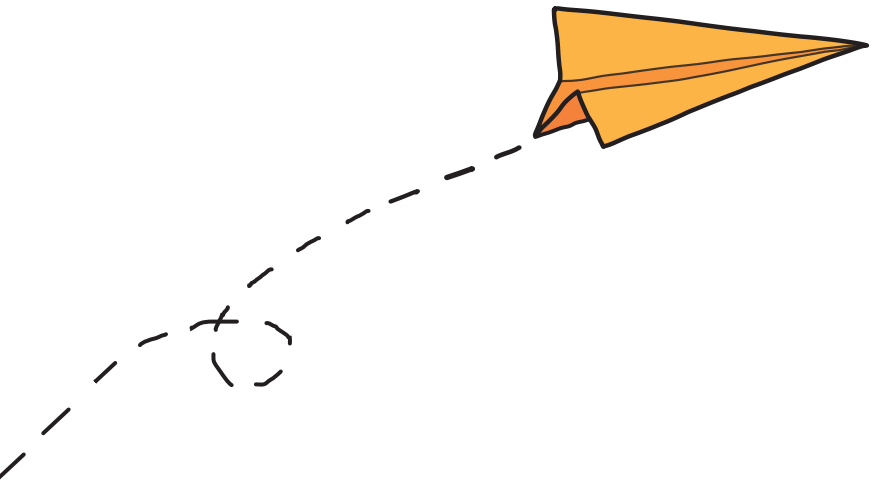
BRIDGING MINDSETS, CALIBRATING CONVERSATIONS

A THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF TEAM FORMATION AND COLLABORATION IN RESEARCH-BASED STARTUPS

ponti processes

OPEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP



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FOREWORD

COLLABORATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

At Open Entrepreneurship (OE), we have been building bridges between researchers and the business community for several years. Through our daily work across all Danish universities, we have seen how creating strong, interdisciplinary teams is crucial for bringing research-based startups to life.

This report gathers experiences, observations, and reflections from the very environments where collaboration must emerge between people with vastly different backgrounds, languages, and logics.

We hope this report will help qualify the conversations and decisions made in the earliest phases of idea development and team formation. OE is not just about commercializing knowledge – but it is also about creating sustainable relationships and spaces for development, where both researchers and commercial actors can grow.

It is essential to share the knowledge and experience we have gathered through our work in OE so we can continue to strengthen the bridge between research and business – and, above all, between people.

Helle Nielsen-Elgaard
Programme Manager & Head of Central Unit, Open Entrepreneurship

WHEN RESEARCHERS AND ENTREPRENEURS MEET

We all say that the team is the most important element in an early-stage startup – but what do we really know? When researchers and business professionals come together with the ambition to create something new, sparks often fly – and sometimes, gold is forged.

As an investor in this intersection, I have seen firsthand how collaboration across different worlds can lead to deep insight, innovation, and sustainable ventures, but also to misunderstandings, gridlock, and, in the worst cases, painful founder breakups.

This report sheds light on the processes and dynamics that unfold when teams are formed across professional domains and mindsets. It is not just a theoretical overview but also a practical guide – the kind I wish I had access to earlier in my own journey. There is tremendous value in understanding how we can facilitate, adjust, and calibrate conversations – not just to move ideas forward, but to bring people closer together.

With this publication, we gain a vital tool to help strengthen collaboration in a decisive phase of the startup journey.

Kenneth Larsen
CEO, Keystones

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ABSTRACT

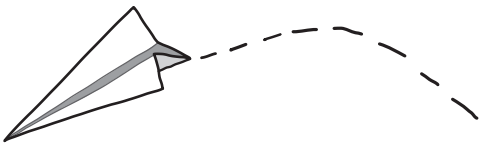
The success of research-based startups relies heavily on the dynamics of their teams. This thematic overview examines how academic and commercial mindsets intersect in such startups, revealing the critical challenges and opportunities within team formation and collaboration. This study seeks to answer: What are the key factors influencing team success in research-based startups?

Rooted in the Open Entrepreneurship initiative - a nationwide collaboration among the Danish universities - this study explores the intricate processes of team alignment, collaboration and communication during the early stages of a research-based startup's lifecycle and the the essential role of intermediaries (Business Unit Managers) in facilitating collaboration and alignment of diverse stakeholders.

The study identifies four key themes: (1) bridging academic and commercial mindsets, (2) team composition and dynamics, (3) communication and shared cognition, and (4) conflict management and trust-building. Through interviews, workshops, and action-research methodologies, the study highlights practical facilitation tools and frameworks used in real-life cases that enable researchers and commercial professionals to navigate these areas effectively.

The findings highlight the critical role of collaboration in research-based startups. Developing a shared vocabulary, addressing how to communicate, and engaging in idea-stage negotiation foster trust and clarity while facilitation and shared reflective practices serve as key tools for aligning diverse team members.

The insights underline the importance of balancing structured frameworks with relational adaptability. It is crucial to find a balance between offering plans and clarity and being flexible with regards to the needs of everyone collaborating. By integrating these insights, research-based startups can foster stronger partnerships, enhance commercialization pathways, and improve their long-term sustainability.



INTRODUCTION

The success of research-based startups often hinges on the dynamics and collaboration within their teams. Despite this, team formation remains an underexplored area, presenting a critical gap in understanding and practice. Here, we seek to address that gap by examining team dynamics in research-based startups, identifying common challenges, and exploring solutions that foster effective collaboration. Drawing on insights from the Open Entrepreneurship (OE) initiative and leveraging interdisciplinary methodologies, this project highlights how well-functioning teams can drive innovation and sustainability in knowledge-intensive ventures.

At the heart of the study lies a series of questions: What makes a team work effectively in a research - driven startup? How can researchers and entrepreneurs - often from vastly different professional and cultural worlds - bridge their divides to create trust and mutual understanding? And what tools or practices can help these teams navigate conflicts and leverage their collective potential?

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Teams are a crucial component of building a startup, often more so than elements like a functioning product, market fit, business models, pitches, or investors. Research-based startups differ from regular startups in several ways, including longer timelines, unique team compositions, and the transition of researchers into entrepreneurial roles, often requiring support from surrogate entrepreneurs or business professionals.

This overview is built on the foundation of Open Entrepreneurship, a collaborative initiative spanning all Danish universities. Through its broad and inclusive structure, OE connects researchers and business professionals, supporting the creation of the right team configurations for research-based startups. The goal is not necessarily for academics to leave the realm of academia but rather to foster a fruitful coexistence between academic and commercial worlds. Researcher-commercial teams are seen as a way to accelerate the impact and startup process and are often considered the preferred model.

“What makes a team work effectively in a research-driven startup? How can researchers and entrepreneurs - often from vastly different professional and cultural worlds - bridge their divides to create trust and mutual understanding? And what tools or practices can help these teams navigate conflicts and leverage their collective potential?

However, researchers can also develop commercial skills and independently drive their ventures forward. In the OE initiative the bridge-makers are the Business Unit Managers (BUMers) who facilitate and support the very early-stage research-based startups, who often become the first commercial contact for the researchers interested in entrepreneurship at the universities. The study focuses on team dynamics during the early and critical stages of a startup’s life-both pre- and post-registration - while exploring how teams navigate challenges like role alignment, shared cognition, and conflict management.

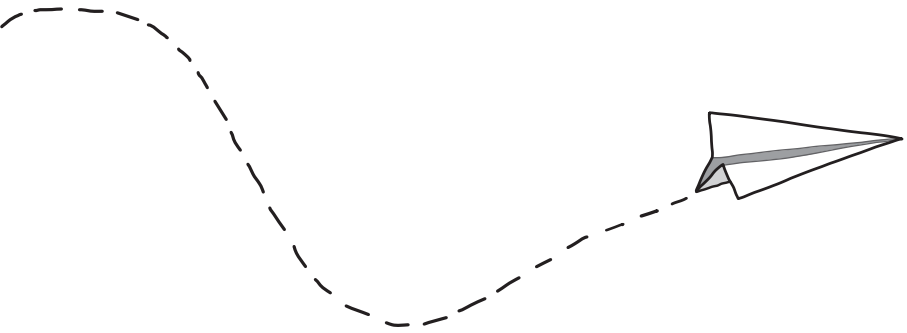
The OE project has successfully established a collaborative environment among Danish universities, as documented in the evaluation report by Norn (2023). A key outcome of the project is the creation of a cross-university network focused on sharing knowledge and best practices in research commercialization. This network has expanded beyond traditional technology transfer professionals to include a wider range of individuals involved in business development and research commercialization, gathered in the OE network. The network has been particularly valuable for universities with less experience in this area, offering them insights and support from their more experienced peers. The OE central hub plays a critical role in supporting this network by organizing quarterly meetings, facilitating workshops, and providing shared resources. The evaluation report emphasizes that this collaborative network has fostered a stronger understanding of effective research commercialization practices across Danish universities.

Timewise, the OE model highlights the early-stage process that occurs before startups reach the pre-seed, seed, and subsequent growth phases. Unlike the conventional Seed → Startup → Growth → Maturity timeline, this model emphasizes an earlier phase of development, which includes:

1. **Opportunity Recognition** – Identifying research or ideas with commercial potential;
2. **Discovery** – Validating market viability;
3. **Maturation** – Refining the concept into a market-ready solution;
4. **Readiness for Seed/Startup** – Establishing the venture and transitioning to formal startup status.

The key goals of this endeavor are centered on fostering stronger, more effective collaborations within research-driven startup teams, ultimately ensuring better survival rates for the startups. This includes capturing shared learning from researchers, entrepreneurs, and Business Unit Managers (BUMers) to uncover best practices for team collaboration. By investigating methods to strengthen teams, the project aims to enhance the teams' ability to navigate challenges while fostering a shared mindset and collective purpose. Additionally, the study seeks to document practical tools and frameworks that can improve communication, build trust, and promote cohesion among the diverse individuals who contribute to the success of these startups.

At its core, the human element - navigating diverse mindsets, motivations, and conflicts - reveals universal themes of adaptability, trust, and teamwork, relevant far beyond academia and startups. By exploring these often - overlooked dynamics, this work sheds light on how collaboration across different fields can foster innovation, providing actionable insights.



METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach was designed to understand and enhance collaboration within the dynamic and evolving environments of research-based startups. It prioritizes adaptability, inclusivity, and hands-on engagement, reflecting the complexity of interdisciplinary teamwork and entrepreneurial endeavors.

COLLABORATION AS EMERGENT AND TEAM-AGNOSTIC

Collaboration is treated as an organic process, arising naturally among individuals and not restricted by predefined team structures. In early-stage research-based startups, the collaborative landscape often includes a variety of actors - Business Unit Managers, investors, cluster partners, and university affiliates - each bringing unique perspectives and roles that evolve over time. By recognizing and adapting to these diverse collaborative configurations, our methods account for the fluid and emergent nature of team dynamics in entrepreneurial contexts. Put a little boldly "a team is where collaboration is happening".

> **A team is where collaboration is happening.**

INVOLVEMENT ACROSS UNIVERSITIES AND OPEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

All Danish universities are involved in this project through the Open Entrepreneurship framework, fostering a broad and inclusive foundation for collaboration. Insights are gathered through interviews with key stakeholders, including Business Unit Managers from all 8 universities, serial entrepreneurs, researchers, and investors, ensuring diverse perspectives are integrated into the research. The material was also discussed with entrepreneurial researchers. Additionally, we have facilitated workshops serving as interactive spaces for collaboration, reflection, and knowledge sharing among these actors, further grounding the research in real-world practices.

INTEGRATING LITERATURE AND PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

The methodology employed a targeted exploration of existing literature to identify key insights and guide attention to further readings. Rather than an exhaustive review, this approach fostered a dialogue between theoretical perspectives on team collaboration, shared cognition, trust, and conflict, and the practical realities captured through the interviews with the practitioners. This integration aimed to bridge conceptual frameworks with empirical observations, enriching the discourse.

"FOLLOW THE FLOW" METHODOLOGY

At the heart of this approach is a commitment to follow the natural flow of ideas, energy, and opportunities. This "follow the flow" methodology emphasizes flexibility, seizing organic openings and adapting to emergent suggestions and insights. Using an abductive approach, we align discoveries with the unique dynamics of each team and conversation, creating a research process that mirrors the fluid nature of entrepreneurial collaboration.

HANDS-ON, ACTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

This project emphasizes participatory and practical engagement. Interviews and workshops are structured as spaces for shared reflection and cognition, moving beyond simple data extraction. The hands-on approach encourages participants to engage in experience-based learning, fostering immediate insights and actionable outcomes during active research sessions. This interactive methodology ensures the study remains directly relevant and impactful for those involved.

INSPIRATIONAL AND REFLECTIVE OUTCOMES

The outcomes of the methodology aim to inspire and create space for reflection. By centering on practices that enhance collaboration and cohesion, the project uses quotes, real-life examples, drawings and visual materials to provide accessible and relatable insights.

> **These resources enable readers to explore and improve their own collaborative processes while recognizing effective practices and drawing inspiration for their teamwork.**

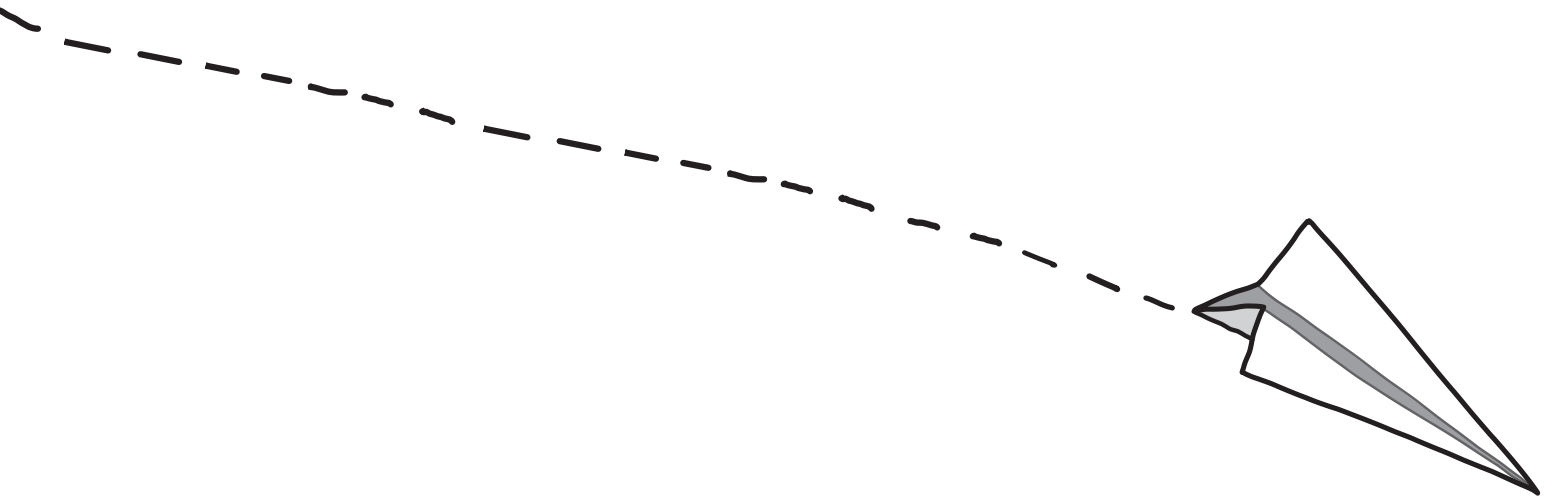
These resources enable readers to explore and improve their own collaborative processes while recognizing effective practices and drawing inspiration for their teamwork.

RESEARCH ASSISTANCE TOOLS

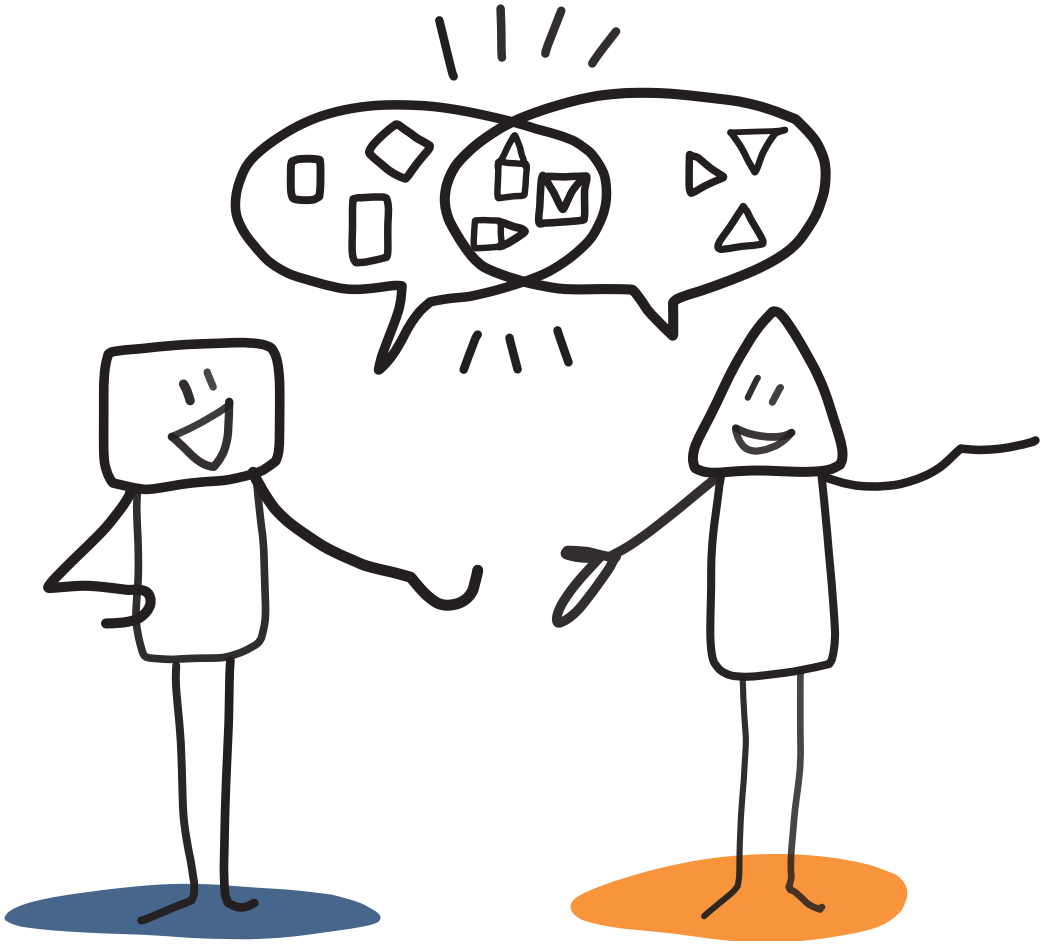
Google's NotebookLM and OpenAI's ChatGPT have supported the research process by providing assistance in transcribing, summarizing, and organizing material. Overall, it was though a human frontal cortex that ultimately worked with the gathering, the thinking and the writing.

AN EXTERNAL LENS

This study applies an outsider perspective to analyze collaborative dynamics within research-based startups. Drawing from theorical approaches to collaboration and cognition, as well as methodologies used in dialogical and restorative workplace practices, this approach helps identify overlooked patterns that may be less visible to practitioners embedded within these ecosystems.



BRIDGING ACADEMIC
AND COMMERCIAL MINDSETS



> Innovation is the intersection of people, ideas, and courage.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main challenges in university spin-offs is bridging the gap between the academic researcher's mindset and that of the commercial professional. Research underlines how these perspectives often pull in opposite directions: one emphasizes the depth, rigor, and knowledge creation, while the other emphasizes speed, relevance to markets, and profitability. These differences stem from their respective environments: academia rewards thorough investigation and incremental contributions, while business rewards rapid adjustment, results, and responsiveness to business opportunities.

Here, we focus on the mindset transformation needed at an individual level for academics entering the commercial space and how intermediaries can support this personal shift.

Research on academic startups by Colombo and Piva (2008) in *"Strengths and Weaknesses of Academic Start-Ups: A Conceptual Model"* highlights that prior work experience, educational background, and team composition significantly influence the resources available to the firm. It emphasizes that individual characteristics and team dynamics shape a startups' initial resources and success.

> **This "academic-commercial divide," requires more than compromise; it demands understanding and empathy to establish a common language that respects both scientific rigor and the urgency of commercialization.**

This "academic-commercial divide," requires more than compromise; it demands understanding and empathy to establish a common language that respects both scientific rigor and the urgency of commercialization. Individual adaptation to these conflicting values not only supports personal success but also enhances a team's ability to harmonize diverse perspectives, as we explore further in the following chapters.

In *"Innovation Competency - An Essential Organizational Asset,"* Lotte Darsø (2012) highlights the importance of fostering innovation competencies - collaborative abilities that thrive under complex and evolving conditions. This raises an important question: What are the learning spaces needed for the birth of research-based startups which must balance universities' structured environments with the flexibility needed to support research-based startups in dynamic startup ecosystems?

SKILL GAPS AND LEARNING CURVES

The learning curve for academics entering commercial settings is steep. Academic founders need to redefine success to align with business metrics, such as customer acquisition and product-market fit, instead of traditional academic markers like publication count. This shift often creates friction, as researchers tend to overestimating the importance of technical perfection and undervaluing market relevance, while commercial professionals prioritize quick solutions that meet customer needs. This challenge highlights the importance of intermediaries, who can support researchers in navigating the commercial transition.

ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

In the commercial-academic interface, intermediaries play a key role as mentors or coaches who guide academics through the mindset shifting. These intermediaries-business managers or consultants - help align academic goals with investor expectations and market timelines, providing a "safer space" where individuals can voice concerns and calibrate their goals.

Intermediaries also manage expectations, translate technical details into accessible language, and provide structured reflection sessions. Intermediaries are important in fostering open communication and building psychological safety, helping to establish a shared language that respects both scientific and business objectives.

> **Intermediaries are important in fostering open communication.**

A TWO-WAY MINDSET SHIFT: ADAPTING BUSINESS TO ACADEMIC REALITIES

It's not just academic researchers who need to adapt to the business world-business professionals also need to adapt when working with academic teams. Unlike market-driven projects, academic research often follows strict standards and longer timelines. Besides, entrepreneurship is an "on-top-of-everything-else" activity for the academic. Business team members need to appreciate that scientific breakthroughs and technical progress can't always be rushed; they require time and careful validation, which might feel slow compared to the usual fast-paced commercial environment.

Research shows that for business professionals, success in academic collaborations often hinges on respecting the foundational work that academics do, even when it doesn't lead to immediate market returns. This mutual respect helps build a shared commitment to quality and innovation, reducing friction when business goals push for quicker results.

BRIDGING ACADEMIC AND COMMERCIAL MINDSETS:
INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE: NAVIGATING UNFAMILIAR TERRAIN

Transitioning from academia to entrepreneurship requires researchers to embrace new skills and perspectives. One researcher reflects on this steep learning curve, recalling: *"You need to go from unconscious incompetent to conscious competent. I was asked to write a business plan and I did so - only to hear that it wasn't what was expected."* For many, this realization comes with the understanding that their academic expertise doesn't necessarily prepare them for essential entrepreneurial tasks like market analysis, investor pitching, and customer engagement.

> **"How do we grow a business? It's not your thing somehow.**

Beyond the practical challenges, researchers often find themselves torn between the pursuit of scientific discovery and the demands of the commercial world. One entrepreneur captures this tension: *"We developed this at the lab because we needed it and there were no similar products available in the market. We then thought, why don't we make this commercially available for other researchers? You now have the product and you sell it to different places but you are like, okay, how do we grow a business? It's not your thing somehow."* Compounding these practical challenges are deeper philosophical and ethical questions about the role of commercialization in academic research. As one interviewee observed, *"The researchers had to discuss long if it was okay to make a company instead of continuing to do research, in terms of prestige."* Another questioned whether alternative business models - beyond profit-driven ventures - might better align with the values of the research community. While the desire to share knowledge and accelerate progress motivates many to commercialize their research, the realities of running a business, such as scaling operations and finding customers, can feel foreign and overwhelming.

These experiences highlight the multifaceted challenges researchers face in navigating the intersection of academia and entrepreneurship. Academics often face a learning curve in leadership and management, as these roles require soft skills that develop over time. They also underscore the importance of open discussions about how different business models can help researchers achieve both commercial success and academic integrity.

COMMERCIAL PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE: SEEKING COMMON GROUND

Commercial professionals, including entrepreneurs and investors, recognize the value of collaborating with researchers but also encounter challenges in initiating and maintaining these partnerships. One serial entrepreneur commented: *"I have yet to meet a researcher that calls me (as an entrepreneur), and I have yet to meet a researcher that doesn't want to meet when I call them."*

This observation suggests a need for structures that encourage researchers to actively seek commercial collaborations. Some commercial professionals emphasize the importance of understanding and respecting the academic research process, which often operates on longer timelines and prioritizes scientific rigor over immediate market results.

> **I have yet to meet a researcher that calls me (as an entrepreneur), and I have yet to meet a researcher that doesn't want to meet when I call them.**

INTERMEDIARY PERSPECTIVE: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Intermediaries, such as Business Unit Managers (BUMers) play a crucial role in bridging the academic-commercial divide. BUMers often facilitate communication, manage expectations, and foster trust between parties with different priorities and communication styles. As one BUM'er noted: *"We have far too often experienced that we have taken some mentor profile and put them into a team. And then after two weeks the team says: 'Well, we didn't really understand why we should meet with that guy? What did he say, what was the point of it all?' So the whole understanding of why people should meet and why they should get together, it's an understanding that's built up over time. It's not something you can just give them and then leave them to their own devices."* This highlights the need for a more deliberate and sustained approach to building understanding and shared purpose.

> **Researchers are driven by innovation and discovery, business professionals are focused on scalability and market growth, and civil servants are guided by civility and institutional policies.**

An entrepreneurship researcher pointed out that academics and entrepreneurs value different parts of building a startup differently. They emphasized that it's important to determine how committed the academic is to running a startup, which may require leaving academia to pursue the venture full time. They suggest that differing aspirations of academics and commercial entrepreneurs explain their different evaluations of ideas versus commercialization.

Researchers, commercial actors, and intermediaries navigate the everyday challenges of operating within the universities and in the startup ecosystem. An investor highlighted the importance of understanding the differing motivations of various stakeholder' archetypes: researchers are driven by innovation and discovery, business professionals are focused on scalability and market growth, and civil servants are guided by civility and institutional policies. The fluid nature of the space between academia and business requires strong negotiation skills and flexibility to navigate effectively.

Intermediaries also advocate for researchers within academic institutions, helping them navigate bureaucracy, secure funding, and access support networks. They play a key role in creating a more supportive environment for research commercialization.

TAKEAWAYS

1. BRIDGING MINDSET DIVIDES REQUIRES MUTUAL ADAPTATION
   Academic researchers and commercial professionals operate with fundamentally different priorities - rigorous knowledge generation versus market responsiveness. Bridging this divide requires mutual adaptation, with intermediaries fostering alignment and shared understanding

2. SKILL GAPS HINDER COMMERCIALIZATION EFFORTS
   Skill gaps in market validation, communication, and business planning can delay commercialization efforts unless addressed through training and support.

3. INTERMEDIARIES ARE CRUCIAL FOR COLLABORATION
   Intermediaries play a crucial role in bridging academic and commercial perspectives, providing safer spaces for researchers to learn and grow while also advocating within institutions and securing resources.

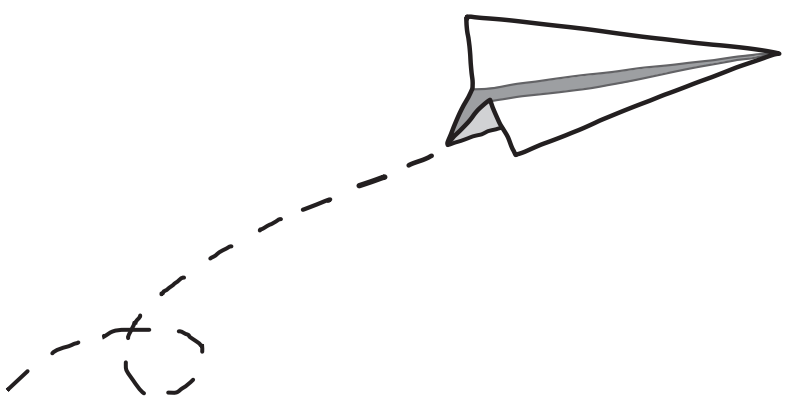
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- BALANCING RIGOR AND RELEVANCE:
  How do you manage the tension between striving for academic excellence and meeting market demands for relevance?

- REDEFINING SUCCESS METRICS:
  How might shifting success metrics - from publications to customer acquisition - affect your professional identity and goals?

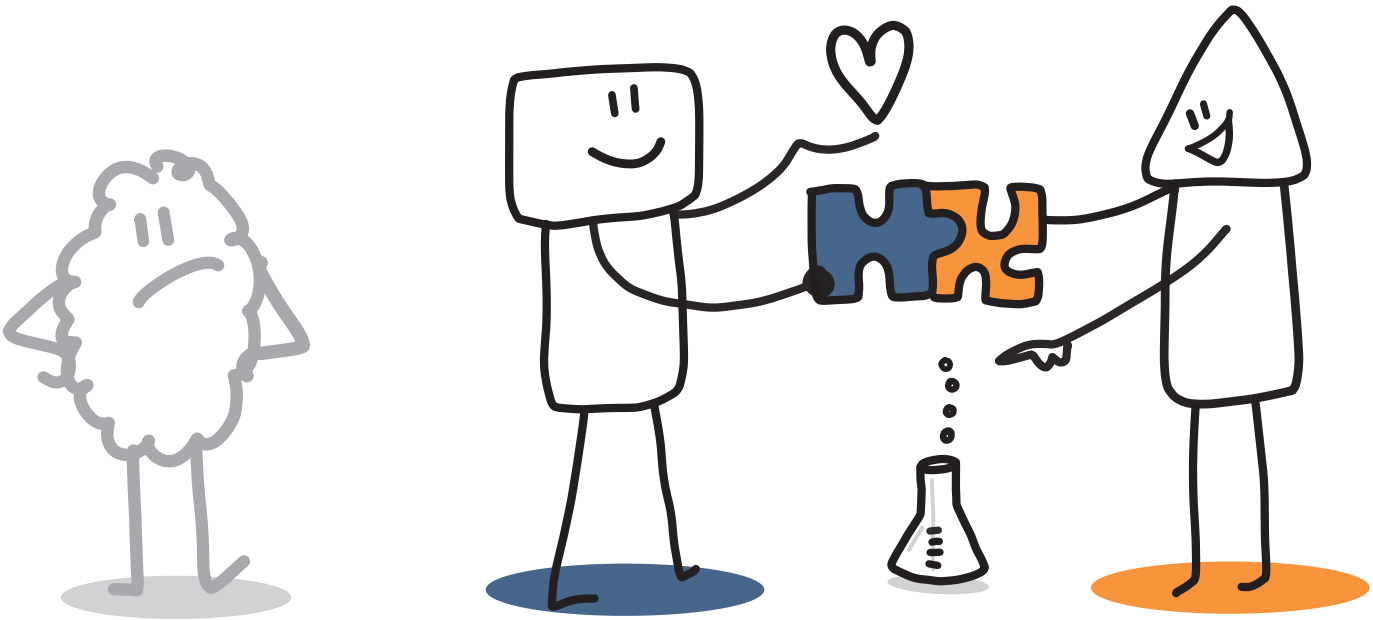
- INTERMEDIARIES AND TRUST-BUILDING:
  What steps can intermediaries take to build trust and psychological safety while balancing academic and business priorities?

- INSPIRING AND ALIGNING SHARED VISIONS:
  What shared vision motivates your collaborative projects, and how do you align this vision with your team?



TEAM COMPOSITION
AND DYNAMICS

> **A team is not a group of people who work together but a team is a group of people who trust each other.**
>
> *Simon Sinek, motivational speaker and author known for his leadership principles and the concept of "Start With Why."*



> **A group becomes a team when each member is sure enough of themselves and their contribution to praise the skill of the others.**
>
> *Norman S. Hidle, author who wrote about teamwork and effective leadership.*

For this study, we define a team as a collaborative unit - ranging from fluid groups that form during short-term projects to long-term co-founder relationships, where team composition evolves over time to create lasting partnerships. In the pre-startup phase of research-based startups, all team members besides the researcher(s) may change during the process of establishment. This dynamic nature of teams is well-illustrated in the article *"Entrepreneurial Team Development in Academic Spinouts: An Examination of Team Heterogeneity"* by Vanaelst *et al*. (2006) who examine how entrepreneurial teams in research-based spinouts evolve in research-based spinouts, showing that teams start with researchers, expand to include privileged witnesses - individuals who connect academic and business networks - and eventually form a management team and board of directors as the venture matures.

BALANCING DIVERSITY AND COHESION

Research on team composition in university spin-offs highlights the importance of balancing diversity and cohesion. Tagliazucchi, Marchi, and Balloni (2021) in *"A Nonlinear Relationship Between the Team Composition and Performance in University Spin-Offs"* shows that teams with moderate diversity, including individuals with technical and business experience, have the most likelihood of outperforming those who are wholly homogeneous or highly diverse. While diversity enhances innovation by introducing different perspectives, it can also create communication challenges and reduce cohesion if not carefully managed. Susanne Justesen in *"Innoversity: A Study of the dynamics inherent in the relationship between innovation and diversity"* (2000) addresses the role of diversity in creative destruction – how diversity challenges existing norms and assumptions, leading to disruption and the emergence of novel approaches.

This chapter addresses team-level strategies for aligning diverse professional backgrounds, with a focus on managing functional and cognitive diversity to ensure cohesion. Intermediaries here serve a broader purpose as facilitators of team cohesion, helping align commercial and academic priorities within the team's dynamic environment.

FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY VS. COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

Diversity in academic teams falls into two key categories: functional diversity, which relates to different professional backgrounds, and cognitive diversity, which refers to problem-solving styles and perspectives.

Functional diversity has a positive impact on commercialization by bridging scientific knowledge with business skills. Teams that combine technical expertise and business acumen can better translated innovations into marketable products. Cognitive diversity is more complex. While it promotes creativity and adaptability, it is important to be followed by shared understanding so it doesn't lead to misunderstandings and unnecessary role conflicts.

"Bringing in a surrogate entrepreneur early in the process allows them to lead both the identification and exploitation of market opportunities

Lopez Hernandez *et al* (2018) in *"Team collaboration capabilities as a factor in startup success"* argue that effective collaboration capabilities are a key driver of dynamic capability building. Collaboration fosters knowledge sharing, learning, and adaptability, allowing the team to respond quickly to new challenges and opportunities.

Team dynamics also affect how members handle stress and setbacks. Research shows that cohesive teams, who invest time in building trust and shared mental models, are better equipped to overcome challenges and support one another under pressure.

Nikiforou (2023), in *"Matching Inventors with Surrogate Entrepreneurs,"* highlights how surrogate entrepreneurs can address skill gaps in research-based startups, providing business expertise that researchers often lack. The study introduces a resource-exploring strategy, where surrogate entrepreneurs are brought in before identifying a market opportunity, contrasting with the traditional resource-seeking strategy, which happens after opportunity identification. Bringing in a surrogate entrepreneur early in the process allows them to lead both the identification and exploitation of market opportunities, reducing the inventor's burden.

TEAM COMPOSITION AND DYNAMICS:
INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

1. INITIAL TEAM FORMATION

Team formation in research-based startups often begins with modest setups, where individual researchers are primarily focused on scientific pursuits. At this stage, Business Unit Managers (BUMers) or support staff typically become the first point of contact, guiding researchers toward commercialization opportunities: *"When the initial team is only one researcher, the beginning of a team is with the business unit manager."* An effective early setup often pairs researchers with students. This combination leverages the researcher's deep knowledge alongside the student's adaptability, freedom, and enthusiasm. This mix balances academic rigor with fresh perspectives, making them effective during the initial innovation phases: *"It's [student and researcher team] a setup that I think has a lot of potential... freedom and drive and... no commitments... [that] students have."*

> **"Be very careful about the choice. Be really mindful of who to team up with.**

Reflecting on the first-time entrepreneurs' experiences, one interviewee emphasized that choosing the right co-founder is one of the most critical decisions: *"Q: What do you think these first-time entrepreneurs would say now to someone just starting out? A: I think they would say to be very careful about the choice. To be really mindful of who they team up with."*

The first six months after forming a new co-founding team is considered "pivotal for long-term success". Giving co-founders time to build trust and alignment - rather than rushing - can significantly improve outcomes. This approach focuses on creating space for co-founders to explore their working relationship before fully committing to shared responsibilities.

2. TEAM COMPOSITION CHALLENGES

As projects progress, forming a cohesive and effective team becomes more complex. Identifying individuals with the right mix of skills, timing, and entrepreneurial mindset is critical. Teams require contributors who take ownership of tasks and drive implementation, especially in fast-paced startup environments. A BUM'er noted: *"We need people who do what needs to be done, not only to advise on what should be done."*

An interviewee stressed that introducing researchers to potential partners requires careful consideration, as first impressions are crucial. There's often a perception that you only get one chance to make the right connection. This caution stems from a desire to protect researchers from discouraging experiences and avoid damaging trust early in the process. Early exposure to business interactions was suggested as a way to ease researchers into these environments and build confidence over time.

> **"What we really need in this context are people who are in the right place in their lives and have the drive and time.**

Timing plays an equally important role. Even highly skilled individuals may fail to contribute effectively if their current life stage or commitments prevent full engagement. One interviewee noted: *"What we really need in this context are people who are in the right place in their lives and have the drive and time."*

Compatibility extends beyond technical expertise or availability; it also requires interpersonal chemistry. Teams that exhibit trust and mutual respect are better equipped to navigate challenges and maintain cohesion over time. However, mismatched dynamics can hinder progress, even when members possess complementary skills: *"Much is important in pairing teams, but you can't go away from human chemistry – do they like each other?"*

Researchers often face a disconnect between their academic mindset and the entrepreneurial demands of commercialization. Many researchers prioritize technological refinement over market needs, struggling to embrace the concept of a minimum viable product (MVP). As one BUM'er explained: *"They [researchers] have an idea that they just have to keep refining their products. … But you have to make the minimal viable product, as we always talk about. The first basic product."*

> **"Much is important in pairing teams, but you can't go away from human chemistry – do they like each other?**

Without the right people to drive commercialization, even promising innovations risk remaining unfinished research projects. As one interviews put it: *"The technology matters, but then it really matters if you have the right team to work and bring this product and technology to the market. Otherwise, it can be just a research project that you try to develop."*

3. BUILDING AND EVOLVING THE TEAM

Team composition must remain dynamic to accommodate evolving commercialization needs. Early-stage teams tend to emphasize technical and entrepreneurial skills, while later stages search expertise in marketing, market analysis, and financial management.

Personal relationships often act as the glue that holds evolving teams together. Teams built on trust and mutual respect - often established during previous academic collaborations - are better positioned to transition into commercialization. As one commercial professional noted: *"Their relationships are so good. They will go through fire and water for each other."*

Managing team dynamics is a continuous process. Open discussions early in the team-building phase can help assess compatibility, set clear expectations, and align roles. However, resource constraints can force teams to operate reactively rather than proactively: *"We've had the opportunity to sit with them and be marriage counselors in the process for a longer period of time,"* said a pair of BUM'ers reflecting on a match between a researcher and a commercial partner.

Founding a company creates a deeper commitment than traditional employment, as co-founders share ownership and responsibility. As one interviewee put it: *"If you're hired in a company as an employee… you can just say let's not work together anymore. But in this case, there is a different level of commitment. Now you both own the company."*

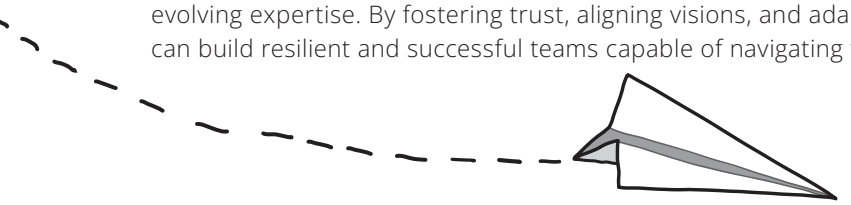
4. ALIGNING THE TEAM

Aligning the team around a shared vision or "dream" is crucial for maintaining focus and motivation. A common goal helps unify diverse perspectives and ensures long-term commitment, even in the face of obstacles. As one matchmaker observed: *"The whole process of finding the right team around the person is also actually what makes us succeed over time."*

A Business Unit Manager (BUMer) shared a striking example of the importance of diversity in leadership teams, recalling a Danish company where five out of six executives were named Søren and all lived in the same area. Recognizing this lack of diversity, they concluded that running an international company requires broader perspectives.

Assessing a team's potential requires ongoing reflection on how team members think and adapt: "You do your due diligence, you do your numbers… But for the team to be the best functioning team, it's more of a process over time to keep learning from how they are thinking and if they are thinking differently."

Effective team composition and dynamics are shaped by the interplay of timing, interpersonal chemistry, and evolving expertise. By fostering trust, aligning visions, and adapting to shifting needs, research-based startups can build resilient and successful teams capable of navigating the challenges of commercialization.



TAKEAWAYS

1. BALANCING DIVERSITY WITH COHESION
   Effective teams balance functional diversity - skills and expertise - with strong interpersonal cohesion. While diverse perspectives drive innovation, managing cognitive diversity constructively is key to preventing misunderstandings and fostering collaboration.

2. TRUST AND ADAPTABILITY AS FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS
   Interpersonal trust and adaptability are essential for team success. Teams that maintain mutual respect and open communication are better equipped to navigate conflicts, while evolving roles and expertise ensure alignment with the project's changing needs.

3. THE PIVOTAL EARLY PHASE
   The first six months of a co-founding team's journey are critical for building trust, aligning visions, and strengthening working relationships. Investing time early in the partnership creates a solid foundation for future challenges.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- BUILDING THE RIGHT TEAM:
  How can we better identify individuals with the right mix of technical skills, entrepreneurial mindset, and personal readiness for a startup journey?

- LISTENING TO THE RELATIONSHIP:
  How can individuals better attune to their own instincts and values when forming teams, ensuring they prioritize working with people they like and respect, while recognizing complementary skills that enhance collective success?

- ADAPTING TEAM COMPOSITION OVER TIME:
  What processes can we put in place to ensure team roles and expertise evolve in alignment with the changing needs of a project?

- BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION:
  How can co-founders create intentional spaces to build trust and align their visions during the early stages of collaboration, ensuring a solid partnership for future challenges?

COMMUNICATION
AND SHARED COGNITION

When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.

Ernest Hemingway, North-American novelist and journalist.

Dialogue is not about winning; it is about learning and finding solutions together.

David Bohm, theoretical physicist

FOSTERING SHARED COGNITION

In research-based startups, effective communication and shared cognition are essential to bridging the gap between academic and business team members. Without a shared language and clear communication, teams struggle to integrate different viewpoints, leading to conflicts, misalignment, and less innovation.

Studies in organizational behavior highlight the importance of shared mental models for team resilience and adaptive performance, particularly in startups. Cannon-Bowers and Salas (2001) in *"Reflections on Shared Cognition"* emphasize that shared mental models - the team's understanding of work processes, goals, and role distribution – help team members anticipate each other's actions and coordinate more effectively. These models enhance decision-making and efficiency in fast-paced environments, enabling teams to adapt quickly to change.

Mesmer-Magnus *et al.* (2020) in *"The cognitive underpinnings of effective teamwork: a continuation"* argue that compositional cognition – a shared understanding across diverse expertise - is critical in specialized and distributed teams. In today's complex, fast-changing environments, teams must align priorities, anticipate actions, and maintain performance through adaptive shared mental models.

BUILDING A SHARED LANGUAGE AND COMMON UNDERSTANDING

Creating shared mental models isn't just about processes and goals - it also involves emotional awareness and empathy. Cardon *et al.* (2012), *"Exploring the Heart: Entrepreneurial Emotion is a Hot Topic"* suggest that emotional awareness and empathy during these early stages of collaboration can further foster trust and alignment." Thomas (2021) in the PhD dissertation *"For Richer or Poorer, Better or Worse?: Exploring How Conflict and Emotions Impact Start-up Team Separation"* found that teams with differing emotional arousal levels can face challenges, impacting their effectiveness and potentially leading to conflict. Interestingly, Thomas' thesis suggests that high levels of positive affect, particularly when not genuine, can mask underlying issues and contribute to eventual co-founder exits.

Beyond emotions, shared values and priorities are key to bridging academic and business perspectives. Understanding shared cognition requires also learning about how the different cognitive processes operate in teams.

> **"High levels of positive affect, particularly when not genuine, can mask underlying issues and contribute to eventual co-founder exits.**

TYPES OF COGNITIVE PROCESSES

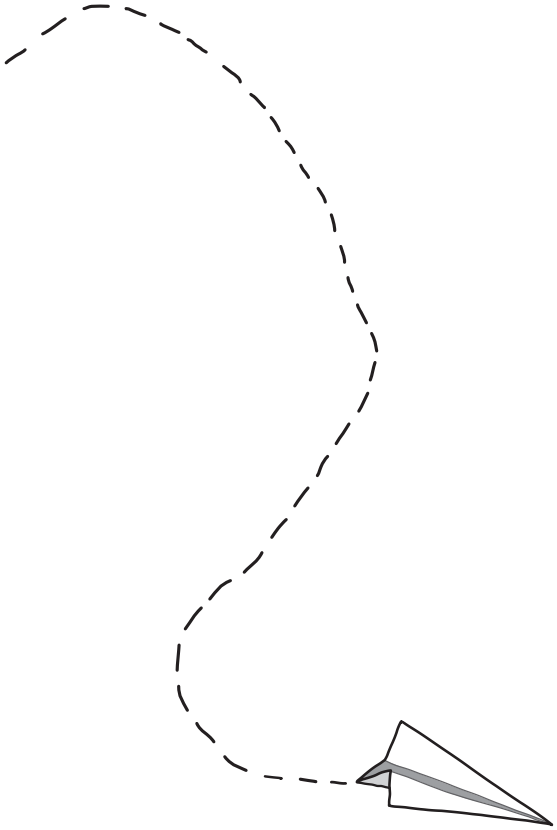
Different tasks in startups require different cognitive approaches. Jesus (2010) in "What Cognition Does for Wikis" distinguishes between Cognition for Planning (CP) and Cognition for Improvising (CI) to better understand how cognitive processes unfold in different tasks. CP refers to deliberate, goal-oriented thinking, where individuals take time to reflect and make coordinated decisions aimed at achieving higher-level goals, such as writing a paper or creating a business plan.

This type of cognition is structured and operates over longer timeframes, requiring focus and organization to complete complex tasks. In contrast, CI involves spontaneous, reactive thinking, used in situations that require quick, lower-level decisions, such as responding in a conversation or making movements in an improvisational dance. CI is flexible and immediate, allowing individuals to adapt to real-time challenges without extensive reflection. Both types of cognition are crucial in different contexts, and many activities require a combination of planning ahead and improvising on the spot to navigate dynamic environments effectively.

Similarly, Healey, Vuori, and Hodgkinson (2015) in "When teams agree while disagreeing: Reflexion and reflection in shared cognition" explore how dual-system theory applies to team cognition, distinguishing between two distinct information processing systems: the X-system and the C-system. The X-system is reflexive, automatic, and unconscious, allowing individuals to make quick, intuitive decisions without deliberate thought. In contrast, the C-system is reflective, controlled, and deliberative, requiring conscious effort and careful consideration. The study shows that teams rely on these systems in different contexts. For example, under time pressure or cognitive

load, teams are more likely to rely on X-system processes for rapid decision-making. However, when teams have more time and opportunities for frequent interaction, they are more likely to engage the C-system, promoting reflection, discussion, and deliberate alignment of goals and strategies.

By understanding and managing the interplay between cognition for improvising and cognition for planning, and the X-system and the C-system teams can reduce hidden conflicts, improve shared understanding, and enhance their overall performance, especially in fast-paced, high-stakes situations.



COMMUNICATION AND SHARED COGNITION:
INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Clear communication and shared understanding between researchers and business professionals are essential for successful collaboration in research-based startups. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of "translating" between academic and commercial mindsets by clarifying expectations, facilitating dialogue within teams, explaining different perspectives, and ensuring everyone understands their role and contributions.

One participant described how poor communication can lead to misalignment: *"For example, he likes to give minimal information to the rest of us. That doesn't work."* The challenge often stems from fundamental different priorities and "languages" used by researchers and commercial partners. These differences can result in misinterpretations and mismatched expectations, leaving teams struggling to align on goals. As one interviewee observed: *"The end of the day, when their [researchers'] career [needs to] be further developed... where does this [collaboration] weigh in? And when you're really busy, do you end up prioritizing it or not prioritizing it?"*

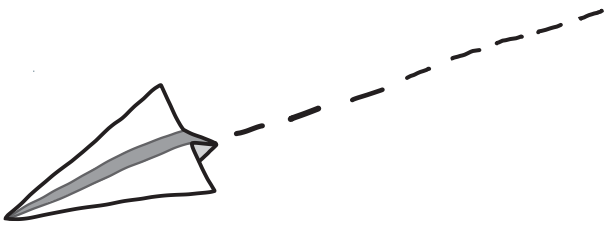
SANDBOX AND FACILITATION

Business Unit Managers (BUMers) play a crucial role in fostering communication and shared cognition by offering researchers a "sandbox" space to practice interacting with external stakeholders. One participant explained how BUMers act as safer spaces for researchers to refine their communication skills:*"The researchers use us, the Business Unit Managers, as a sandbox to train to meet investors and others from the industry."*

> **"The researchers use us, the Business Unit Managers, as a sandbox to train to meet investors and others from the industry.**

Regular feedback and structured reflection sessions help identify and address issues early, fostering a culture of shared ownership and trust. These practices enable teams to adapt to changing circumstances more effectively. One participant described acting as a *"sand grain in an oyster,"* facilitating difficult conversations that helped align expectations and address concerns.

In essence, communication is more than exchanging information - it is about building shared cognition and trust that enables diverse teams to collaborate successfully. Several participants highlighted the importance of negotiating early at the "idea level" rather than waiting until later stages. Engaging stakeholders at this stage helps build shared ownership and a unified vision for the project: *"The negotiation should happen at the idea level - also for all to own it and see the potential paths."*



TAKEAWAYS

1. SHARED COGNITION ENABLES INNOVATION AND COHESION
   Teams thrive when they develop shared mental models and align their understanding of roles, goals, and priorities. This alignment reduces conflicts and enhances coordination, creating a strong foundation for innovative problem-solving.

2. COMMUNICATION BRIDGES ACADEMIC AND COMMERCIAL PERSPECTIVES
   Structured communication practices, such as clear meeting agendas and sandbox environments, help bridge the gap between academic researchers and commercial professionals, ensuring that different perspectives are effectively integrated.

3. TRUST AND REFLECTION ARE BUILT THROUGH DIALOGUE
   Open communication and regular reflection sessions foster trust within teams, enabling them to address challenges collaboratively and adapt to evolving goals.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- BRIDGING DIFFERENT MINDSETS:
  What steps can we take to help team members from academic and commercial backgrounds better understand and respect each other's priorities and perspectives?

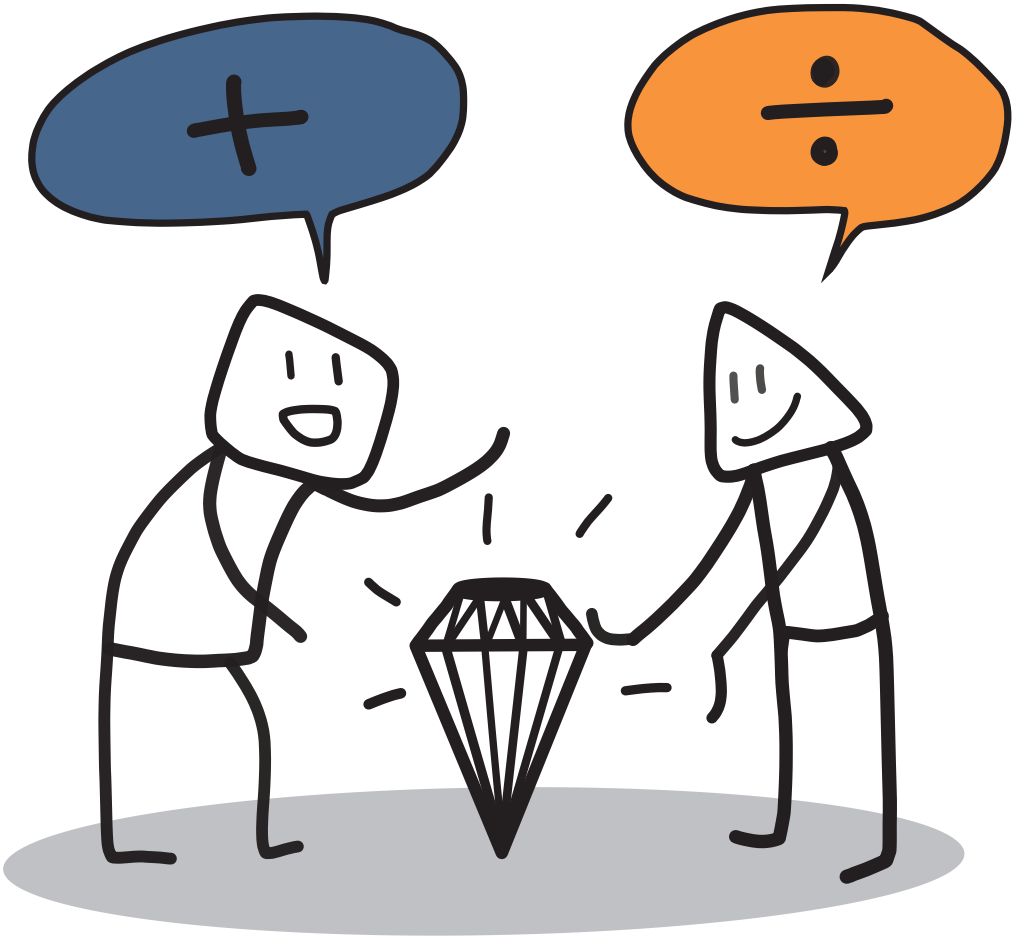
- FOSTERING SHARED OWNERSHIP:
  How can we encourage early-stage negotiations at the "idea level" to create a shared sense of ownership and alignment among team members?

- BUILDING TRUST THROUGH REFLECTION:
  What strategies can we use to integrate regular reflection sessions into our team processes to strengthen trust and ensure that evolving goals and challenges are addressed collaboratively?

- IMPROVING MEETING PRACTICES:
  How can we implement structured communication tools in meetings, such as meeting agendas, minute-taking and feedback mechanisms, to ensure clarity and alignment during team discussions?

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
AND TRUST-BUILDING

> **The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say, 'What are you going through?'.**
>
> *Simone Weil, French philosopher and social activist.*



> **It's remarkable how often the real problem is not what happened, but how it was communicated.**
>
> *James Clear, author and entrepreneur.*

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

In research-driven startups, where academic and commercial objectives often intersect, conflict is inevitable - and can even be productive if managed effectively. Research shows that not all conflicts are harmful; some types can even boost team performance and creativity if approached constructively. Jehn and Mannix (2001) in *"The Dynamic Nature of Conflict: A Longitudinal Study of Intragroup Conflict and Group Performance"* distinguish between task, relationship, and process conflicts, each impacting team dynamics differently. Task conflicts, which focus on disagreements about ideas or approaches, can fuel creativity and improve decision-making if handled constructively. However, as highlighted in *Communication and Shared Cognition*, strong shared mental models can preemptively reduce unnecessary task conflicts by aligning expectations.

Conversely, relationship conflicts, often arising from interpersonal tensions, tend to be detrimental and require early resolution to avoid team fragmentation. Process conflicts, revolving around disagreements about roles and workflows, can also negatively affect team cohesion if not addressed promptly.

> **Shared affect and reflective cognition help teams channel disagreements constructively, turning conflict into a driver of collaboration.**

Task conflict, in particular, can have positive effects on decision-making teams, as shown by O'Neill, Allen, and Hastings (2013) in *"Examining the 'Pros' and 'Cons' of Team Conflict: A Team-Level Meta-Analysis of Task, Relationship, and Process Conflict."* Similarly, Thomas, Cash, and Lomberg (2022) in their paper, *"Do You Feel What I Feel? Shared Cognition, Shared Affect and Co-Founder Exits,"* found that task-related conflict, when paired with shared emotional understanding, predicts team retention rather than dissolution. This suggests that shared affect and reflective cognition help teams channel disagreements constructively, turning conflict into a driver of collaboration.

> **Task re-allocation is often conflict-laden but necessary for adapting to evolving project needs.**

Brattström (2024) in *"Task Re-Allocation in New Venture Teams: A Team Conflict Perspective"* emphasizes that task re-allocation is often conflict-laden but necessary for adapting to evolving project needs. This suggests that teams should embrace conflict as an opportunity for growth, rather than suppress it, and use it to drive substantial adjustments in roles and responsibilities.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING TRUST

Trust is a foundational element for effective collaboration in high-stakes, interdisciplinary teams. In research-driven startups, where uncertainty and rapid changes are common, cultivating high levels of trust allows teams to navigate conflicts, adapt to challenges, and maintain resilience.

Abson, Schofield, and Kennell (2024) in *"Making Shared Leadership Work: The Importance of Trust in Project-Based Organisations"* argue that trust is essential for shared leadership to emerge in teams. Trust involves two key elements: a willingness to be vulnerable and positive expectations of others' behavior. In teams, trust manifests as beliefs in members' honesty and competence, leading to mutual influence and collaboration. Their study shows that trust-building within teams encourages individuals to take on extra responsibilities and support each other, ultimately fostering cooperation and shared leadership. As trust spreads across an organization, collaborative behavior increases, making team members more willing to share leadership roles to achieve common goals.

Webber (2008) in *"Development of Cognitive and Affective Trust in Teams: A Longitudinal Study"* distinguishes between two forms of trust: cognitive trust and affective trust. Cognitive trust is based on rational assessments of a team member's competence and reliability, developing as individuals demonstrate their skills and consistency in their roles. In contrast, affective trust is rooted in emotional bonds and grows through empathy, personal connections, and interpersonal understanding among team members. Webber's study finds that while both forms of trust are important, affective trust has a stronger positive impact on team performance over time, suggesting that emotional bonds and mutual support play a more significant role in achieving long-term team success than task-based competence alone.

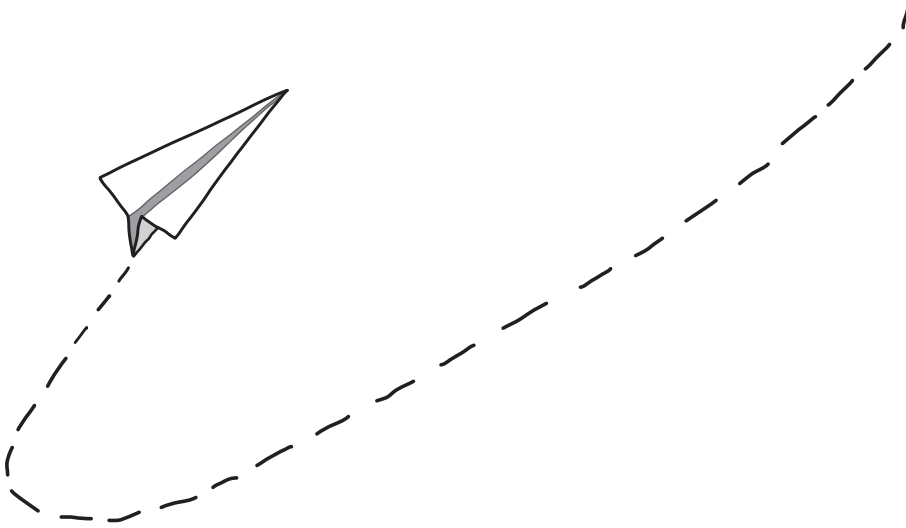
Hakanen and Soudunsaari (2012) in *"Building Trust in High-Performing Teams,"* stress that trust encourages team members to voice opinions, share ideas, and offer help to others. Without trust, individuals are less likely to express their feelings or engage in problem-solving discussions. The authors highlight the importance of sharing critical information and maintaining high levels of communication through constant interaction, which fosters collaboration and strengthens trust within the team.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINABLE TEAM DYNAMICS

When conflicts arise, restorative practices can re-establish trust and maintain cohesion within teams. Raunkjær and Ponti (2021) in *"Diverse Conflict Management in the Workplace"* advocate for open dialogue and inclusive restorative practices to turn conflicts into opportunities for growth and understanding. They emphasize that building a culture of dialogue helps teams navigate differences and foster understanding in diverse work environments. In contrast, overly ambitious goals without tangible progress can backfire, as Brattström (2024) highlights in *"Innovation Theater in Corporate Venturing Units: Cultural Design as a (De)Legitimizing Mechanism."* Teams that engage in "innovation theater" - focusing more on appearances than on substance - risk losing credibility and eroding trust within the team.

> **Open dialogue and inclusive restorative practices can turn conflicts into opportunities for growth and understanding.**

Practical tools such as debriefs, reflection sessions, and calibration meetings help prevent lingering tensions after conflicts and ensure that lessons learned are applied to future projects. Debriefs allow teams to reflect on successes and challenges, preventing issues from festering and reinforcing team unity. Calibration sessions help teams adjust roles, reduce process conflicts, and align on evolving goals as projects progress. By implementing these restorative practices, teams can foster a culture of openness, continuous learning, and adaptability - all essential for navigating the uncertainty and complexity of research-based startups.



CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND TRUST-BUILDING: INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

THE FOUNDATIONS OF TRUST

Building trust is a cornerstone of effective collaboration in research-driven startups. Trust requires transparency, vulnerability, and open communication, creating an environment where individuals feel secure sharing ideas, navigating conflicts, and addressing challenges. As one interviewee noted: *"So we're really trying to work with trust."*

Trust isn't built instantly – it develops over time as team members share experiences, align expectations, and engage in honest dialogue. For researchers, this often means relinquishing some control over their ideas while maintaining confidence that their intellectual contributions will be handled with integrity. A Business Unit Manager (BUM'er) observed that researchers become more open to collaboration once they respect the contributions of external partners.

NAVIGATING CONFLICT

Conflict is inevitable in collaborative settings, especially where academic and commercial priorities intersect. However, how conflicts are handled determines their impact on team dynamics. One interviewee explained: *"And that's why I also think it's good to have this early conflict... so that you're not wasting time on something that won't work."*

> **"It's good to have an early conflict... so that you're not wasting time on something that won't work.**

The interviews revealed that all types of conflict - whether task-based or personal - involve emotions. What often matters more than the content of the disagreement is how people communicate during the conflict. Passive-aggressive behaviors, such as stonewalling, or overly aggressive approaches can damage relationships, while constructive, emotion-aware communication can facilitate resolution. An entrepreneurial researcher points out: *"So there is not so much about the actual content of the conflict that we see is important. It's so much more about how people say things in which way they're saying things."*

When managed constructively, conflict can strengthen teams and foster growth. Open and respectful communication is key to resolving disagreements effectively and preventing long-term damage to team cohesion.

PREVENTING CONFLICT THROUGH CLARITY AND STRUCTURE

Early discussions on contentious issues, such as equity splits, which often trigger disagreements can reveal how people react and what matters most to them. Addressing these issues at the outset fosters transparency and minimizes long-term friction. As one participant remarked: *"Early prevention is key. Once conflicts become severe, it's much harder to resolve them."*

Structured processes such as trial periods for co-founder matching or grace periods, can also foster trust by allowing team members to align expectations and ensure compatibility before fully committing to partnerships.

THE ROLE OF MENTORSHIP AND MEDIATION

Mentors play a critical role in navigating conflicts and building trust. By being transparent about their intentions and avoiding personal agendas, mentors can establish credibility with researchers. One interviewee highlighted this dynamic: *"Mentors should be driven by a genuine desire to give back, not by personal financial interests."*

> **"So there is not so much about the actual content of the conflict that we see is important. It's so much more about how people say things in which way they're saying things.**

Mentors and intermediaries also serve as mediators, providing an external perspective to resolve tensions within teams. BUM'ers often act as buffers to prevent miscommunication from escalating into larger issues. One interviewee shared an example of misalignment: *"There have been huge conflicts… The external partners haven't been able to explain to the researchers what they're contributing or how they're doing it. They've just been doing their own thing."*

The interviews also highlighted the connection between founder well-being and team dynamics. An interviewee stressed the importance of investing in support structures to improve founders' well-being and mental health and business outcomes: *"we've seen there's such a strong correlation between the founder well-being and the health of your founding team socially and the success of their venture. (…) So there is actually a financial case for investing in making sure that the team dynamics are really strong, giving them the tools to have tough conversations, giving them time and space."*

THE LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE ON TRUST AND RESILIENCE

Building trust requires patience and persistence, as shifts in mindset and culture take time. One interviewee described the lengthy process of aligning academic and commercial perspectives: *"I have said it many times, but it takes 3-4 years until they start listening."*

This highlights the importance of resilience and long-term thinking in research and entrepreneurial efforts where results are not immediately visible. Unlike traditional business ventures, research-driven startups often require time, effort, and resources without an immediate sense of reward or success. As one participant poignantly observed: *"It's only after that you know if what you did was useful."*
This insight underscores the retrospective validation inherent in both research and entrepreneurship – success often becomes clear only after sustained effort and reflection.
By fostering open communication, managing expectations, and addressing conflicts early, teams can build the foundation for trust and long-term collaboration.

LEVERAGING NETWORKS TO BUILD TRUST

Participants also discussed the role of professional networks in fostering trust between researchers and external stakeholders. Presenting mature, well-prepared research cases is essential to maintaining goodwill and ensuring the continued engagement of mentors and investors.
A BUMer highlighted the risks of presenting immature cases: *"When you use your network to find mentors and investors, you need to present cases that are mature enough to become startups. Otherwise, you strain your relations."*

When you use your network to find mentors and investors, you need to present cases that are mature enough to become startups. Otherwise, you strain your relations.

This highlights the importance of preparation and thoughtful communication in building trust with external partners.

BALANCING EMOTIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DYNAMICS

Ultimately, trust-building requires balancing emotional awareness with professional alignment. As one investor described how testing emotional resilience can reveal whether a partnership will succeed: *"I want to trigger it a little bit on purpose… to test how far they can go. If they can't handle it, then we need to stop."*

This approach involves balancing support with challenge, ensuring that researchers are prepared for the commercial realities of their ventures while maintaining confidence and motivation. Addressing emotional undercurrents in a constructive manner helps teams navigate the complex journey from research to commercialization. Effective conflict management and trust-building are essential for sustaining long-term collaboration in research-driven startups. By fostering open communication, managing expectations, and addressing conflicts early, teams can build the foundation for trust, navigate challenges, and ensure lasting success.

TAKEAWAYS

1. CONFLICT CAN BE PRODUCTIVE IF MANAGED CONSTRUCTIVELY
   Task-based conflicts, when handled with emotional awareness and clear communication, can surface valuable insights and fuel creativity. Implementing early restorative processes such as open dialogue and structure reflection, prevent destructive dynamics from taking root.

2. TRUST IS THE FOUNDATION OF EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION
   Building trust requires transparency, vulnerability, and consistent communication. Structured processes, such as trial periods and regular feedback, help establish psychological safety, ensuring that long-term conflicts are avoided.

3. MENTORS AND MEDIATORS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN TEAM DYNAMICS
   External mentors and intermediaries serve as facilitators, helping to align diverse perspectives, resolve tensions, and maintain trust between academic researchers and commercial partners. Their involvement can significantly improve team cohesion and collaborative success.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- PROACTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT:
  What strategies can we implement to establish clear communication channels and address potential conflicts early, such as trial periods for partnerships or open discussions about equity splits?

- BUILDING AND MAINTAINING TRUST:
  What practical steps can we take to cultivate trust within our team, ensuring open communication and transparency during high-pressure situations?

- ROLE OF EMOTIONAL AWARENESS:
  How can we better recognize and address emotional undercurrents within our team to navigate conflicts constructively, while maintaining motivation and cohesion?

- LEVERAGING MENTORSHIP AND MEDIATION:
  What role should mentors and intermediaries play in our team's dynamics, and how can we ensure their guidance aligns with the team's goals and needs?

CALIBRATING CONVERSATIONS
FOR BRIDGING MINDSETS

CASES AND WORKSHOPS, THEIR WORKINGS AND LEARNINGS

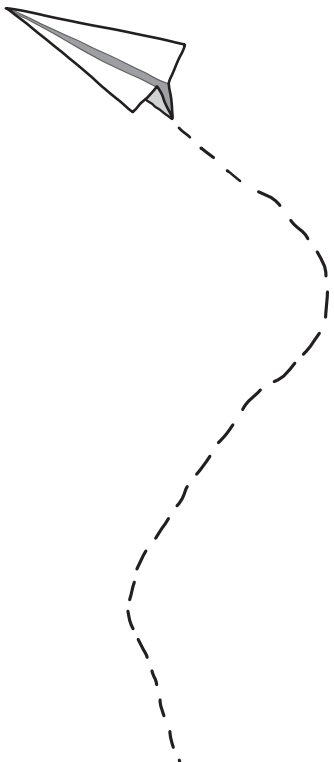
The cases in this study provide a unique window into the dynamics of live collaboration, offering real-time insights into how diverse perspectives and roles interact. These interactions illuminate the value-creating conversations between Business Unit Managers (BUMers), researchers and commercial professionals. Rooted in an action-research perspective, the cases serve as both analytical tools and also interactive opportunities for participants to engage in problem-solving, dialogue, and alignment.

The workshops proved valuable to participants, delivering immediate benefits such as strategy refinement and improved communication practices. Beyond their practical outcomes, the cases reveal emergent learnings about facilitation and teams that can inspire new approaches for team formation and professional development in the field.

Each case is presented with a description of the scenario, followed by the facilitation processes involved and key learnings derived. This structured approach highlights how the practice of calibrating conversations can constructively bring diverse perspectives and experiences into play.

The facilitation in these cases was undertaken by Di Ponti as part of the action-research for this study, in everyday situations the role of facilitator/the facilitation techniques can be undertaken/used by any of the participants.

> **Emergent learnings about facilitation and teams can inspire new approaches for team formation and professional development.**



"SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT" FACILITATION

CASE: ALIGNING APPROACHES TO COMMERCIALIZATION

WHAT AND WHO

Two Business Unit Managers (BUMers) engaged in a discussion about strategies for commercializing two university research innovations ahead of meeting with the researchers. While they shared the overaching goal of bridging the academic and business worlds, they reveal in their conversation - prompted by the transition of a case from one to another - contrasting approaches to overcoming commercialization challenges.

The discussion centered on defining the Minimum Viable Product (MVP) for both technologies – a critical step for attracting investment and advancing development. While one manager emphasized building on established relationships and taking incremental steps toward market readiness, the other advocated for accelerating timelines and showcasing concrete progress to maintain investor interest.

By leveraging the positive dynamics of difference, teams can build a stronger foundation for collaboration and enhance their ability to navigate the complexities of commercialization.

It's natural to have different strategies, but open dialogue is essential to acknowledge these differences and collaborate on finding shared paths forward. Both managers sought to guide the researchers toward aligning with business goals, such as delivering tangible results and responding quickly to investor needs. However, their strategies diverged while the researchers didn't have the possibility of evaluating them, as they are more accustomed to securing grants than navigating market demands. This required managing differences in pace, communication styles, and priorities effectively.

KEY LEARNINGS

This case underscored the importance of embracing differences and using collaborative dialogue to create alignment. Facilitating these conversations involves the following steps:

1. **Recognizing Complementary Strengths** – differences in strategy and style can complement each other when viewed as opportunities for collaboration rather than obstacles;
2. **Addressing Disagreements Constructively** – openly discussing divergent perspectives helps identify shared goals and reduce misalignment;
3. **Enhancing Alignment Through Dialogue** – structured discussions allow participants to clarify expectations, explore trade-offs, and align on a shared approach;
4. **Building a Culture of Complementarity** – encouraging teams to value differences fosters a culture of complementarity, where varied perspectives drive better outcomes.

REFLECTIONS ON COMPLEMENTARITY IN STRATEGY

The case demonstrates that differences in strategy, priorities, or interpretations of project needs should not be seen as hindrances. Instead, they represent opportunities to achieve a more nuanced and effective approach to commercialization. By leveraging the positive dynamics of difference, teams can build a stronger foundation for collaboration and enhance their ability to navigate the complexities of commercialization.

TIMELINE INNOVATION FACILITATION

CASE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIAGNOSTIC SOFTWARE IN MEDICINE

WHAT AND WHO

This case examined the development of a diagnostic decision-support software and highlighted the collaborative efforts of a professor and co-inventor, responsible for the technical aspects, and two Business Unit Manager (BUMers). One BUMer mainly focused on team building and business development, while the other also offered expertise in medical device regulations. The goal was to find the next steps. The first shared goal became to establish a viable software company by February 2026, centered around an MVP consisting of a diagnostic algorithm and a user interface.

Through the workshop and using the timeline facilitation techniques, it became clear that while the project already had a big database to validate the software's clinical efficacy, there was significant work that remained. The coming steps became rewriting the algorithm from Matlab to Python for commercial viability, developing a user-friendly UI, and addressing regulatory requirements for CE marking. User feedback was also identified as important to refining the interface and ensuring the software's usability in real-world settings.

HOW: STRUCTURING THE PATH TO INNOVATION

The workshop used facilitation methods to align the team's vision and develop a systematic roadmap balancing research rigor and commercial objectives.

1. **Setting Clear Goals** – a key milestone was established: the formation of a company by February 2026, anchoring all actions toward this goal.
2. **Backward Planning** – essential steps were mapped, including completing the MVP (algorithm and interface), gathering user feedback for iterative refinements, proactively integrating regulatory requirements, such as CE marking, into the development timeline.
3. **Development Timeline** – the timeline outlined tasks such as estimation of the time for the algorithm translation and scheduling UI development and user feedback integration.

A visual timeline was collaboratively designed, mapping the journey backward from the 2026 milestone. This tangible representation enhanced team alignment, clarified roles, and translated abstract milestones into actionable tasks.

VISION-GUIDED STRATEGIC FACILITATION

CASE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GREEN TECHNOLOGY

WHAT AND WHO

This case focused on a startup advancing a groundbreaking technology aimed at climate change mitigation. The workshop brought together two professors as technical specialists and two Business Unit Managers, acting as strategic consultants on funding and commercialization.
The team had already developed a working prototype, demonstrating the feasibility of the technology. While its potential applications are broad, the current focus was on scaling a commercially viable module. The meeting emphasized three key priorities: increasing public visibility, securing funding, and creating a strategic commercialization roadmap.

HOW: DEFINING VISION AND ACTIONABLE STEPS

The facilitation centered around defining a compelling vision and aligning efforts towards shared goals.

Structured Approach to Align Efforts: At one point the discussion began to "loop," leading to repeated misalignment, to break the cycle each participant was asked to outline two concrete steps they believed critical. These steps were written down allowing the team to articulate their vision clearly and distill the discussion into concrete actions and timeframes. This process revealed that the team's goals were less misaligned than they initially appeared. The structured exercise clarified the path forward, reduced friction and enhanced accountability, empowering the team to collaborate effectively toward shared objectives.

Key Moment and Metaphor "Cannon Fodder": A pivotal moment occurred when a researcher used the metaphor of being "cannon fodder," describing himself as waiting for the business professionals to take aim and fire. This powerful metaphor was particularly revealing, highlighting the high stakes involved and the emotional vulnerability experienced when navigating unfamiliar territory. It underscored how a lack of understanding about visibility strategies can create a sense of powerlessness.
This metaphor opened the door for deeper empathy and constructive dialogue, underscoring the need for greater clarity and shared understanding in research-business collaborations.

KEY LEARNING: NAVIGATING COMMUNICATION STYLES AND HOPE FORMATION

A significant insight from this case involved the contrasting communication styles of researchers and commercial professionals, rooted in the distinct training and priorities. Commercial professionals often rely on aspirational "big statements" or "dreams" to generate enthusiasm, attract interest, and build momentum.
This difference can create two key challenges in collaboration. First, it can be difficult for both parties to truly hear and understand each other. Researchers may view the statements as overpromising, while commercial professionals may feel that researchers' hesitation dampens potential enthusiasm. Addressing this requires understanding the underlying intentions - commercial professionals use these statements to spark interest, not necessarily as definitive claims.

> **"Researchers may view big statements as overpromising, while commercial professionals may feel that researchers' hesitation dampens potential enthusiasm.**

Secondly, researchers may misinterpret bold statements as guarantees of success, leading to misconceptions about market value or potential outcomes.
Effectively facilitating the calibration of bold statements and realistic expectations requires fostering an understanding of the underlying intentions on each side and collaborating to create a shared vision.

This case highlights the importance of structured facilitation in aligning diverse team perspectives. By creating spaces for clarity, fostering empathy, and bridging communication gaps, in otherwise goal-oriented meetings, teams can harness both research rigor and commercial agility to drive innovation forward.

BRIDGING WORLDS FACILITATION

CASE: IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND STRATEGY IN A RESEARCH-BASED TECH COMPANY

WHAT AND WHO

This case involved a tech company marketing a device with versatile applications, currently primarily utilized by other researchers. The board meeting brought together the main researcher (foreigner) focused on technical and scientific aspects, a supportive researcher (local) providing practical and logistic support and advice and a commercial professional responsible for business development and profitability.

The meeting aimed to address challenges in the company's business model, particularly pricing strategies, transitioning to a higher-value model (e.g., rental options), and gathering customer feedback to refine product applications. A key focus was on aligning the long-term scientific vision with immediate market needs while fostering mutual understanding between technical and commercial profiles.

HOW: FACILITATING SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

To prepare for the meeting, each board member was interviewed individually to capture their perspectives. This ensured the joint meeting was well-informed and tailored to address key concerns. The facilitation emphasized:

1. **Encouraging Open Expression:** Each participant was invited to articulate their needs and challenges. For example, the commercial professional expressed difficulty in interpreting the researchers' ideas, which hindered the development of a clear commercial strategy.
2. **Reframing and Bridging Gaps:** The facilitator reframed concerns to enhance mutual understanding. Discussions were guided towards specific examples, helping participants visualize practical implications and potential markets.
3. **Guiding Toward Concrete Applications**: Abstract ideas were translated into actionable steps, respecting the distinct roles and expertise of each participant.
4. **Establishing Actionable Steps:** By the end of the meeting, the team developed a clear plan with responsibilities and scheduled follow-ups.

ADAPTING LANGUAGE

A key moment arose when the commercial professional described exploring the device's capabilities as "playing with it." This term appeared to alienate the main researcher, who either misunderstood or found the metaphor of playfulness unengaging. When the question was reframed more neutrally as, "How can this device be used?" the researcher re-engaged and provided thoughtful input. This highlighted the importance of adapting language to bridge differing perspectives, ensuring effective communication and collaboration

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

Another challenge emerged during a discussion on pricing strategies. The commercial professional proposed various pricing options, which the main researcher viewed as overly expensive and unnecessary. The supportive researcher reframed these options into two categories: one for the general public and another for collaborators. This categorization made the pricing structure easier to navigate than the less formal notion of offering discounts to "friends."

When the commercial professional asked the main researcher to decide who should receive which pricing, the researcher expressed discomfort, finding this task outside their expertise. The group resolved this by assigning responsibility for pricing tiers to the commercial professional, with the option to consult the researchers

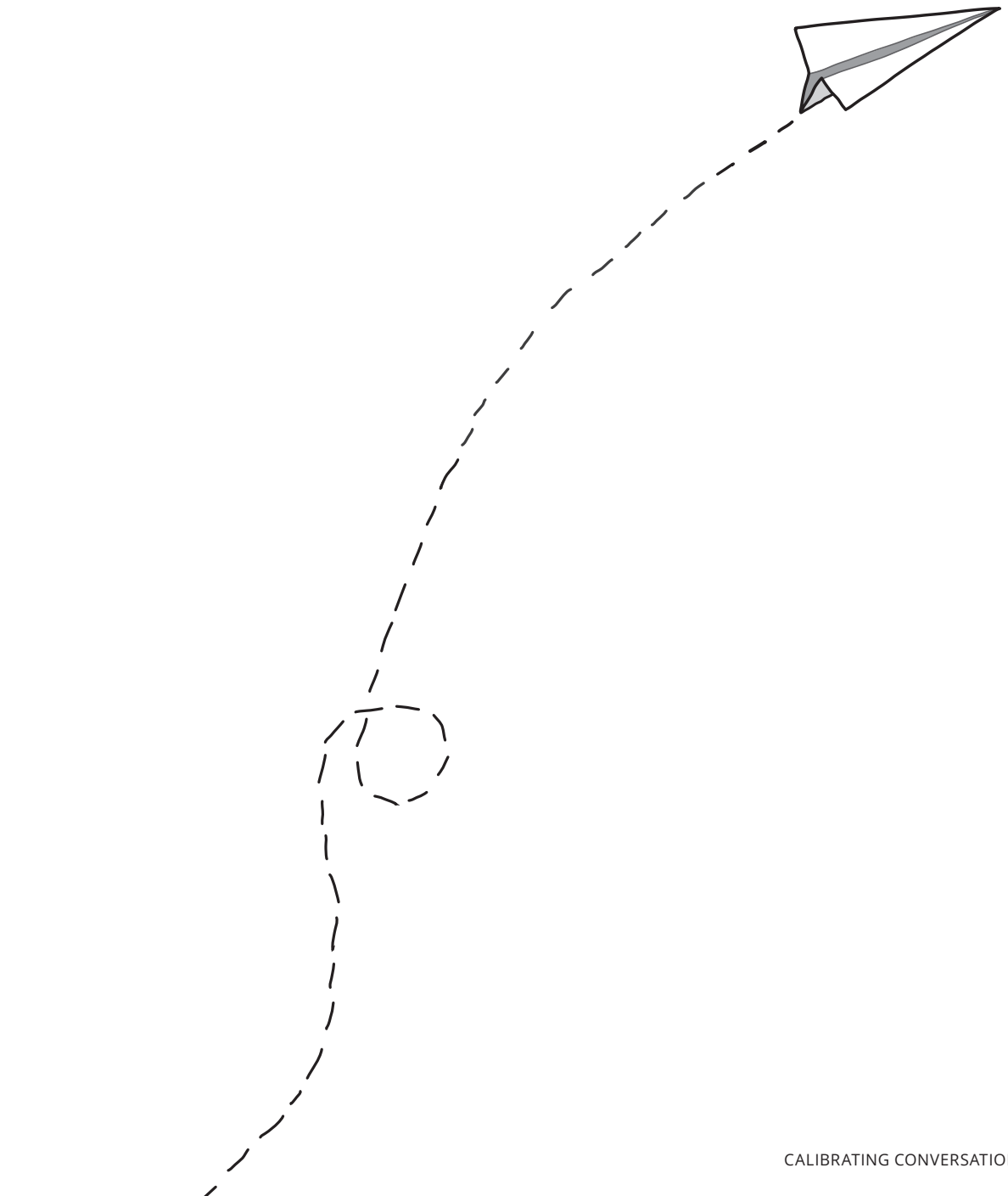
as needed. This path allowed each participant to stay within their comfort zones, while ensuring clarity and functionality in the pricing strategy.

KEY LEARNINGS

The following insights emerged as crucial to enhancing collaboration and strategic alignment:

1. Language Matters: Adapting communication styles can prevent misunderstandings and keep all team members engaged.
2. Shared Responsibility: Assigning tasks based on expertise and preferences fosters collaboration and ensures practical solutions.
3. Facilitated Alignment: Structured facilitation enables teams to translate technical innovation into tangible business opportunities, while respecting diverse roles and priorities.

This facilitated discussion improved communication, fostered alignment, and clarified strategic goals. By acknowledging differences, fostering dialogue, and calibrating roles and responsibilities, the team created a pathway for mutual understanding and strategic progress, bridging the divide between technical and commercial perspectives.



REFLECTION IS ALSO WORK

CASE: DESIGNING FUTURES TOGETHER

WHAT AND WHO

This case focused on a team of three individuals, two early-career professionals and one late-career professional – collaborating to commercialize culture-related software. With a year of funding support, the team is working to develop the software into a marketable product but has yet to establish a company. Significant challenges have emerged, including imbalance in time and commitment, blurred role boundaries, and gaps in communication and business strategy. To address these issues, a workshop was conducted with the two early-career participants, providing a space for reflection on their life paths and the future direction of the project.

HOW: THE PATH FOR GREATER CLARITY

The workshop created an open and constructive environment for participants to articulate frustrations, goals, and visions for the project. Facilitators used a structured process to help the team explore potential pathways forward:

1. Clarifying Options: Participants collaboratively identified and wrote down clear options for the project's future, such as continuing at a reduced pace, seeking additional funding, or pausing the project.
2. Defining Criteria for Decision-Making: Key criteria were identified to evaluate these options, including educational priorities, team commitment levels, belief in the project's potential, and desired level of autonomy.
3. Exploring Additional Possibilities: Using the criteria as a framework, the conversation expanded to uncover new options and enabled participants to weigh the alternatives more analytically.

NEXT STEPS

To address team imbalances and establish a clear direction, the following steps were proposed:

1. Individual Conversations: Facilitators will first meet with the third team member (late-career professional) to understand their perspective and ensure all voices are heard.
2. Two Facilitated Discussions: The first session will focus on openly evaluating options and addressing challenges, such as role boundaries and ownership shares. The second session will aim to finalize decisions and define the next steps.
3. External Guidance: The team will seek expert advice on legal and business strategies to assess the feasibility of their chosen direction.

OUTCOME

This structured approach provided the team with a clearer understanding of their challenges, a collaborative framework to align individual ambitions with the project's goals and a roadmap to address disparities in commitment and redefine roles, enabling a more balanced and sustainable path forward. By integrating reflection into the decision-making process, the team was empowered to make thoughtful choices that align with both their personal and professional trajectories.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

ENHANCING COLLABORATION IN RESEARCH-BASED STARTUPS

Building successful research-commercial partnerships in research-based startups requires a careful balance between structured frameworks and relational dynamics. Structured approaches provide the clarity and organization needed to keep projects on track, align expectations, set clear goals, and ensure progress stays measurable. On the other hand, the relational side - including trust-building, adaptability, and open communication ensures that teams can navigate uncertainty and resolve conflicts. The most effective support systems integrate both aspects fostering meaningful and lasting partnerships while maintaining flexibility to adapt to evolving needs.

> **Building successful research-commercial partnerships in research-based startups requires a careful balance between structured frameworks and relational dynamics.**

This study highlights the importance of facilitation and strategic interventions to bridge the gap between academic and commercial mindsets in research-based startups. Researchers and industry professionals often bring different priorities, communication styles, and expectations to the table. Recognizing these differences and actively addressing them is essential for successful collaboration. For instance, methods that foster shared goals, clarifying roles, and encourage open dialogue can turn misalignment into opportunities for growth and innovation.

KEY AREAS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION IN RESEARCH-BASED STARTUPS

META-COMMUNICATION: ADDRESSING HOW WE COMMUNICATE

Discussing how teams communicate – beyond the content of their discussions – is essential in research-based startups. Setting clear goals, aligning expectations and creating dedicated spaces for reflection enable teams to address both technical and interpersonal challenges. These processes build clarity, trust, and mutual understanding, lying the foundation for effective collaboration.

SHARED VOCABULARY: BRIDGING ACADEMIC AND COMMERCIAL PRIORITIES

Bridging the language gap between academia and industry requires a shared vocabulary that makes abstract concepts more relatable. For example, equating competitor analysis with literature reviews or framing funding applications like journal submissions can make business processes more accessible to researchers. Developing a “dictionary” of terms can enhance mutual understanding and reduce friction in communication.

BUILDING SHARED COGNITION THROUGH IDEA-STAGE NEGOTIATION

Effective collaboration in diverse teams relies not only on the exchange of information but on fostering shared cognition and trust. Engaging stakeholders at the earliest stages - when ideas are still forming - creates a sense of collective ownership and alignment, setting the foundation for productive teamwork. By prioritizing negotiation at the idea level, teams can surface differing perspectives early, refine their shared vision, and establish a more cohesive path forward. This proactive approach strengthens commitment, minimizes later-stage friction, and enhances the team's ability to navigate complex challenges with clarity and unity.

> **Methods that foster shared goals, clarifying roles, and encourage open dialogue can turn misalignment into opportunities for growth and innovation.**

EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP: GUIDING RESEARCHERS IN NEW ROLES

Transitioning from researcher to entrepreneur demands intentional, structured mentorship. Clear goals, defined roles, and open communication between mentors and mentees are crucial for building trust and ensuring productive relationships. Expanding mentorship programs across universities and ecosystems would increase access to this essential support and strengthen commercialization pathways.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMING AND READINESS

The timing of team formation and the personal readiness of team members are crucial factors for success in research-based startups. The first six months of a co-founding team's journey are pivotal for establishing trust, aligning visions, and building strong working relationships. Additionally, even highly skilled individuals may struggle to contribute effectively if their current life stage or commitments prevent full engagement. Ensuring that team members are both professionally and personally ready to commit enhances the likelihood of long-term collaboration and success.

FACILITATION AS A CATALYST FOR COLLABORATION

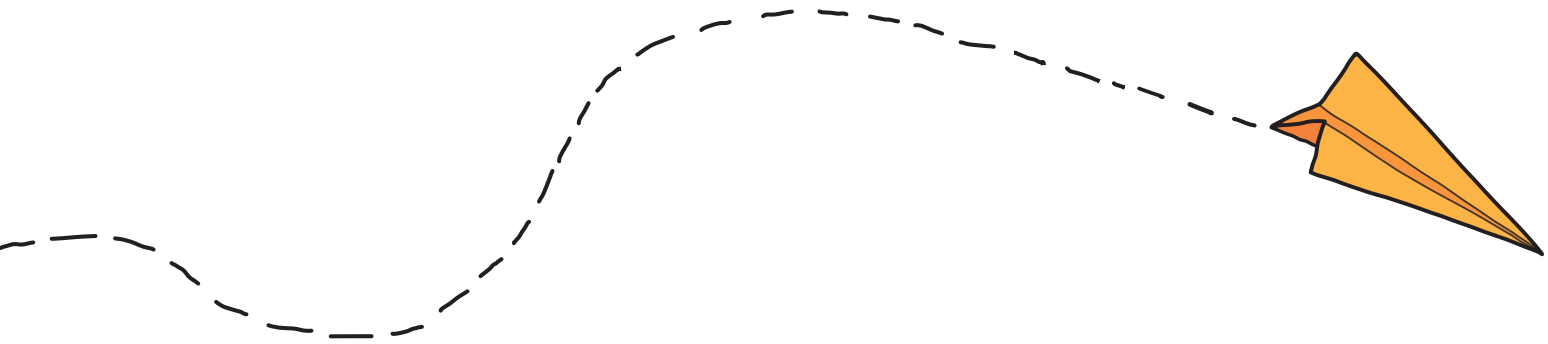
Structured facilitation is an indispensable tool for aligning diverse perspectives and strengthening team dynamics in research-based startups. Effective facilitation practices, whether led by internal team members or external consultants, create spaces for clarity, foster empathy, and bridge communication gaps. By calibrating conversations and encouraging open dialogue, facilitators help teams integrate research rigor with commercial agility, turning differences into opportunities for innovation. This approach highlights the importance of embedding facilitation skills into startup processes to navigate the complex interplay of academic and business priorities effectively.

CONCLUSION:
A HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK FOR STARTUP SUCCESS

Research-based startups thrive on strategic alignment, shared understanding, and balanced team dynamics. Integrating structured frameworks with relational flexibility, allows startups to transition innovative ideas into impactful real-world solutions. Intermediaries play a vital role in this process by aligning priorities, guiding communication, and building trust among team members.

Navigating the complexities of commercialization while maintaining an academic foundation requires adaptable tools and institutional support that address both technical challenges and human dynamics. Structured processes provide clarity, but the human element - the motivations, intentions, and relationships of team members-shapes the outcome of collaborative efforts.

Ultimately, collaboration and innovation thrive when teams acknowledge and address the relational dimensions of their work. Creating space for trust-building, open dialogue, and long-term alignment ensures that startups are well-equipped to navigate the challenges of bringing research to market, achieving sustainable impact in both academic and commercial spheres.



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