

What Is Wrong with Collaboration: The Need for Leadership

By Michael Astle, Executive Thought Leadership

Collaboration is necessary to business success, right? It is if you listen to the 394 executives around the globe who participated in an Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) survey and report called “Collaboration: transforming the way business works.” Although they currently work within the confines of their own spheres—functions, locations, or organizations—globalization, along with its increased opportunities for new markets and productivity, as well as competition, will require them to collaborate across all these borders within the next three years.

Employees Want to Collaborate

Collaboration is easy, isn't it? Many executives must think so, judging by the way they presumptively mandate collaboration in their organizations. But you'll get a different view if you speak to the people who are trying to collaborate. They often tell of failed collaborations that waste resources and even create resentment and a determination to “go it alone.” They cite lack of common goals, miscommunication, perceived inequities, distrust, insufficient resources, and a lack of incentives as the reasons for the failures.

In short, when a collaboration effort fails, the finger of fault often points at the organization's leaders. Without the right leadership, collaboration is syncategorematic—like a predicate without a subject, an action with no one acting.

According to the EIU survey, employees want to collaborate. They say they have the right culture of trust and desire to partner. Executives and employees agree that leadership, incentives, processes, and metrics are the missing ingredients.

Use the Seven Ingredients of Successful Collaborations

The following are not secret ingredients. These suggestions apply to both internal collaborations across business functions and those that span distance and organizations.

1. *Create a formal process to find the right collaboration partners.* You have a process for selecting suppliers and other vendors. Set up a similar process for selecting partners with whom you will collaborate. Identify your goals and the necessary capabilities of the partner. Create a formal process for testing and establishing trust. And employ a consultant that specializes in finding the right partners for your objectives.

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2. *Plan, set goals, and follow up.* Seven of 10 collaborations fail when they don't begin with careful planning and provide proper follow-up, according to Gene Slowinski, professor in the Graduate School of Management at the Rutgers University School of Business. Firms that identify joint goals, allocate sufficient resources, and identify roles and responsibilities enjoy the exact opposite results: 70 percent succeed.
3. *Communicate openly, clearly, and frequently.* Right in the planning stage, create the means you will need to communicate throughout the collaboration. Consider the information that will be shared and build the necessary channels. For example, the staffing firm Aramark discovered that managers were extending employment offers to candidates who had already received offers from other parts of the organization. To rectify the overlap, Aramark developed a shared, real-time recruitment database that gave all hiring managers a view to where candidates were in the hiring process, as well as the ability to see candidate details and set up interviews.

Communicate the purpose, goals, processes, responsibilities, and expectations of the collaboration to all participants. Twenty percent of employees in the EIU survey claimed their organizations failed to provide a compelling reason for collaborating.

Keep the channels of communications always open. Successful leaders spend as much as one-third of their time on the phone with team members, according to a study called "Can Absence Make a Team Grow Stronger" reported in the Harvard Business Review May 1, 2004.

4. *Trust your partners.* In addition to contractual implements such as nondisclosure statements, develop a formal process to test and learn to trust your collaboration partner's integrity and competence. Include reputation, recommendations of other trusted partners, market reports, financial standing, who the partner partners with, referrals, independent testimonials, and so on.
5. *Lead.* Now we're back to the main point of this article. Respondents to the EIU survey indicated deficient leadership, incentives, processes, and metrics as the main obstacles to collaboration. As a leader, inspire your team members to collaborate. Educate them on the benefits and goals of the collaboration. Define processes based on known successes so your employees don't reinvent the process each time. Though you'll find employees want to collaborate, doing so successfully is not intuitive. They need to understand where to start, how to set goals in line with your objectives, what to do when conflicts arise, and how to divide responsibilities, among others.

Collaboration requires executives who lead with goals, metrics, and incentives.

6. *Establish metrics.* The EIU survey revealed that many organizations do not measure their success. Maybe they believe collaborations will succeed naturally. We know they won't. Maybe metrics are difficult to define. This is probably true, but with your objectives defined, you are a giant step closer.

7. *Pay for success.* Employee incentives that you attach to your objectives and metrics and communicate at the beginning of the collaboration process will pay off in the end, but without incentives your vision may become just a dream.

Lead the Way

Firms will continue to globalize, according to another report by the EIU called "Foresight 2020." Business functions are atomizing into parts of the world where they are completed most efficiently and effectively, opportunities are opening in markets where firms have little experience, and competitors are rising from places you've never expected competition. The role of collaboration will only grow in importance, becoming a basic tenet of any successful organization.

Collaborating is not an activity that can be dictated by managers. It requires leaders who identify the right partners, paint their vision, form the right processes, communicate often, develop trust, and, most importantly, lead the way with goals, metrics, and incentives.



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