



BSI Standards Publication

**Collaborative business relationship  
management — Guidelines for large organizations  
seeking collaboration with micro, small and  
medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs)**

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## National foreword

This British Standard is the UK implementation of [ISO 44004:2021](#).

The UK participation in its preparation was entrusted to Technical Committee SVS/1/4, Collaborative business relationships.

A list of organizations represented on this committee can be obtained on request to its committee manager.

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# INTERNATIONAL STANDARD

**ISO**  
**44004**

First edition  
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## **Collaborative business relationship management — Guidelines for large organizations seeking collaboration with micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs)**

*Management collaboratif des relations d'affaires — Lignes directrices  
pour les organisations cherchant à collaborer avec des micro, petites  
et moyennes entreprises (MPME)*



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## Foreword

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This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 286, *Collaborative business relationship management*.

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this document is to establish guidelines for how large organizations can adjust their approach when collaborating with MSMEs. It is based on the principles for successful collaborative business relationship management described in [ISO/TR 44000](#). A similar document, [ISO 44003](#), provides guidelines to MSMEs on how to adopt the same principles. When read in conjunction, ISO/TR 44004 and [ISO 44003](#) facilitate an understanding of how to apply the principles for successful collaboration from both a large company working with MSMEs and an MSME perspective.



# Collaborative business relationship management — Guidelines for large organizations seeking collaboration with micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs)

## 1 Scope

This document gives guidance for large organizations seeking to engage micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) within their collaborative relationship programmes.

It uses the 12 collaborative relationship management principles given in [ISO 44001](#).

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There are no normative references in this document.

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## 4 Context

The recommendations in this document are based on the premise and experience that many large organizations tend to have evolved requirements, processes, templates and systems in place that are optimized to work within their own business while working primarily for and together with other large organizations. In some cases, these processes and systems give rise to an increased focus on internal requirements, causing the organization to be perceived as self-centred on compliance rather than interested in identifying and paying attention to the needs of partners, especially MSMEs, which are smaller and tend to have less need for complex governance structures.

MSMEs typically bring more agility and flexibility to a collaborative relationship. They are also likely to have more limited resources and structures when it comes to management processes. They are often overwhelmed by the requirements imposed through the processes and systems of larger organizations.

Large organizations are likely to have processes and tools for collaboration, but they are not designed to bring out the best performance of MSMEs in collaborative relationships. Often where large organizations have taken the lead in the process and governance of collaboration initiatives with MSMEs, one-size-fits-all processes and requirements have weighed down their smaller partners, who have tried to conform to a way of working that is unnatural to them. When this mismatch occurs, all parties miss out on the intended and expected value return of the collaboration, and real financial, resourcing and efficiency barriers occur for the MSMEs.

Large organizations experiencing some or all of the issues described above are likely to benefit from learning to pragmatically adjust their way of working to more MSME-friendly terms and to achieve better alignment, in line with the recommendations in this document. Consequently, this leads to greater value from the relationship and a more positive experience for the MSME when working with the large organization.

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MSMEs do not always have high profile issues to consider. However, they can have a focus and often personal commitments on corresponding visions and values that can be a key performance driver in the relationship. Therefore, larger organizations benefit from including visions and values when evaluating smaller organizations. For example, standardized partner evaluation criteria based largely on size and processes can disqualify a smaller organization with great value potential that works strongly aligned with the larger organization's vision and values. Clarified alignment and familiarity with the visions and values of its MSME partners strengthens the relationship. Lack of alignment can pose issues that need to be mutually addressed.

The large organization should:

- a) ensure partner selection criteria take into greater account the visions and values of MSMEs;
- b) consider accepting a self-declaration where appropriate to address compliance;
- c) consider using facilitated discussion around visions and values to identify influences, share perceptions and ensure effective engagement.

### 5.3 Business objectives

Only when drivers for collaboration support the business objectives of each partner organization, large or small, does a collaborative relationship make sense. Collaborative relationships can enhance competitive advantage; however, such approaches require effort and resources to achieve the desired goals and objectives of each of the partners. As a result, there should be clearly defined business drivers where such investment is validated, warranted and sustainable. Implementing a collaborative relationship can require individuals and functions within the organizations to undertake changes to their normal operating practices. These changes need to be ratified against a robust business case where the success of the collaboration is fundamental to the overall success of the organizations, and is effectively communicated across all internal functions to ensure consistency. Ensuring that each partner's objectives can be achieved through the relationship supports continued effective engagement at both organizational and individual levels to sustain mutual benefit.

It is a key task for larger organizations to ensure they fully understand what smaller organizations hope to achieve and how this can benefit the collaboration. When engaging with smaller organizations, it should be recognized that their ability and resources can be constrained. By working together, a larger organization can strengthen the relationship and its outcomes by supporting MSMEs. For example, rather than solely focusing on its own desired outcomes, the wide reach and resources of the large organization can complement the capabilities of smaller organizations to achieve joint success.

The large organization should:

- a) learn about the objectives of the MSME partner in order to identify points of additional value to the objectives of both organizations, as well as to the joint objectives of the collaborative venture;
- b) concern itself with the objectives of the MSME partner, and consider investing time and resources to help the MSME to be successful, see [5.4 c\)](#).

### 5.4 Collaborative leadership

Senior leadership responsibility and operational leadership accountability is crucial to underpin successful collaborative relationships. In a collaborative relationship, the more traditional command and control models of leadership are inappropriate. Collaborative leaders embrace influence models, consensus building, leading by example and forging alignment to a shared vision.

In larger organizations, the more senior leadership typically have a broad range of duties and responsibilities and, therefore, limited capability to handle face-to-face engagements on a daily basis with several smaller organizations. Larger organizations also have room for more specialist management appointments, while in smaller organizations it is frequently the case that leadership and operation activities are combined with a single individual undertaking multiple roles. This is one reason why decision-making and agility are more effective in smaller organizations. On the other hand,

such concentrations of responsibilities can limit the ability of these individuals to respond to multiple demands. Senior leadership can facilitate collaborative leadership throughout the relationship by ensuring that weight and focus is also given to the issues and objectives of MSME partners.

The large organization should:

- a) ensure that those handling the relationships with MSMEs have appropriate collaborative competences and skills, and are empowered as far as practical to manage the interface and focus internal multiple requirements through simplified channels;
- b) ensure that senior leadership remains accessible when necessary, see [5.5](#) c) and e);
- c) include leadership that provides help and guidance to MSMEs, as well as being both an advocate and a mentor, see [5.6](#).

## 5.5 Governance and processes

Relationships between organizations require governance structures that support collaborative decision-making to ensure success. Management processes and accountabilities sometimes need to adapt to ensure that collaborative working is effective both internally and across joint activities.

Large organizations by their very nature can and do develop a broad range of policies, processes and systems supported by the appropriate resources. This usually sets them aside from smaller organizations. Frequently, larger organizations expect and often demand specific alignment to their business processes which can be unfavourable for getting the best performance from smaller organizations. Large organizations frequently have significant reporting requirements and, as a result, the resources to service these. In smaller organizations, there are often fewer resources available and excessive reporting can divert scarce resources from performance-related activities. Adopting an MSME-friendly approach does not mean diluting critical requirements but making sure that they are proportional and balanced, including the allocation of risk (see [5.10](#)) and contractual terms. Smaller organizations often have internal quality management processes that are proportionate to the size of their business.

When assessing smaller organizations, the larger organization should not expect process and systems which mirror its internal approaches, as these are frequently not practical in smaller organizations. This can highlight the need for a more streamlined approach. The partners need to establish working procedures and responsibilities to provide clarity and evaluate what is practical in terms of satisfying their needs. If not addressed, they are likely to influence performance, confidence and, subsequently, the level of engagement and behaviours.

The large organization should:

- a) consider the applicability of processes based on practical need, risk, complexity and scope;
- b) ensure contracting models are assessed and balanced with the desired outcomes;
- c) set up and agree on a joint management for the relationship;
- d) evaluate if it can assume a proportionally bigger share of reporting requirements where appropriate to enabling operational performance;
- e) ensure practical and effective communication approaches are in place;
- f) be aware that a wide range of meetings can quickly become resource intensive and hindering for smaller organizations where a few people are likely to have many roles;
- g) align its management processes to those of its MSME partners wherever possible.

## 5.6 Collaborative competence and behaviour

Establishing and developing collaborative behaviours, skills and capabilities significantly enhances relationships between organizations. Fundamental to successful collaboration is the assignment of personnel with the appropriate competence and skills for collaborative working. The competences of the individuals involved impacts on their behaviours. Working in a collaborative venture can significantly challenge many individuals with the result that they do not fully engage or fail to understand the importance of their contribution and their responsibilities within the collaboration.

In larger organizations, business skills development, competence assessments and training are often well established and managed. In smaller enterprises, the trend is more likely to be technically focused and more loosely aligned to complicated people management processes, although the agility and flexibility within smaller organizations is more likely to have evolved through practical need and application. When evaluating the capability of smaller organizations, there is a need to take a more flexible approach to assessing competences and behaviours beyond the desired technical capabilities, since their training and development approaches tend to be from hands-on-learning as opposed to formal qualifications. Sharing and coaching not only enhances competence but additionally raises the awareness of the importance of collaborative behaviours to achieve the desired outcomes. It also contributes towards building a stronger relationship.

The large organization should:

- a) when assessing technical and collaborative capability in an MSME, emphasize practical experience and management commitment to collaborative working;
- b) where practical, share its own development training, mentoring and coaching with smaller organizations.

## 5.7 Trust and commitment to mutual benefit

Trust and commitment to mutual benefit is essential for delivering to the full potential of the collaborative business relationships. To be sustainable over time, organizations need to ensure that the trust in the personal relationships among the individuals working in the collaborative relationship enables them to overcome conflict and adversity. This in turn builds sustainable relationships at an organizational level. Confidence that each organization is also looking out for the interests of their partner(s) helps build and sustain trust in relationships.

There is much to be gained from mutual agreement that each party's success is a function of everyone's success. The attitude of larger organizations, driven by success, size and confidence, can often be interpreted as arrogance by those outside the organization, and particularly by smaller organizations. A sustainable relationship requires the organization to look for the interest of the other partners. It is the responsibility of the leadership of the larger organization to foster and reinforce on a regular basis its commitment to building trust by promoting mutual benefit. The challenge always arises in times of crisis because of the temptation for the larger organization to focus on its own interest. When large organizations act this way towards MSMEs, the consequences for the small partners can be devastating.

The large organization should:

- a) ensure senior leadership supports the organization working for mutual benefit;
- b) take action so MSMEs recognize that their interests are important and protected, e.g. establish a trust and commitment system.

## 5.8 Value creation

Value creation is at the core of any collaboration and seeking additional value beyond its initial purpose enables a more sustainable collaborative relationship. A significant benefit from working closely with other organizations is the ability to share ideas and develop new opportunities. At the same time, a focus on continual improvement is required to ensure the collaborative organization benefits from

and adapts to change. Working with partners brings added insight and, as trust builds, so does the opportunity to enhance working practices.

Innovation is a potential benefit to both large and small partners, but the large organization needs to recognize in a fair and equitable way how the investment and risk to harness the opportunities can be proportionately higher for the MSME. Where additional value or innovation comes as result of working together, it can often become a point of tension between large and small organizations. The value creation should be for mutual benefit. It should not undermine the relationship and leave one partner feeling exploited by the other.

The large organization should:

- a) when engaging with smaller organizations, establish a value creation process which encourages innovation and new ideas;
- b) be prepared to support implementation and help demonstrate their benefits;
- c) acknowledge its contributions and be prepared to share benefits achieved with the MSME, taking its proportionately higher risk and investment into account, see [5.9](#).

## **5.9 Information and knowledge sharing**

Appropriate sharing and managing of information and knowledge is a key ingredient to effective collaboration. A significant value in collaborative working is the ability of parties to share their knowledge, experience and expertise. Providing clarity and transparency in what needs to be shared and what cannot be shared is essential in achieving the objectives of the relationship, adding value and building trust between the partners. Failure to define this can lead to a reluctance of individuals to fully engage.

Openness between individuals across organizational boundaries and clarity of access removes potential areas of conflict, builds trust, enhances speed of operation, facilitates appropriate behaviours and enables the creation of new value.

One of the key drivers for engaging with smaller organizations is their specialist capability. Larger organizations often recognize the beneficial dynamics and innovation that smaller organizations can bring, but have sometimes been perceived as acting as one-sided opportunists in relation to making use of the intellectual property that has come out of the relationship. As a result, it is important they accommodate these concerns and, in many cases, go out of their way to protect the interests of the MSME. It is essential to achieve the objectives of the relationship, adding value and building trust between the partners. Failure to define this can lead to a reluctance of individuals to fully engage.

The large organization should:

- a) take additional care in providing clarity and transparency in what needs to be shared and what cannot be shared;
- b) establish clear ownership of intellectual property which originates from either party or results from joint innovation, and provide suitable protection;
- c) lead by example when sharing knowledge and information.

## **5.10 Risk management**

Management of risk is a critical aspect of collaborative relationships because of how threats and opportunities influence individual and organizational behaviours. Effective collaboration depends on both the behaviour of organizations and on the individuals involved. Their attitude to risk is perhaps the most significant influence on how they behave. Risk management processes should address relationship risk in addition to facilitating joint management of risk by ensuring threats and opportunities are managed by those best placed to do so. Collaboration can help to mitigate some risk and drive opportunities while at the same time it can introduce risk.

Partner organizations inevitably view risk from different perspectives, making joint and transparent risk management a significant source of value creation. Transparency of risks and issues has the benefit of providing clarity for smaller organizations, which in turn enhances their confidence and subsequently their level of participation. A common shortcoming in the risk management process is, however, a high focus on risk transfer. Particularly where large organizations collaborate with MSMEs, this issue should be addressed so that the partners can focus on joint performance instead of individual risk avoidance.

The large organization should:

- a) openly discuss and establish a joint approach to risk management, to ensure that, as far as is practical, all business risk is identified, assigned and managed effectively;
- b) consider utilizing its resources and capabilities to avoid the disproportionate assignment of risk to the small organization;
- c) evaluate its attitude to risk transfer when engaging with smaller organizations for which a proportionately higher financial risk can be a deterrent to engagement.

### **5.11 Relationship measurement and optimization**

Measuring the health of a collaborative working relationship is crucial to continually improving its performance and capacity to create value and deliver on business objectives. During the life cycle of any collaborative relationship there are continual challenges placed on the relationship, such as changes to the business circumstances of any of the partners, including organizational changes, changes in personnel, together with day-to-day operational issues. Any of these can affect behaviours and trust and, thus, affect performance. Without knowing how the relationship is performing, the chances of collaborative success become low.

Large organizations can be intimidating for MSMEs, especially when dealing with challenging circumstances and the need for critical feedback. Such a working climate can easily lead to a reluctance from MSMEs to raise relationship tensions until they have reached a critical point. Measuring and monitoring the performance of relationships provides organizations with early insights for them and their partners to proactively address performance issues throughout the life of the relationship and to optimize joint objectives.

The large organization should:

- a) ensure an open and constructive two-way dialogue where issues can be identified and addressed without confrontation or taking offence;
- b) find agreement on a basis for periodic measuring and monitoring of both performance and behaviours to continually assess and improve the health of the relationship.

### **5.12 Exit strategy**

An agreed exit strategy removes uncertainty and enhances joint engagement. Evaluating the ending scenarios for a collaborative relationship is crucial for organizations before venturing into such an arrangement. It is also necessary to ensure that the partner organizations and those involved understand the rules of disengagement, whether upon completion or prematurely.

The essence of a collaborative engagement is that it removes the more traditional hierarchy between large and small organizations. It also contributes to building trust, as it is based on the recognition of mutual benefit. As a result, a joint learning process of understanding the exit triggers and the values for all partners should be openly encouraged in both directions. As an example, large organizations sometimes identify MSMEs as a potential area of concern for the sake of continuity. Smaller organizations, on the other hand, are likely to see a significant risk to their business in committing to larger organizations where they have no visibility of a future business strategy or policy impacts. Understanding and acknowledging these differences in perspectives helps to build better engagement.

The large organization should:

- a) develop a joint exit strategy early in the process to highlight potential exit triggers for each of the partners that can need to be mutually addressed through the engagement process and into operations;
- b) mutually review and manage the joint exit strategy to ensure it recognizes MSME considerations to build confidence and assurance between the partners;
- c) understand the importance of sharing appropriate strategic information with its MSME partners to build confidence, keep its relationship relevant and avoid early disengagement.

## Bibliography

- [1] [ISO/TR 44000](#), *Principles for successful collaborative business relationship management*
- [2] [ISO 44001](#), *Collaborative business relationship management systems — Requirements and framework*
- [3] [ISO 44003](#), *Collaborative business relationship management — Guidelines for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises on the implementation of the fundamental principles*

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