

Team Up Without Turmoil!

Winning Strategies for Collaboration

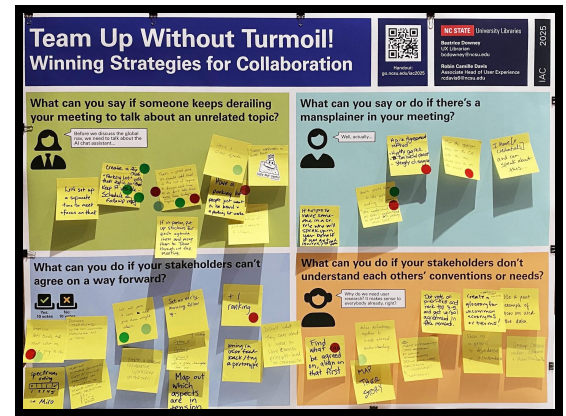
Green = additions from IAC attendees on our poster!

When there's overall disagreement or uncertainty

- Get more information or data!
 - "Let's do user testing and return to this once we know more about users' expectations."
 - "Let's look at web analytics data to help us understand how this content gets used."
 - "Let's ask the person most familiar with this scenario."
- Try visual thinking (whiteboarding)
- Use +1 ranking to narrow down multiple ideas
- Use a gradient of agreement, rather than a binary yes/no:
 - Endorse / Agree with reservations / Mixed feelings / Disagree but won't veto / Veto
- Inversion: "let's briefly talk about what we aren't going to do." (Then flip those ideas around to get the conversation started) +2
- Discuss the risks of not moving forward on a topic
- Map out future ways of moving forward on a matrix to make next steps more objective
- List out pros and cons and give them weight values +2
- Create a structured, collaborative workshop on the topic
- Not getting replies or opinions about how to move forward? Set an early-morning follow-up
- Outline using Option 1, Option 2, Option 3 (a game changer for me)
- Map out which aspects are in tension
- Bring in user feedback
- Try a prototype
- Discuss what they care about and agree on some common principles, based on commonalities

When stakeholders don't understand each other's conventions or needs

- Make your goals clear, and be upfront about your process.
- Conduct user research to highlight user needs. Share real quotes and video clips
- Encourage the stakeholders to be involved in user research
- Find what can be agreed on. Align on that first +1
- Write out definitions together to create shared understanding +2
- Map their story
- Make differences less abstract by having stakeholders define their needs. Then, discuss together!
- Dot vote on priorities and rank top 3-5 and get verbal agreement in the moment
- Create a glossary for uncommon acronyms or terms!
- Show as a process; dependencies or interdependencies
- Use a past example of how we used the data
- Group concerns under categories and show similarities



When someone consistently gets the wrong idea

- Establish the scope of the project: communicate clearly what it is and is not about.
- Use the parking lot in your notes. Place out of scope topics in the parking lot, to be addressed later or in another context.
- “Can you explain what your understanding is about this project? Maybe I can help clarify where the disconnect is.”
- “Based on the feedback from the last meeting, I thought we agreed on [insert point]. Please let me know if I’m mistaken!”

When someone derails the conversation

- Always set a meeting agenda ahead of time to help avoid derailment.
- “It sounds like we’re getting a little off-track.”
- “I see that we’re running short on time. Let’s table this part of the conversation for later.”
- “Thank you for that context! To take the user’s perspective for a moment...”
- Send follow-up emails (include notes) after meetings to reiterate discussion points and to-do items for the next meeting.
- “Let’s set up a separate time to meet to focus on that.”
- Create a flip chart ‘Parking Lot’ and write their topic on it. Keep it visible throughout the meeting! Schedule a followup meeting. +4
 - People just want to be heard, and a parking lot works +1
- “That’s a great point. We should add that to the list of topics to discuss next time so we don’t take time away from today’s topics.” +4
- Have a clear agenda +1
- Simple maps/models to guide focus
- If in person, put up stickers to each agenda item and move them to “Done” throughout the meeting
- ...balance of guard rails and ambiguity for collaboration

When there’s a mansplainer in your meeting

- Set and abide by ground rules, like *Make space, take space*:
 - Hold back if you’re usually the one talking in this scenario, to make space for others to share
 - Speak up if you’re usually quiet; be encouraged to take up space in the conversation
- “I’ve worked with this before, so I’m comfortable with it. Does anyone else have additional insights?”
- “I think I’ve got that covered, but thanks for the reminder.”
- “Interesting point. Can you explain how that applies here?”
- “Let’s let everyone finish their thoughts before jumping in—that way we don’t miss anything important.”
- “Before we move too far off-track, I want to return to the earlier point [Name] was making.”
- It helps to have someone in a senior role who will speak up on your behalf if you get ignored or talked over
- Don’t invite them to the next meeting (if possible): “You understood [what we were talking about], so we met without wasting your time.” +2
- Agile agreement method: Highly agree, can live with decision, strongly disagree. +1
- Put the spotlight back on the OG with the idea, and make sure she gets credit. +

This handout was created to accompany a poster presentation by Beatrice Downey (bcdowney@ncsu.edu) and Robin C. Davis (rcdavis6@ncsu.edu) at the 2025 Information Architecture Conference.