

Collaboration: Friend or Foe?

Collaboration is a popular approach to work used at many other organizations, including MC. We use the term, but what is collaboration? It connects with people in your and other groups, obtains and provides information, and participates in joint projects (Hansen). It sounds good, and we believe it is good and more is even better. However, just as collaboration can be underdone, it can be overdone.

When underdone, it allows silos to form, creating duplicate effort, acting on incomplete knowledge, and lacking support for the outcome. When overdone, it wastes time and reduces a successful outcome. When everyone's ideas need to be included, it can dilute the core idea or response. What is needed is disciplined collaboration.

Disciplined collaboration is a set of practices that assesses when and when not to collaborate. People are willing and able to commit to it and deliver results when used. It uses five rules to improve an individual's performance (Hansen).

1. Ask, why collaborate? You must express the value of collaboration in a clear, compelling way. If there is no clear value, resist collaborating. You may have all the subject matter expertise, data, and support needed. Ask yourself what benefits you forego if you collaborate. You may need to postpone other work to collaborate on another project. Can you do so?
2. Get them excited. Create a unifying goal that excites people so much that they subordinate their agendas to put yours first. The goal (vision) must be common, specific, measurable, and finite. Think SMART.
3. Reward—yes, but for what? Reward people for collaboration results, not activities. If you acknowledge participating and attending meetings, people will do these activities more but that only results in more hours and more work. What counts is the results.
4. Go all in. Finding time is a perennial issue. Individuals have their work that they put first, then try to find some leftover time to collaborate. The result is that people spend too little time honoring their collaboration commitments. Your challenge is to find a mechanism that ensures your collaboration receives sufficient time, effort, and needed resources (budget, equipment, space, etc.). You need to garner support from the supervisors. Remember the adage, part-time commitment, part-time results. If you don't receive support, scale it back or scrap it.
5. Establish trust early. People need to trust each other, and often in collaboration, they don't know each other. Trust is not present: people need the confidence that colleagues will deliver high-quality work on time, every time. You need to find out why no trust exists and then boost trust. For example, if there are insincere intentions, get commitment from them on small matters as you publicly commit your intentions to them. Send an email, vocalize your vision at a meeting, or check in (not check-up) with individuals about their progress. If there is a misunderstanding about priorities or processes, give time to review the process and make a checklist that people can use to measure progress.

Leaders think about collaboration too narrowly: as a value to cultivate but not a skill to teach (Gino). Organizations have tried increasing it through various methods, from open offices to naming it an organizational value. While many of these approaches yield some progress, they all try to influence employees through superficial or heavy-handed means. Research has shown that none of them reliably delivers truly robust collaboration. Using these five rules as much as possible develops your sustainable collaboration skills. Remember that the goal of collaboration is not to say you collaborated. The goal is improved performance and results.

References:

Gino, Francesca (2019): Cracking the Code of Sustained Collaboration, Harvard Business Review, November-December 2019.

Hansen, Morten T. (2018): Great at Work: The Hidden Habits of Top Performers, New York: Simon & Schuster Press.

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