
HOW TO: COLLABORATE

Another article about collaboration? Really? Yes.

Collaboration has become a buzzword and often an illusive ideal. Like any word that is overused, its capacity is reduced. Can we reclaim our understanding of this vital practice?

OLD DEFINITION

Collaboration is defined as the mutual mental or physical activity of two or more people. Easy enough to see how this definition does not spark enthusiasm. With this definition a paper jam in the copier becomes a “collab” session with my colleague to remove it. Every meeting technically is collaboration, but we all know that every meeting does not inspire us to do good work. Here’s the thing though, collaboration should be inspiring. It should get us pumped to get to work.



Patty McCord, in her book *Powerful*, records her first conversation with Reed Hastings about coming to work for Netflix. McCord asked Hastings, “If we [created a company we both really wanted to work at] how would you know it was great?” Hastings answered, “Oh, I’d want to come to work every day

and solve *these problems* with *these people*.” Doing great work together; solving great problems together. It was for this opportunity that McCord came on board in the early days of Netflix.

Good collaboration—the inspiring kind—is worth cultivating.

UNLEARNING

Two years ago an [article](#) appeared in Education Week entitled “Children Must Be Taught to Collaborate, Studies Say”. As a father of young children I read attentively because I was immediately skeptical of the title. My children show ample enthusiasm to work with others, engage, share ideas (the sillier the better), mimic, argue and create. Granted we are not coming together to build a new app. Usually we are playing legos or preparing dinner, but I think the fundamentals are the same.

The article details research which shows that middle-school students working in groups produced more ideas on average when the first idea shared came from a fellow student rather than the teacher. The researchers saw this as “the elephant in the room” which pointed to the supposed fact that collaboration is a skill that must be taught.

Before I give my response to this assumption, imagine yourself back in middle school. Remember what it was like to sit at your desk with your peers all around and answer the teacher’s questions. Do you remember the fear of raising your hand to provide an answer? What was that about?

What I remember most was the burning feeling in my belly when I was wrong.

What I remember most was the burning feeling in my belly when I was wrong. I would never have raised my hand if I thought I was incorrect or to challenge the question or the understanding. Maybe I was a little sensitive but I think I had also been *taught* to only answer when I knew I was right. Kathryn Shulz, in her [2011 TED Talk](#), says what we learn early on is “the only way to succeed is to never make mistakes.” In my experience of school the point was not to truly learn but to find the right answer and make sure you remembered it for the test.

Back to the article and the findings of the research study. When the teacher, guardian of correct answers and grader of tests, stands in front of a group of students and gives the first idea to kick-off collaboration the students will always be limited in their ability to collaborate. When a fellow student initiates all ideas are fair game because “correctness” has not already been implied. In short the students will seek to engage less and offer less diverse ideas *because* the teacher is present.

It is not *children must be taught to collaborate*, but actually *children must unlearn in order to collaborate*. As professionals we also must unlearn our fear of being wrong and help cultivate environments in which good collaboration is possible.

NEW DEFINITION

Consider this elevated definition: good collaboration begins with the exchange of ideas and continues by creating freedom and space for everyone to contribute. It is most fruitful when one’s candid thoughts are freely shared and diversity of thought is accepted. Ideas do not need to be correct, in fact fumbling over incorrect ideas often leads to the best ones. Collaboration seeks to make connections and bring collective understanding forward.

There is vulnerability in asking questions and putting forth new ideas, especially if it is not typically practiced in your environment. Your idea could be rejected outright. It could be ignored. Perhaps in putting forth your idea you forgot to consider all the available information and now you seem to have made a mistake. As you candidly make comments or ask questions maybe the person answering begins to feel threatened and responds negatively. Because these are all potential outcomes, it takes courage to put yourself out there. This courage is something that each person in your group or company must choose to display. The alternative to being vulnerable and brave is uninspiring work. However, there is a limit to how much each person can influence the whole environment.

We are good at sensing the unspoken rules, what we can and cannot say and who is supposed to be correct—usually the one in charge. I have personally experienced environments that were hostile to new ideas or questions. Mostly though I have experienced apathetic environments. Environments entrenched in stringent process where collaboration is not worth trying because it will not change anything anyway. In both, there was little my own vulnerability and courage could do to positively impact our work.

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Each person is responsible for doing their part to influence the environment towards collaboration but a complete shift only happens when leadership is committed to the values that enable collaboration. People have to *feel* like they have space to contribute, opportunity to ask lots of questions and share from their unique perspective. The environment has to communicate that new ideas are worth pursuing and failure is okay. Only those responsible for rating performance and signing checks can instill this into the environment.

RELATIONAL RUB

Fair warning: in the pursuit of good collaboration things get sticky. People are complex and affected by different things in different ways. Despite your best efforts to tread lightly and genuinely care you will piss off others. Remember that as you step out in vulnerability you may get hit a few times. I refer to this as the relational rub. It is what happens when we work, live, play with others and it's not a bad thing. It's an indicator of the health of a relationship and the revealer of true thoughts and feelings.

It's necessary for good collaboration.