

BOLD AND HUMBLE IN THE AGE OF IMPACT

How collaboration—supercharged by AI—can turn purpose into performance, and performance into accountability.



Leaders must learn to lead across boundaries as the most pressing challenges of today cut across government, business and civil society.

When accountability is high and scrutiny is sharp, leaders must be both bold and humble to chart the path forward while earning trust.

Artificial Intelligence can be used by leaders to enable collaboration, but it does not replace human judgment.

A BAR, A TEST AND A WARNING

If partnership were a place, it would be a warm bar: good talk, new friends and a sense that something useful might happen before the last call. It is a pleasant image—and also incomplete.

In the Age of Impact—a time where legitimacy and trust increasingly depend on demonstrable outcomes—the bar certainly has a bouncer. The bouncer’s name is accountability. You can’t just talk with no substance anymore. You need to show what changed, for whom, at what cost and with what side effects. In the literal and broader sense, expectations are rising globally, and Asia is no exception. Corporations are asked to justify social value. Philanthropies talk about systems change. Universities are pressed to be catalysts, not cloisters. Governments, too, are expected to deliver results and processes for verifying them. “Impact” is no longer a buzzword for annual reporting; it is becoming a governing demand.

On many of the issues society cares most about, collaboration is needed across the public-private-citizen divide. So, here is the test: can we collaborate across sectors quickly enough to match the pace of problems? Can we do it well enough to create real value, not just good vibes? And can we do it honestly enough that impact metrics illuminate rather than decorate?

A warning follows, especially for people who love dashboards. Metrics can make us wiser—and they can make us worse. Measure the wrong thing and you will get more of it. Measure the right thing badly and you invite gaming. Measure only what is easy and you neglect what is vital. The Age of Impact does not merely demand measurement; it demands judgment.

That is where leadership comes in.

THE AGE OF IMPACT: WHY COLLABORATION IS NO LONGER OPTIONAL

Think of a public health goal: a clean-energy transition, a safer city, better schools, more trustworthy procurement or climate adaptation. None of these can be achieved by government alone—or, for that matter, by business or civil society alone. In each case, collaboration matters, because each kind of institution brings different strengths. Government can set rules and fund services. Business can bring investment, logistics and innovation. Civil society may provide legitimacy, local knowledge and reach. Impact happens when these capabilities align—not when institutions sit in separate silos and send polite memos.

There is a pragmatic reason collaboration is rising now: many high-impact problems are multi-causal and multi-owner. Government often lacks agility and local knowledge. Markets alone tend to underprovide public goods and underprice harms. Civil society can seldom scale on its own. The fastest gains come from combining strengths and compensating for weaknesses.

There is also a political reason: trust is scarcer. Citizens doubt institutions; institutions doubt one another; and everyone doubts the motives behind everyone else's "purpose". Collaboration, then, is not just a technical arrangement. It is a trust-building enterprise.

But let us not romanticise. Collaboration has real costs—not only monetary costs, but also opportunity costs: time, coordination burdens, conflicts, mission drift and capture risks. Partnerships are desirable only when their benefits to society outweigh their costs. The Age of Impact doesn't erase those costs; it simply makes the alternative of working alone less plausible.

BOLD AND HUMBLE: THE TEMPERAMENT IMPACT DEMANDS

In the book *Bold and Humble*, I analyse the theoretical literature on public-private-citizen collaboration and study five success stories from Asia.¹ The cases covered a range of high-impact partnerships: a cultural festival, STEM in high schools, urban beautification, rural development and a remarkable cross-cutting methodology called the Performance Governance System.

Each case achieved meaningful impact through carefully designed collaboration. And each had a leader who was both bold and humble.

"Bold and humble" sounds like a paradox because it is. The leaders we most need now combine professional will with personal humility.

They must be bold in their vision and analysis: *We can't do what's needed on our own. We have to combine forces with other agencies, businesses and civil society. That means leaving our comfort zones. It means working across the usual boundaries of government, business and citizen groups. And it means leading in a particular way—enabling all of us to work better for a common cause.* This is anything but business as usual for leaders in government—or in business or civil society, for that matter.

At the same time, those who lead collaboration must be humble in how they work with people inside and outside their organisations. Resistance is common, especially at the beginning. Partnering pushes each party beyond familiar routines, introduces uncertainty and can even trigger a kind of culture shock: *It looks like extra work—and why? That's not our job.*

Effective leaders understand and anticipate that resistance. They listen, learn and then make the case in practical terms: how collaboration helps individual teams do their work better, not just how it serves the institution's mission.

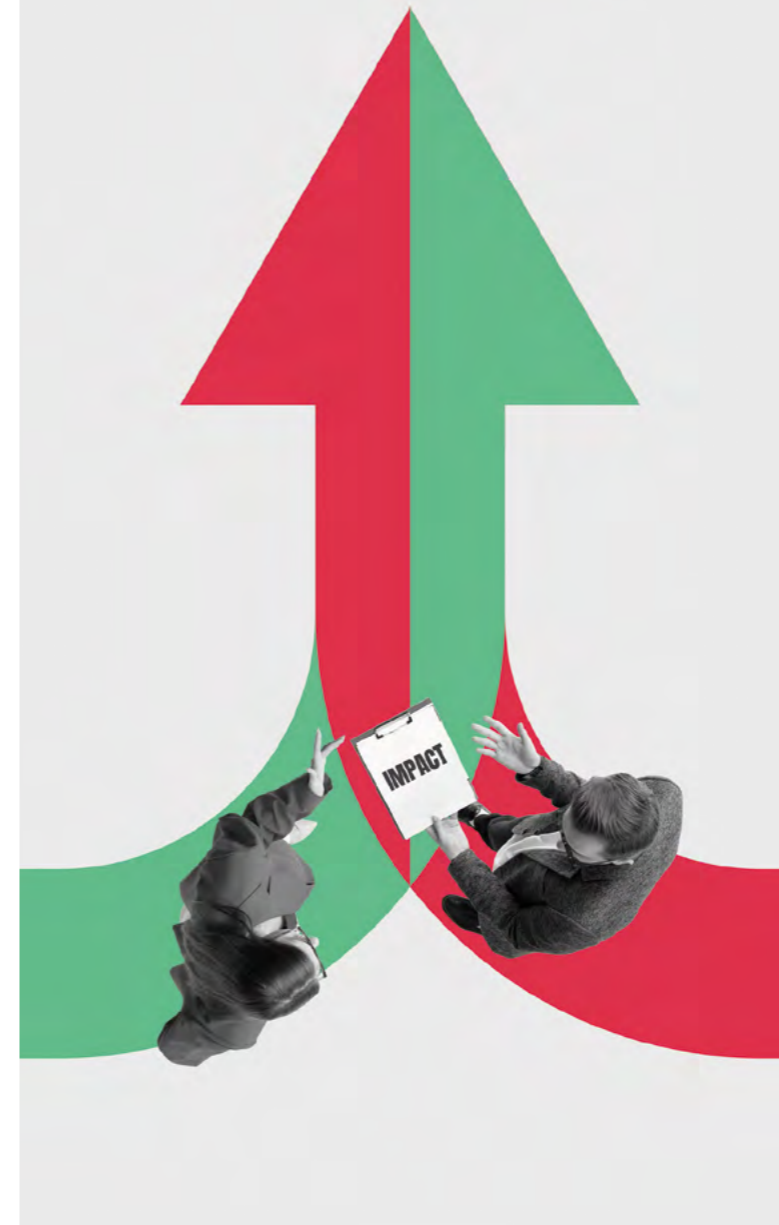
Leading collaboration is not about giving orders. It takes humility to recognise when we can't tell people what to do—not the recipients, not our colleagues and employees, and certainly not counterparts in other agencies, companies and civil society organisations. In these cases, leadership is not just about declaring a glorious purpose or showing how working together will help the country or the citizens. It is about participatory leadership, where eventually all the partners get to see how they—and others—can make a difference on a shared problem, and how collaboration can help each partner according to their institution's goals and metrics.

FIVE QUESTIONS THAT TURN PURPOSE INTO PERFORMANCE (AND PERFORMANCE INTO ACCOUNTABILITY)

The impact agenda forces a healthy question: what changed? But change rarely emerges from inspiration alone. Leaders need a sequence of questions that is practical, repeatable and portable across contexts.

Here is a five-step playbook for leading innovation across the public-private-citizen divide.

**“Impact”
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1. What is the problem or challenge?
2. What goods and services are required to meet the challenge?
3. What institutions might provide those goods and services?
4. How might those institutions partner effectively?
5. How can leaders mobilise supply, demand and resources?

This may look obvious. Good. Obvious frameworks are often the most usable—especially under political pressure and time constraints. The five steps do four quiet things that matter for impact.

They begin with clarity, not slogans. “Purpose” without a problem definition becomes a branding exercise.

They force attention to capabilities—who can do what, and at what cost. The goods and services required for impact can be specified, improved and monitored.

They make partnership a design choice, not a moral posture. The question is not “Are partnerships good?” but “Which partnership design fits this problem?”

And they lead naturally to accountability because each step implies hypotheses that can be tested. If we claim the problem is X, we should be able to show evidence. If we claim institution A can deliver service B, we should be able to specify and monitor its performance. If we claim a partnership will reduce costs or widen access, we should measure those claims.

Notice what the five steps do not promise. They do not promise a final solution. Many public challenges are perennial precisely because they cannot be “solved”. Impact is often the art of moving a stubborn system several degrees in the right direction—and then defending the gains.

ACCOUNTABILITY AT THREE LEVELS: CHECKS FOR HONEST IMPACT

A practical way to keep collaboration honest is to evaluate it at three levels.

First, accountability for each partner. Are the partner's own goals and constraints respected? Are they better off joining than walking away? In business language: is there a clear value proposition for each partner? In public language: is there a mandate and legitimacy?

Second, accountability for the partnership as an entity. Does the collaboration itself function—clear

roles, decision rules, conflict resolution, data-sharing protocols and a cadence of review? A partnership can fail even when each partner is competent, simply because the “space between” them is unmanaged.

Third, accountability for public purposes. This is the Age of Impact’s central demand: are we actually achieving the outcomes that justify the effort? And can we show it credibly?

If you build all three into your design, you reduce the temptation to perform “impact theatre”—busy activity plus glossy reports, with little change on the ground.

PARTNERSHIPS WITHOUT ROMANCE: BENEFITS, COSTS AND THE COORDINATION FOG

Before we celebrate collaboration, we should ask three key questions.

First: why is this partnership good for each partner? Partners join for reasons—some noble, some practical, some political. If those reasons are ignored, resentment blooms. A partnership that works for society but not for its partners will not last.

Second: what does the partnership cost? Leaders often downplay the “transaction costs” of collaboration. These include money and staff time, of course. They also include slower decisions, blurred accountability, mission dilution, reputational contagion and opportunities for cronyism. In the Age of Impact, add a new cost: data risk. Sharing data can make impact measurable; it can also make systems vulnerable.

Third: are we using words like partnership to conceal ignorance? Robert Chambers, a pioneer of participatory development, once remarked that when experts lack understanding of a problem or system, they reflexively recommend more “coordination”. The joke stings because it is true. “We need better collaboration” can be a way of saying: *we don’t know what is happening*.

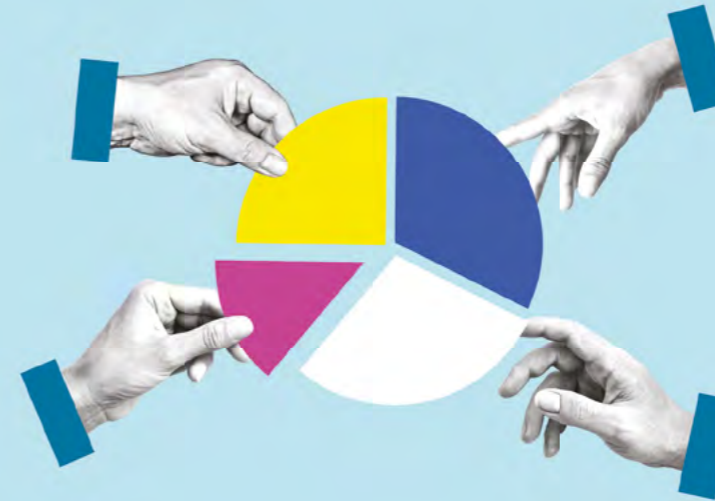
A small parable captures the danger of naive synergy. The beautiful dancer Isadora Duncan once teased the curmudgeonly Irish playwright and polemicist George

Bernard Shaw at a dinner party, “Oh, Bernard, we should have a child together! Imagine your brains and my body!” To which Shaw replied, “What if it should be the other way round?” Partnerships sometimes fail for the same reason: each side expects to import its strengths and export its weaknesses.

A useful discipline is to write an explicit partnership ledger before you sign anything. On one side: the benefits to the public and to each partner. On the other side: the costs and risks. Then decide whether the ledger balances.

The leaders we most need now combine professional will with personal humility.

THE PHILIPPINES’ PERFORMANCE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM: WHEN COLLABORATION BECOMES A HABIT



The Philippines offers a compelling example: the Performance Governance System (PGS), developed and championed by the Institute for Solidarity in Asia (ISA). ISA begins with a deceptively simple proposition: governance is a shared responsibility. If that is true, then performance must be shared too—in goals, in monitoring and in accountability.

The PGS invites local governments and national agencies to collaborate with the private sector and civil society to articulate a shared vision of success, formulate measurable strategic objectives and key performance indicators, and align resources and priorities to fulfil those objectives on an agreed timetable. It is a disciplined way to turn “purpose” into a management system.

The PGS adapts the balanced scorecard approach to public purpose. It helps public organisations clarify mission, values and vision; build strategy maps; create governance scorecards; and institutionalise review and learning. The ethos is blunt and practical: measure things that matter, not just things that are convenient to measure.

ISA launched the PGS in 2004 with eight “dream cities”. The word “dream” matters. A shared vision does political work. It gives disparate actors a common reference point and makes trade-offs less personal. Over time, the PGS spread beyond the initial cities because it was not a one-time project; it was a way of collaboration.

One of the PGS’s methods is a process of staged accreditation. ISA certifies five stages of achievement: Initiation, Compliance, Proficiency, Institutionalisation and Island of Good Governance.

The stages are not merely labels. Each requires specific performance targets, verified by ISA reviewers. To be deemed an “Island of Good Governance,” an institution must demonstrate transformation and sustainability, with breakthrough results for citizens validated through external audits. Proof is required that governance reforms led to those breakthroughs—not just that outcomes happened to improve.

This matters for the Age of Impact because it connects performance to credible accountability. It also makes a subtle point: impact systems take time. Moving through the stages may take four to six years. In a world addicted to quarterly results, that is a courageous claim.

For corporate leaders, the lesson is not “copy the PGS.” It is this: impact claims gain force when they are tied to routines—shared targets, regular review and credible verification—rather than glossy narratives.

Levels of Collaboration

The PGS also shows that collaboration is not one thing; it is a set of mechanisms.

First, within government, the Office of Strategy Management (OSM) functions as the internal vanguard of collaboration—developing accountability mechanisms across departments while offering technical guidance so that activities align to the vision.

Second, cross-departmental task forces translate strategy into action. Vision-Aligned Circles (VACs) carry out high-priority activities with roughly six-month deadlines, with members devoting about one-fifth time to these shared responsibilities. VACs meet weekly to review progress. They are extra work—but when they succeed, they generate commitment, excitement and results.

Third, across sectors, the Multi-Sectoral Governance Council (MSGC) provides a platform to engage private and civil society actors, bridging gaps between citizens and the political process. The MSGC advises and supports reforms—and also takes on concrete projects consistent with the strategy. Two principles are crucial: it is self-propelling, and it persists beyond a mayor’s term. That is institutional humility: the reform is designed to outlive its champions.

A good system like the PGS is helpful but not sufficient. Leadership also matters.

Mandaue City

Bold and Humble details the inspiring story of Mandaue City in the Philippines and how the PGS became lived practice.

After a few years in office, Mayor Jonas Cortes had made progress—raising revenues, fighting corruption—yet he felt virtually alone, taking on one initiative at a time. Seeing the PGS in action elsewhere convinced him that transformation required governance to become a shared responsibility in the community.

Once the vision was sharpened—“By 2020, Mandaue City is the primary source of high-quality manufactured consumer products”—the reform turned inward. Staff were surveyed not only on skills and working environment but on the emotional undercurrents: politics, affiliation, trust. The results made it clear that mobilising employees would require more than memos.

Here the PGS used an unexpected tool: experiential education. The OSM team trained together at an outdoor adventure camp, then immersed the city’s employees in the same programme through the #iammandaue Transformation Programme. The goal was to build a team with the trust and understanding needed to fulfil the city’s vision. The programme linked intangibles such as culture, buy-in and motivation with tangibles such as intellect, logic and performance.

Back at City Hall, the weekly meetings of VACs and Vision-Aligned Partner projects became the heartbeat of the new habit. When teams struggled, the OSM offered guidance. When teams succeeded, the success created its own momentum.

And then came external accountability. ISA awarded Mandaue “PGS Proficiency Status” and invited the city to apply for Island of Good Governance certification. To receive that three-year renewable status, Mandaue needed to achieve two breakthrough results, have progress audited by a third party and submit results to an international panel at a public review. The city was certified in 2015. It was later feted at the APEC Summit and recognised as a low-carbon model town.

The point is not to admire trophies. It is to see how a system can make collaboration measurable, and measurement credible, without turning public purpose into sterile accounting.

AI AND THE NEW COLLABORATION EQUATION: HIGHER NEED, LOWER COST

AI is often discussed in terms of productivity, disruption and risk. All true. But for the Age of Impact, its most important effect may be simpler: AI changes the transaction costs of working together. It does so in two ways—first by reshaping how we collaborate with one another, and second by challenging us to learn how to collaborate with AI itself, without outsourcing judgment.

Why does AI increase the need for collaboration? Because many AI problems are inherently cross-sector. Data governance, model oversight, labour market transitions, misinformation and cyber risk are not “owned” by any single institution. Even purely corporate AI deployments spill into privacy, fairness, legitimacy and political stability.

Why does AI lower the cost of collaboration? Because many collaboration barriers are informational and procedural. People do not share the same facts. They do not speak the same dialect. They cannot quickly draft and revise shared documents. They struggle to explore scenarios and trade-offs at speed. Used well, generative AI (GenAI) can help with all of these—if treated as a tool for sensemaking rather than a machine for certainty.

Here are five practical uses of GenAI, mapped to the five-step playbook:

1. **Shared diagnosis at speed (Step 1).** GenAI can summarise competing accounts of the problem, surface disputed assumptions and propose what evidence would settle disagreements. Used well, it helps a group argue about the right things.
2. **Decomposing goods and services (Step 2).** It can translate a big aspiration into the concrete goods and services that must exist for success: what must be delivered, to whom, at what quality, at what unit cost.
3. **Matching institutions to tasks (Step 3).** It can generate option sets for which institutions have comparative advantages, including “unusual suspects” that a single sector might overlook.
4. **Partnership design drafts (Step 4).** It can draft governance structures, roles, escalation paths, risk registers and incentives—then help teams stress-test those drafts against likely failure modes.

5. **Impact measurement support (Step 5).** It can propose indicator menus, draft dashboard mock-ups and suggest learning questions that keep measurement from becoming a ritual.

There is, however, a second collaboration equation—between leaders and AI itself. If we treat AI as an oracle, we invite errors with confidence. If we treat it as a junior analyst, we can move faster while keeping judgment where it belongs.

But each use has a shadow. GenAI can hallucinate. It can reflect biases. It can create false consensus—polished prose that sounds like agreement. It can even enable accountability laundering: blaming the model for choices leaders made.

So a rule for the Age of Impact: use AI to widen the option set, not to outsource judgment. Use it to surface assumptions, draft alternatives and test scenarios—then decide like a human being, with consequences owned by humans. In other words, keep the critical faculties switched on—and keep your sense and sensibility intact.

THREE HABITS OF BOLD AND HUMBLE IMPACT LEADERS

The high-impact playbook is being rewritten across the world, including Asia. The best drafts, I suspect, will be written by co-authors: leaders from government, business and civil society. Three habits can keep the writing honest.

1. Say the purpose plainly. Name the problem, the people affected and the change you seek.
2. Design the partnership for friction, not fantasy. Write the ledger of costs and risks. Clarify governance. Decide how you will handle conflict. Build accountability at three levels: each partner, the partnership and public purposes.
3. Use AI to accelerate learning—without surrendering judgment. Let AI help you see, draft and test. Then decide like a human being.

Yes, let partnership be a warm bar with good talk. But in the Age of Impact, let it also be a convening with data, case studies, policy frameworks and an imaginary news story of our success five years hence. Leaders must be bold enough to insist on results, humble enough to learn and share credit and disciplined enough to build collaboration that endures. And yes—the bouncer stays. [LMI](#)



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is a University Professor at Claremont Graduate University. His 16 books include *Controlling Corruption*, which helped launch the global anti-corruption movement; *Choosing Elites*, which is included in *The Harvard Guide to Influential Books*; and *Tropical Gangsters*, named one of *The New York Times’* Books of the Century. He is also the author of *Bold and Humble: How to Lead Public-Private-Citizen Collaboration, with Five Success Stories*, on which this article is based.

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