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Leading Collaboration – Living Interdependence

Walking your talk as a senior leader is both critical and difficult. The complexity and multitude of elements to handle can at times seem overwhelming. At the same time, most of the onlookers really have no idea of all the elements you must consider, juggle, and facilitate.

So it is with an appealing concept such as *Collaboration*, and a desirable if not somewhat murky concept such as *Interdependence*.

This month we dig deeper into both concepts and look at just what it takes to make them work effectively, and provide some food for thought as you look forward into the coming year.

COLLABORATION

Collaboration (n.) 1. To work in partnership.

Syn: teamwork, group effort, association, alliance,
relationship, co-operation.

Ant: Competition

Somehow this dictionary compositional definition is rather sterile and unhelpful in a Board or Executive Leadership context. For me, the word “collaboration” is evocative of a lot more passion, intensity, interactivity, and purpose. It is also strategic. Collaborations take you to new heights and engage your organization in new ways that you would not otherwise be able to accomplish. Instead, I would offer up a different definition:

Collaboration (n.) 2. A creative process of knowledge/wisdom sharing within a community of common interest; in pursuit of a new level of excellence in service provision, product design, and/or policy formulation; which would be unattainable on one’s own.

With this definition, senior leaders can see the enormous potential and benefit to building collaborations. And, while some of the synonyms above are related, they aren’t the same. Competition, meanwhile, remains as a clear opposite to collaboration, yet is always lurking at the edge and even within collaborative environments, requiring the watchful eye of the leader!

In health care, collaboration between various practitioner groups in a case-model, can bring greater understanding about a patient’s condition and insight into treatment options that a single specialist might well miss. In technology companies, collaborations can open up whole new markets and global standards, creating product suites that might be impossible in proprietary approaches. Service organizations can “bundle” total service solutions with an array of elements that the one contact point organization would be unlikely able to provide by themselves, and for which the client would have had to search out on their own. At the community level, collaboration between governments, businesses, and NGO’s can better position/brand the whole community and create more sustainable strategies and practices.

Collaborations have the potential to address what Einstein observed; that:

“The significant problems we face today can not be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”

The collaboration approach is very different than the competitive approach most of us have experienced and observed throughout our careers. We have fewer experiences, role models, and examples to guide us in the successful implementation of collaborations. And, here is one of the key challenges to a concept like collaboration: it takes excellent, sustained implementation leadership to make it so. Simply speaking about collaboration won't make it happen!

Leading the Implementation of Collaborations

It is important to understand that collaboration is first and foremost a *social* activity. Technology mediation is helpful and valuable, but must be positioned to support the participants. With this in mind, here are some key elements to be intentional about in your implementation efforts...

1. Identify and recruit the community members

As a leader, your first action is to develop the collaboration community. This means carefully selecting the participants, or if you are trying to get your whole organization and suppliers to collaborate together; to bring them together, and discuss the concept of collaboration and clarify who are the members. Often, collaborations can integrate external parties – crossing departmental, organizational and international boundaries. Sometimes, a leader will make a decision to engage previous competitors to become part of a new collaboration initiative. As mentioned above, it is not just a community you are building, but a community of *common interest*.

So, as leader(s), you must work at clarifying and creating buy-in (if not *passion*) towards the common interest. This is often challenging at the outset.

- Why should colleagues change their perspectives and practices?
- What is compelling about the new approach and purpose to the initiative?
- What benefit might flow to every member?

2. Co-create the “Rules” of Engagement

If I am going to open up and share my knowledge or wisdom with someone else (often that I don't really know or trust), then I will at least be concerned about whether I can expect to receive something in return from them. Those who have been bred on the competitive model, recognize that knowledge & wisdom represent “power” in organizations and communities, and some will be reticent to simply share this openly. For others who are used to being in control and making their own decisions, the concept that they will be receiving regular suggestions for adaptation or improvement, that their ideas/creations might be taken and improved upon (or ignored) by someone else, and then someone else, and all of a sudden they are an “originator” but not a “completer” is very destabilizing.

Pride of authorship or invention needs to give way to pride of co-creation, learning, and breakthrough excellence.

- How does one “share” effectively? (As the leader do you have a picture in your mind?)
- What are the terms of reciprocity amongst the members?
- How will the community address inequality in participation? (The silent ones. The ones who always comment but never initiate or complete. The one who always wait until the end to try to take over.)
- Who “owns” the final co-creation?
- Who “decides” that something is finished?
- When and how does someone “go outside” the community for assistance and input?
- Synchronous vs. A-Synchronous styles of communication and contribution

In many ways, the leader can be like a “Producer” and the community members all contributors. Are you as the leader the Producer, always? Does the “Producer” role shift? Are there “rounds” to the collaboration process (i.e. First draft, suggestions/workings due by X; then compilation and Second Draft, suggestions/re-workings due by Y)? If as leader you are the overall “Producer”, are there specified gatekeeper or energizer roles required from others?

A different role for the leader is as “Master Facilitator” of ideas flow/contribution, and of consensus around suggested changes/conclusion of the process. In this model, the leader wouldn’t dare make THE key decisions without the various collaborators revolting! The benefit of this process is arguably a better, more robust end-product. The risk, is that nothing ever gets completed on time, on budget!

So, clarify the rules of engagement for your collaborative community plus the role you will play, and communicate them several times, with regular reminders!

3. Be Explicit about the Values

As in any other social enterprise, the “glue” that binds the initiative together is a set of commonly held Values: respect for diversity, openness to new ideas, commitment to continuous learning, shared ownership and rewards, and the like.

As a leader, you may need to establish these before recruitment, or facilitate the group through a clarification exercise near the start. However, you will always be re-stating, re-explaining, re-interpreting things against these Values.

Sound warm and fuzzy? Well, in some engineering organizations for example, the values aren’t necessarily warm and fuzzy at all – they value technical accuracy, stress tolerance, fail-safes, and more. Even customer service collaborations have hard values around timeliness, measuring quality, performance levels, and more.

Remember – these represent the “glue” that holds a collaboration together.

4. What Technology Support Platform will be used?

High or low tech may not matter. However, the technology platform chosen for sharing, communicating, prioritizing, evaluating, etc. needs to be put into place and maintained. Some teaching/learning may be required to ensure all members of the collaboration community are conversant. Good platforms exist such as Lotus Notes, newer versions of MS Word, and various web applications. Key to their successful utilization is a “low barrier” to learning. If people in the collaboration community have to learn a whole new skill set or even computer system, there will be significant push-back. I have seen some excellent platforms including a radical but brilliant one several years ago from the notable Fernando Flores. Some of these platforms failed to take hold however; usually because they required too many changes in habits and approaches by the members, and ultimately because they required too much learning time amid the pressures to get on with the collaborative effort.

While technology can assist with communication, and layer comments and/or new ideas on top of each other, provide round-the-world multi-timezone collaboration cycles, and more; there is no replacement for inter-personal contact and trust building.

Find ways to get the community members together, at least in pods, and in mixtures that span the normal barriers. This will engender the much needed trust and personalize the team relationship aspects.

5. Clarify Outcomes

As much as possible for a creative initiative, specific outcomes should be clear for all involved. Ideally the outcomes should be client or market-related. They may initially be somewhat hazy, but these guideposts must be sharpened by the leader over a reasonable timeframe, as it is against these outcomes measures that evolving innovations will be judged.

As the leader of a collaboration initiative you also need to consider whether or not your collaboration is “contained” or “networked”. In the “contained” scenario, your collaboration will stay within a more traditional, organizational setting. Collaboration is desired across teams and departments, and perhaps across geographically separated business units/offices. This systems-based collaboration community has some general corporate regulations, measurement mechanisms, and control elements; and perhaps formal authority recognition that the leader can utilize to assist in orchestrating the collaboration implementation. That said, it will also hold some barriers and cultural obstacles that you as leader will have to remove in order to be successful.

If your collaboration is more “open system” or “networked”, then you will have whole elements of the collaboration over which you will have little formal authority. As a leader, you will be asserting yourself through influence, plus your ability to make connections between members of the collaboration. Cross-cultural and language misunderstandings will keep you clarifying and re-motivating throughout the network.

So why is it we are collaborating again? What is it we are trying to accomplish and why should you want to still be engaged? Clarification of context and outcomes becomes a significant implementation role of a senior leader trying to create a collaborative venture.

What the Textbooks won't tell you!

Collaborations are damned difficult to lead! Many people who claim they want to be collaborative, don't actually know how to do it effectively themselves. It requires learning and a whole new level of energy and initiative from ALL members of the system/network. New measurements and mechanisms for measuring will need to be invented and Board members/market onlookers may need to be educated about these new standards. And, people will be people! Emotions will get in the way, misinterpretations due to different communication styles/preference are common, and competition between members will always threaten to dissolve the collaborative spirit.

Remember why you want collaboration though - it will take you places you can't reach otherwise.

As the leader, you will be scrutinized like never before. Your talk, walk, and intentions are almost always being questioned by someone. Consistency, continuity, and an endless supply of energy plus self-motivation will be called for. So be sure you take care of yourself, and have a couple of key lieutenants or advisors you can call upon to keep your own head straight.

Be in the community. It sounds simple enough, but this IS an active leadership process, not an office-bound managerial approach. You need to connect personally with almost everyone in the community somehow, regularly. You also need to be personally connected to the clients or market that you are collaborating to serve. Bring the clients in, or take members of the collaboration to the clients.

Remember the issue of unequal contribution. For my money, this is THE single biggest threat to the sustainability of the collaboration. Silence in collaboration is NOT golden! Second guessing in collaboration is detrimental if it always comes from the same person(s) towards the end of each cycle. And, those who are always originating will get tired without others sharing this role.

The actions of one affects all the others. The standards of one can enhance or detract from all others. The “Brand Integrity” (or lack thereof) of one component affects the other Brands in the collaboration. This can be a ‘high stakes’ game. And, if the collaboration involves more than one organization or identity, then their actions or reputation in other activities outside the formal collaboration can also affect the perception of the collaborative venture. This is often why collaborations are not entertained in the first instance. I must ensure I have a voice and some influence in anything the other organization does as it reflects upon my Brand. My activities and reputation affects their Brand. This interdependence and need for transparency/influence/communications in the affairs of another renders the need for an “all or nothing” commitment to collaboration ventures.

Celebrate success, and also have the knack for calling a spade a spade. Frank talk - trustful, respectful, and helpful in nature - is crucial to avoid getting off track and for keeping the standards high. Meeting a deadline is a great reason to celebrate. Meeting/exceeding client expectations is another reason to celebrate and communicate throughout the collaboration community. Hitting that “Grand Slam” is THE reason to feel good about all the challenging work it takes to make it successful AND to share rewards all around when it happens!

INTERDEPENDENCE

Interdependence is a natural extension of the collaboration concept.

Within the concept of interdependence however, is an unsettling word/ concept: dependence. For many humans the desire for ‘control’ is pretty strong, and so the recognition that we might be somehow or somewhat dependent on another entity for our success is unsavoury. Some might therefore try to ignore this dependence by asserting control of more and more things around them. Others may just ignore their dependencies – opening themselves up to unexpected influences.

Throughout the world today, nations, regions, communities, organizations are clearly interdependent. However, one could argue that this occurred back in the Industrial Revolution or even earlier. A Brand name retailer is dependent on their materials supplier, manufacturer, distributor, etc. More often than not, these elements are separate entities and might be in separate countries/jurisdictions. With today’s air travel, our health systems, and bio-systems have become significantly interdependent. Clients and markets for even the charitable sector are increasingly trans-national. Our power grids in North America have become noticeably interdependent recently.

Do we, do you, live and lead conscious of this interdependence?

- In our planning processes do we consider the trends & issues outside our traditional geography that can impact our markets, supply lines, or differentiation?
- Do we discuss the challenges faced by our suppliers and/or customers regularly?
- Do we pursue, initiate, and nurture relationships with individuals in government, industry, NGO’s, professions, regulatory bodies, etc.? (My generation has often derided the “old boys club” of the exiting generation, and yet we have also largely failed to build relationship networks that allow us to get a grasp on the complex and multi-lateral challenges facing us today.)
- Do we really respect diversity, support more equal economic distribution, and attend to the elements required for social stability?
- Do we attempt to study/understand different religions and cultures?
- Do we travel, so as to better understand and try-out unfamiliar lifestyles?
- Do we explore and attend to different media sources from different perspectives?

The web-link below to Will Durant’s “Declaration of Interdependence” (1945), reminds us that this is not a new concept. At the same time, it reminds us how challenging even simple and self-evident truths are to implement on a wide scale.

Embrace it or Fight it

Unlike collaboration, which requires an intentional decision to undertake – or not; interdependence is probably unavoidable.

Many will try to carry out initiatives to control their environment in an effort to mitigate the risk associated with the fast-evolving interdependence. Some will seek to dominate (economically, politically, intellectually) the various components upon which they depend, so they will appear to their stakeholders to be less dependent. These are long-established competitive patterns. The mega-corporations do this by trying to dominate a global market niche. Countries do it by trying to dominate political institutions or international agreements. In essence, they are fighting the interdependence that 7 – 10 Billion people on the planet make inevitable.

Others will embrace the reality, and seek to begin to network and create reciprocal agreements/relationships/partnerships to encourage successful interdependence. This approach recognizes the need for attention to sustainability issues. It also recognizes that if one can't control the external forces, then success probably comes by controlling our internal forces – our adaptability, needs, biases, emotions, ego, and consumption patterns. We will recognize the importance of creating new patterns for our behaviour and look at implementing for example what Bill McDonough champions: the concept that Waste for one should equal Food for another.

Living interdependently means looking around and noticing the network around us. It requires you and others to understand your place in the network and the many dimensions of interaction and dependencies you both create and have. Finally, one needs to understand the “dynamics” of the dependency network, and the relative orders of magnitude of sub-system components to which you are tied.

As we hit the limits of Competition models; Collaboration and Interdependence can provide new perspectives, patterns, and practices to ensure sustainability. Competition is unlikely to be eliminated, nor is it really desirable to do so. However, unfettered competition, as the edges of independence start to overlap and force interdependence, will drive the need for new leadership approaches, orientations, and strategies.

Investment funds and Pension plans for example may be challenged to completely re-think the existing patterns of asset growth as a basis for future security. Reinvention of business processes and marketing networks may be needed to eliminate excessive waste and reduced cost in light of shrinking profit margins. And corporate or government planning really can no longer ignore the network dynamics at play around us.

Ultimately, interdependence forces the senior leader to think and live in a triple-bottom-line world. Interdependent Leadership thus requires your attention to the implementation of economic, and social, and environmental pursuits.

Moving Ahead

Just as it is becoming inevitable that collaborations will become crucial to successful organizations and leaders, so living and leading in an interdependent context is also more and more unavoidable. Hopefully this article has given you a combination of practical ideas and insight, along with a “nudge” or two towards considering new perspectives in Leadership.

Exploring The Web!

The web-links below take you to further insight on collaboration and interdependence. Enjoy!

<http://www.darwinmag.com/read/110101/ecosystem.html>

“The Culture of Collaboration” from Darwin Magazine

http://www.collaborate.com/publication/newsletter/publications_newsletter_september03.html

“Models of Collaboration” article. A good look at some different views on how to make collaborations of different composition or focus work successfully.

<http://www.artistcollaboration.com/index.html>

A very interesting site, “Collaboration Central” is for artists in the music world to collaborate together in the development of new music. Executives can pick up some excellent ideas from a ‘different’ context.

<http://crs.uvm.edu/ncco/collab/framework.html#framework>

“Collaboration Framework – Addressing Community Capacity”; from the National Network for Collaboration. A look at the differences between collaboration, teamwork, alliances, etc.

<http://www.willdurant.com/interdependence.htm>

Some history and insight from the author of “The History of Civilization”, and the 1945 co-creator of the original “Declaration of Interdependence”

http://www.davidsuzuki.org/About_us/Declaration_of_Interdependence.asp

The David Suzuki Foundation’s contribution to the 1992 Rio Summit.

http://www.oecd.org/department/0,2688,en_2649_33949_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

OECD’s site for Globalization and Interdependence

<http://regentsprep.org/Regents/global/themes/interdependence/index.cfm>

A site for students summarizing “Interdependence” through the course of human history. However, a great thought stimulator for all of us!

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