

Collaboration:

Making it Work

Collaboration. We hear it all the time. Everywhere. Innovation and creativity are products of great collaboration, and some companies need it to thrive. It's the buzz word in businesses, training days, and team building sessions. Recently, collaboration has been a major theme with our clients within the education, public sector, and manufacturing industries. Understandably so, as these days often the greatest successes result out of a collective genius, when diversity comes together and perspectives collide. So it is no wonder that companies are investing time, energy, and money on initiatives that enhance the collaborative potential of their people. Through our work we have gained a breadth of insight into this ambitious word, why it can be hard to achieve in practice, and what you can do to really make it work.



We have consistently found that the hunger for collaboration is big. People want to work in an environment that offers the right balance of support and healthy challenge. Even for those who prefer to work solo, there is a strong recognition that collaborating has benefits and can elicit outcomes greater than if the same people were to work on their own, or in silos. Within departments, between departments, within a team, amongst different teams, between a company and a supplier, between a manager and direct report- collaboration is everywhere and can take different forms. Brainstorming, being a critical friend, having healthy conflict, avoiding 'Group Think', exploring alternate perspectives, delegating, pooling strengths and compensating for weaknesses, are all benefits and outcomes of great collaboration. While collaboration may sometimes seem like a daunting process more effortful and time consuming than if people or groups were to work solo, below are 4 key insights that have emerged as we have talked about, and seen, collaboration (and competition) in action.

1. **Speak their language** - No, I don't mean literally. Successful collaboration involves a lot more than an open space and a willingness to share ideas. When people come together, they create a 3rd entity, which is the relationship that has its own dynamic and is determined in part by each person's personality preferences and ways of working. Getting to know and understand this 3rd entity, the relationship space- and the dynamics and preferences in the group- goes a long way when trying to influence others and to be heard. Who in the group is more extroverted than introverted? How do you differentiate the reflective observers from the active experimenters? How are people processing the information you're sharing- do they pay attention to the details or consider more abstract ideas and the bigger picture? Good awareness of the 'self' (our own) and 'other' (other collaborators and the group as a whole) preferences can help determine what *you* need from them, and what *they* need from you, in order to make collaboration really work.
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2. **What's in it for them?** Why should people bother collaborating with you? The bottom line is people are busy with their own work commitments and priorities. To collaborate successfully, each person needs to feel like they are gaining value in investing their time, energy, ideas, and intellect to the party. Whatever that value is, identify it, name it, and make it clear. Additionally, recognise what value *you* are getting from this investment as well, as this is a big source of motivation for collaborating, especially when working solo is your preference.

"After learning about personal differences in personality preferences and the impact that this has on collaboration, a senior manager of a public sector organisation stood in awe as she came to a sudden insight and understanding as to why the people in her team 'don't listen to her'. She realised the differences between her and many of her direct reports, and understood why she wasn't getting through- She wasn't speaking their language. As a senior manager she realised the value in tuning into people's differences and preferences and was able to identify where collaboration was going wrong for her."

3. **Determine the rate-limiting step.** In chemistry, the rate-limiting step is the slowest step in a chemical reaction or process that requires the greatest amount of energy. It is essentially determining the rate at which the process functions and is complete, and regardless of how efficient everything else is, the rate-limiting step is the queen of timing. So, what is your rate-limiting step when trying to collaborate with your team, stakeholders, or suppliers? Is it a person? A protocol or procedure? A technical resource? Team moral or mindsets? Absence of trust? If something is holding you back from creating great collaboration, it is essential to name it and work on it before trying to collaborate. Persistent efforts to make collaboration work when an invisible anchor is bound to your team's feet is discouraging, laborious, counterproductive and time-wasting.

4. **Reveal your cards.** When we have recreated situations where either collaboration or competition were both equally probable outcomes, we have witnessed fear reveal its ugly head in many ways. Fear of failure, fear of losing, fear of having an idea stolen- whatever it was- came out as competitiveness which elicited dishonest, greedy, and possessive behavior when people were trying to achieve their personal or group objectives. Through post discussions, it often came out that people felt a need to lie about their own objectives as a means to maintain a sense of power leverage over the 'competitor'. Observing this situation, I often noticed that both withdrawing the truth and explicitly lying created confusion, time wasting, and in all cases I've seen so far, a failure to achieve the group's objective.

Post discussions also elicited recognition that in order for collaboration to happen and for everybody to gain, there must be a willingness to be open and honest; to show your cards. While this certainly isn't easy, it might be worth at the very least asking yourself, what is holding you back from showing your cards and telling people what you *really* need? Dare yourself to be a role model of openness and transparency; you will often find that people admire this bravery and feel that they have permission to follow suit.

So there you have it. Four insights from our recent client work that bring to life the real challenges of collaboration and what you can do to overcome them. If you forget everything, just remember one thing. In a collaborative space there are 3 key factors: yourself, the 'other', and the context in which you are collaborating in. If you begin with a clear understanding of all three factors then you are, at the very least, starting on the right foot to brilliant collaboration.