

# Collaboration Conundrum

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**The collaboration conundrum is that the very things you do to increase collaboration can effectively make things worse.**

## Part 1\*

Occasionally Effective collaboration does in fact drive business results while simultaneously energizing and engaging the organization. We have been fortunate to work with a number of cross functional teams who had a focused goal and left the agenda from their individual functions at the door. We have been part of great improvements in time to market, brilliant change plans, significant reductions in handoffs, notable cost savings, and great product development. But these are the exception, not the norm.

One of the best ways to illustrate challenges associated with collaboration is to begin with a real life example. This same scenario repeats itself in many organizations.

Rachel was the CEO of a well-known retail chain. The good news: the business was growing quickly and overall results were positive. The bad news: it was evident that

the more the company grew, the more difficult it was to connect corporate projects and initiatives with the needs of the stores. Store managers felt inundated with programs and processes from multiple enterprise functions. The timing and content of what they received never seemed coordinated with the various corporate groups and the store managers ended up managing the ongoing mess. Rachel was convinced that if things didn't change, their ability to keep growing would be compromised.

The CEO worked with the HR department and leadership team to establish cultural values she felt were critical to success. First on the list was collaboration. Rachel strongly believed that many of the organization's challenges would be corrected if communication between corporate groups improved. Rachel and her team completed a well thought out and thorough roll out of the cultural values, with collaboration as the key point of emphasis. Posters featuring these values were displayed in conference rooms and other prominent locations.

A year later there was more good news and more bad news. On the positive side, it was evident that people from different groups were making more of an effort to work together. On the other hand, the push for collaboration resulted in more meetings, slower decision making, and confusion regarding who needed to be

involved in which decisions. The desire to be more collaborative generated all kinds of extra activity.

At The RBL Group, virtually every organization we work with stresses the importance of increasing the quality of collaboration in order to improve business results. Many of these same organizations have experiences very similar to Rachel's. Collaboration done well has huge benefits, both in terms of business success and employee engagement. Alternatively, when these initiatives are rolled out in a general way, that is without focus and without a process, it often makes things worse. This environment is often characterized by work overload, excessive meetings, and bogged down decision making. The collaboration conundrum is that the very things you do to increase collaboration can effectively make things worse.

## Part 2

Effective collaboration does in fact drive results. When colleagues work together effectively, the process is highly engaging and exhilarating. At The RBL Group, we have been fortunate to work with a number of cross-functional teams who had a focused goal and left the agenda from their individual functions at the door. We have witnessed great improvements

\* The Collaboration Conundrum Parts 1 and 2 were originally two separate articles.

in time-to-market, brilliant change plans, significant reductions in handoffs, notable cost savings, and great product development, all due to collaboration. Unfortunately, these positive results seem to be the exception, not the norm.

As illustrated in Part 1, the conundrum with collaborations is the more we push for collaboration, the more we see wasted time and slower decision-making. Often when organizations identify collaboration as a core value or capability, the message gets confused and collaboration becomes the goal instead of a means to an end. It becomes a stimulus that results in more people being involved in more meetings and slower decision making. In contrast, companies who are effective at collaboration prioritize and focus these efforts. They recognize that as powerful as collaboration can be, it also has a cost.

Over time we have learned principles and lessons that help manage the conundrum and allow collaboration to be either effective. We begin by making a few decisions, guided by simple principles, which help determine the optimal approach to use.

## Decisions

### 1) Is there a need for a project team or can the problem be solved by key individuals interacting more effectively?

How you answer this question has huge implications for both the form and the success of your collaborative effort. Can this be solved with key individuals working one on one or does it require a team from different parts of the organization? Some collaboration needs can be solved by assigning clear roles, clear decision rights, and an agreement on when interaction needs to occur. On the other hand, some collaboration needs are best served by forming project teams. Either way, the key is determining which approach is the simplest solution to meet the need. It is worth noting that if you have a need for a lot of project teams, you may have an organization design problem.

### 2) Are we looking for an innovative breakthrough or more effective coordination and sharing perspectives from different parts of the organization?

Most would agree that work requiring teams also demands some type of process. The process is different depending upon the desired outcomes. Most collaboration efforts fall into one of two general categories: information sharing/coordination or innovative breakthroughs/creative solutions. The process you use for coordination type activities is more structured and narrowing. It should be designed to converge on answers. The process you use for innovation and creativity should be more open ended. It is driven by less structure and divergence to examine and explore new alternatives.

## Principles

**Don't confuse means and ends:** Frequently when organizations identify collaboration as a core value or capability, the message gets confused and collaboration becomes the goal. It can become justification for more people being involved in more meetings and slower decision making. Our conclusion is very simple; less is more. Collaboration is a means to an end, not an end. Companies who are effective at collaboration prioritize collaboration efforts. I suggest you do so based upon the impact on customers and other external stakeholders.

**Create a superordinate goal:** Although this sounds very elementary, surprisingly it is often overlooked. Many collaboration efforts involve bringing people together from different parts of the organization with different agendas and competing goals. Taking time to identify a goal that is bigger and more impactful than what they can accomplish on their own is a key starting point. A goal that is well articulated is critical to inspiring participants to rise above current thinking and move beyond political turf protection.

**Involve the right people:** The tendency in many organizations is to involve people primarily based upon their hierarchical role. While this criteria may prove adequate, subject matter expertise often matters more. Look for individuals who have a combination of attributes including: expertise, openness, team players, and high interest in improvement.

**Alignment matters:** Years ago, Steven Kerr wrote an article titled "On the Folly of Rewarding A While Hoping for B." Often that is what happens with collaboration. We want folks to work well together and reward the opposite. The way we organize work, the behavior we recognize, and what we reward need to be considered to improve collaboration.

### View collaboration as a capability and process first, then as an individual skill:

The skill of being collaborative is valuable in all organization settings and who doesn't like to work with people who are effective collaborators? The problem is, training everyone to be collaborative might be helpful but it will not fix the problem. The key is developing the capability as an organization which includes having a clear collaboration process, systems that reinforce collaboration, and having people with good skills.

**Technology is an enabler, not an answer:** If you Google "Collaboration Tools" you will find thousands of technology solutions. While some find technology helpful, it is limited by how effectively you focus your collaboration efforts and how much clarity you have around who needs to be involved at what phase and who owns which decisions. Those who treat technology as an answer are often disappointed.

A number of approaches and tools exist that help improve collaboration. Some organizations focus on developing the skill of collaboration in individuals. While this might be helpful, it is not sufficient. If you apply the principles above, you will be on your way to developing collaboration as organization capability.

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