

Creating a Collaborative Organizational Culture



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Introduction

Collaboration can re-invigorate organizations by fully engaging employees, improving retention, and increasing innovation. It can help employees thrive in an ever-changing, diverse workplace.

However, as organizations grow, employees scatter through telework and multiple locations, budgets shrink, and workloads expand, collaboration remains a challenge. Unfortunately, many senior leaders view collaboration as a skill that is best applied on selected projects, rather than as an organization-wide cultural value that should be embedded in the company's fabric.

This can be seen in the conclusions drawn from a Corporate Executive Board survey on the nature of collaboration in today's workplaces. The survey confirmed that jobs require more collaboration today than they did three years ago, and that more employees need to regularly coordinate their work with people from different units and supervisory levels. The study concluded that collaboration should be encouraged among teams when projects have a high-potential impact; when diverse perspectives would help the project get completed; and when participants share similar goals (CEB staff, n.d.).

CEB's conclusion about when to encourage collaboration among teams recognizes the contribution that collaboration can bring to an organization, but it does not go far enough. Most organizations share a similarly narrow definition and relegate collaboration to an activity best used on complex, high-impact projects. A truly collaborative environment involves all organizational levels and is infused in an organization's cultural identity and day-to-day operations.

This white paper:

- Redefines collaboration and establishes what a truly collaborative environment is;
- Lists the benefits of sustained collaboration;
- Examines why collaboration often fails in organizations;
- Explores the building blocks required for effective collaboration, and;
- Provides steps on how to encourage collaboration in the workplace.

What Is Collaboration and How Does It Benefit the Bottom Line?

Collaboration is often seen as an activity that involves team members working on a project together. True collaboration is more than an activity, however. It is a process with associated behaviors that can be taught and developed. It is a process governed by a set of norms and behaviors that maximize individual contribution while leveraging the collective intelligence of everyone involved. It is the way in which a group of people collectively explore ideas to generate solutions that extend beyond the limited vision of a single person (Maynard, n.d.).

Since collaboration should be viewed as a process, it is important to identify what a collaborative environment looks like. In a truly collaborative environment, everyone has a voice. When people have a voice, they are able to contribute. When they understand how their contributions fit into their organization's strategy, it gives them purpose. With that purpose comes belief in their organization. Purpose and belief translate into high levels of engagement. At the most basic level, people want to feel a sense of belonging, and as such, collaboration takes center stage because it helps create an environment in which people want to belong.

Collaboration should not be confused with cooperation. Cooperation is when each person on a team develops his or her own plans and shares those plans with the team. There may be joint discussion, but the focus remains on individual actions and achievement rather than on a collective strategy.

Collaboration is when individual goals are subordinated for collective achievement. Joint discussions are focused on the give and take about strategies and ideas, and the outcome often leads to new ways of working (Ashkenas, 2012).

Organizations have conventionally applied collaboration to teams or organizational levels (such as senior leadership) to break down silos, to foster cross-functional activities, and to encourage better innovation. Collaboration—even when applied in this limited manner in an organization—can yield positive results. In addition to increasing innovation, collaboration increases employee energy, creativity, and productivity, which generally leads to less stressed, happier, and more engaged workers (Goman, n.d.).

As many organizations can attest, however, when collaboration is focused only on teams or a single level in an organization, it is extremely difficult to sustain, and this makes the benefits of collaboration fleeting. Organizations must redefine what collaboration means by making it part-and-parcel of the organizational culture and daily operations. True organization-wide collaboration can provide sustained benefits such as:

- Fully engaged workers who are eager to take on new projects and challenges and who embrace change.
- Improved organizational flexibility and agility.
- Improved employee health, wellness, and performance.
- More productive and energized meetings.
- Extremely high retention rates.
- A competitive advantage when attracting top talent.
- The ability to develop and bring products faster to the market.
- Increased top-line revenue and better profitability.

Organization-wide collaboration can breathe new life into a company and reinvigorate employees. Sharing new ideas and knowledge lets others see things from different perspectives, spurs their own work in new directions, and moves the organization forward (Contactzilla, n.d.).

Why Collaboration Fails in Organizations

Collaboration often fails in organizations because when it is viewed as an activity, the behaviors necessary for organization-wide collaboration fail to occur. Senior leaders understand the benefits of collaboration and often mandate more of it. It is unrealistic, though, to mandate collaboration without teaching all employees how to collaborate. Collaboration training is frequently offered only to senior leaders and high-potential employees, but training only these groups can be detrimental to creating an organization-wide collaborative environment. Every employee must be able to speak the same collaborative language.

Yet even when collaboration is entrenched in a company's culture and silos are disbanded, it can be stymied. Studies by Charlan Nemeth, a psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley found that the "do not criticize" tenet of brainstorming can cause "groupthink" and can be counterproductive when it comes to collaboration. Nemeth notes that healthy debate and criticism actually stimulate ideas. To cultivate collaboration, then, organizations should encourage debate within groups, not stifle it (Contactzilla staff, n.d.).

Collaboration can also stumble when employees confuse collaboration with teamwork. In teams, employees with different knowledge, skills, and abilities may work side by side on common goals, but

not engage in debate. Collaboration involves interaction, debate, and working together towards a common goal. Individual goals may also be a part of collaboration, but those individual goals are achieved through the contributions of knowledge, skills, and abilities of others on the team (Contactzilla staff, n.d.) In other words, teams may be formed, but collaboration is not guaranteed. Collaboration takes an understanding and application of key behaviors that employees should learn and demonstrate.

The Building Blocks Required for Effective Collaboration

Collaboration does not come naturally for most employees, particularly those born before the Millennials. Previous generations were taught that competition was good, and that individual hard work—the “nose to the grindstone” mentality—would be rewarded with steady career progression. The nature of work has changed, however, and the management and knowledge silos that were created in the 20th century are no longer tenable today if organizations are to succeed. Collaboration helps break down those silos so that organizations can be creative, flexible, and ready to meet the changing, demanding needs of business today.

There are a few building blocks that must live within leaders and individual contributors to ensure that collaboration is part of an organization’s culture. These building blocks are trust, communication, and a shared vision and purpose.

Trust

Trust is the foundation of effective collaboration. There are many facets to trust, but vulnerability is the aspect that most affects the collaborative process. Without vulnerability, people will not fully invest themselves or their ideas in collective efforts. In the collaborative process, trust means creating an environment where everyone can openly express concerns, fears, and differences of opinion (i.e., be vulnerable) without fear of rejection, aggression, or retaliation. When vulnerability is threatened, behaviors that stifle creativity and innovation—like self-editing—take over. Furthermore, when people feel disrespected and see their contributions going unrecognized and unvalued, they disengage and look elsewhere for opportunities to contribute. Trust and respect are the bedrock of collaboration and are the key to building a commitment to collective goals.

HR and talent management professionals can assess the level of trust in an organization through employee surveys and confidential one-on-one interviews. Some questions HR and talent management professionals can ask employees to assess trust levels include:

- Do you feel that risk-taking is encouraged?

- Do you feel safe communicating your ideas and opinions with colleagues?
- Do you believe you are treated fairly and with respect?
- Do you believe your ideas are taken into account during the decision-making process?

Employee responses will help assess trust in the organization. An analysis of the results will identify the level of trust—which includes respect—the organization as a whole is accomplishing and which areas need improvement (Hatch, 2012).

Communication

There is no collaboration without effective communication. Leaders must communicate why collaboration is important to the organization’s success and must outline the strategy and roadmap for how the organization will work collaboratively. Both employees and leaders must share and build ideas, constructively criticize, and provide feedback.

Effective communication requires a substantial level of self-awareness. Employees must understand their own preferences for how they approach a collaborative situation. They must also understand the communication and collaboration styles that other employees may prefer. It is this awareness that allows employees to recognize different communication and collaboration styles and to leverage them. This heightened level of self-awareness allows individuals to modify their behavior and communication styles, which paves the way for increased engagement. All employees must be taught these communication skills for a collaborative environment to be realized. Everyone in the organization must be on the same page, and this can’t be accomplished if senior leaders are the only ones who have the opportunity to develop these communication skills.

Shared Vision and Purpose

The best way to get employees invested in the collaborative process is to give them an opportunity to contribute to a shared vision and purpose. This is about taking the time to articulate the “why” to everyone involved in the collaborative process on a particular project or initiative. Unfortunately, this can easily get overlooked when managing heavy workloads and deadlines. Instead, it should be prioritized as a necessary investment for increasing individual and team performance and long-term success. Leaders must ensure that all employees understand how their work contributes to the goals of the team and organization and how collaboration will help them meet their goals. When employees understand their broader purpose, they can make more meaningful contributions to their teams.

HR and talent management professionals who take the time to teach and nurture these building blocks—trust, communication, and shared vision and purpose—will lay the groundwork to create an organizational culture based on collaboration. As a result, they will see improved employee retention,

less conflict, lower stress, an improved competitive advantage, a higher level of performance, and a healthier bottom line.

Twelve Habits of Highly Collaborative Organizations

1. **Lead by example.** In highly collaborative organizations, leaders use and demonstrate collaboration tools and strategies and encourage employees at all organizational levels to do the same.
2. **Focus on individual and organizational benefits.** Highly collaborative organizations communicate to employees about how they will personally benefit from a collaborative environment—how it will improve their lives and make their jobs easier—as well as how it will take the organization to the next level.
3. **Emphasize behavior and strategy before technology.** Highly collaborative organizations formulate a strategy (the “why” and “how” of collaboration for their organization) before rushing to buy the latest collaboration platform. The technology should support the strategy.
4. **Learn how to get out of the way.** Leaders and managers in highly collaborative organizations understand that micromanaging stifles collaboration. Best practices and guidelines are fine, but let employees do their work, their way. Empower employees.
5. **Give employees a voice.** In order for someone to feel like they have a voice, they have to have a platform and be acknowledged. This is a simple idea but gets lost quickly at the speed of business.
6. **Integrate collaboration into organizational workflow.** Collaboration should not be viewed as another competency that must be incorporated into an employee’s skill set. It should be integrated into all aspects of their work.
7. **Create a supportive environment.** Collaboration and teamwork should be rewarded. For example, make a percentage of an employee’s bonus tied to how well he or she collaborates with others.

Twelve Habits of Highly Collaborative Organizations (...continued)

8. Examine behaviors the organization is rewarding. Highly collaborative organizations focus on metrics that align different business units.
9. Practice persistence. Collaboration should not be confined to teams, employee levels, or pilot programs. Highly collaborative organizations make collaboration a corporate-wide initiative.
10. Adapt and evolve. Highly collaborative organizations recognize that collaboration is a perpetual state in their organizations and adapt and evolve as needed.
(Continued...)
11. Recognize that employee collaboration benefits customers. Happy employees are better performing employees, and this translates into more satisfied, happier customers.
12. Acknowledge that collaboration generally makes the world a better place. Highly collaborative organizations recognize that collaboration lowers stress, increases retention and loyalty, and improves the bottom line.

(Source: Adapted from Morgan, 2013.)

How to Encourage Collaboration in the Workplace

IF HR and talent management professionals focus solely on improving the building blocks that are critical to creating a truly collaborative work environment, they will see happier employees. To build and sustain a culture of collaboration, however, HR and talent management professionals may want to consider using the following steps.

1. Define what a collaborative environment looks like for the organization.
2. Offer training that teaches specific collaborative skills.

3. Make sure the metrics for success are aligned among different business units.
4. Ensure that leaders understand their role in facilitating collaboration and maintaining a collaborative environment.

Define What a Collaborative Environment Looks Like for the Organization

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It also probably lacked a strategy. The same is true when creating an organizational culture of collaboration. Without a strategy and a roadmap that articulates clear goals, employees will have plenty of good intentions, but will fail to act on them.

The “why” for creating a culture of collaboration has already been discussed - collaboration improves employee morale, retention, competitive advantage, and an organization’s bottom line. The next step is to create the “how” that is unique to each organization—the strategy. The strategy and the roadmap must be designed with the input and buy-in of all employees, not just senior leaders.

When creating a strategy, a good exercise to use is visualization. Carol Kinsey Goman, an executive coach, author, and keynote speaker, writes in an article for the *Reliable Plant*, that visualization is a team sport. It will help create a shared purpose and vision, and when the exercise includes all employees, it will increase the likelihood that they will enthusiastically buy-in (Goman, n.d.).

The roadmap provides guidelines for how the strategy will be executed. It should include goals, timelines, and individual roles and responsibilities, but it should not be too detailed. It should provide enough to give employees direction, but not enough to create roadblocks.

Offer Training that Teaches Specific Collaborative Skills

HR and talent management professionals can encourage a collaborative workplace by working with employees to improve collaborative skills. The building blocks discussed earlier—trust, communication, and a shared vision and purpose—can be improved with the help of employee development opportunities and activities. Other collaborative skills that can also be taught include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- How to embrace change.

- How to ask for input from others.
- How to share information with others.
- How to listen for understanding.
- How to provide constructive feedback.
- How to use negotiation skills.
- How to recognize and reward others.
- How to improve self-awareness.
- How to reach consensus.

These skills may be part of an organization’s professional development for employees on a management track, but for a collaborative culture to be realized, they must be part of all employees’ professional development plans. A collaborative culture gives every employee a voice, and so every employee must possess the skills necessary to be able to collaborate. HR and talent management professionals should conduct a needs analysis of where the organization stands in terms of collaboration skills for all employees, and a plan should then be developed that will improve any weaknesses uncovered in the needs analysis.

Make Sure the Metrics for Success Are Aligned Among Business Units

For an organization to truly be collaborative, metrics must align among various functions of the business. If metrics are not aligned, employees may engage in anti-collaborative behaviors, which may result in silos, intentional lack of inclusion and transparency, and territoriality. An example of this can be seen when examining the classic organizational friction between sales and operations.

Sales professionals usually are rewarded by sales volume, margins, and profitability. For that reason, they are motivated to sell things to customers that may fall outside the normal product offering. This “yes we can” type of customization can be critical to closing a deal. Once the sales professional closes the deal, something collaboratively destructive can happen. The sales professional is rewarded in the way of compensation, accolades, increased influence, and in some cases, a promotion.

The operations person on the other hand, is rewarded for things like process, execution, and speed of delivery. They invest their time in systems and processes that support how they are ultimately rewarded and compensated. This customized deal is great for the sales person to meet his goal but comes at the expense of the operations person who has to invest extra time and resources to deliver it. A very dangerous zero sum game dynamic has been created. For one person to win, the other person has to lose. This causes a number of collaborative issues and leads to silos, territoriality, and even conflict.

For these reasons, it is important for HR professionals and organizations to examine what behaviors are being driven by incentives and compensation plans.

Ensure that Leaders Understand Their Role in Facilitating Collaboration and Maintaining a Collaborative Environment

Although this new definition of collaboration emphasizes giving every employee in an organization a voice, leaders still play a pivotal role in facilitating and maintaining a collaborative environment. In their white paper, *Building a Collaborative Workplace*, authors Shawn Callahan, Mark Schenk, and Nancy White offer six behaviors that leaders display that help build collaboration in the workplace. Leaders who support collaboration in their organizations:

1. Pay attention to collaborative strategies and model collaborative skills and behaviors.
2. Do not sacrifice long-term goals for short-term fixes when faced with a crisis. They recognize that short-term fixes sabotage collaboration.
3. Invest resources that support and encourage collaboration.
4. Act as role models, teachers, and coaches of collaboration.
5. Reward collaborative behavior.
6. Ensure that collaborative talents are recruited and nurtured (Callahan, Schenk and White, 2008).

A seventh behavior that could be added to that list is accountability. To ensure that leaders at all levels actively encourage and maintain collaboration in the workplace, they must be held accountable to invest in, model, and reward collaborative behavior exhibited by their employees consistently. This accountability will ensure that the collaborative culture endures.

How to Improve Workplace Collaboration

- **Lead by example.** Be sure that those in leadership positions have the requisite communication and collaboration skills.
- **Build a sense of community.** Employees need a personal connection to one another. Be sure to provide opportunities for co-workers to get to know each other in a casual, non-working setting.
- **Train employees to collaborate.** According to a study by ESI International, 81 percent of the organizations surveyed said their employees needed to improve communication skills and nearly half needed to improve leadership and critical thinking skills.
- **Clarify roles and responsibilities.** Collaboration is greatly facilitated when everyone is on the same page. HR and talent managers should ensure that goals are outlined, responsibilities are articulated, and deadlines are set.
- **Tap into individual talent.** To optimize collaboration, assign roles that fit each person's strengths. Build teams based on what each person can bring to the table.
- **Hold productive meetings.** Good meetings have clear objectives and an agenda. They should serve to motivate people.
- **Don't micromanage.** Respect employees and give them autonomy to do their jobs.
- **Consider using collaboration tools and software.** It is rarely possible to have all employees involved at one place at one time. Consider investing in a collaborative software system to provide a centralized hub for communication and project management.

Conclusion

A truly collaborative environment involves every employee at every level and department, and is infused in an organization's culture and reflected in its daily operations. It can help recruit, retain, and motivate employees; increase productivity; bring new products and services to the market faster; increase customer satisfaction and loyalty; and improve an organization's bottom line. And because it lowers stress, it makes for a better work environment overall.

About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning to ensure that all individuals gain relevant new skills that they can easily implement within their own organizations. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. We are dedicated to following-up with our clients and individual participants to ensure that their learning experiences have been meaningful and impactful. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind, and we are focused on successfully meeting our clients' business and academic expectations. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined
- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

Contact Us

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