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Blue Papers



Growth & Innovation through Collaboration

Collaboration: A hot mess of growth and innovation

Imagine the scene: world famous, British, conductor Charles Hazlewood stands alone on stage. Normally you'd find him surrounded by dozens of musicians, but not today ... Which seems odd because he's giving a TED Talk on collaboration,¹ specifically on the role of trust and mutual respect in a successful collaborative effort.

"I am a conductor, and I'm here today to talk to you about trust. My job depends upon it. There has to be, between me and the orchestra, an unshakable bond of trust, born out of mutual respect, through which we can spin a musical narrative that we all believe in," he says.² Then he slowly raises his hands.

With subtle and silent skill, he summons the strains of a solitary violin from the back of the auditorium. Then another. And another. Soon the hall is filled with a beautiful, soaring melody that swims around the audience as the members of the Scottish Ensemble make their way to the stage, one by one. By the time Hazlewood silently stops the crescendo with the closing of his fist, he has demonstrated the point.

Collaboration can deliver amazing results. But here's the thing; real collaboration is also dangerous.

To many people, collaboration is an overwhelmingly positive word. It brings to mind utopian conditions where everyone gets along and works in harmony to make things happen faster and more efficiently. It's portrayed like working in an office staffed entirely by Care Bears. But that's just not reality.

Real collaboration is about stepping outside of established roles and traditional institutional structures to focus on results. Real collaboration can be messy, it may involve a lot of collisions. Roles overlap, information gets disseminated with little gatekeeping, and authority has a tendency to get usurped by the group as a whole. For many organisations, it pushes them too far out of their comfort zones because it forces them to deal with the 'conflict' that's a natural by-product of effective collaboration.



¹ Charles. Hazlewood. "Charles Hazlewood: Trusting the Ensemble." Video on TED.com. Oct. 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. < http://www.ted.com/talks/charles_hazlewood.html>.

² Ibid.

A great example of collaboration in action is the 'Collaborate'³ initiative from London Southbank University that promotes 'effective and sustainable collaboration between the public, business and social sectors to secure improvement in public service outcomes, build sustainable communities and foster a strong civil society.' Programmes in 2013 included managing the journey from homelessness to housing, managing future demand for public services and enabling more fluid career pathways across public, business and social sectors; this new model certainly steps outside the pure 'organisational' boundaries that will be discussed in this Blue Paper but the principles remain the same: a willingness to be open, share knowledge and information, trust programme partners and taking a look at the bigger picture rather than departmental 'wins.'

Hazlewood describes it this way:

I, as the conductor, have to come to the rehearsal with a cast-iron sense of the outer architecture of that music, within which there is then immense personal freedom for the members of the orchestra to shine. So in order for all this to work, obviously I have got to be in a position of trust. I have to trust the orchestra, and, even more crucially, I have to trust myself.⁴

Effective collaboration at an enterprise level is no different to what Hazlewood is describing. For collaboration to take hold and be effective within an organisation there needs to be a firm foundation of trust that gives employees the confidence to exercise their personal creativity within an 'outer architecture' that outlines the organisation's strategic plan. To be more specific, effective collaboration requires a foundation built from a careful mix of three essential ingredients: trust, embracing conflict, and providing an environment that encourages employees to collide and share ideas. Taking the time to establish all three of those in your organisation will greatly boost the success of your collaborative efforts in solving complex problems, boosting innovation and delivering improved business results.

When you say dangerous, you don't really mean DANGEROUS, do you?

Yes - but not life-threatening! This is really about understanding scope and the cultural impact of embracing collaboration. In order to pull this off, you're going to ask people to change the way they behave, which is not always easy.

³ "Collaborate." South Bank University. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <<http://www.collaboratei.com/about-us.aspx>>.

⁴ Charles. Hazlewood. "Charles Hazlewood: Trusting the Ensemble." Video on TED.com. Oct. 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://www.ted.com/talks/charles_hazlewood.html>.



Collaboration is much more than simply purchasing technology; it's about helping your employees to think differently about how they work, make decisions and communicate.

That's why it's dangerous, because in order to make the kinds of changes necessary to build trust, embrace conflict, and alter the work environment, you inevitably start to cross the line into organisational culture and personal work style. That's also why so many organisations fail to make real collaboration stick. They don't realise the scope of the change they're attempting. So it's important that, right from the start, you take a second to understand the dangerous aspects of collaboration, and the potential personal and organisational stress that comes along with it. Getting a grip on that now will greatly increase your chances of making collaboration work for your organisation.

In her article 'Eight Dangers of Collaboration'⁵ written for the Harvard Business Review (HBR), author Nilofer Merchant points out some of the more dangerous aspects of collaboration within an enterprise. At the top of her list is the impact of ambiguity on individual employees. She explains:

*The fundamental premise of collaboration is that you can use it to solve complex problems that are beyond the function of one domain or expertise. That means that each participant needs to be comfortable with a certain amount of ambiguity. Most people have built their careers - perhaps even their identity - on being the expert. They don't like feeling ignorant.*⁶

Merchant points out that collaboration has a tendency to create the same kind of ambiguity around roles, especially when a collaborative group crosses departments or business units within an organisation. She says:

*Roles and responsibilities in the collaboration space tend not to be hierarchical; they are often fluid, changing from phase to phase of the work. This can be especially hard for senior executives, because it may mean taking off their mantle of being the 'chief of answers' and becoming part of the 'tribe of doing things.'*⁷

It's clear that collaboration can push individuals out of their comfort zone and add an additional layer of ambiguity around roles within the collaboration space,



⁵ Nilofer Merchant. "Eight Dangers of Collaboration." Harvard Business Review. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <<http://blogs.hbr.org/2011/12/eight-dangers-of-collaboration/>>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

both of which can conflict with individual behaviour and, therefore, organisational culture. It's also clear that making the shift from a more segmented or 'siloed' structure to a collaborative environment will initially cause pain around how the organisation makes decisions and shares information. Merchant explains it this way:

*Collaboration means a shift from thinking big ideas alone, and more into the real-time mess of problem solving with others. Shifting work from 'I tell, they do' to a 'We think together' approach will appear at first to be all about talking ... But thinking together closes a gap. By thinking together, people can then act without checking back in because they were there when the decision got made. They've already had the debates about all the tradeoffs that actually make something work. But that means organisations spend more time in the messy and time-consuming up-front process of designing solutions that'll work.*⁸



Merchant points out that information tends to flow freely and often in the collaboration space, which can be daunting for some people. She explains, "... information is rarely left in any silo but is shared and often combined in unexpected ways to reframe problems."⁹ Merchant notes that many people may experience an extreme case of information overload from the free flow of information. Others, who have tended to withhold information as a means of remaining in a position of power, may find the free flow of information "threatening."¹⁰

The long and short of all of this: Realise there is a massive behavioural shift that has to take place in order for collaboration to stick. You can't just buy a piece of software and train people how to use it. This is about people first. Focus on creating an environment of trust, learn how to embrace conflict, and encourage employees to share ideas in order to get the most out of any collaborative tool you put in place.

... Is all this work really worth it?

The short answer is ... Yes! There's no doubt that collaboration can help all kinds of organisations to solve complex problems and boost innovation. 'The

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Nilofer Merchant. "Eight Dangers of Collaboration." *Harvard Business Review*. Dec 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <<http://blogs.hbr.org/2011/12/eight-dangers-of-collaboration/>>.

¹⁰ Ibid

Corporation of the Future¹¹ was a study conducted by Google and Future Foundation that found an 81% correlation between collaboration and innovation.¹² The more you collaborate, the more creative you become as an organisation. However, that same study concluded that, outside of technological considerations, management structures would have to change to accommodate the kind of collaboration required to provide a significant boost in innovation. We're talking about a wide range of changes that includes things like incentives, access to expertise from other departments or locations and changes to the working environment.¹³

In addition, the study makes it abundantly clear that if there is no clear vision from senior management of how the organisation will benefit from collaboration, the potential benefits of a more collaborative organisation are quickly marginalised.¹⁴ The study supports the premise that effective collaboration is as much about trust, embracing conflict and providing the right environment as it is about software and process. It also highlights the business case for investing the time and effort needed to build the foundation for effective collaboration. Put simply, collaboration is the future of innovative enterprise.

So why is collaboration so important for the future? Because there's a real global culture shift going on outside the office and it's happening whether organisations are ready for it or not. As people continue to grow up using services like Facebook, Twitter, and Dropbox, they'll be expecting to take advantage of some of those technologies in the workplace. That same Google study points out that only 12% of the employees surveyed were satisfied with the technology available to them at work, preferring tools that they are already familiar with and use outside of work.¹⁵

So while creating a truly collaborative organisation is a huge undertaking, external technological advances combined with the changing expectations of your future workforce seem to indicate that the organisations of the future will need to be a lot more collaborative than they are now to remain competitive. Aligning your organisation and preparing for a collaborative environment means that, as you begin to implement tools that facilitate sharing across departments and locations, you'll have greater buy-in and a higher degree of utilisation from your



11 "The Corporation of the Future." Google Decisive Decade Report. Nov. 2010. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=1CG4TpXGnVsuFFf4h2pNDvJDpOnEa_djqSq6Qzkfj5Sw>.

12 Ibid

13 Ibid

14 Ibid

15 "The Corporation of the Future." Google Decisive Decade Report. Nov. 2010. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <https://docs.google.com/document/pub?id=1CG4TpXGnVsuFFf4h2pNDvJDpOnEa_djqSq6Qzkfj5Sw>.

staff because the foundation enabling them to confidently collaborate is already in place. That'll increase your ROI on technology investments. More importantly, you just might end up with happier staff doing more productive work. Now wouldn't that be great?

If you're trying to better leverage the expertise of your staff and the accumulated knowledge and creativity of your entire organisation, you need to embrace collaboration. If you want to remain competitive in the future, you need to embrace collaboration. If you want to provide an attractive work environment for future employees raised on Facebook and Twitter, you need to embrace collaboration. Do you see a pattern?

Now that you understand the potential dangers of collaboration, and why it's worth embracing in spite of the foundational work that's required, let's get into how to get started.

Time to wade into the squishy stuff

We've been deliberately staying away from the technology part of the collaboration conversation for a simple reason: Focusing on technology creates a 'build it and they will come' mentality. Simply putting a tool in place and training someone how to use it doesn't motivate them to actually use it to accomplish anything. This is especially true if the learning curve is high or if the tool requires them to change the way they work. The technology is simply the means by which they do their work. Before you can get them to embrace it, you have to change how they work. That's where our three essential ingredients of collaboration come in: trust, conflict and environment.

The importance of trust

Author and consultant Larry Prusak had this to say about trust in a 2011 Harvard Business Review article 'One Thing That Makes Collaboration Work'¹⁶:

If I had to pick the one thing to get right about any collaborative effort, I would choose trust. Yes, trust. More than incentives, technology, roles, missions, or structures, it is trust that makes collaboration really work. There can be collaboration without it, but it won't be very productive or sustainable in the long run.¹⁷

Trust, in a collaborative environment, is essential. As you pull people from

¹⁶ Larry Prusak "One Thing That Makes Collaboration." Harvard Business Review. July 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/07/one_thing_that_makes_collaboration.html.

¹⁷ Larry Prusak. "One Thing That Makes Collaboration." Harvard Business Review. July 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/07/one_thing_that_makes_collaboration.html.



different parts of the organisation together to work on a particular task, you're creating a new dynamic. As we mentioned before, experts may no longer be experts in this new context. Senior leaders are not necessarily there to make a decision, but to participate in getting the work done. Roles may be switched around or completely ambiguous. There's only one thing that will hold a team together under those circumstances ... and that's trust.

Consider, again, conductor Charles Hazlewood. What happens in his scenario if the orchestra doesn't trust his direction? He explains:

When you're in a position of not trusting, what do you do? You overcompensate. And in my game, that means you overgesticulate. You end up like some kind of rabid windmill. And the bigger your gesture gets, the more ill-defined, blurry and, frankly, useless it is to the orchestra. You become a figure of fun. There's no trust anymore, only ridicule.¹⁸

No one wants to be ridiculed. That's exactly why trust is so essential within an organisation. If everyone's afraid that they're going to be ridiculed when they suggest something new, you can guarantee that innovation will be virtually non-existent. Without trust, collaboration will become less and less productive because no one's willing to take a risk. Building trust within your organisation is a serious commitment, requiring a lot of time and energy to cultivate, but it's an essential part of effective collaboration.

In his article, Prusak outlines a few key strategies for cultivating trust:

- 1. Promote trustworthy people.** According to Prusak, this is the strongest signal you can send employees about the fact that trust is important.
- 2. Work with your own employees.** In Prusak's view, this extends beyond your direct reports to staff further down the organisational structure. Spend time working closely with them.
- 3. Publicise the costs of distrust.** Prusak believes that lack of trust, both internally and externally, increases transaction costs. Distrust, in his view, leads to the kinds of watching and recording often performed by lawyers, accountants and additional managers. All of this increases overhead.



¹⁸ Charles Hazlewood. "Charles Hazlewood: Trusting the Ensemble." Video on TED.com. Oct. 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://www.ted.com/talks/charles_hazlewood.html>.

4. **Give staff a reason beyond their wages to come to work.** In Prusak's words, "... embodying your strategic vision in a common narrative that everyone can believe in."¹⁹
5. **Reduce pay inequality.** This is not simple or straightforward. But Prusak believes this can have a huge impact on building trust. As he puts it, "... it's hard to establish trust between people supposedly working for a common good when one party is paid 400 times more than another."²⁰

Consider these steps and how they may apply to where you work. Some of them are straightforward and some are not. The key is to think about how you can communicate to your staff that trust matters. Think about how you can build trust throughout the organisation and create a firm foundation for productive collaboration.

Embracing conflict

"The fact is, you can't improve collaboration until you've addressed the issue of conflict,"²¹ say Jeff Weiss and Jonathon Hughes, partners in Vantage Partners, a consulting firm based in Boston USA that focuses on strategic relationship management. In their Harvard Business Review article 'Want Collaboration? Accept- and Actively Manage – Conflict'²² Weiss and Hughes go on to say:

*This can come as a surprise to even the most experienced executives, who generally don't fully appreciate the inevitability of conflict in complex organisations. And even if they do recognise this, many mistakenly assume that efforts to increase collaboration will significantly reduce that conflict, when in fact some of these efforts - for example, restructuring initiatives - actually produce more of it.*²³

Conflict is the root cause of most collaboration failures. Consider the case of the 60s mega-group the Beatles or how about Simon and Garfunkel? See what we

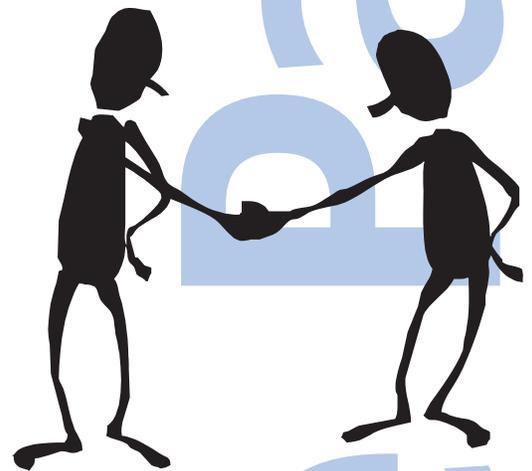
¹⁹ Larry Prusak. "One Thing That Makes Collaboration." Harvard Business Review. July 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/07/one_thing_that_makes_collaboration.html>.

²⁰ Larry Prusak. "One Thing That Makes Collaboration." Harvard Business Publishing, July 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/07/one_thing_that_makes_collaboration.html>

²¹ Jeff Weiss and Jonathon Hughes. "Want Collaboration? Accept - and Actively Manage - Conflict." Harvard Business Review. March 2005. Web. 20 Jan. 2014. <<http://hbr.org/2005/03/want-collaboration-accept-and-actively-manage-conflict/ar/1>>.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid



mean? The point is that most organisations, instead of getting to the root cause, deal with the symptoms of the conflict. And the symptoms lead them to perfectly logical, but totally ineffective methods for improving their collaborative efforts. Weiss and Hughes highlight a few classic mistakes that organisations make when trying to improve collaboration.

'Teaming'

In this case, organisations think that collaboration can be improved by taking employees through teamwork training. They cover common subjects like clarifying roles and responsibilities, coming together around common goals, etc. But Weiss and Hughes point out that this approach, while perfectly good, is the solution to the wrong problem. They explain:

First, the most critical breakdowns in collaboration typically occur not on actual teams but in the rapid and unstructured interactions between different groups within the organisation. For example, someone from R&D will spend weeks unsuccessfully trying to get help from manufacturing to run a few tests on a new prototype. Meanwhile, people in manufacturing begin to complain about arrogant engineers from R&D expecting them to drop everything to help with another one of R&D's pet projects. Clearly, the need for collaboration extends to areas other than a formal team.²⁴

Teamwork training doesn't solve the problem because it doesn't address how to deal with conflicting business functions and departmental goals, which is a critical part of successfully working across organisational boundaries.

Incentives

Reward collaborative behaviour and you'll get more collaborative behaviour. That seems logical, yes? In practice, it doesn't usually work that way though. Weiss and Hughes explain the discrepancy this way:

An incentive is too blunt an instrument to enable optimal resolution of the hundreds of different trade-offs that need to be made in a complex organisation. What's more, overemphasis on incentives can create a culture in which people say, 'If the company wanted me to do that, they would



²⁴ Jeff Weiss and Jonathon Hughes. "Want Collaboration? Accept - and Actively Manage - Conflict." Harvard Business Review. March 2005. Web. 20 Jan. 2014. <<http://hbr.org/2005/03/want-collaboration-accept-and-actively-manage-conflict/ar/1>>.

build it into my comp plan.’ Ironically, focusing on incentives as a means to encourage collaboration can end up undermining it.²⁵

In short, it’s often the case that the extra effort required to work with individuals in other parts of the organisation, both in terms of time and potential frustration, outweigh the potential reward. So, not surprisingly, employees choose to focus on their own individual work instead of collaborating.

Structure

This is a classic mistake; the belief that if you create opportunities for people to get together, collaboration will just happen.

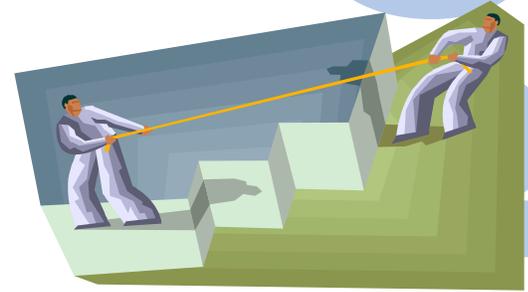
Structure’s a pretty broad term that includes all kinds of things like purchasing software, creating cross-functional teams or developing processes that pull various people or departments together to perform key functions or to make critical decisions.

Weiss and Hughes sum it up succinctly, “... bringing people together is very different from getting them to collaborate.”²⁶

They provide an illustration in which a company develops an internal software system for submitting IT support requests. The point of the system is to eliminate conflict related to prioritisation between department managers and to enable IT to service the organisation’s needs while efficiently utilising their resources - a perfectly logical structural approach. Weiss and Hughes explain what happens next:

Despite painstaking process design, the results are disappointing. To avoid the inevitable conflicts between business units and IT over project prioritisation, managers in the business units quickly learn to bring their requests to those they know in the IT organization rather than entering the requests into the new system. Consequently, IT professionals assume that any project in the system is a lower priority - further discouraging use of the system. People’s inability to deal effectively with conflict has undermined a new process specifically designed to foster organisational collaboration.²⁷

The real lesson here is that conflict is not something to be avoided. Conflict is as essential to effective collaboration as trust. They work hand-in-hand to foster



²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Jeff Weiss and Jonathon Hughes. “Want Collaboration? Accept - and Actively Manage - Conflict.” Harvard Business Review. March 2005. Web. 20 Jan. 2014. <<http://hbr.org/2005/03/want-collaboration-accept-and-actively-manage-conflict/ar/1>>.

conditions for real innovation. Weiss and Hughes explain the role of conflict this way:

The disagreements sparked by differences in perspective, competencies, access to information, and strategic focus within a company actually generate much of the value that can come from collaboration across organisational boundaries. Clashes between parties are the crucibles in which creative solutions are developed and wise trade-offs among competing objectives are made. So instead of trying simply to reduce disagreements, senior executives need to embrace conflict and, just as important, institutionalise mechanisms for managing it.²⁸

Give conflict a big hug

So what can you do to make your organisation more adept at embracing and dealing with conflict? Weiss and Hughes provide some clear techniques that can help create a culture that realises the collaborative benefits of conflict. They divide their suggestions into two different categories: managing disagreements at the point of conflict and managing conflict upon escalation.

How to manage disagreements at the point of conflict

Weiss and Hughes outline three components that, if implemented, can help to create a culture in which your employees aren't afraid to deal with conflict and, in fact, embrace it as an opportunity to make decisions that lead to improved results for the organisation.

- 1. Have a common method for resolving conflict.** There are lots of different methods for conflict resolution, but the key according to Weiss and Hughes is to have clear steps for employees to follow and to have the conflict resolution process integrated into the other essential business processes of the organisation. Don't allow it to be a separate function, because that increases the chances that it'll disappear into the background if it's not actively pushed by management. The goal is to have your conflict resolution process become a regular part of business activities like creating a proposal for integrated services, working on R&D prototypes, etc.



- 2. Provide criteria for making trade-offs.** Providing clear guidance

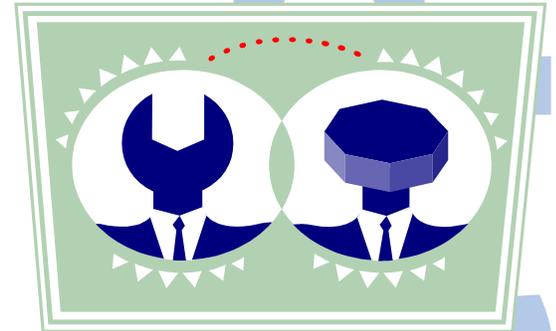
for employees on how to approach the inevitable trade-offs that result from dealing with competing priorities can greatly improve collaboration within your organisation. Weiss and Hughes point out that this isn't necessarily easy, but providing context for employees helps in key ways. First, it shows that management understands conflict is part of running a complex organisation. Second, it gives your employees an objective focus to guide them into productive conversations about how to reach a solution together.

- 3. Use escalating conflict as an opportunity for coaching.** In most organisations, the natural tendency is to kick conflicts up the management chain for supervisors to address. The result: managers who are removed from the conflict spend their time trying to resolve it. Not ideal by any means. Instead of falling prey to that cycle, Weiss and Hughes suggest investing that time into working with the employee experiencing the conflict directly. Resist the temptation to try and solve the problem and, instead, coach the employee on other courses of action or potential outcomes to investigate. It takes more time up front, but eventually employees begin to deal with the conflicts on their own without involving management.

How to manage conflict upon escalation

Not every conflict can be resolved directly by those involved. Sometimes conflicts can become complex and they'll need to be resolved higher up the hierarchical chain. The key to managing conflict when it's escalated up the management chain, according to Weiss and Hughes, is to not only make sure it's resolved constructively, but to take the opportunity to model desired behaviours, too.

- 1. Have a requirement of joint escalation.** This is a straightforward concept. Instead of each individual involved in a conflict going to their respective manager and escalating the situation, which creates a series of segmented viewpoints and solutions, Weiss and Hughes suggest a process for coordinated escalation. Present the disagreement jointly to the appropriate manager or managers. Why is that a good idea? They say it helps to eliminate the surprise and suspicion related to a one-sided escalation, which is what usually causes damage to internal relationships.
- 2. Managers should resolve escalated conflicts directly with their counterparts.** This is another straightforward suggestion. Weiss and



Hughes recommend a formal, codified policy in which managers agree to handle escalated disputes directly with each other. This avoids a few things. Firstly, they don't make the issue worse by kicking it even further up the management chain. Secondly, it avoids the negative effects of a unilateral decision from someone higher up in the organisation, which frequently breeds resentment and could potentially make future conflicts more severe.

- 3. Make the process transparent.** A common mistake is to 'hand down the decision' once it's been made by a manager with no explanation other than, "Here it is. Now get this done." Weiss and Hughes suggest taking time to explain the trade-offs that were weighed as part of the decision and explaining the process used to resolve the conflict, will go a long way in garnering trust. In addition, it gives employees guidance on how to address the conflicts they face as part of their daily work.

The role of environment

We've now covered the roles of both trust and conflict in setting the stage for effective collaboration. Working on those two elements will help you build a strong foundation for collaboration on an enterprise level, giving your staff the confidence to present new ideas and a path for dealing with the potential conflicts that those new ideas create. The next step is to provide an environment that helps facilitate collaboration. (We're going for the collaboration equivalent of pouring lighter fluid on a BBQ.) The goal is serious collaborative heat accompanied by an amazing display of brightness.

In many ways, the role of environment is really as simple as the illustration implies. The best thing you can hope to accomplish is to provide regular opportunities for a diverse group of people to collide and share what they're up to. For proof of that concept, take a look at author Steven Johnson's 2010 TED Talk 'Where good Ideas Come From.'²⁹ Johnson specialises in studying the intersection of science, technology and personal experience. In this TED Talk, Johnson talks about where good ideas come from and how environment is a critical contributor to the generation of really good ideas.

To explain why environment is important, Johnson travels way back to the 1650's to study the role of the coffeehouse in helping to birth the Enlightenment. He explains, "It was a space where people would get together from different



²⁹ Steven Johnson. "Steven Johnson: Where Good Ideas Come From." Video on TED.com. Sept. 2010. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://www.ted.com/talks/steven_johnson_where_good_ideas_come_from.html>.

backgrounds, different fields of expertise and share ... and an astonishing number of innovations from this period have a coffeehouse somewhere in their story.”³⁰

The coffeehouse became a catalyst for collisions. People would engage in conversation, share ideas and refine their concepts. Johnson goes on to share some qualitative data that adds weight to this argument. He references a study conducted by researcher Kevin Dunbar. Dunbar went around to a series of science labs and recorded every aspect of their work. Johnson describes what Dunbar discovered:

*[A]lmost all of the important breakthrough ideas did not happen alone in the lab, in front of the microscope. They happened at the conference table at the weekly lab meeting, when everybody got together and shared their kind of latest data and findings, oftentimes when people shared the mistakes they were having, the error, the noise in the signal they were discovering. And something about that environment - and I've started calling it the 'liquid network,' where you have lots of different ideas that are together, different backgrounds, different interests, jostling with each other, bouncing off each other - that environment is, in fact, the environment that leads to innovation.*³¹



Collaboration will require an environment that allows people to collide and share ideas, whether that is in person or virtually. The collisions are what lead to the “Eureka!” moments that can drive innovation. There’s a reason Steve Jobs famously put the only set of bathrooms in the entire Pixar office in the building’s atrium. Pixar’s Brad Bird, the director of The Incredibles and Ratatouille, said, “The atrium initially might seem like a waste of space ... but Steve realised that when people run into each other, when they make eye contact, things happen.”³²

In your office, consider whether the environment gives people a chance to collide across departments. Do you have a virtual environment that allows employees in different locations to collide? Those collisions are an essential part of effective collaboration. As Johnson puts it, “Chance favours the connected mind.”³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Steven Johnson. “Steven Johnson: Where Good Ideas Come From.” Video on TED.com. Sept. 2010. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://www.ted.com/talks/steven_johnson_where_good_ideas_come_from.html>.

³² Jonah Lehrer. “Steve Jobs: Technology Alone Is Not Enough.” The New Yorker. Condé Nast, 7 Oct. 2011. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/10/steve-jobs-pixar.html>>.

³³ Steven Johnson. “Steven Johnson: Where Good Ideas Come From.” Video on TED.com. Sept. 2010. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://www.ted.com/talks/steven_johnson_where_good_ideas_come_from.html>.

Conclusion

True collaboration can be 'dangerous,' but only if you don't understand the reasons why it either succeeds or fails. Collaboration is not a by-product of software. It doesn't happen because you train people to work in a team. Collaboration doesn't happen because you switch to an open plan office. Real collaboration is the result of mutual trust, the ability to embrace conflict and an environment that encourages employees to collide and share ideas.

It's not necessarily easy. But taking the time to do the groundwork to create trust and embrace conflict will gradually create a culture that's built on collaboration, effective collaboration that extends beyond teams and across departments and locations. If you can get there, you'll have created the conditions that lead to innovation and a truly competitive advantage that puts your organisation in poll position for growth.

The reason to strive for more collaboration, after all, is to better leverage your staff and the collective knowledge of the entire organisation to become more innovative and more productive. That's your real return on the investment made in building trust, embracing conflict, and creating an environment that allows ideas to collide. Ultimately, you reap the rewards through new products or services that get developed at a faster pace than would've been possible if they'd been developed by employees or departments working in isolation.

If you do it right, it'll boost your output and help you blow past your competition.



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