

The Art of True Collaboration



5 Quick Tips for Mastering Deep Collaboration

Here are the key points for this month. More details are listed below!

1. Do your homework with collaborators. Collaboration is the key to making any project a success. Take the time to know what everyone wants and needs as well as uncovering what they are concerned about or what the obstacles to success might be.
2. Focus on creating a successful process. Rather than looking at each person or department in terms of strengths/weaknesses or advantages/disadvantages, what would happen if you look for what causes that individual or group to engage in a project and do their best work and then gave that to them?
3. Start with yourself. Model the behavior you want to see. Me being a perfectionist makes everyone else feel like they have to be perfect too, which reduces the chances of an honest, productive conversation.
4. Surprises are always bad. Let people know what you are thinking before you get to the big meeting. Meetings are a confirmation of your thinking not an introduction to it.
5. Stay in touch. Did you know that leaders who simply show up are seen as more likable and collaborative, even when they are quiet? It's true. Communicate the little bits of progress to your team along the way. Not only will it give you the encouragement you need to keep going, it will create a sense of team spirit along the way.

A puzzle: value of deep collaboration example

If you can figure out the answer, you'll be well on your way to becoming a master of deep collaboration.

You run a plant that manufactures and bottles salad dressing. Consumers are complaining that the labels on your salad dressing keep falling off when they get the product home. What is the issue and how can you solve it?

“Why should I deeply collaborate? I barely have time to open my emails!”

Why collaborate? That seems obvious to some, but it's not. There is surface collaboration – where you copy people on emails and invite them to meetings; and then there is deep collaboration – where you invite people into the process to share ideas and comments. Most of us, honestly, practice surface collaboration. Meaning we kind of share things but don't really ask for comments.

Why? Because we falsely think that by not inviting comments, we can avoid criticism, keep our projects on track and retain control. In truth, that rarely works and often backfires when these same people do an end run around our efforts. Thus, even though it may seem more painful in the short-run, practicing deep collaboration works better in the long-run. What was once “my project” becomes “our project” as you avoid pitfalls, address issues and build advocates for your efforts – even among detractors.

A lesson from a fairy tale. Remember that fairy tale where a new baby is born and all the witches of the kingdom are invited to celebrate? All but ONE! Guess what that witch does? Casts a terrible spell on the baby. That's exactly what happens when you exclude key players in your internal collaboration plans. Even the most low-level individual in the organization can sabotage your idea if they are not on board. Compliance with the changes your idea presents may not be happening or may be happening in a slow and unenthusiastic way . If you haven't done your homework, you may never know who's behind it.

Case in point: IBM Global Services was partnering with the first and largest network-to-network payment system (for auto parts). It was a huge endeavor costing millions of dollars and thousands of man hours. When they launched the new program, the team discovered that one of the key suppliers was not following the system. In fact, they had 70% of their transactions being done in a workaround way. Our team was brought in to find out why. Can you guess what the issue was? The key administrative assistant that was in charge of processing orders and setting up the system was not following it.

Digging deeper, we found out that the woman at the key implementation point had been using the invoicing process to show her creative flair – adding clip art and seasonal holiday greetings to documents that would only be seen internally. She also had poor vision. The new system had a much smaller, harder-to-read typeface AND it didn't allow for the graphic customization that had become her signature stock in trade. Thus, without even realizing it, she perceived the new system as being unfriendly and hard to use. The changes she wanted took less than 10 minutes – increasing the typeface and providing a way to let the administrator change out custom graphics took less than 10 minutes to implement. But making those changes made a world of difference.

A puzzle update: what was your guess?

Did you guess that there is a problem when the bottles are delivered to the store? That's not it! Good try. Keep thinking.

Create a collaboration contact list – 10-minute exercise

- List all the people who you work for and who work for you.
- List all the people who you “report to” for the deliverables of your work.
- Who else in your organization has insight about your work? (Audience, operations, specific product/service knowledge)
- Who can say “no” or “yes” to your business transformation plan? (from communications to operational changes, you are doing business transformation!)
- Who are your key partners that can make or break your work? (ad agency, research firms, outside consultants)
- Now that you have your list, create a calendar to contact everyone individually.

Starting the process – 1 hour a week, as you see fit

When I am working with a new client or team, I make a point to connect with everyone on the team, even if it's only for a few minutes. I set a goal of contacting 5 people per week, spending at least an hour a week on having those meaningful conversations – more if I have the time. I ask them who the main players for the project will be – not by title but by influence. Organizational Behavior Expert, Shoshana Zuboff's work on teams shows that your experience of your workplace is the 8-10 people you spend the most time with. The most influential person in that group may or may not be the person with the most seniority. [Today's reliance on data and machines](#) have made the need to tap into human capital even greater.

Key questions to ask when starting collaboration on a new project

- What makes this person feel successful? Ask them to tell you a story of a work process where they felt successful. You are looking to understand their process and what circumstances allow them to do their best work. Some people are introverts and need time to think; others need to be able to share ideas in free-flowing way to get their juices going. Some like deadlines and tight check ins, while others do better with a more independent process.

- What makes this person NOT feel successful? Ask them to tell you a story of a work process that didn't work for them. Again, what you want to learn is if you are asking someone to work outside their style (introvert vs. extrovert, planning vs. spontaneous), etc. I have a friend and former student whose manager LOVES to do everything in a free-flowing kind of way. My friend is much more introverted and prefers to have time to think things through before she responds. If I were managing her, I would be sure to give her a head's up about what I am thinking before we get into the group discussion. Otherwise, my free-wheeling ideation style would always put her out of her comfort zone with the team.
- What is their idea of the problem and solution that this project solves? Remember those cartoons when the characters are turned upside down and all the coins fall out of their pockets? It's CRITICAL to understand everyone's perspective on the context of the problem you are solving, why it needs to be solved and their idea of the solution.
- What is the ideal outcome of the project? Get them to share their larger vision of the impact of the project for the company and the world, as well as how that outcome will affect them personally in their role. People are motivated personally by feeling important and getting more of what they want from their careers even more so than they are motivated by making money for the firm.
- What is the nightmare outcome of the project? This question is where the rubber meets the road. Your work may seem like such a wonderful opportunity to "change the world" that you don't realize that your new ideas could seriously jam up the works for others. Even if/when they agree with your ideas, getting an understanding of the larger impact of your ideas and working to address those is key.

Case in point: I was working on an innovation project for a major window company. One person I was supposed to interview refused to even respond to my emails. I continued to contact him as nicely as possible. Turned out, this individual was not resistant to innovation at all. He loved it! The problem was that he had been burned in the past by others who promised innovation and an open idea to express ideas – only to be thrown under the bus when the company changed its mind. I learned more about the history of the company and how to tap into the unmet need for openness and innovation than from anyone else I talked to.

PRO TIP: make a special effort to reach out individually to people who think differently than you do. I tell my team that I have 100% of me 100% of the time. I don't need more! It's vital for me to get other points of view. If you are a freewheeling ideation person, make a point to create a safe space for more quiet and thoughtful people, a place to air their views. If you are a person who wants to hear "just the facts," make a point to create a safe space for more freewheeling discussion from people who need to give you the long answer when they provide their input.

A puzzle update: what was your guess?

Did you guess that something was happening on the manufacturing line to make the labels on the bottles not stay on? Another good guess, but nope. Keep trying.

Why the “surprise!” theory of presentation is always a bad idea!

No one likes a surprise. No one. Literally no one. I am saying that three times for the people and agencies that think it’s great to save the big idea for the meeting. No it is not.

Sure, the top head manager doesn’t want to see the final idea until the meeting, but everyone else needs to be in on it.

Here's an example: Eleanor Roosevelt, an unelected public figure whose husband had just died, was asked to write the first human rights doctrine for the newly formed United Nations. Now remember, at that time, women were not considered leadership material by most of the world. Again, she was not even an elected official! Why did they ask her? She had a longstanding history of bringing in people from around the world with different ideas and listening to them, then bringing those ideas to leadership – both her husband and the many social/political action organizations she connected to.

How did she do it? She followed her pattern of bringing people in to talk individually in a private setting in a way that was non-threatening. She listened. She didn’t always agree, nor did she always take their suggestions, but she listened with respect and let them know how her ideas were evolving.

By the time she presented her plan, all the key stakeholders knew what she was going to say because they had all been part of the process.

The result? The plan was adopted. Eleanor Roosevelt remains the first and only individual to receive a standing ovation by the entire United Nations Assembly. That’s pretty good collaboration, don’t you think?

A puzzle update: what was your guess?

Did you guess that there was a problem with the glue on the labels? You are getting warmer! Not the right answer, but a good guess.

Dealing with Difficult People

You've pinpointed someone as difficult. Maybe they are. Maybe they just have a different take on things. Check your bias at the door. First, because it is unhelpful and prevents you from listening. Second, because your negative projection will bring that out in the other person. Literally.

There was an experiment done with 20 men and 20 women; all were going to potentially go on a date. Each pair had a phone call in which to decide. 10 of the men were told the women they were talking to were very attractive; 10 were told the women they were talking to were not so attractive. The researchers then listened to the women's side of the conversation. Physical appearance was never mentioned, but they could tell which women had been pre-labeled as less attractive. YOUR negative views of others will literally bring out the worst in them.

Also realize that some people get a lot of their self-esteem from complaining, from being a professional victim. You are not going to talk someone out of their life-orientation. There's a great book called ["Making Things Better by Making Them Worse."](#)

When you find yourself in a toxic conversation with a chronic complainer, agree with their feelings while not commenting on anything else. "Yes, that IS terrible, yes that CAN get worse." And then leave. Many times, you'll find them taking a more positive stance.

PRO TIP: people can't argue with you when you agree with them. Agreeing with someone's feelings, "yes, that must be upsetting if you think that X is happening" doesn't mean you agree with their view of the situation.

Instead, be a collaboration Zen master

I have a client who is an absolute master of giving difficult feedback. I have personally seen her give the harshest criticism in the most diplomatic, compassionate way, to the point where the people receiving the feedback warmly accepted the direction and thanked her for it. Amazing!

I am not at that level, but here are a few tips that I use on a regular basis...

Lessons from my amazing client who is a Zen Master of feedback:

- Speak calmly and with kindness.
- Instead of asserting your view, start with a question or express that something is confusing to you.
- Be clear what you think the solution is by incorporating what people are doing right already into the final idea (even if it's just that they thought about the problem).
- Assume the best in others, they can do it and they want to.
- Finish the conversation by having the team list what the next steps are so that you are sure that you are on the same page.

A puzzle solution: the answer to the puzzle.

The group that is washing the bottle has recently changed the soap they use to clean the bottles. The new soap is creating a film on the bottles which means the label does not stick to the bottle properly. If you were the manager of this plant and had taken the time to talk to everyone, creating a way for them to be honest, this solution would have been revealed. Now go tap into all that great knowledge available to you from your team!

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