



The Future of Collaboration in Life Sciences:

Insights, Challenges and
Practical Actions for Leaders



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Introduction.

Five&Co. is on a mission to help everyone in the life sciences industry thrive – to do well for the business (whatever their context) and feel well too.

We asked 100 global pharma leaders we have worked with to share their experience and insights on the subject of collaboration. Whilst collaboration was universally seen by them as an essential feature of the modern workplace, the experience of developing and delivering it was more mixed.

In this briefing you will also see a number of practical recommendations for leaders. Some recommendations are conversation starters for you and your leadership teams, others are more practical – things that you can start to do now to change the way you approach the design, development and delivery of effective collaborations.

We conclude with some industry predictions that we think will help you prepare for the next 5 years.



We trust you will find it helpful and join us in our mission to help everyone to thrive – to do well for the business and feel well in the life sciences sector.

Why Collaboration, and Why Now?

When we asked senior leaders in the life sciences industry if collaboration was essential to the success of their business, the vast majority said yes.

But, when we ask if the strategies they have deployed across their businesses to increase collaboration have been successful, we get a much more varied response.

One of the issues we want to confront straight away is that we find collaboration is often seen or talked about as a wholesome part of working well – right up there with cooperation, and kindness. When you think how powerful it is when people truly ‘co-labour’ on something, it seems a shame that the word collaboration has become so ubiquitous in the modern leadership language – it’s almost lost its power. This may sound odd but think about how we use a word like ‘love’. On the one hand, love has inspired individuals to spend life together, it has prompted nations to their feet. On another level, who hasn’t said at least once how much they ‘love’ their favourite food or sport?

So, words can exist at different levels. Context is important. Let’s put collaboration in its current context with some remarks from business experts and some of the many senior leaders who responded to our last survey – The View from Your Window

Respondent quotes

“There is an urgent need for different perspectives (e.g. patient, customer, employee, etc), and a need to think outside of the box”

“You have to be ready for change and be agile - collaborating helps!”

“There is a complexity to the industry that can lead to a lack of cohesion”

“No one has all the answers or all the pieces of the puzzle... we need to collaborate to win”

The idea of collaboration has a strong, profound edge to it. We have some clear evidence from decades of organisational research and leadership experience about what collaboration is, why it works, and how you can develop it. We have less clear evidence on how much collaboration is useful. For example, if collaboration is a strength, can it be overplayed (like any strength)?

The aim in this white paper isn't to push leaders into ever more collaboration. Nor is it to pretend that collaboration is not as great as it seems.

Rather, we want to give leaders a chance to discover what elements of collaboration are important, how it adds value (and when), and what role it can play in a modern, complex organisation.

As ever, we want to keep things simple and real but also want to invite you to be bold. So, in addition to the 5 facets of effective collaboration below, we have outlined some high impact actions you can take now, and next to bring focus and energy to collaboration.

For those who love the long view, at the end of the white paper you will find our unique road map towards a healthy, effective collaboration culture which we hope will kickstart your collaboration journey or perhaps refresh a journey you are already on.

“When someone takes your ideas, tells you you’re crazy or it’s impossible, and then works with you anyway, that’s collaboration. We’re on a mission together”

The Pharma Context for Collaboration

The health needs of society are changing rapidly. There is a shortage of talent, time and resources to deploy so we need a more co-ordinated approach than ever. That requires organisations and staff to collaborate effectively across organisational and professional boundaries.

But at industry level, why would companies want to collaborate? Why would they share data and resources that potentially mean giving away a competitive advantage?

Some have argued that the cost of the current drug development process is unsustainable. There are eye-watering amounts of financial and human resources that has to be set aside to fund not only the successes but also the failures.

In 2010, Morgan Stanley radically suggested that companies “exit research and create value” elsewhere in the drug development process. They argued that success rates in the pharmaceutical industry were not sufficient to sustain large internal R&D organisations.

Over time, the industry fragmentation this mindset contributed to was replaced by an acceptance of the value of collaboration – in particular continuity and integration of diverse skills and understanding from different parts of science, medical, and commercial disciplines.

It still seems important for companies to either improve success rates or decrease the cost of failure. Industry level collaboration in the development of tools and technologies to make drug development more effective and efficient is one answer to help pharma avoid multiple high cost solo ventures slowing down delivery of medicines to people that desperately need them.

Senior leaders tell us that this translates into a never ending search for novel ideas, efficiencies in processes, and excellence in execution. To avoid silos, many of our clients have pushed hard on matrix working and using resource allocation as a driver for internal collaboration.

Respondent quote

“I see that faster and broader access of medicines to patients is driving the need for collaboration where I work. The continued evolution of global teams and remote working is changing the way what we collaborate”

These organisational challenges are requiring collaborative, fluid patterns of teamwork. We are regularly seeing structures where teams are being assembled and led by members as well as managers. In other words, there are leaders across workstreams and groups as well as within functions. We are certainly seeing a firm move away from the hierarchical and static ideas of team from the past.

To be clear, for us and for the leaders we work with, teams are still an integral part of organisations. In fact teamwork is more important than ever. It's just that globalisation, the scale and complexity of problems, and the capabilities of technology have fundamentally altered the context for teams and shifted the focus onto collaboration.

Respondent quote

“We need to make sure everyone, at different levels in the business, has a stake in the outcome... need to avoid one person getting the credit”



40% of respondents think leadership development will be required to improve the quality of collaboration

Five&Co, 2025

When Collaboration Goes Wrong...

Too Much of a Good Thing

A narrow view of collaboration often results in process or practices involving too many people. Too many views and too many points of reference can bring even the most talented people to a juddering halt.

In a study by Ethan Bernstein, Jesse Shore and David Lazer¹, three groups were set a logical problem (devising the shortest route for a travelling salesman visiting various cities). In one group, its subjects acted independently; in another they saw the solutions posted by team members at every stage; and in a third, they were intermittently kept informed of each other's views.

The study found that the individualist group reached the optimal solution more often than the constant collaborators but had a poorer average result. The group with constant interaction produced a higher average quality of solution but more solutions that were mediocre (see fig 1 below).

Fig 1 – Can you have too much collaboration?

No interaction	Moderate Interaction	Constant Interaction
<p>High creativity Largest number of unique solutions, including some of the best and some of the worst</p> <p>Low overall quality Average quality of solution poor due to so much variation</p>	<p>Best trade off Preserved enough individual work to find the best solutions at least as frequently as other groups</p> <p>Collaborated enough to maintain high average quality of solution compared with the groups with constant interaction.</p>	<p>Low creativity Less variation in ideas. Absence of learning time creates group think</p> <p>Highest quality Higher average quality of solution but finding the very best ones much less frequently.</p>

¹ Bernstein, E. Shore, J., and Lazer, D (2019) Improving the Rhythm of Your Collaboration. MIT Sloan Management Review September 10, 2019

It was the intermittent collaborators that captured the best of both worlds (i.e. individual and connected efforts) and in doing so found the right result as frequently as the individualists but got a much better average solution. It would seem you can have too much collaboration.

Ironically, respondents to our survey and others have commented that the very thing you need to make progress in today’s complex pharma industry (diverse expertise, cross functional reach, multi-centre coverage, flexible and remote working) are often the very things that get in the way of effective collaboration².

Collaboration in name only

The word collaboration may be ubiquitous but effective practice is not. Strategic changes in business that require collaboration often stall because collaboration is held to only be an attitude or belief when it is actually an intentional way of working.

We have heard a number of leaders across the industry state that they aim to “collaborate as much as possible” but on examination we found that the quality of the collaboration is variable and often confused with cooperation or coordination (see insert fig 2)

Fig 2 – Coordination – Cooperation – Collaboration

Cooperation	Coordination	Collaboration
<p>Focus: Maintaining relationships and getting along with one another</p>	<p>Focus: Coordinating individuals’ tasks to accomplish a project</p>	<p>Focus: Harnessing diverse views, productive conflict and integrative solutions among teams and stakeholders</p>
<p>Pros and Cons: + Helps healthy culture - May lead to conflict avoidance</p>	<p>Pros and Cons: + Improves efficiency - May require separate resources to make it work i.e. a coordinator role</p>	<p>Pros and Cons: + Especially useful for innovative solutions or complex change - Requires intentional investment and space to make it work</p>

2 Gratton, L, and Erikson T. J., (2007) Eight ways to build collaborative teams. Harvard Business Review November 2007

3 Thomas, G F (2024) Six Steps to Develop Collaborative Teams Online Seminar October 2024

True collaboration focuses on and draws out diverse views, healthy conflict, and integrative solutions among team members or other stakeholders along a planned path.

In summary, it can be assumed that collaboration is taking place because teams 'get along' and working practices suggest sharing of effort. In fact, collaboration is only truly effective when seen as a powerful tool that needs to be deliberately deployed in a specific way with a clear end in mind.

Just 7% of senior leaders believe that their organisations were "very ready" to execute the shift to network-based collaborative models, and only 6% rated themselves "very effective" at managing cross-functional teams

- DELOITTE 2019

A road to nowhere

Leaders don't always pay enough attention to the preparation for as well as the execution of collaboration. In Deloitte's 2019 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 65% of the nearly 10,000 respondents identified the shift from functional hierarchies to team-centric and network-based organisational models as "important" or "very important." Yet only 7% of the respondents believed that their organisations were "very ready" to execute the shift to network-based models, and only 6% rated themselves "very effective" at managing cross-functional teams.

A desire to collaborate, townhall announcements on collaboration, and even investment in collaboration skills, whilst helpful, will not deliver any value without a plan to build up the required skills, mindset and practices to make it effective.

Whilst much about collaboration is intuitively positive, its 'negative' experiences are underestimated or glossed over. Collaboration can be slower. It can cause heated debates, and challenge traditional ideas or practices. Sharing resources and prioritizing together can result in 'favourite projects' being terminated in preference for another which can make people feel their previous work is devalued. Relationships can be strained when collaborating at pace. These unspoken features of effective collaboration can become stumbling blocks.

In our view, collaboration has to be mission orientated enough to inspire and add value, but also practical and planned out to ensure that your people are skilled and equipped to respond to the range of collaboration effects.

“Starting the Collaboration Journey”

We have highlighted both the unique nature of collaboration and the power of effective collaboration. Our respondents and experience in the industry tell us that in order to create effective collaboration, you will need to start by assessing and investing in three elements of your leadership – mindset, skills and culture.

Mindset

It’s about being able to be a leader and a follower, often in the same conversation. It’s about being able to adapt on the fly to feedback while holding a laser-like focus on the goal. Your people need good self-awareness and to develop a healthy approach to conflict and disagreement.

Skills

We have identified four skills that are foundational to effective collaboration:

1. Communication (which should absolutely include effective listening)
2. Emotional intelligence
3. Conflict management
4. Agile problem solving

A quick audit of your team skills will help decide where to invest first but be open to a ‘fresh start’ on learning these skills together to create alignment.

Culture

This can take time to develop fully but it starts with a shared understanding of and confidence in your collaborative processes. Regular learning moments whilst establishing effective collaboration can help develop behaviours that help groups ‘hold the collaborative frame’, build trust and positive relationships, and create an openness to sharing resources. Simply put, culture can be defined as “how we do things here”, so take time to identify your preferred collaboration culture

Respondent quote

“Task oriented teams who don’t have enterprise view can be insecure”

The next step in creating effective collaboration is to identify which work will benefit most from collaboration (and which will not). Remember, not everything benefits from collaboration. Here's a Five&Co. Collaboration Checklist to aid your decision making:

Suggested approach Requirement	Cooperation / coordination	Collaboration
Broad aspirational goals		✓
Repeated delivery of familiar goals	✓	
Narrow deployment of specific expertise required	✓	
Clear roadmap for delivery	✓	
New product ideas required		✓
There are novel or stretch problems to solve		✓
Milestones and deliverables are clear and agreed	✓	
Existing knowledge isn't enough - new insight is needed		✓

“Checklist insights”

Once the ecosystem is in place, you can think of collaboration as something you can ‘switch on’ and ‘switch off’. For example, a long term project can have collaborative workstreams within it. It doesn’t have to be “collaboration all the way”

Think of collaboration as a valuable resource that needs to be spent wisely. So, if the checklist doesn’t provide a clear recommendation either way, use a tool like the ‘Impact vs Effort’ matrix to determine next steps. The speed of delivery or resource available might mean collaboration is the wrong choice.

Like any new approach, your first time around will feel slower, and might not deliver in quite the way you imagined. Stay curious, be humble, ask questions, lean in and learn – every experience will build effective processes, and deepen trust



40% of respondents think leadership development will be required to improve the quality of collaboration

Five&Co, 2025



The Five Facets of Effective Collaboration – the view from your window

After reviewing decades of research, our experience of the pharma industry and the carefully reflecting on the contributions of our invited senior leaders, we have developed the 5 Facets of Effective Collaboration. These can be used as talking points before your next collaboration project or as the starting point for a review into existing initiatives.

1. Clear Purpose

Collaboration thrives when people know why they're coming together and what problem needs to be solved. A shared purpose creates direction, urgency, and meaning. Too often, teams are invited to "collaborate" without clear alignment on goals or intended outcomes. This leads to confusion, duplication, or disengagement. When the purpose is clear, collaboration becomes focused — not just busy.

Ask yourself: Do people know what success looks like together — not just individually?

2. Always learning

True collaboration requires people to share ideas, challenge assumptions, admit what they don't know, and have the courage to explore novel or untested approaches — all of which requires time, space and willingness to learn. The intermittent interaction that real collaboration brings creates two requirements — a requirement for individual exploration of new or novel ideas and a requirement to share that learning with others. This collective intelligence is more effective over time when compared to relying on a few leading individuals to come up with the strongest ideas.

Ask yourself: Have we created an environment where people are encouraged to learn, experiment, and then share knowledge (not just information)?

3. Speak Up Culture

Collaboration isn't effective if the same voices dominate every conversation or if people feel unsafe to challenge the status quo. Diverse perspectives — across roles, functions, experiences, and identities — lead to better thinking and more robust decisions and psychological safety is the foundation. Without it, people hold back, become protective and default to safe patterns. With it, people contribute more fully, take intelligent risks, and co-create.

Ask yourself: Whose voices are missing from the table and why — what could we learn from them?

Respondent quote

“listening and truly understanding where the other person is coming from makes it easy for them to collaborate”

4. Productive Conflict

Collaboration isn't always smooth — nor should it be. Some of the best outcomes come from friction: differing views, challenging questions, and opposing insights. What matters is how teams work with that tension, not avoid it. Healthy conflict, managed well, leads to better clarity and smarter results.

Ask yourself: Do we see challenge as a threat — or as a resource for better thinking?

5. Visible Accountability

Great collaboration drives action. That means making decisions, owning tasks, and moving forward with energy. It's not about collaboration for collaboration's sake — it's about getting the right things done together with the right people. Strong collaboration balances listening, acting, discussion and delivery so whether people are working together or alone, installing a habit of accountability is essential.

Ask yourself: Are we moving forward together — or circling in endless conversation?



These five facets aren't a checklist — they're a framework. Most teams are strong in some and developing in others. But when all five are present, something powerful happens: people begin to work together in ways that feel natural, purposeful, and effective.

Building Effective Collaboration:

What you can do now, and next

Now

Set aside 30 minutes with your leadership team to discuss which goals or projects are most likely to need intentional collaboration

Take a pulse check of your team's collaboration capacity and competency using the Five Facets. What needs immediate investment and what plans do you need to put in place to increase your team's collaboration capacity?

Ask your peers for their best examples of collaboration within the business. What are they learning that you can repeat? What's missing that you can start to build?

Next

“Optimise how you deploy your experts”

Too many experts can slow collaboration. We find a good number of collaborative teams we work with are 'expert heavy' because the seats at the table are filled for representative purposes rather than the essential nature of their contribution.

The role of experts on collaborative projects also needs to be clear. Sometimes it's appropriate for experts to hold a decision making role, sometimes it is just advisory – they are there to offer recommendations about how the business can deliver its goals.

Tough, direct conversations early in the birth of collaborative initiatives on who really needs to be there for the whole journey and why; who needs to contribute in part; and who doesn't need to be there at all are a pre-requisite of success.

Take 60 minutes to undertake a review of each of your main collaborations to see which has a healthy and sustainable level of expert input, and which needs a refresh. What are the conversations you need to have with peers to declutter your collaboration?

“Change the rhythm of collaboration”

Part of effective collaboration is to help your teams balance separation and connectedness — for example by using technology and ‘cultural signposts’ that permit or encourage intermittent interactions, even within meetings.

To start you can experiment in small ways within larger or longer meetings. For example, rather than having ‘all-in’ roundtable discussions on a complex issue, send your team away from the meeting into brief periods of individual reflection (say 10mins) to help move the conversation forward in a different way.

Consider setting aside time for ‘shark tank’ style sessions in response to complex problems before trying to ‘thrash them out’ in a large group together. Commission a small number of individuals to work alone in preparing ‘challenger’ ideas to present to peers who can then receive and testing those ideas together rather than simply debating on the fly.



The Forward View

Each of the participants in our survey had a view on the future and we have added our own experience and expertise to those contributions to provide a forward view for senior pharma leaders:

“Right tools for the right job”

COVID brought an acceleration of the use of online meeting and communication platforms. We believe that in practice, the use of tools like Zoom and Teams has become ordinary with a lot of the various functions offered by these platforms being seen as irrelevant or too clunky to deploy effectively at pace.

In the next 5 years, we think that effective collaborators will re-engage with online platforms and re-invent their place in team communications, relationships and execution. The current trend of returning staff to physical office spaces will require honest conversations about how those tools are used and when.

Of course, AI will feature in the future of drug discovery and development. We have no doubt it will continue to play a pivotal role in identifying trial candidates, optimising clinical trials management, and personalising treatment. The integration of digital technologies, including wearable devices and mobile apps, will continue transform patient monitoring, medication compliance, and facilitate more remote healthcare delivery.

Together the above issues will require leaders and teams to have foundational knowledge in a number of platforms and understand how they support the ecology of collaboration (not the other way around). In other words, the tools should follow – not lead – new ways of working. As a leader, think first about the kind of collaboration you want, and then decide how AI, digital and social platforms can play their part.



Collaboration is a very human endeavour and needs a human centric approach to help it deliver value.

Life sciences leaders were 10 percent more likely than those in other industries to say that managing an ever-growing ecosystem of partners is the ‘technology stack challenge’ that is most impacting their ability to deliver

- KPMG, 2023

“The best time to invest in collaboration competence was 5 years ago, the next best time is now”

Organisations that have failed to invest in collaboration competences will already be less impactful than those that have done the hard work. We already know that collaboration is not just a sentiment but the result of planning, skills, mindset and culture.

In the next 5 years, what we call ‘collaborative practice’ will be a discreet discipline that the most successful teams will have mastered as part of onboarding and ongoing training and development. Performance metrics for individuals will evolve to focus not only on the quality of execution, but also the success of the various collaborations they are involved in.

Leaders can prepare for this now by establishing a focus on four core collaboration competences for their team and future hires – conflict management, effective communication, emotional intelligence and agile problem solving.

“More collaboration and less homogeneity in our partnerships”

We said above that we expect to see more collaboration between pharmaceutical companies and technology firms specializing in AI, digital health and data analytics.

You might be surprised to hear that we also think more cross-industry collaboration will be essential. For example, future innovation may require life sciences companies to partner with experts in fields like engineering, communications, social and behavioural sciences to develop the innovative solutions patients need.

For organisations, the collaborative agreements of the past will feel too bulky and rigid. We think truly collaborative organisations will adopt looser partnerships that focus on learning and shared ideas of growth, rather than just looking at the bottom line.

This means that leaders will need to develop boundary-crossing confidence: the ability to communicate their story to a different industry without relying on the audience having insider knowledge. They need to be able to translate and learn from leadership stories from other industries for application in their own.



We are the leadership and team development experts in the life sciences sector, empowering ambitious leaders to build teams that thrive.

Five and Co Consulting Ltd
2nd Floor, 4 Finkin Street
Grantham
Lincolnshire
NG31 6QZ