

Brief

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The more experts in a group, the more dysfunctional it will be: *Collaboration and how to get it to work at its best.*

“Getting good players is easy. Getting ‘em to play together is the hard part”

Casey Stengel (American Major League Baseball coach)

Experts and collaboration do not go hand in hand. It's tough. As the world becomes more complex, organisations construct all sorts of ways to divide us into like-minded silos. We have more specialists, each with their own way of working, language and rules. We give them accountability and power.

We also need more collaboration to stay agile, make progress and perform better. Humans have an innate ability to connect and collaborate – we are social creatures and have survived and developed as a species by pooling our work. The greatest value comes when we bring together diverse specialists to collaborate.

But – here is the problem: members of complex teams of different specialists are less likely to collaborate – unless the right things are done – less likely to share knowledge freely, learn from one and other, shift workloads flexibly to break up bottlenecks, help others complete projects. The research suggests that greater the proportion of experts the more non-productive or dysfunctional a group is likely to be. When the group involved is an informal or project-based collaborative group, this challenge can be even tougher

Under the right conditions, complex cross-boundary teams or groups can achieve high levels of co-operation – but creating those conditions requires thoughtful and sometimes significant investments in the capacity to collaborate. Creating these right conditions will rarely happen by accident or simply good-will and requires deliberate actions and commitment to create them. The rewards are significant – there is now plenty of good research that suggests that strong cross-boundary collaboration creates faster-growing, more innovative and more engaging organisations. With the ever-increasing number of informal, cross-silo and virtual groups needing to collaborate, we looked at the recent research and publications (from Margaret Heffernan's excellent *A bigger Prize*, to what neuroscience tells us) to summarise the latest thinking about what shapes success. Here are the key themes

Five success factors

1. Trust

It sounds simple, but collaboration requires trust. The neuroscientists show us that when we are with people we trust, oxytocin is released, in turn this makes us more empathetic and

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connected to others. Moderate levels of stress (the thrill of the challenge) also releases oxytocin – although too much stress causes the release of epinephrine which inhibits oxytocin. The challenge is that our brain is wired to make quick instinctive decisions about whether someone is friend or foe.

Five key factors that help enable trust	
Inclusion	Ensuring everyone is treated as an important contributor regardless of role or level
	<i>Dark side:</i> use of hierarchy or status to ensure certain views or contributions prevail over others
Predictability	Early clarity of purpose, plan, role and timing unlocks energy on solutions and progress
	<i>Dark side:</i> uncertainty and surprises in the process, plan and project will disrupt collaboration
Autonomy	Room for people to control or shape aspects of what happens
	<i>Dark side:</i> too much control from others, or lack of any choices, increases stress and dysfunctional behaviour
Belonging	A sense of community, belonging and sharing create powerful results
	<i>Dark side:</i> cliques, 'an inner circle', jargon and proprietary behaviour
Fairness	Transparency, clear expectations, recognition and reward
	<i>Dark side:</i> credit being grabbed by a few people, workload not being shared fairly

2. A common purpose

Successful collaboration requires some form of an explicitly developed and shared vision or purpose. Many project teams or informal adhoc groups only have transactional targets or tasks. Most of the best outcomes in a collaborative group come from having a strong shared

sense of 'Why', not just what and how. The best 'Why's are about making a difference – to the company, the market, the world, or to the people in the group themselves.

This will build the strongest sense of community and identity. The more that personal goals are aligned with group and organisation goals, the more intensely will a group pursue those goals.

3. The right mindset (and accepting you are not in control)

The whole point about collaboration is that it is voluntary. It is not about doing work because you are required to by your line manager and it is just simply your job. Collaboration goes beyond that – but it does require a working with a different mindset.

The best results flow from everyone being clear about their own role, but there is plenty of flexibility about how to achieve tasks. This requires every individual recognising that they are *not* in control. It is also about building a culture that encourages diverse opinions from people with diverse experiences – and welcoming constructive challenge.

This is a mindset - seeing yourself as leading horizontally: your team is not just those who report to you, it is also peers, bosses and people in other parts of the organisation. And people reporting to you are part of someone else's team.

Over the longer-term, building successful collaboration requires creating a 'gift' culture: where it is normal practice to mentor and coach people who may not be in your team; where sharing time, resource and knowledge are common practice. Recognition – the pats on the back, the thoughtful thank-yous and the celebration of work well done – is a routine way of working.

Finally – use the flexibility of collaborative working to let customer experiences and viewpoints into the work. Depending on the context this can be done by asking customers to join discussions, or asking the group to go and talk to customers.

4. Leadership and role models

As a leader, your actions and behaviour will have a significant impact on how collaborative everyone will be. Use your power as a role model. This starts with how you expect collaboration to work:

- Set the ground rules for interaction and behaviour
- Lead with questions not answers – allowing others to contribute to solutions or plans
- Don't be afraid to be vulnerable and honest – you do not have all the answers (or even most of them), you face challenges and you learn from mistakes

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- Invest as much in collaboration as everyone else - spend time building relationships and trust.
- In meetings and less formal discussions, be fully present: if you want people to give you their ideas, then look and listen - don't multi-task, check your phone messages, or see what others are doing. Focus on the person speaking.
- Modelling collaborative behaviour with your peer group leaders: senior executives need to be seen to collaborate between themselves, rather than the classic rivalry between divisions. For example, Microsoft developed a tablet computer 10 years before Apple but rivalry between divisional leaders killed the project with no-one at the top seeking to change that outcome. Of course, the first priority of new CEO Satya Nadella when he took over in 2014 was to address this aspect of the culture, saying he wanted leaders who were 'learn-it-all's', not 'know-it all's'.

These are the key attributes of collaborative leaders

<i>Traditional leaders vs collaborative leaders</i>		
	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Collaborative</i>
Power	Comes from singular authority and hierarchy	Comes from the collective team
Information	Maintains and controls ownership of information	Openly shares information and knowledge
Solutions	Delivers the solution to the team, as the 'top' expert	Create solutions together with the team, using everyone's experience
Resolving issues	Fights fires, focuses on symptoms, often looking for who to blame	Seeks the root causes of issues, using the insight of others
Goals and targets	Individual accountability only	Strong elements of shared goals
Feedback	Review individual performance annually in a bureaucratic process	Immediate, ongoing feedback with coaching

5. Investment in the collaborative community, and long-term collaborative capability

Collaborative mindset, behaviour and capability can spring up naturally of its own accord. It will always happen faster, more powerfully and more effectively when it is actively supported. This is not only about money – it is more about being thoughtful and deliberate in a range of decisions that are likely to lead to success. These include:

- Assign project leaders who are both task and relationship focused: both are needed
- Build on existing relationships between people in different parts of the organisation that know each other: too many strangers in a group and it will be slow to collaborate
- Encourage social time in a collaborative group: socialising out of work
- Invest in signature relationship practices – visible commitments by leaders to cover costs of travel for teams to meet, or create open plan flexible, informal working areas
- Training in building relationships, good communication and conflict resolution

Sources

Sources used for this article include: Ambler: *11 practices of collaborative leaders* (Gartner); Bodell: *How to set productive collaboration in action* (Pwc); Chibber: *What yellow slime can teach your organisation* (Quartz); Dewar, Adler, Heckscher, Prusak: *Building a collaborative enterprise* (Harvard Business Review); Freiber, Frieberg: *17 strategies for improving collaboration* (Freiber.gs.com) Gardner: *Smart collaboration*; Gatty: *3 strategies to improve collaboration in the workplace* (AllBusiness) Goman: *8 tips for collaborative leadership* (Forbes); Gratton, Erickson: *Eight ways to build collaborative teams* (Harvard Business Review); Hansen: *Collaboration*; Hansen, Ibarra: *Are You a Collaborative Leader?* (Harvard Business Review); Keller, Lavoie, Weiss: *How do I drive effective collaboration to deliver real business impact?* (McKinsey); Heffernan: *A bigger Prize*; Heimans, Timms: *Understanding new power (collaboration)* (Harvard Business Review); Jartese: *8 differences between traditional and collaborative leaders* (Innocentive blog); Kumar, Raghavendran: *Bringing fun and creativity to work* (MITSloan); McGuire: *The Neuroscience of collaboration: building strong teams* (LinkedIn); Morieux, Tollman: *Improvement by reduction* (HR Executive online); Nayar: *A shared purpose drives collaboration* (Harvard Business Review); Ricci, Weise: *The collaboration imperative*; Thomas: *The neuroscience of effective collaboration: what the best leaders know about team building* (Neurosciencegroup.com.au) Tumin & Bratton, Ricci & Weise: *Four traits of Collaborative Leaders* (Pwc); *The neuroscience of leadership and trust: 8 ways to promote employee collaboration* (t-three.com); *Cross functional collaboration in a culture of continuous improvement* (Kainexus.com).