Creating Collaborative Projects

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Podcast transcript

Hi, I'm Courtney Moon, with Training and Organizational Development. Today I would like to speak to you about how to create collaborative projects.

To collaborate means to work with others to achieve a common goal. It's about working together to get better results. Collaborations occur for a number of reasons, such as, working on large scale projects and research endeavors, and they occur both inside teams as well as across different work units and disciplines. The benefits of collaboration are numerous. It produces better decisions, better results, higher quality team relationships, increased organizational learning and personal satisfaction.

The first step for leaders is to determine opportunities for collaboration. Although collaboration has many advantages, overuse or using it at the wrong times can potentially cause problems. As we know, collaboration takes time. It involves a group of people, multiple meetings and many decisions. And, rarely do people have just one priority to focus on, so the time commitment a good collaboration will require may put a burden on some.

Once you've made the decision to collaborate it's worthwhile considering how those involved will respond to it. What you may find out is that some people are not willing to collaborate. As a leader being able to spot the barriers early allows you to identify solutions for working through these hurdles to ensure the efforts are successful. Let's take a look at some common barriers to collaboration:

The first types of barriers fall into a category known as **resistance based on real or perceived threats**.

Here we see things such as **knowledge hoarding**, when people fear they will lose power if they share their knowledge and as a result they hoard or protect what they know. We see this occur often. People avoid sharing what they know for fear that someone else will learn what they know and they will no longer be in a specialized position.

Another barrier associated with resistance based on real or perceived threats is the **fear of revealing shortcomings.** When people don't ask for help, it's often because they don't want to appear vulnerable, incompetent or lose credibility. Of course, not asking for help—or not being candid about what we know or don't know—hurts our ability to collaborate effectively.

The second category of barriers is lack of **willingness & ability**.

Being able to work independently is a good thing, but any strength pushed to its limit can become a weakness. When this occurs we get the **silo effect**, which is when people don't want to collaborate and they prefer to work on their own. Often the mindset here is "My way is the only way or is the better way", and they staunchly avoid opportunities to work with others. Sometimes folks believe—and often rightly so—that they can do something far faster working by themselves. Because this is often true, it can lead to the perception that the end result, when working alone, is better than a collaborative effort. It's important to remember, though, that faster does not necessarily mean better quality.

Lack of time is a barrier that resonates with many. People may feel as if they do not have time for collaboration.

Weak ties can also pose an obstacle. People find it harder to work with others they do not know or haven't built a rapport with. When this occurs it's more difficult to transfer knowledge or be willing to collaborate.

The next barrier is **conflict aversion**. Rarely is collaboration free of conflict. Conflict occurs due to differences in needs, objectives, values and expectations of outcomes. Conflict occurs because we differ from one another—this is completely normal. In fact conflict, when handled appropriately, can be a good thing. It can lead to new, creative solutions and ideas. Conflict aversion stifles communication and creativity. In order to have a successful collaboration, you need people to be comfortable speaking their opinions and insights, even if they differ from others (including your own!)

The last barrier to collaboration related to lack of willingness and ability is **lack of trust**. This is a big one. When mistrust is present folks experience difficulty working with each other.

When we recognize the barriers, we can be sure to put in place some practices that help address or overcome them. So, let's discuss some solutions that can help.

First, while it may sound obvious, it's important to identify an opportunity for people to collaborate. This means having a unifying goal. The goal should be simple to understand and concrete enough that everyone understands exactly what result they're expected to achieve. The overarching goal of collaboration is to achieve something better than you can on your own. The goal should also stir passion and serve as inspiration to those involved. If the collaboration doesn't have the potential to yield superior results people will be less willing to participate.

Once a unifying goal has been identified, put in place a process for how the collaboration will work. No one wants to be part of a collaborative effort that is vague and directionless. Establish how you will communicate, monitor performance and provide feedback while working together. Also determine ahead of time how decisions will be made. Collaborative effort often utilizes consensus for decision making. If it turns out consensus is not possible, be clear about what happens –that is, when you'll make a decision based on the best feedback and input from the group. Being clear about this upfront prevents endless meetings and helps avoid a stand-off because no shared decision, that everyone can support, has been identified.

Next, determine who will be a part of the collaboration—that is, who has the expertise and knowledge needed to achieve the desired results? Once the people have been identified, it's also important to define their roles and responsibilities.

The first meeting with the group is important and sets the tone for the collaboration. If the group is made up of cross functional employees use the first meeting to make introductions and discuss each person's role and what they bring to the group. In this initial meeting review the collaboration logistics—how often you will meet, how you will communicate, how decisions will be made, timeline of the project and discuss conflict communication. To achieve the desired results of the collaboration people must be able to explore issues and debate points in a constructive manner. Setting some ground rules early for how to manage conflict is useful. Some potential ground rules you might want to consider include:

- One person speaks at a time
- Don't interrupt others to state your point of view

- Listen to one another and try to understand the other person's point of view before responding
- What is said in the room stays in the room, unless there is agreement regarding who needs to know further information
- Keep interactions respectful, avoid put-downs and name calling

Lastly, let's discuss the role of trust. In many ways this is the most important element and, at the same time, benefit of collaboration. Trust is the foundation of a successful collaboration but it does take time to develop trust. A benefit of collaboration is that it has the ability to increase trust between people and teams. Working together on a shared goal encourages team members to share their knowledge. It also can strengthen relationships and help them learn how to work together. With each successful collaboration the depth and breadth of trust will continue to increase.

Albert Einstein said "The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them." Collaboration isn't always easy. The barriers we discussed can prove to be very challenging to overcome at times, but the payoff of a successful collaboration is powerful: better results, higher satisfaction, and a stronger organization.

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