Enhancing Collaboration in Teams to Unlock Business Potential

By TRACY DUBERMAN

Collaboration in teams is becoming the "go-to" strategy for solving some of the thorniest problems facing organizations today. While critical to success, collaboration is no easy task. The audacious challenges we face in today's workplaces— from global pandemics to systemic inequities and managing hybrid workplaces — benefit from the input of people with different expertise, disparate views, and backgrounds. Therefore, effective collaboration in teams leverages these differences to enhance problem-solving, stimulate innovation, build engagement, support learning, and improve efficiency.

Common collaboration concerns we often hear are inefficiency (It takes too long), risk aversion (Can I trust others with my vision?), perception of low value (I have all the needed expertise to get this done myself), and political concerns (It will take too much positioning to get through to others). Team failure is often a result of poor collaboration, as outlined below:

Rob Cross' in When Collaboration Fails and How to Fix It, Winter 2021, MIT Sloan Management Review

Team failure is often the result of poor collaboration in teams due to:

1. Lack of formal and informal decision-making which slows progress, inhibits innovation, and overwhelms decision-makers
2. Lack of access to resources resulting in team members losing interest
3. Lack of communication with each other resulting in efforts that are not well integrated
4. Lack of protected time which can lead to dissociation and/or burnout
5. Underutilized diverse resources and expertise which can lead to innovation stalls

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Overcoming these traps requires leaders to create the process, structure, systems, and conditions for successful collaboration in teams. These conditions include integrating expertise through joint work and clearly articulated decision rights; creation of shared purpose, norms, and metrics; a focus on relationships to optimize team member strengths; elimination of unneeded work and interactions; and continuous refocusing on purpose and goals to name a few.

In our experience working with teams across various sectors, trust and psychological safety are the keys to successful collaboration. Here are 5 helpful tips for building successful collaboration in teams:

1. Establish a Shared Purpose

When working to solve a problem, the first step is to co-create a vision of what will be accomplished once the problem is solved. This vision helps inform who needs to be part of the collaboration and ultimately who needs to help co-create the purpose of the collaboration.

According to Amy Edmondson, PhD, an effective statement of purpose should be updatable and reflective of a continuous learning process. When leaders approach others they need to avoid overconfidence and overpromising. Too much certainty early in the effort to collaborate is likely to be perceived as disingenuous. Instead, leaders should explicitly frame the opportunity to others as a creative exercise. The problem-solving that lies ahead is a team sport, and you want to start by identifying and naming what the creative opportunity might be, inviting people in to help craft this journey together, and relying on each other to make forward progress. Collaborative teams align

around the purpose of the work and the problem to be solved, view collaboration as a continuous learning process; and evolve and change the purpose and the problem statement as the team moves forward.

To create motivation, focus, trust, and psychological safety, involve everyone in defining the purpose by asking:

• Who will be affected by our solutions?
• What positive outcome would they want?
• What is the highest potential outcome for each of those parties?
• What would "good" look like?

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2. Develop Clear Team Norms

Establishing a process defining how team members will interact in the working relationship is best done when the relationship is new. The group should establish clear norms for working relationships that focus on the process for giving feedback, establishing and reinforcing accountability, resolving conflict, evaluating team process and results, after-action reviews, and modifying plans along the way.

To avoid unnecessary conflict when building collaboration in teams, ground rules for discussion should be established, such as:

• Job titles don't matter
• Senior members speak last
• Listen and don't interrupt
• Ideas can be evaluated, not individuals

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3. Select and Align Effective Team Members

We often assume that others operate as we do or know what we need from them. Explicitly determining and discussing individual preferred working styles and strengths can

alleviate the inevitable tensions that occur in any collaborative team effort and match capabilities to needs. Taking the time to understand each other's strengths can help determine the division of labor and signal when you might want to consult with or defer to your colleagues.

> **To leverage the strengths of team members, consider the following:**
> - Match expertise and experience to the identified purpose and the problem
> - Ask participants to share strengths they bring to the team
> - Identify and close expertise and experience gaps
> - Discuss preferred working styles
> - Discuss what you need from each other

4. Focus on Role and Process Clarity

Creating a roadmap for building collaboration in teams that focuses on roles and processes can alleviate territorial disputes.

> **To balance workload, avoid duplication of efforts, and create the conditions for more effective meetings, focus on role and process clarity such as:**
> - Full team, partial team, and individual responsibilities
> - The process to define how to collaborate off-line
> - Meeting agendas and expected outcomes
> - Key performance indicators and timelines
> - Shared view of deliverables

## 5. Empower Effective Team Process and Decision-Making

Teams need to specifically articulate how ideas will be shared and integrated to produce optimal decisions. Will the leader inform the team of a decision, decide after gathering input from team members, work to reach consensus, or rely on majority rule? With more and more teams working in a remote or hybrid environment, it has become increasingly important for teams to consider how and where work will be performed and how feedback and decision-making can be optimized.

> **To optimize meetings, reduce conflict, and improve the execution of effective collaboration in teams, we recommend the following:**
> - Send out an agenda ahead of time, with clearly defined roles and content topics
> - Rotate the schedule of call facilitators
> - Start by asking everyone to answer the same question (walk the table)
> - Ask every participant for their opinion at least once and acknowledge their answers
> - Give credit where it's due; when an individual reiterates an idea that someone else put forward earlier, point out who shared the idea originally
> - Celebrate different opinions and value different perspectives
> - Coach team members through potential conflict
> - Encourage curiosity
> - Help people take risks and be comfortable with not being right

Final Thoughts

If your team is in need of expert coaching or consulting services to boost collaboration, reach out to us. We can help build collaboration in your team to enhance your day-to-day activities and overall business success.
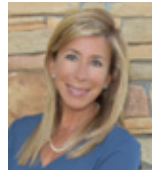
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