

# SCIRT and New Zealand Red Cross: Reflections on Effective Collaboration

## Interview with Duncan Gibb and Elizabeth McNaughton

At the end of 2015, I took the opportunity to meet with Elizabeth McNaughton and Duncan Gibb to discuss their experiences of cross-sector collaboration. Elizabeth is the former Director of Strategy and Government Relations at New Zealand Red Cross, and Duncan is the former CEO of the Stronger Christchurch Infrastructure Rebuild Team (SCIRT).

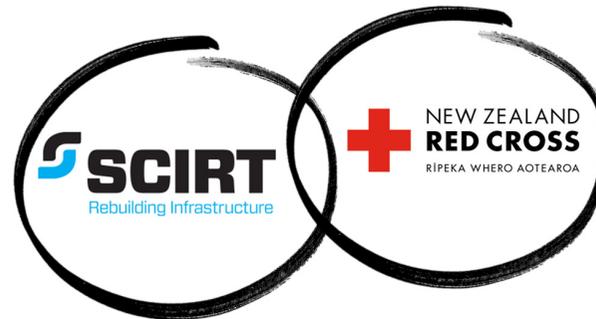
Since the formation of SCIRT over five years ago, researchers at Resilient Organisations have been interested in what makes this alliance a little bit different. You can read about the intentional approach to peak performance and internal collaboration at SCIRT in an earlier case study: [Creating a High Performance Environment With Intent](#). This time, we wanted to turn our attention to external collaboration, more specifically, that which crosses the boundaries often thought to exist between different sectors.

*The synergies you gain and the extra surprises you get out of true collaboration, far outweigh just the skill set of separate groups working independently. (Gibb, 2015)*

## SCIRT - New Zealand Red Cross Collaboration

SCIRT is an alliance of local and central government and five infrastructure contracting firms; formed in 2011, it was tasked with rebuilding the horizontal infrastructure

in post-earthquake Christchurch. We focused our discussion on their collaboration with humanitarian organisation New Zealand Red Cross, which primarily involved the Red Cross Christchurch based Recovery Team.



Many may not be aware of this collaboration. It evolved from a meeting of minds between two individuals with a shared vision: bringing together the built and social environment to explore the possibilities that emerge, while consciously working with people at the centre at all times. In short, this collaboration consisted of a rare mix of skills and capabilities at the leadership level: creativity, possibility, and emergence, combined with intentionality and a linear, output-focused approach.

We discussed how the pairing of these organisations came about, how the collaboration worked on the ground, and what the two thought partners believed the elements for success were behind this seemingly unconventional collaboration.

## Relationship Brokerage

In mid-2013, a mutual contact suggested Elizabeth and Duncan were on a similar trajectory, both advocates of intentionality and true collaboration, and both applying these approaches in their respective organisations. With hindsight, this trusted contact who knew them both well, had acted as a partnership broker, and upon recommendation, they got together to test the water. The connection and synergies in their thinking developed from the first meeting, and continues to do so today.

Elizabeth and Duncan spoke about the importance of a relationship broker for enabling rapid trust; a process already familiar with the SCIRT team. This brokerage allowed the partnership to start from a foundation of assumed trust, and to a certain extent, assumed values and beliefs.

For some time the collaboration existed only at the leadership level; Elizabeth and Duncan would meet and discuss the ideas and possibilities they foresaw, often taking the opportunity to present their ideas to new audiences. Fortunately, in late 2014, SCIRT was looking to share available floor space created by the winding down of its design team. This was the perfect opportunity to experiment with the idea of a working collaboration between the built and social environment, in a recovery setting.



### Improved Outcomes

The collaboration extended to action on the ground. An example they provided was the task of talking with the Christchurch community about how the infrastructure recovery process was affecting them; the task was huge, and SCIRT was short of people. The results they achieved by collaborating with Red Cross far surpassed the expectations of both organisations and their respective leaders. Red Cross achieved a completely different rapport with the community by the very nature of who they are – a humanitarian organisation. The depth of communication and understanding increased notably; with Red Cross co-delivering the service they began receiving different feedback. The community gained an improved relationship, and SCIRT gained a new perspective and greater depth of understanding. This enabled them to carefully consider how they respond to and approach the community.

*We started to see real concrete evidence of a gain we never would have foreseen. (Gibb, 2015)*

### Possibility and Emergence

Both leaders are comfortable with emergence; the idea of not knowing what might happen next, not knowing what the outcome might be, and yet committing to the process of collaboration with confidence and a willingness to experiment with possibility. For Elizabeth and Duncan, committing to this methodology means stepping out of their comfort zone and onto the learning edge: “a space where you’re trying so much new stuff, it’s uncomfortable!” (McNaughton). They relate this uncomfortable feeling to the process of learning and change; as a leader you need to be okay with this, it is an important part of the collaboration process, particularly in a multi-disciplinary partnership such as this. They believe that in many ways leadership in post-disaster recovery is about “leading people in discomfort, through that discomfort” (McNaughton).

*I try and say to people, if we are frustrating each other right now, from different disciplines and ways of thinking, that is a good thing, it demonstrates that we are on the learning edge of something, we’re working it out together – it will be frustrating until we align and work it out. (McNaughton, 2015)*

### Intentionality

Intentionality is at the core of this collaboration; it is an approach both leaders are firm believers in and action in their respective fields. To apply intentionality to the practical, action on the ground, side of collaboration requires open conversations where you discuss exactly

what you’re hoping to achieve, agreed targets, and 100% focused effort. The more human task of building trust between individuals can also benefit from an intentionality approach; Duncan commented: “at SCIRT we intentionally say our core value is that we are going to trust people, purposefully” (Gibb). The same applies to the process of collaboration at the organisational level; you have to be intentional about trust if you want it to work.

Duncan reiterated the importance of planning: “you can’t just hope something will happen. You can’t just hope you’ll get your team to build or do something, you need to plan it properly!” (Gibb).

*Hope is not a method! (Gibb, 2015)*

When Duncan and Elizabeth began discussing possibilities behind the scenes, they soon realised intentionality and a people focus was important to the both of them, and yet they applied it differently in their respective organisations.



At SCIRT, there was an inward focus and intentionality about peak performance and workforce resilience. Looking after their team was a priority in order to deliver the best service they could to the community. Whereas at Red Cross, there was a similar level of intentionality, but outward focused; they were dedicated to the wellbeing of the community they served, without necessarily applying this level of attention to the wellbeing of their team.

This is an important lesson with regards the potential for learning between the two sectors. Traditionally, the community and voluntary sector has an outward focus and purpose, and the private sector is more inward facing. It was, therefore, interesting to hear that one of the key learnings for these partners was the importance of finding a balance between the two.

### Shared Noble Purpose

Shared Noble Purpose - You will have heard this phrase before if you are familiar with Duncan or Elizabeth. They believe a shared purpose is essential for effective collaboration, and not only in an environment such as post-disaster Christchurch. Without a common purpose, there is nothing to commit to or engage in from the outset.

### Leadership Level Collaboration

This is where it all began, two leaders who share a vision, who are comfortable with emergence and fuelled by the idea of possibility. For Duncan and Elizabeth, collaboration at the leadership level was the first and most important stage; shared trust existed at this level to begin with.

By the time they floated the idea to their respective teams, the ride had already begun and they were keen to get their teams on board. They wanted to show them the bigger picture they could see unfolding. Having established a commonality of values and agreed on a baseline of what they wanted to achieve in bringing the two organisations together, they believed the teams stood to gain on many levels, and so they ensured what they were creating was set up for success.

For Duncan and Elizabeth, whether the mode of collaboration is contractual or voluntary is unimportant, so long as there is commitment at the leadership level and an understanding that “to make things work as a system, you don’t necessarily have control, you influence each other and influence a system” (McNaughton). Duncan and Elizabeth demonstrated this influence from the outset, both in choosing to work together, and following through on their commitment to the process of true collaboration.

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*Ann Brown, Resilient Organisations*



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## What made this unusual collaboration so effective?

- 1. Relationship Brokerage**  
Establishment of rapid trust between two leaders, laid a good foundation on which to explore common values and beliefs.
- 2. Leadership Level Collaboration**  
Collaboration between thought partners who influenced one another, and together comprised a rare but complimentary set of skills and capabilities.
- 3. Possibility and Emergence**  
Commitment to the process of true collaboration; comfortable with allowing things to emerge through experimentation; open to learn and change as a result.
- 4. Intentionality**  
Being intentional and purposeful across all areas, particularly with inter-personal trust.
- 5. Shared Noble Purpose**  
Commitment to that all-important common ground early on; acting together for the greater good.