

Brief

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The more experts in a group, the more dysfunctional the group 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: research shows that members of complex teams of different specialists are less likely to collaborate – unless the right things are done. The greater the proportion of experts, the more non-productive or dysfunctional a group is likely to be.

Under the right conditions, complex cross-boundary groups reach high levels of co-operation. Creating those conditions needs thoughtful, sometimes significant, investments in the capacity to collaborate.

Five success factors

- 1. Trust:** It seems simple - collaboration requires trust. Neuroscientists show us that when we are with people we trust, oxytocin is released, in turn making us more empathetic and connected to others. Key factors that help enable trust are: inclusion, predictability, autonomy, belonging and fairness.
- 2. A common purpose:** Successful collaboration requires some clear form of shared vision or purpose - having a strong shared sense of 'Why', not just what and how (the normal transactional targets and plans). 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 is - collaboration is voluntary. It is not about doing work simply because your line manager tells you. Collaboration flows from everyone being clear about their own role, but with plenty of flexibility about how to achieve tasks. It is about building a culture that encourages diverse opinions from people with diverse experiences, and welcomes constructive challenge. Over the longer-term, it requires creating a 'gift' culture: where it is normal practice to mentor, coach and recognise people who may not be in your team; where sharing time, resources and knowledge are common practice.
- 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: set the ground rules, lead with questions not answers, don't be afraid to be vulnerable and honest, model collaborative behaviour with your peer group leaders.
- 5. Investment in the collaborative community, and long-term collaborative capability:** Collaborative will always happen faster, more powerfully and more effectively when it is actively supported. Actions can include: assign project leaders who are both task and relationship focused; build on existing relationships (too many strangers in a group and it will be slow to collaborate); encourage social time in a group; invest in costs of travel for teams to meet, or create open, flexible working areas; training in building relationships, good communication and conflict resolution.