

The Collaboration Paradox: Why Collaborations Seem so Common but are actually Very Rare

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Many vital human endeavors require collaboration, but although we hear incessantly about purported collaborations, few of us understand how to create an environment where we are truly drawing on the strengths of all the participants. This is particularly important for business and academic leaders, because they must cultivate collaboration (across and within our fields) to bring the next wave of breakthroughs to the public: Real advances increasingly demand expertise from multiple fields. To reap the full promise that emerging technologies offer, we must change the way we teach and reward collaboration from kindergarten through professional education and the workplace.

The first thing to recognize is that the word "collaboration" is widely misused. When a group of people gets together to work on a problem, it's not a true collaboration unless each individual feels like an equal participant and is putting their honest opinions and best ideas forward. Many of the "collaborations" we hear about today never come close to this state. They are simply "pseudo collaborations" where the voices that will be heard are predetermined, and many of the participants are just there for show.

I experienced a striking example of what I like to call "the collaborative state" while helping develop a new type of medical meeting that emerged during the 1970s -- the live demonstration course. These meetings were and still are controversial because they involve telecasts of real-time surgical procedures on actual patients and they include a mix of commercial, academic, and professional participants, rather than being purely academic. Despite the unease they engender in some, because of the commercial component, such meetings quickly caught on when doctors found they could learn more there than at typical society meetings. The "live" aspect exponentially increases learning,

and participants get to hear perspectives that are typically excluded from most society-sponsored meetings, where academics rule.

One of the goals at these meetings is to establish which medical devices are best used in which circumstances, and how: Questions that engender a lot of debate among competitors and their supporters. At the best live demonstration meetings -- for example, the International Symposium on Endovascular Therapy (ISET) and Transcatheter Cardiovascular Therapeutics (TCT) for example – the organizers have worked hard to create a culture where these debates are very open, and each perspective is judged on its own merits, not only on the credentials of the speaker.

To anyone who has attended these meetings, my next statement may be perplexing, but done correctly; a live demonstration course can be an excellent example of "peak collaboration." A diversity of views, experience, and culture built into these meetings is built into these meetings from the start – and that is a cornerstone for true collaboration. During the televised live demonstrations, in addition to a presenter/moderator, a contrarian expert panel comments, questions, and advises the procedure real time – using their collective knowledge base to both help the operator and educate the audience. The information presented is thus a rich synthesis of many opinions, which is expertly shaped by a skilled moderator. The audience also helps direct much of the discussion at these meetings, often through the innovative use of audience response systems. Although ceding control to the audience is frightening to the traditionalist, it is these moments that represent episodes of true collaboration. And, as a result, I believe these kinds of courses have done more to accelerate progress in advancing medical technology than any other factor.

In this context collaboration does not mean everybody "being in synch" and feeling good about each other. In fact, although it seems counter-intuitive, a certain amount of unease or discomfort is necessary to get to this level of collaboration. Rather than settling into groupthink mode, participants are fully engaged and listening for the unexpected.

Since the first live demo meetings, I've witnessed true collaboration in other circumstances as well, including at FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) a remarkable student competition in which teaching collaboration is a specific goal. The rules and rewards of the competition, and an absolute requirement for "gracious professionalism," ensure that collaboration is ingrained into the students' behavior. A team cannot win without collaborating, and not only with their teammates, but with everyone else involved, including their competitors. Students learn that they win by collaborating. Just like those special moments at the live demonstration meetings, FIRST brings participants to a collaborative state. It's something you truly have to watch to fully understand.

This same level of real collaboration can be achieved for meetings, projects, and other initiatives. An example of how this worked amazingly well on a personal project is the successful search for the submarine ([USS Grunion](#)) that my father and 69 other men were lost on during World War II. My brothers' and my hunt for the USS Grunion would not have succeeded without the full commitment of an Alaskan crab boat operator, a Japanese WWII history buff, a number of sonar and ROV experts, a collection of WWII submarine history sleuths, and three women who managed to track down at least one family member for every single crewman who went down with the sub. Because of the way we set up this project, and moved it forward, the whole group shared a single goal, and worked towards it unfettered by our worries about who would be credited for what, or how our ideas would be received by others. One of the most remarkable parts of this experience for me was watching different individuals step up and contribute at unexpected moments. That's only possible if you are in the collaborative state.

What is this mysterious collaborative state? In my experience, it only arises in a group where there is trust, openness, creativity, and accountability—qualities that are very difficult to attain. Each individual must feel their participation is not just encouraged, but vital to the endeavor, and that they can express any view, no matter how controversial, to further that goal. Participants must know they will be rewarded for digging deep to really understand the issues, and creating a group culture for curiosity. The goal is not to hold to

a comfortable path, but to explore insights that can change the level of discourse. Without this special culture, the collaboration lapses into a simple exercise in conformity. Most importantly, this culture is what will lead to the best outcome.

But why is this so difficult to achieve? And why, despite how well educated we are, are we surrounded by examples of projects that have paid mere lip service to collaboration but we have so few examples where it has actually been achieved?

The answer, of course, is that despite all the inflated talk you hear about the importance of team work, many anti-collaborative traits are ingrained in us from early on and reinforced throughout our education and careers.

Few people understand the inherent obstacles to true collaboration, starting with the overwhelming importance of self promotion for advancement. We learn early on that we won't be rewarded for collaborating. Rather, the big payoffs only come from blowing our own horn and pandering to the powerful. Group curiosity is discouraged, and inviting opinions from outside one's own field is often regarded as frankly unpatriotic because there is so much to gain by promoting one's own area of specialization above all others.

The more specialized we become in our fields, the more tightly we circle the wagons. To get real collaboration, leaders must work against the system, setting up clear incentives to encourage individuals to really say what they think and put their best, or most dangerous, ideas forward.

But perhaps the biggest obstacle is that true collaboration is not taught. It is assumed that people know how to do it, when the opposite is true. From early on, personal traits that are collaboration killers are encouraged or just ignored. In schools and even the most sophisticated professional circles we routinely hear role models defending their positions by disparaging others. The powerful grab the podium and drone on, without introspection or interference. Just as damaging is the behavior of individuals who

patronize others to build allegiance, or don't speak out for fear of disrupting the apparent consensus.

You may say that this is just natural human behavior. After all, who doesn't want to get ahead? Indeed, it is the leaders, whether they are managers, CEOs, or department heads, who must set the stage for a successful collaboration. Truly collaborative leaders have learned that they gain more through successful collaboration than on their own – no matter how brilliant they are. Such individuals become the "impresarios" of collaboration. (At ISET or TCT, these are typically the moderators. At FIRST, there are many impresarios, including the referees, mentors, and organizers.) They work their magic on the participants, the agenda, and even details such as the environment, to ensure a successful outcome. One of their most important roles is to build up trust in the process in advance --to set the stage effectively.

These impresarios are crucial to the process. If no one with those skills is at hand, you better learn how to be an impresario yourself.

There are specific tactics one can use to try and bring a group into the collaborative state. First, invite even those with extreme views into your group. While it may seem counter intuitive, this tactic will save you time in the end. If someone is likely to lob a grenade at the project, involving someone early on lets them benefit from the rich discussion that follows. That process alone may disarm them, or at least neutralize them. Also make sure the group includes divergent perspectives – people from unrelated disciplines or even competitors. The right mix will give everyone a fresh outlook and raise the thinking to a different level. And don't avoid conflict. The point is to manage conflict well, not to squelch it.

Next, examine the participants for the following;

- Are different cultures, silos, and levels of understanding represented?
- Do any strong egos in this group need to be stroked and contained?
- Is anyone likely to be a messenger killer who will try to crush bearers of views different from their own?

- Are there any pontificators in the group who will waste inordinate amounts of time or draw the discussion off topic?

Those are the major factors that derail collaborations. By being mindful of these issues in advance, it is possible to create a true collaborative state.

Every day, I read announcements about supposed collaborations that elicit deep skepticism, if not frank disbelief. I am heartened by a few examples of some who, like the organizers at ISET, TCT, and FIRST, are taking the right approach. The rest of us must follow these leads, and examine the barriers to collaboration upfront and take clear and distinct steps not only to improve our collaborations, but to teach young people the skills necessary for them to become expert collaborators too.

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