

HEADLAND ASKS ONE QUESTION

IS
COLLABORATION
COMPETITIVE
ADVANTAGE?

Q ONE
QUESTION

Headland

Introduction

Written by Siobhan Shea-Simonds, Managing Director, Headland

Leadership has never felt more exposed or more challenging. The breakneck pace of AI adoption, geopolitical instability, climate-driven emergencies, and deepening culture wars, the list could go on. Navigating these Grand Challenges is even more difficult for leaders as the boundaries between business, politics and society have become increasingly blurred, and decisions that once sat quietly in boardrooms, now play out in public.

At Headland we've long believed that collaboration holds some of the answer to how organisations can navigate this increasingly volatile and fast-moving landscape. Collaboration builds resilience, accelerates innovation, and derisks decisions.

This value is what we call, "Collaborative Advantage" and we believe it should be a defining feature of modern leadership. But too often, leaders fail to connect collaboration to tangible outcomes, which makes the word feel like table stakes; a cliché rather than a critical tool.

In a world where questions are increasingly complex and answers are hard to find, who better to partner with than One Question? An organisation built on curiosity and the belief that to build more sustainable and profitable businesses, we must ask better questions. Together, we distilled this shared challenge into a single question: "Is collaboration a competitive advantage?" Exploring to what extent collaboration is being seen as a strategy for commercial opportunity, or whether leaders are leaving its value on the table.

Ahead of One Question's annual conversation, we convened leaders from business, politics, sport, and the non-profit world to examine how organisations can unlock collaborative advantage to create value, strengthen industries, accelerate progress, build trust and act with clarity in complexity.

This piece of critical thinking aims to provide some answers to our One Question and show how collaboration is indeed a competitive advantage as we head into 2026.

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The Short-Term Tension of Today

When balanced against immediate leadership pressures, collaboration becomes a choice between short-term results and long-term resilience. The need to deliver certainty now is immense, but the long view that collaboration demands requires a tolerance for uncertainty and acceptance from all stakeholders.

Faced with this tension, behaviour often narrows. Leadership becomes about control rather than curiosity, about maintaining the status quo instead of exploring what might be possible. Collaboration becomes a perceived risk rather than a path to commercial opportunity.

True collaboration is an investment in time, a leader's most expensive resource. It involves recognising that shared intelligence, trust, and the ability to collaborate are what keep a business resilient when economic, geopolitical, or cultural landscapes change.

The irony is that the answers leaders are looking for often already exist within the relationships they have built; the challenge is to create the space and find the courage to look up long enough to see them.

The Narrowing Horizon of Fear

Fear has changed the tone of leadership, particularly when it comes to building trust with teams, customers, and audiences. The fear of innovation replacing jobs, rising economic and political uncertainty, and ongoing cultural shifts all breed a broader sense of insecurity, one that seeps into how we communicate with each other, within organisations, and with the outside world.

When every comment can be taken out of context and replayed as fact, language becomes cautious, defensive, and stripped of authenticity. What began as an attempt to avoid risk has created a deeper challenge: the loss of openness that quietly reshapes behaviour.

“Leaders are under pressure to either say nothing or to say something so vanilla that it can’t possibly offend. It’s hard to be a visible leader now.”

Siobhan Shea-Simonds, Managing Director, Headland

The effort to protect reputation is increasingly performative. Instead of creating space for trust to emerge, many leaders attempt to manage it or engineer it through control, especially internally. Yet the very qualities that markets claim to reward, originality, imagination, and resilience, are born from the relationships that fear quietly erodes.

“Vanilla messaging invariably gets people in trouble because it becomes a cypher, you can use it to mean whatever you want, and then it is deliberately misinterpreted.”

Sarada Peri, Political Speechwriter and Communications Strategist

The conversation acknowledged the opportunity collaboration brings, but also how the pace and pressure of leading today make it feel almost impossible to practise. The question is whether that is reality or perception.

The Harder Edge of Collaboration

An important tension raised in the discussion was whether collaboration needs harder edges to be seen not as a nice-to-have, but as a source of competitive advantage and commercial opportunity.

“Collaboration needs a harder edge. If it is to survive, it must carry real commercial value in the boardroom.”

Katie Mackay, Director of Corporate Communications and Campaigns, Sainsbury’s

Competition itself can be a form of collaboration; in many industries, it already is. regulators now encourage investment in pre-competitive areas such as sustainable farming, allowing rivals to pool resources where the system needs repair while continuing to compete on brand and execution. These examples show that working together does not weaken competition; it strengthens it by reducing duplication and protecting the credibility of an entire industry.

When collaboration reduces cost, manages shared risk, or accelerates progress that no single company could achieve alone, it becomes a genuine source of advantage.

Nike’s work in women’s sport offered another example, when one brand sets a new commercial and cultural benchmark, the industry rises up, improving their own performance.

“When we win, the whole industry rises. And that’s the point: our partners need each other to win, because when we do, the whole industry lifts.”

Stephanie Ankrah, VP, Brand Marketing, Women, EMEA, Nike

This reframes collaboration as energy rather than harmony, a kind of friction that drives progress for everyone. It may not always produce consensus, but it creates movement and raises ambition. When viewed as a commercial strategy rather than an act of altruism, collaboration becomes a genuine competitive advantage.

“Collaboration doesn’t mean everyone holding hands. It has got misty-eyed and very romantic, it is about creating a tension that moves things forward.”

James Scroggs, Chairman, One Question

Trust as Design, not Hope

“Maybe the route is simple. Collaboration has to start with the principle of trust. In business, we’ve created zero-sum habits, so distrust is the starting point.”

James Scroggs, Chairman, One Question

Collaboration is not a structural issue; it is a behavioural one. The environment a leader creates, along with their decision-making, credit-sharing, and response to uncertainty, determines whether collaboration thrives.

When leaders model clarity, courage, and consistency, people feel able to contribute, to disagree, and to think beyond their own roles. Trust builds quietly through example. Conversely, when leaders pit teams against one another and competition replaces cooperation, trust collapses, and short-term wins are celebrated at the expense of collective intelligence and long-term gain.

Several guests pointed to the shift this creates in tone and outcomes, citing organisations that moved from a culture of “doing good is good business” to one where conflict was used to drive performance, and how quickly the system unravelled. Others spoke about the absence of incentives: people are rarely rewarded for sharing, only for delivering.

True collaboration requires leaders to create conditions of openness combined with commercial clarity, where people understand both the goal and the value of working together to achieve it. It depends less on charisma and more on consistency: the quiet discipline of aligning words, actions, and metrics of success.

“Senior leadership sets the tone. When leaders stop being collaborative, the system falls apart.”

Ali Jones, Senior Leader, Retail.

Owning the Power Imbalance

Beneath the language of collaboration sits the question of power. This was discussed through examples of corporate–charity partnerships and global supply chains, where large organisations often set both the pace and the terms. The multinational usually brings reach, visibility, and money; the partner brings credibility, impact, and proximity to the community. Each depends on the other, but rarely on equal footing, or at least not perceived as such.

Too often, charities are still seen through the soft lens of collaboration: fundraising to do good and “rattling the money jar” rather than working as strategic partners that help solve business and societal challenges. This perception limits the value of collaboration, turning it into an act of goodwill instead of a shared opportunity.

UNICEF was cited as an organisation that recognises this imbalance and takes responsibility for how it is managed. When one partner recognises that its influence can open access and the other contributes legitimacy and insight that money cannot buy, the relationship shifts from being transactional to genuinely valuable.

“It’s difficult to ever be true equals in that environment; a power dynamic will always exist. What matters is how it’s managed, through behaviour, transparency, and sometimes the presence of a neutral partner to create a genuine sense of balance.”

Mohini Raichura-Brown, Strategic Partnerships

Clarity, Credibility, and Communication

Clarity is as important to collaboration as trust.

Organisations that know who they are and what they stand for find it easier to work with others because they understand what strengthens them and what dilutes them. Collaborating without that self-awareness leads to compromise, turning an opportunity into an obligation.

Nike's decision to return to its core principle — we are about sport — was used as an example of how focusing on purpose protects it. By being sure of what it stands for, the company can choose partners that strengthen its identity rather than dilute it. The same is true for KFC, whose purpose is disarmingly simple: good fried chicken. When an organisation knows what defines it, collaboration becomes sharper, not softer.

But clarity alone isn't enough; too often, businesses announce partnerships before they have built the systems to sustain them, resulting in surface-level alignment without substance.

Lego's partnership with Epic Games showed what happens when that credibility is earned. Rather than avoiding gaming because of perceived risk, Lego understood its core value—play—and leaned into that perceived risk to capture a dwindling market. Partnering with the creators of Fortnite to make online play safer for children, Lego launched a brave, commercially intelligent collaboration that expanded relevance while deepening purpose.

“That’s how the partnership with Lego came about, they had a problem with kids falling out of love with play, and we had a problem with kids falling out of love with sport. Together, we could put the play back into sport. not just through big brand campaigns but through our community teams. The Lego Foundation and the Nike Social Community Impact teams are working together every day to get kids playing again.”

Stephanie Ankrah, VP, Brand Marketing, Women, EMEA, Nike

Collaboration holds its power when the story is built and then told.

The Isolation of Leadership

Towards the end of the conversation, a quieter question sat: where does collaboration begin?

For many leaders, the obstacle is not competition or time but isolation. As leaders rise and pressure increases, their circle of trust becomes smaller. Since the pandemic, leadership in many organisations has turned inward; the collective spirit that briefly emerged has given way to caution and, in some cases, retreat.

This loneliness, combined with scrutiny from consumers, media, and shareholders, has made the bravery required for collaboration feel risky. Fear and isolation are connected; leaders who operate under constant judgment rarely feel free to admit uncertainty.

“Fear and isolation are connected. If you can’t show doubt, you can’t really connect.”

Siobhan Shea-Simonds, Managing Director, Headland

Many described how the search for advice or counsel can itself become narrow; leaders often turn to people who mirror their own world back to them, so risk is managed vertically rather than collectively.

As One Question has previously explored with Headland, participation is a form of leadership today, showing up, listening, and engaging beyond one’s own agenda are not indulgences, they are acts of responsibility.

A Working Definition

From the conversation, a simple but practical definition emerged: Collaboration is the decision to share risk and capability in pursuit of an outcome that no one organisation could achieve as effectively on its own.

It becomes an advantage when it is tied to the core of the business, with power made transparent and trust designed rather than assumed. It works when success is measured in both commercial and cultural terms, recognising that one reinforces the other.

Collaboration is not an act of goodwill; it allows complexity to be navigated rather than merely managed, and it is what turns collective intelligence into a commercial opportunity.

Conclusion

Written by Sarah Parsonage, Founder, One Question

Is collaboration a competitive advantage? Undoubtedly. I would argue that it always has been. Yet over time, it has been diminished, seen as something soft, even moral, rather than strategic. Too often, collaboration has been positioned as doing good instead of good business. Perhaps Overton's window —the bellwether of culture—has led business to romanticise collaboration, to rush to communicate it before we commercialise it.

We asked this One Question in conversation with Headland from different perspectives to explore how collaboration can create competitive advantage, and through the many answers, to develop a blueprint for enacting it.

What this conversation revealed is that when, as leaders, we know what we value and why, what we want to build, and how we measure it, collaboration stops being a risk. It becomes a source of resilience, growth, and genuine commercial opportunity. As Katie said, collaboration needs to sharpen its edges: to build trust where regulation cannot, connection where politics fails, and shared intelligence where markets divide.

Because collaboration and competition were never opposites; one is the condition for the other.

I hope our conversation and this piece of critical thinking help to sharpen the edges of collaboration and find opportunity in uncertainty.

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