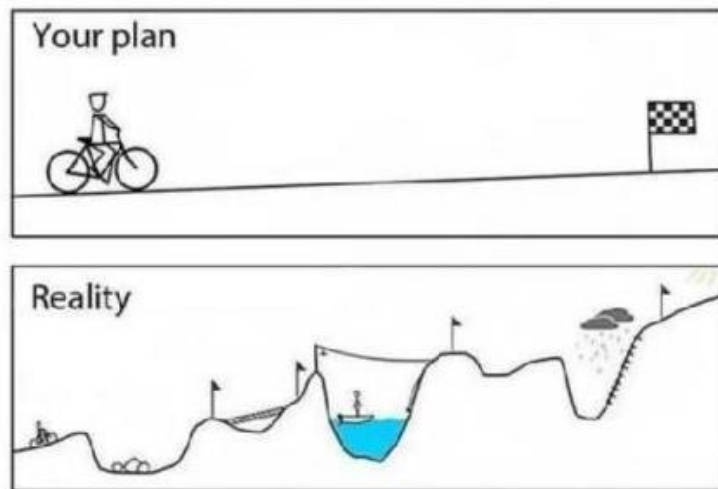


## COLLABORATION | EXPLORING THE COLLABORATION CYCLE

*Written by Liz Weaver*

### The Collaborative Context

Many enter into collaboration thinking that the shared work is a linear and flat process from start to end. One of the favourite images describing collaboration that is often included in Tamarack power points is this image of plan versus reality. It captures the reality of collaboration including the twists and turns that collaborative efforts face as they move from start to completion. It can include obstructions like boulders and choppy waters and other challenges which are found obstructing the path along the way. This image always receives a small chuckle because individuals in the room have experienced these challenges.

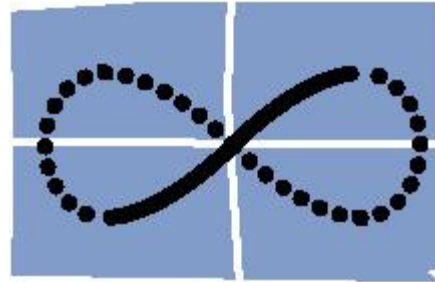


However, the reality image still conveys a relatively linear, if upward, and challenging experience. This image is relevant for collaborative efforts seeking to achieve a result that is more defined such as the exchange of ideas, or development of a new program or service.

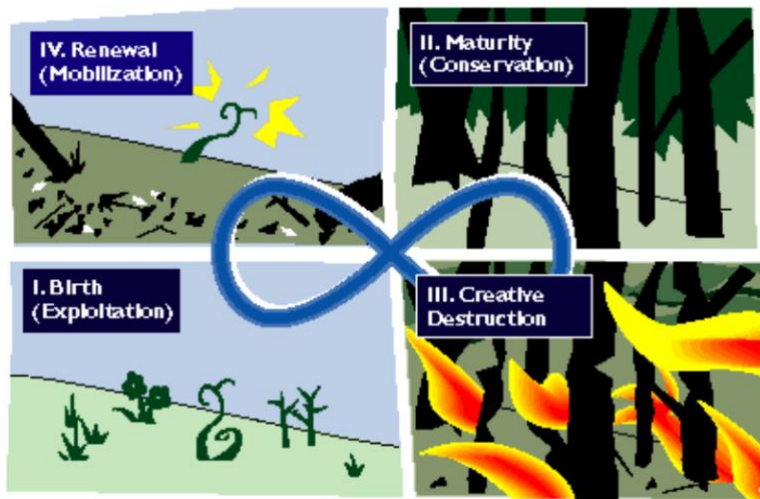
For more significant community change efforts, a different approach was introduced to Tamarack by Brenda Zimmerman of The Plexus Institute. Zimmerman described community change as a more **cyclical process** mirroring phases of development found in ecology.

The **ecocycle concept** is used in biology and depicted as an infinity loop. In this case, the S curve of the business school life cycle model is complemented by a reverse S curve. It is the reverse S curve, shown below with the dotted line, that represents the death and conception of living systems. In our depiction of the model, we call these stages **creative destruction** and **renewal**. The importance of the infinity loop is that it shows there is no beginning or end. The stages are all connected to each other. Hence renewal and destruction are part of an ongoing process.

Being an infinity cycle, there is no obvious start or end to the cycle. Let us begin our examination of the stages at the beginning of the traditional S curve. We will begin each phase by using the biological example of a forest and then look at the analogous phase in human organizations.<sup>1</sup>



The four phases of the ecocycle, as described by Zimmerman and the Plexus Institute follow the traditional (and linear) growth curve from birth to maturity. However, it also considers a renewal loop. The renewal loop includes a creative destruction phase and a renewal phase.



The image from the Plexus Institute website displays and describes the ecological cycle of a forest which starts with a variety of different plant growth (birth) which leads to increasing density as the forest grows to maturity. At maturity, the forest becomes increasingly vulnerable because of the density of growth. It can experience rot through invasive moths or pests or be ruined because of a forest fire. The creative destruction phase creates the space for renewal and regrowth. It is often the results of decay that enable the regrowth or renewal to seed.

## Using the Ecocycle to Inform Our Practice

The ecocycle has been adapted by many organizations over the last several years to describe a better way of understanding community change and collaboration cycles. **Tamarack** has used the ecocycle to inform our practice of supporting communities tackling complex issues like ending poverty, building youth futures, deepening community, and navigating climate transitions. Tamarack, influenced in our early years by Brenda Zimmerman, recognizes that communities are dynamic and responsive. Even as collaborative tables begin to intervene in community change efforts, the community begins to respond,

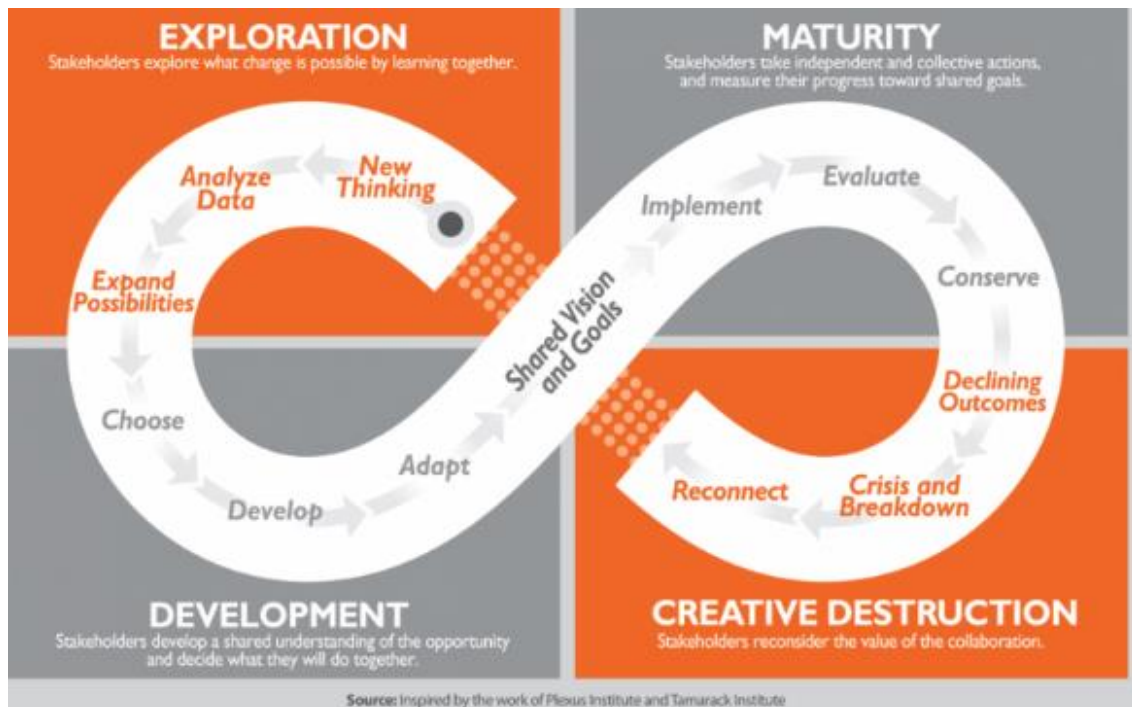
grow, and change. The ecocycle approach can be useful to collaborative tables to help understand and navigate dynamic change recognizing that change is not linear but rather exists in phases and cycles.

## From Ecocycle to Collaboration Cycle

There have been many articles written about the Ecocycle and adaptations to this approach. One useful adaptation of the ecocycle was developed by Chris Thompson, [Collaboration – A Handbook from the Fund for our Economic Future](#).<sup>ii</sup> In this handbook, Thompson adapts the ecocycle to a collaboration cycle approach. Thompson builds off the Plexus Institute ecocycle framework and Tamarack’s approach to adapting the ecocycle to community change efforts. Thompson uses the phases language of development, maturity, creative destruction, and exploration.

Thompson describes three elements which are vital to impactful collaboration: capacity, process, and leadership. The collaboration cycle is useful to focus on the process of collaboration.

This cycle serves as a roadmap for the diverse players who are along for the collaboration journey. It is invaluable to new participants joining an existing collaboration, as it can be used to help them understand where the partners are on the journey. Advocates of collaborations, particularly those performing the key collaboration functions, also should take the time to help each partner assess where they are on the cycle. Not every partner travels through the cycle at the same pace. (Thompson. Page 29) Thompson provides useful steps in each of the phases such as developing new thinking, analyzing data, and expanding possibilities in the exploration phase.



In the development phase, the steps include choosing strategies, developing approaches, and adapting as the collaboration moves forward. The maturity phase includes implementation, evaluation and in some cases conserving to build on successful results. The creative destruction phase is initiated by declining outcomes, crisis, or breakdown and reconnecting.

## Beware of the Collaboration Cycle Traps

As collaborative efforts navigate their way through the different phases of the ecocycle, they may encounter a trap or obstacle which prevents the collaboration from moving forward. The traps can be navigated but may take time for the collaborative effort to move forward.

An example of one of these traps is the scarcity or **poverty trap** which exists between exploration and development. The exploration phase is focused on new thinking and expanding possibilities. The development phase is about making choices, narrowing the ideas and possibilities down to a smaller more manageable number of options to move forward. The scarcity or poverty trap contains different challenges for the collaborative. Some collaboratives might want to spend additional time analysing data, doing research, or consulting the community to identify the ‘perfect idea’. They often spend weeks and months in this cycle of research and consulting. Scarcity can be defined as lack of commitment to an idea, a perception of lack of community support or the hesitancy of the collaborative to take a risk and move a ‘good enough’ idea forward into development.

Each of the traps across the four phases of the collaboration cycle can prevent a group from moving forward. Tamarack describes the traps and the challenges often experienced by collaborative tables. If a collaborative table seems stuck and unable to move its collective work forward, it is likely that they are entering into or in the midst of one of these collaboration cycle traps. Knowing that the traps exist makes it easier to navigate your way through them.

Traps	Description	Challenges
<b>SCARCITY</b> Moving from Exploration to Development	Too few resources are available to support vibrant exploration of new ideas so few or none take root. No new ideas lead to outcomes or garner the support.	The ideas are not compelling. Underdeveloped decision-making process & criteria. Members disagree on which options to pursue. Members have insufficient credibility. Energy spread too thin across many directions.

<p><b>CHARISMA/ PARASITIC</b></p> <p>Moving from Development to Maturity</p>	<p>People seem unable to sustain or grow their work without the original founder, host or primary funder. They are “parasitic” on the host(s) that gave it birth.</p>	<p>Over reliance on key – often founding – members of the group. Dependence on start-up pool of resources. Approach works well only at a certain scale or in unique context.</p>
<p><b>RIGIDITY</b></p> <p>Moving from Maturity to Creative Destruction</p>	<p>People are unable or unwilling to change or dismantle an approach that no longer fits the evolving context in which they operate. They resist new ideas.</p>	<p>Psyche of immediate return. Fear of uncertainty. Self-Interest. Lack of clear exit rules. Concern about perception of failure. Pressure to continue by entrenched constituency (e.g. ‘too big to fail’).</p>
<p><b>CHRONIC DISASTER</b></p> <p>Moving from Creative Destruction to Exploration</p>	<p>People find themselves ‘spinning’ and unable to get traction on a compelling new vision, values and intent for moving forward.</p>	<p>Inability to let go of the past. Weak trust amongst members. Difficulty in agreeing on shared vision and values. Volatile environment.</p>

### Three Approaches to Mapping the Ecocycle

Three different tools can be used to map the ecocycle or collaboration cycle. Tamarack has developed a simple [ecocycle mapping tool for collaboratives](#).<sup>iii</sup> The tool explores the four phases of community change and identifies the traps which can be found in each of the four phases. Collaborative table members are invited, through this tool, to map their preference on the ecocycle, identify where their organization might sit on the ecocycle, and identify where the collaborative work might sit.

The core reason for mapping separate elements is to understand where potential conflicts might occur. In some cases, the collaborative table might be in the early stages of development whereas the individual and organization might exist further up or at the top of the maturity phase. This situation often creates tension and conflict because mature organizations have less patience for the time spent on development or the framing of ideas.

The Tamarack tool provides an opportunity for mapping different partners across the ecocycle. It also encourages the collaborative partners to reflect on their observations about the map they generated. Where might conflict arise? What trap might the collaborative encounter? What opportunities might exist for the collaborative? The [ecocycle mapping tool](#) is a useful framework for understanding the dynamic nature of collaborative efforts focused on community change.

A second example of ecocycle mapping was developed by FSG, a social impact consultancy, in a series about systems thinking tools. It included the ecocycle approach as a system thinking and mapping tool. The FSG authors re-envisioned the ecocycle infinity loop as a circle and used the phases to map different

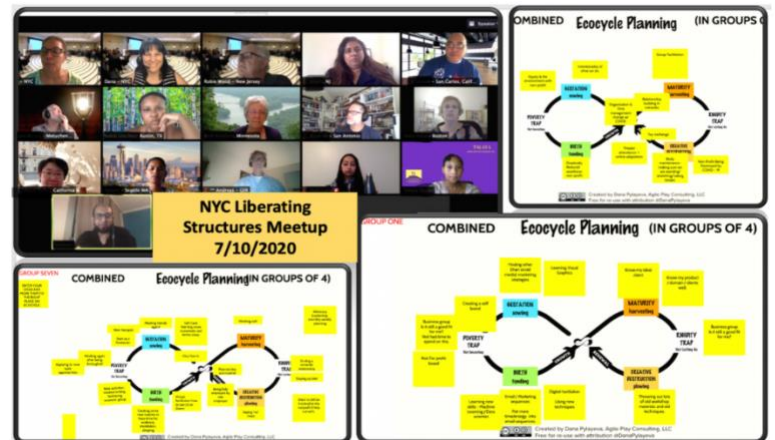
collaborative efforts around the circle.<sup>iv</sup> They also shifted the language across the ecocycle to make it more accessible:

- From development to new opportunities
- From maturity to maturity
- From creative destruction to reframe or exit
- From renewal to emerging ideas

Using the revised design, FSG collaborated with Minnesota Philanthropy Partners staff to map their existing philanthropic investments across the phases of the ecocycle to gain insight into how much time and energy was spent on organizations across the different phases of the ecocycle. The [FSG Ecocycle Mapping Tool](#) provides useful insights into the time and energy required to support organizations and collaboratives experiencing creative destruction, reframing of ideas or renewal phase which took significantly more time than the other phases.

The third useful ecocycle tool is one of thirty-three helpful systems thinking tools developed by Liberating Structures. This approach is called [Ecocycle Planning](#). It builds on the basic design of the ecocycle, and through a structured set of instructions, supports collaboratives to consider how to plan forward across the four phases of the infinity loop.

The Ecocycle makes it possible to sift, prioritize, and plan actions with everyone involved in the activities at the same time, as opposed to the conventional way of doing it behind closed doors with a small group of people. Additionally, the Ecocycle helps everyone see the forest AND the trees—they see where their activities fit in the larger context with others. Ecocycle Planning invites leaders to focus also on creative destruction and renewal in addition to typical themes regarding growth or efficiency. The Ecocycle makes it possible to spur agility, resilience, and sustained performance by including all four phases of development in the planning process.<sup>v</sup>



In this approach, collaborative partners who are invited generate activity lists for each of the phases. These activities lists are then mapped onto the infinity loop with the different phases identified. The partners are asked to reflect on the activities that have been mapped individually or in small groups. They are invited to identify which activities will have the greatest impact and should be expanded or which activities have only a limited impact and should be creatively destroyed. [The Ecocycle Planning](#) approach is very useful for collaborative groups to co-create actions and to focus on those actions or activities which will advance the collective effort.



## Collaboration is Not a Straight Line

Understanding the dynamic nature of collaboration makes it easier to navigate the twists and turns. The collaboration ecocycle illustrates four phases to collaborative work, particularly when the collaborative effort is seeking to influence or change systems. The collaboration ecocycle is dynamic and a path through change. At Tamarack, we have seen collaborative and community change efforts take three to five years to navigate their way through the ecocycle.

There are lessons that Tamarack has learned through supporting more than 1,000 collaborative efforts when applying the ecocycle. These lessons were identified by Mark Cabaj, Tamarack Associate and Principle, Here to There Consulting. The lessons recognize that achieving impact through collaboration is challenging.

- Collaborative efforts have eco-cycles: These include development and implementation (the performance loop) and regeneration and exploration (renewal loop).
- The entire collaboration cycle is critical: A successful performance loop begins with a solid renewal loop.
- Situational Leadership: Leadership and management styles, organizational culture and resources should fit the unique phase of the work.
- Resilient and sustainable collaborative: The importance of continually adapting and reinventing the collaborative to reflect the distinct phases is key.
- Natural attrition: Not all collaborative efforts are robust enough to make it through the entire collaboration cycle
- Patch dynamics: Collaborative efforts are more resilient when they are partly operating in all four phases of the collaboration cycle

### Tools for Navigating the Collaborative Ecocycle

1. Plexus Institute. [From Lifecycle to Ecocycle](#)
2. Tamarack Institute. [Ecocycle Mapping Tool](#)
3. Fund for Our Economic Future. [Collaboration Handbook](#)
4. FSG – [Guide to Ecocycle Mapping](#)
5. Liberating Structures – [Ecocycle Planning](#)

Deepening our collective understanding about collaboration is important. To solve many of the complex issues facing our communities, organizations are increasingly being asked to collaborate with both sector and cross-sector partners. The collaborative ecocycle is a useful tool for understanding the current context of the collaboration and identifying the next steps. It can also be helpful to diagnose when the collaborative effort is stuck and how to navigate out of the trap.

### The Collaborative Governance and Leadership Series

This is a paper in a series about Collaborative Leadership and Governance. The papers will be released throughout mid 2022 and early 2023. We invite your comments and feedback. If you are a member of a collaborative table, we would love to hear from you. Please email Liz Weaver – [Liz@tamarackcommunity.ca](mailto:Liz@tamarackcommunity.ca)

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<sup>i</sup> Plexus Institute. Edgware. Brenda Zimmerman.

[http://www.plexusinstitute.com/edgware/archive/think/main\\_aides9.html](http://www.plexusinstitute.com/edgware/archive/think/main_aides9.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Fund for our Economic Future. Collaboration, A Handbook for Our Economic Future. Chris Thompson.

<https://www.thefundneo.org/collaboration-handbook/#:~:text=Collaboration%3A%20A%20Handbook%20from%20the,%E2%80%9D%20to%20true%2C%20effective%20collaboration.>

<sup>iii</sup> Tamarack Institute. Ecocycle Mapping. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/the-eco-cycle-mapping-tool>

<sup>iv</sup> FSG. New Systems Thinking Tool: Ecocycle Mapping. <https://www.fsg.org/blog/new-systems-thinking-tool-ecocycle-mapping/>

<sup>v</sup> Liberating Structures. Ecocycle Planning. <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/31-ecocycle-planning/>