Disciplined collaboration:

4 steps to collaborative success

Effective collaboration drives revenue and customer satisfaction and acts as a buffer against economic downturn[1]. But it's a means to an end that, unless skillfully managed, can cost you and your teams precious resources without achieving its intended results.

"While there are many feel-good arguments in favor of collaboration, the real justification for effective collaboration (...) can be found in the bottom line," explains Heidi K. Gardner in her forthcoming book *Smart Collaboration*. Greatly facilitated by digital technologies, collaboration can be defined as the integration of different expertise and resources to solve greater, more complex problems. As the need for collaboration continues to grow – along with the size and complexity of the problems that organizations face – the question of how to manage it becomes more urgent. Drivers like individual accountability and competition simply do not function in collaboration in the same way that they do when people execute tasks individually, and so team leaders must figure out new ways to ensure successful results. For example, you can't simply order people to contribute to a collaborative process and expect results; people need to feel intrinsically motivated to contribute, thanks to drivers like shared vision. In *Disciplined Collaboration*, expert Emmanuel Gobillot sets out to explain how to lead collaboration in a way that better reconciles its benefits with other performance drivers like, notably, individual accountability and competition. He codifies his solution into four successive steps, which each surmount specific fears around potential costs, or losses, associated with collaboration. In other words, Gobillot argues that overcoming the (often misguided) fears around collaboration is essential to managing its costs and reaping its benefits more effectively.

Step 1: Manage fear of loss to individual value

"The world of work is a world of differentiation," notes Gobillot, who explains that this straightforward business principle is at the root of the fear that sharing skills, knowledge, and other individual resources will diminish differentiated value. Gobillot argues, however, that this fear results from an overly narrow definition of value and success. In fact, as the bottom line shows, when managed with discipline, collaboration doesn't erode value: it amplifies it. Surmounting this fear starts with clearly identifying and communicating the "unique value" that each individual party brings to the collaboration and how the collaboration aims to amplify it. You can help your people develop their ability to "articulate and share the value they bring," which should make them feel less protective of it (with the added benefit of increasing their capacity to draw others towards them in collaboration).

Step 2: Manage fear of loss of quality

This step is about managing a fear that is both "insidious and real": the fear of loss of quality of results. In collaboration, sharing the work with others erodes your control over the outcomes, which creates a spiral of anxiety "within everyone, every day, in every organization." People wonder: Will my collaborators understand the issues as well as I do? Will they be as dedicated as I am? "In other words," writes Gobillot, "does qualify suffer when others get involved?" Most people see only two options for managing this fear: "You can do it yourself with the upside that it's done better and faster. The downside is that you end up doing everything and the organization is suboptimized. The alternative is that you (...) spend time explaining and checking." Having to choose between these two far from perfect solutions makes collaboration feel like a compromise – and the definition of a compromise is a reduction in quality. In fact, however, it is possible to reconcile the two in such a way as to receive the benefits of both while avoiding their downsides. How? Take two steps to ensure your collaborators understand the need for a quality outcome and are focused on achieving it, so they will achieve that quality without you having to explain or check up on them. Those two steps are 1) involving the right people in the collaboration — as Gobillot notes, "there cannot be quality outcomes if the wrong people are involved — and 2) articulating your collaborative goal in such a way that it focuses everyone towards achieving quality. As Gobillot argues, "In social systems, it is what gets talked about that gets done."

Step 3: Manage the risk of loss of speed

Is it possible to work collaboratively (with all of the discussions and back-and-forth that it entails) with the same efficiency that people can achieve when working individually? According to Gobillot, yes, it is possible for you and your teams to achieve collective momentum. The first step is to understand that the incentives typically used to build momentum do not apply in collaboration, because the work isn't contractual in nature. "You could incentivize someone to collaborate," writes Gobillot. "But this would be a mistake. By making collaboration contractual, you remove the social and moral obligations necessary for power to be effectively applied. In practice, what that means is that by incentivizing people to collaborate, you guarantee they book the room ...

When collaboration runs amok

Researchers Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant highlight the problem of an unequal distribution of collaborative work. "In most cases, 20-35% of value-added collaborations come from only 3-5% of employees," they report, going to on to explain that top collaborators soon earn a reputation for being "capable and willing to help," which in turn increases the collaborative opportunities that are dropped in their laps. According to the researchers, however, "What starts out as a virtuous cycle soon turns vicious. Soon helpful employees become institutional bottlenecks: work doesn't progress until they've weighed in. Worse, they are so overtaxed they're no longer personally effective." Meanwhile, this is aggravated by the wider challenge for team leaders of tracking and recognizing individual contributions as teams collaborate across units, offices, and even companies.

Based on "Collaborative overload" by Rob Cross, Reb Rebele and Adam Grant (*Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2016).

MEMO

- Collaborative work is increasingly important to business performance, and this poses a challenge for team leaders.

- To reap more of the benefits of collaboration, team leaders must actively manage fears around the risks associated with this work mode.

... for the meeting but you can't guarantee what'll go on in the room." Instead, setting clear achievement markers and providing constant feedback - in the form of engaged, informed, candid conversation - can be used by you as a team leader to spur efficient progress.

Step 4: Manage the risk of loss of control

According to Gobillot, this fourth and final step involves "the biggest challenge of all" for leaders: realizing the need to let go of control. This fear is pervasive and understandable, but you must overcome it to lead genuinely collaborative – and thereby accelerated – value creation. In this case, it is helpful to recognize the distinction between "directionless" and "leaderless": "Leaderless groups are not uncontrollable groups," explains Gobillot. "In collaboration, leaders may not be in control but that does not mean they are not in charge... Removing control is not as dangerous as we would assume for the achievement of a goal, if we understand the role we can play to facilitate the discovery of solutions."

Gobillot emphasizes the power of "one simple mechanism" for starting to lead more disciplined collaboration in your teams: dialogue. In fact, if you take only one lesson away from his book, he hopes it will be the importance of dialogue as a tool to influence your collaborators as you all pool your resources together to find high quality, efficient solutions to today's complex problems. ■

1. In her forthcoming book *Smart Collaboration*, Heidi K. Gardner presents these arguments based on her research for the business case for collaboration (*Harvard Business Review*, to be published in January 2017).
2.Idem.

Collaboration is a form of power

At the heart of Gobillot's research is his hypothesis that collaboration failures are most often the result of a "fundamental misunderstanding of power": "Collaboration is power," he writes. "It is no different than any other form of social interaction. Collaboration is the same as competition, cooperation, and coordination. All are simply forms of power (i.e., our ability to impact and influence others) applied in different contexts." In brief, he argues, to collaborate successfully, key participants must understand when and how to exert their power, or, in other words, wield their influence. "Think of value creation as a spectrum of influence," he explains. "At one end of the spectrum lies single accountability where no form of social engagement is necessary. At the other end lies collaboration." In particular, Gobillot emphasizes a close link between competition and collaboration, which he describes as "two sides of the same coin," with competition often driving the highest value collaborations.

Based on...

Disciplined Collaboration: 4 Steps to Collaborative Success by **Emmanuel GOBILLOT** (Urbane Publications, May 2016).