations. Forcing, adapting, and exiting are more straightforward than collaborating because, with the former, we decide and act by ourselves, whereas with the latter, we decide and act together with others. Some people enjoy or are more comfortable with collaboration and reach for it as their first choice; others find it frustrating and try it only when they think none of the other options are workable.

None of these options is necessarily stable or permanent, so we need to move among them as our situation changes. Because they involve different orientations and mindsets, moving among them requires stretching. We need to learn to choose skillfully and fluidly among these options:

- based on power
- reactively
- with others
- based on preferences
- based on ability

### CHAPTER 2

## With Whom to Collaborate

It is impossible to collaborate with everybody, so choosing to collaborate includes choosing whom to do it with. Enemyfying frames this choice in black and white, dividing people into those we can collaborate with and those we cannot. We therefore need to choose pragmatically whom to work with, whom to work without or apart from, and whom to work against.

### A World in Black and White

These days, as always, war produces enemyfying, and enemyfying produces war: a front line dividing friends from enemies. Yet I have observed this same black-and-white perspective spreading into every kind of conflict, not only in actual wars. In many places I have been over the past few years, I have noticed increasingly ferocious enmity against others—political and geopolitical opponents; people of other races, religions, and genders; and foreigners and outsiders.

### The Gray Area

Enemyfying treats many people we do not agree with or like or trust, who are different from us or who differ with us, as enemies. We enemyfy in all spheres and at all scales.

I am not saying we must collaborate with everyone we consider an enemy. What I *am* saying is that there is not a simple, principled, fixed line between those with whom we must collaborate and those with whom we must not. We must choose, pragmatically, whom to collaborate with in each particular situation.

### Navigating the Gray Area

To make choices and advance in the gray area, we must first clarify its boundaries. We cannot get much done entirely by ourselves, or by only ordering others around (forcing) or taking orders from others (adapting), so we need to collaborate with some people on some things.

And we cannot collaborate with everybody on everything. Within this broad gray area, replete with the opportunities and risks created by diversity, difference, disagreement, complexity, contradiction, and conflict, we have many options as to whom we can work with, many more than simply with friends and against enemies.

We collaborate with certain people in certain domains when we think we need to. And we do not collaborate with them when we think it would be better to force, adapt, or exit.

### CHAPTER 3

## How to Collaborate

Collaboration works through the integration of three universal and complementary drives: the drive to come together and unite, the drive to meet their own needs, and the drive to be in good relationship with one another. I call these three drives *love*, *power*, and *justice*.

Most of us are more comfortable with one or two of these drives, so we tend to favor and rely on them. But all three are required for collaboration to work.

### Love: The Drive Towards the Unity of the Separated

I use the definition of love given by theologian Paul Tillich in his seminal 1954 book *Power, Love, and Justice*: “the drive towards the unity of the separated.” This captures precisely what I have experienced—that collaboration involves participants yearning to unite themselves, and the parts of the system they represent, into larger wholes.

Love in this sense is the drive to make whole what has become or appears fragmented. It arises from the reality that all of us are parts of larger wholes and expresses itself as community and belonging.

Collaboration must work with love. Ignoring love means ignoring the reality that we are interdependent and need to work together to get things done. Denying or shying away from love and belonging produces estrangement and enemyfying. On the other hand, focusing only on love and unity, while ignoring power and justice, produces sentimentality and anemia—or worse, a cynical reproduction of the status quo.

### Power: The Drive Toward Self-Realization

Tillich defined power as “the drive of everything living to realize itself, with increasing intensity and extensity.” In this sense, power is the drive to achieve one’s purpose: *power to*.

It is the power that “guerrilla gardeners” harness when they plant seeds in vacant city lots, relying on the drive of the seeds to realize themselves and thereby create green spaces. This definition differs from the common understanding of power as *power over*.

Collaboration, then, is driven by the participants’ yearning not only to unite but also to realize themselves. Power arises from the reality that each of us is a whole in ourselves. It expresses itself as identity, purpose, ambition, and agency.

Our potential collaborators are not black and white  
—they exist in many shades of gray.

”

Collaboration must work with power. Ignoring power means ignoring the obvious everyday reality of self-realization, self-centeredness, and self-interest. Denying or shying away from power and agency produces impotence and passivity.

### **Justice: The Structure That Enables Love and Power**

Tillich defines justice as “the form in which the power of being activates itself . . . and through which love performs its work.” This means that the power and love of collaborators (their drives to realize themselves and to unite) can be expressed only if they see the form or structure of the collaboration as fair and just. In the absence of justice, power and love cannot be balanced or reconciled.

Justice arises from the reality that we are all related. It expresses itself as solidarity and reciprocity: the Golden Rule of treating others as we would want to be treated.

---

#### CHAPTER 4

### **Conventional Collaboration**

Conventional collaboration is the way most collaboration is done (although not always well or successfully) and the way most people think collaboration has to be done.

It addresses the challenge of collaborating across difference by limiting the scope of the collaboration to activities that are low in conflict and complexity, or can be made so, and by limiting the collaborators to those willing to prioritize the interests of the team over their own. It works in contexts where these limitations are feasible.

#### **What Conventional Collaboration Looks Like**

Conventional collaboration looks like well-executed teamwork, as practiced in many “teams,” whether in robotics labs or families, on concert stages or sports fields, or in business, government, or nonprofit organizations. It functions like any group with clear limits and boundaries and a directive boss: an orchestra with a conductor, an operating room with a lead surgeon, a football team with a coach, a clan with a matriarch, a corporation with a CEO, or a nation with a ruler.

Conventional collaboration is, in many contexts, simply a familiar and reliable way of living and working together. Some of us find this way comfortable and obvious, and others find it confining and oppressive.

#### **The Structure of Conventional Collaboration**

The primary characteristic of conventional collaboration is that it is hierarchical, in that the team or organization as a whole is prioritized over its members: the collaborators are, sometimes eagerly and sometimes reluctantly, aligned with and subordinate to the collaboration.

It applies in both clear and complicated contexts where, for every technical problem, there is a best solution. It works in contexts that are, or can be made to be, low in conflict and complexity—in other words, relatively simple.

But beyond that limit of management or control, this approach does not work. We also cannot make it work beyond the limits of the organization or system that we manage or control.

---

#### CHAPTER 5

### **Stretch Collaboration**

Stretch collaboration is not the conventional way to work together, so many people think it cannot accomplish much or is not even possible. But this is not so. It is possible, and it enables us to work together even in contexts with high conflict and/or high complexity. It is a valuable option that complements conventional collaboration and requires stretching beyond what is comfortable, thereby offering additional opportunities and risks.

#### **The Structure of Stretch Collaboration**

The primary characteristic of this approach is that it is horizontal: collaborators see themselves primarily as wholes in themselves and only secondarily as parts of the collaboration or subordinate to it. They work together without having a single directive boss; they each are or have their own boss. They understand themselves to be on different “teams,” with their differences and disagreements out in the open and on the table for everyone involved.

Stretch collaboration is needed for alliances of independent organizations to work together. It is also needed within organizations that have cultures that emphasize the agency and equity of individual persons and teams and that de-emphasize hierarchy. Because this form of collaboration is looser than conventional collaboration, it enables us to work with a broader range of collaborators across and within organizations: not only “friends” we agree with and like and trust but also “enemies” we do not agree with or like or trust.

It abandons the assumption of control. It gives up nostalgic, unrealistic fantasies of harmony, certainty, and compliance and instead embraces the messy realities of discord, trial and error, and cocreation.

It is often cluttered and confused, so many people find it daunting. But it can be done and, in conflictual and complex contexts, is perhaps the only workable way to work together.

### How to Make Stretch Collaboration Work

The operating manual for stretch collaboration, as for conventional collaboration, explains how to make choices that integrate love, power, and justice, but now in their “stretched” (more expansive, complex, and unstable) forms.

In practice, this means working differently across all three dimensions:

- **Working with love:** rather than expecting collaborators to fit into the collaboration, we nurture their sense of belonging within it.
- **Working with power:** rather than subordinating individuals to a hierarchical structure, we recognize each collaborator’s autonomy and agency and organize horizontally.
- **Working with justice:** rather than focusing on security and fairness alone, we structure the collaboration for equity and reciprocity.

These more complex manifestations of love, power, and justice enable stretch collaboration to work in more conflictual and complex contexts than conventional collaboration and to include a broader range of collaborators, including those who do not agree with, like, or trust one another.

### Where Stretch Collaboration Doesn’t Work

When we are in a context we find dangerous or complicated, authority- and expert-led conventional collaboration can be a good option. Stretch collaboration requires us to stretch, but in some contexts with high conflict and/or high complexity, this can feel too risky.

When we think we have gone, or might be going, too far, we reverse and contract our collaboration and our collaborators to levels we consider workable. Within this smaller domain, we then employ either stretch or conventional collaboration; outside it, we force, adapt, or exit.

---

#### CHAPTER 6

### The First Stretch: Embrace Conflict and Connection

The key challenge of collaborating is obvious but not easy: how to align the needs of each of the diverse collaborators with those of the others and of the collaboration as a whole. In practice, this means working with multiple “wholes,” not a single unified team.

In conventional collaboration, this is more straightforward, because collaborators are expected to act as players on a single team, aligning and subordinating their own needs to those of the collaboration.

In stretch collaboration, achieving such alignment is more difficult, because collaborators see themselves as members of other, different teams and are not willing to subordinate themselves to the collaboration.

The first stretch—embracing both conflict and connection (that is, employing both asserting and engaging)—requires getting beneath the surface of the collaboration to expose and work with the different perspectives and interests of individual collaborators, in order to discover how to align these sufficiently to move forward together. The key to this is understanding that, in practice, there is no such thing as “the whole.” Every social system consists of multiple wholes that are parts of larger wholes.

#### Alternating Power and Love, Enabled by Justice

When we collaborate, we exercise love and power alternately. First, we engage with others. As our engagement continues and intensifies, it can produce an uncomfortable feeling of fusing and capitulating, of having to subordinate or compromise what matters to us to maintain the engagement.

This discomfort is a signal that we need to shift to asserting or pushing for what matters to us. But as that asserting continues and intensifies, it can produce in us an impulse to block, push back, or resist. This reaction is a signal that we need to return to engaging.

The key to alternating between engaging and asserting is to

We need to focus on deciding what we ourselves will do next.

”

know when to employ each so as to keep the cycle generative rather than degenerative.

### The Challenge of Living Together

When we notice ourselves overemploying love, we need to employ power and live with the conflict that comes with it, which can feel uncomfortable. When we notice ourselves overemploying power, we need to employ love and live with the collectivism that comes with it, which can feel limiting.

In this context, justice is the structure or quality of our relationships that enables this fruitful alternation between love and power. Therefore, the first stretch requires us to employ all three drives together.

---

#### CHAPTER 7

### The Second Stretch: Experiment a Way Forward

The second dimension of collaborating is engaging with our context—the problematic situation we are trying to address through our collaboration. Conventional collaboration does this in low-conflict, low-complexity contexts by agreeing on the problem, the best solution, the plan for implementing it, and who will do what.

But in contexts with high conflict and/or high complexity, we cannot agree in advance on solutions, both because we do not see eye to eye with our collaborators and because the results of our actions are unpredictable. The second stretch is to try out multiple options, one move at a time, to discover what actually works and enables us to advance.

### Discovering the Path Along the Way

In stretch collaboration, we cannot know our route before we set out. We cannot predict or control it—we can only discover it along the way. Such learning by doing can be both exciting and unnerving. It requires trying things that might not work at first.

Participants in stretch collaborations often do not agree with or like or trust one another enough to be willing to commit to any plan of action other than one that is modest, short-term,

and low risk. They participate voluntarily and provisionally, with no one having control over the others. As a result, they usually have the option of exiting. Collaborators do what they want to do, so attempts to force or cajole them into doing otherwise do not work.

Stretch collaboration therefore involves more than making a deal or an agreement. It is an ongoing and emergent process in which it is more important to act than to agree. What is crucial is to create conditions that enable collaborators to act freely and creatively across a portfolio of different experiments supported by different people, and in doing so create a path forward.

### Emergent Strategy

Management professor Henry Mintzberg points out that there are two opposite ways to realize an objective:

1. **Deliberate strategy:** one that succeeds in realizing an intention
2. **Emergent strategy:** one that is realized despite or in the absence of an intention

He observes that in organizations, few managers can or do implement purely deliberate strategies.

In stretch collaboration, we advance through processes that are primarily emergent rather than deliberate. We realize emergent strategies through experimentation. We try out ideas we think might work and then learn from the results.

---

#### CHAPTER 8

### The Third Stretch: Step into the Game

The third dimension of collaborating is engaging with ourselves. In conventional collaboration, we focus on doing our job and getting others to do theirs. This approach works in contexts with low conflict and low complexity, where we can be confident that we can influence others' actions and that these actions will produce the intended results.

But in contexts with high conflict and/or high complexity, where neither of these assumptions holds, we need to shift more of our focus onto what we ourselves are thinking, feeling, and doing. We need to examine how we are contributing

to things being the way they are and what we can do differently to help change them.

### Enemyfying Is Focusing on Others

When we are faced with a challenging or stressful situation, we focus our attention first and foremost on what other people are doing, not doing, or ought to be doing. Our habitual thinking is that *they* need to change.

We blame and enemyfy others, both to defend and define ourselves. We are frightened of losing or being hurt, so we separate and shield ourselves by asserting that we are right and others are wrong.

The problem with enemyfying is that it distracts and unbalances us, which makes it harder to choose to collaborate with people we differ from and easier to choose to force, adapt, or exit. We cannot avoid others we find challenging, so we need to focus on deciding what we ourselves will do next.

### Be a Pig Rather Than a Chicken

The essence of the third stretch is assuming responsibility for the role that we play in the situation we are trying to change and for what we need to do differently to change it.

This stretch is challenging because it requires us to take the risk of engaging fully in the situation and, in doing so, being changed or hurt by it. It requires us to be more open and vulnerable, and more willing to sacrifice some of what feels known, familiar, comfortable, and safe.

“In a ham omelet,” the quip goes, “the chicken is involved, but the pig is committed.” Stretch collaboration requires us to be pigs rather than merely chickens.

When we notice ourselves blaming or enemyfying others, we need to bring our attention back to what we are thinking, feeling, and doing, and what we need to do differently.

### CONCLUSION

## Choosing to Collaborate

The world we live in has few flat, clear, straight roads, so it is often difficult to find our way forward. It is made even more difficult by the fact that, to get where we want to go, we often need to work with people we do not agree with, like, or trust. We make it harder still by enemyfying these people—viewing them not simply as people we differ from or oppose but as enemies we must avoid or defeat.

When we dial down our enemyfying, we move from blaming others for what is happening toward acting with agency to change it. We move away from trying only to force things to be the way we want, regardless of what is going on around us, or to adapt to the forcing of others, or to exit—and toward trying to collaborate.

Choosing only to force or be forced is choosing to participate in creating a degenerate world of dog-eat-dog, tit-for-tat, and might-makes-right. Choosing to collaborate, with all the arduous and liberating stretching this demands, is choosing to participate in creating a generative world of flourishing.

The recurring theme is the need for us to shift the way we are in the world, away from reacting to what is happening with separation, hurriedness, arrogance, certainty, anger, and fear, toward responding with engagement, patience, humility, creativity, curiosity, and faith. To collaborate across difference, we must choose to abide.



**Adam Kahane** is a practitioner and author focused on helping people collaborate across differences to address complex challenges. He cofounded Reos Partners, a global social enterprise supporting leaders in government, business, and civil society. His work has contributed to initiatives in South Africa, Colombia, Mexico, the United States, Canada, Europe, India, and Thailand, addressing issues including democracy, health equity, and climate resilience. Kahane has written six bestselling books translated into more than twenty languages. A member of the Order of Canada, he has held fellowships at Oxford and other institutions. He lives in Montreal and Cape Town with his wife, Dorothy, four children, ten grandchildren, and a cat named Gata.

*Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust, Second Edition* by Adam Kahane. Copyright© 2026 by Adam Kahane. Summarized by permission of the Publisher, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. ISBN 9798890571199. Summary published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®. Copyright 2026 Soundview, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. For permissions and reprints, please contact [service@summary.com](mailto:service@summary.com). 4816