

the 21st century leader new skills



# The collaborative advantage

The rewards of a collaborative culture are significant,  
but so is the effort to get there

by Yosh Beier

**O**ver the past few decades, the nature of work—what we do, how we do it and with whom—has transformed radically, triggered by technological and business model innovation, globalization, and changing expectations among the next generation of employees.

Just responding to these changes alone significantly taxes organizational leaders. But at the heart of these challenges is how effectively leaders can address the “human side” of work, which—beyond some lip service—is rarely properly addressed.

In a dramatically complex world where no one person has all the answers, leaders need enhanced collaborative skills on top of technical expertise. Collaborative capacity—the ability to collaborate and co-create—has become the new competitive frontier for organizations. Work culture has changed, and with it the role of a typical leader. Driving innovation without disrupting daily operations already fully consumes leaders’ attention. They too often have little attention left to absorb and decipher trends and complex data. Professional communicators find themselves increasingly in the role of consultants to executives. In that role, they need to remind and challenge leaders to establish organizational cultures that foster collaborative capacity and turn it into competitive advantage.

### **What collaborative leaders get**

Companies that are able to organize collaborative practices and distributed decision making outperform their peers. Consider Pixar, whose incredible track record speaks for itself. Asked about the company’s “secret sauce,” Ed Catmull, Ph.D., the president of the animation film studio, told the

*Harvard Business Review* that “everyone must have the freedom to communicate with everyone” and “it must be safe for everyone to offer ideas”—key elements to Pixar’s approach to fostering collaborative creativity.

But such a culture cannot be mandated; it requires authentic role modeling from leaders—as well as years of committed culture change efforts. In his landmark article “Leadership That Gets Results” in the *Harvard Business Review*, Daniel Goleman posited six leadership styles and their impact on outcome. Among those six styles—command and control, pace-setting, visionary, coaching, affiliative, and democratic—only two were shown to have a negative impact on work atmosphere: command and control, and pace-setting. Those two styles also happen to be most commonly experienced in hierarchical and power-focused organizations.

Collaborative leadership focuses on the remaining four people-centered leadership styles. The power of this approach has been confirmed in Google’s Project Oxygen, the company’s effort to build a rigorous model for improving the performance of managers. By applying its data-mining genius and digging through thousands of performance reviews and other data evaluating managers’ effectiveness, according to a 2011 *New York Times* article, Google found that the key differentiator between managers doing a good job and those doing a great job were qualities that make a manager accessible to his or her staff. These included:

- Listening actively.
- Coaching staff.
- Supporting staff members’ career development.

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- Being interested in staff members' success and well-being.

### What leaders can do

The process of building a collaborative culture starts with some powerful questions: How much is it worth to your organization? What might the effect be of not having guarded and conflict-avoidant conversations dominated by functional interest and limited thinking? What might it be worth, instead, to have team members align around shared vision and strategy, effectively negotiate multiple perspectives, make and implement quality decisions faster, and trust each other enough to hold each other accountable?

As the role of leaders has changed, so has the role of communicators. Rather than organizing external or top-down communication, communicators can and must create environments through meetings, presentations, events and so on that encourage and enforce collaborative practices. Communicators can guide executives they consult with toward concrete collaborative attitudes and behaviors in a variety of leadership contexts. Among internal stakeholders, communicators can use their influence and visibility to model and to inspire key attributes of collaboration.

If it sounds like it might be worth the effort, how do you get there efficiently? Our firm, Collaborative Coaching, and the customer and employee research firm Resonance Strategies combined our experience in organizational effectiveness and employee research to study what motivates or undermines collaboration on teams. We found key behaviors that leaders can focus on to improve the collaborative capacity of their teams and organizations. In reading through the behaviors here, consider where you might naturally focus your attention,

which of these aspects deserve more of the limelight in explicit or implicit communication, and which of these aspects you wish to bring to the attention of leaders in your organization.

- **Focusing both on tasks and relationships.** Team members flexibly adjust their approach toward getting tasks accomplished—either by supporting task and role clarity or by strengthening relationships.
- **Sharing information openly.** Team members are easily accessible to each other, generously provide contextual information, and openly share rationales for their decisions as much as difficulties and setbacks.
- **Sharing personal stories.** Individuals provide meaningful personal information that fosters human connection, and actively work to strengthen their relationships to build the trust and connections required for having difficult conversations.
- **Building on each other's ideas.** Team members acknowledge and include the ideas of others during brainstorming and problem-solving sessions—and actively look for connections.
- **Addressing conflict in a timely way.** Conflict is addressed as or soon after it emerges. Rather than using “undercover” forms of venting or influencing, team members address their differing opinions or needs directly with each other.
- **Discussing and clarifying decision-making norms.** The team deliberately discusses and clarifies how decisions are made and what decision-making roles exist on the team. There is clarity about what decisions the team



picture it  
Test your collaborative capacity by evaluating your team on the 12 qualities of highly collaborative teams mentioned in this article. You'll get a graphic representation that shows where you can improve.

needs to make and consensus about which decisions are critical.

- **Focusing on possibilities, not problems.** Team members stay connected to the strategic goal and bigger picture during decision making and execution, rather than getting stuck on problems.
- **Inviting and managing different thinking styles.** Team members can appropriately switch between fact finding, analysis and problem solving, and between idealism and pragmatism, and different members of the team represent different thinking styles at different times.
- **Reflecting on how work gets done.** Team members regularly talk about the factors that may be helping or hindering their ability to collaborate. Such conversations focus on communication, team dynamics, commitment and accountability, not timelines and deliverables.
- **Limiting the use of formal power.** Leaders and team members avoid the use of power, rank or status, instead seeking to influence each other by setting positive personal examples, building meaningful relationships, and being transparent about their reasoning, values and objectives.
- **Ensuring no one person or party dominates the discussion.** Team members actively seek to bring different per-

spectives to a given problem, invite voices they haven't heard from in a while, and "self-police" to ensure evenly distributed conversational turn-taking.

- **Continuously clarifying roles and responsibilities.** Team members make time to set up, review and revise their roles and responsibilities. Interdependence of roles as a reality of teamwork is accepted and role-related conflict reduced whenever possible.

The rewards of a collaborative culture are significant, but so is the effort to get there. Building collaborative capacity through collaborative leadership is not an elusive concept. The behaviors above are as much a signature of high-performance teams as they are a predictor for future performance. Just by focusing on a few crucial collaborative practices, leaders can improve the quality and effectiveness of their collective decision making—for their teams as well as their organizations.

#### about the author

An executive coach and organizational effectiveness consultant, Yosh Beier is the co-founder and managing partner of Collaborative Coaching, a New York-based consultancy that supports leaders and leadership teams in collaborating more effectively and making better decisions. He has worked with Fortune 1000 and nongovernmental organizations on four continents.

Outperforming organizations support open information flow, diversity of thought, peer-driven accountability and transparent decision making, and are comfortable with ambiguity and creative conflict.