

EXPERT SERIES

The “Expert Series” is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions’ associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

Collaboration Rules

Forget one-upmanship: Working together is the competency for the ‘00s.

by Jeannette Cabanis-Brewin

Collaborate: “To labor together,” according to the dictionary. But in today’s complex world of work, collaboration has become much more than that. It’s hard to do Internet research on collaboration; not because information is lacking, but because it’s everywhere, and pertains to everything. Type in that word, or any variant of it, and you will come up with everything from MIT’s Dept. of Coordination Science, to online Linux labs, to programs for schoolteachers, to Web-enabled community/business partnerships. Collaboration seems to be the word of the hour.

In fact, the engine of change in business and in society is driven by four nested layers of collaboration:

1. Personal skills for working with others
2. Team skills for effectively achieving group goals
3. Collaboration among business units or groups of stakeholders within an organization
4. The high-dollar version—collaborative commerce: the ability of companies who might once have been in competition to work together, on projects, via software, and across the Web.

Because org change is evolutionary, and tends to be most effective when it grows from the grassroots, it’s hard to imagine creating a culture of partnership on the corporate scale when individuals are still hoarding information and treating team members like foreign Olympic rivals. Indeed, a recent article in *InformationWeek* (The trust imperative, 30 July 2001) by John Soat, noted that collaborative commerce ventures, despite their enormous potential for profit and cost-cutting, have not caught on as fast as they might because of the huge culture shift that such ventures require. To paraphrase the song, “Let there be collaboration in business, and let it begin with me.”

Personal skills for collaboration

It would be nice if the skills of collaboration were those easy skills ... you know, the ones we used to call “hard skills”—the ones involving software and hardware and charts and math. But in fact, you could make the case (as Chip Bell does, in his article this month) that collaboration is the business-world corollary to marriage. Buddhist writer Alan Watts once called relationships “the yoga of our times”: the discipline that forces us to stretch and breathe and work out all the kinks in our behavior. Working collaboratively does just that. We can be both at our best and our worst when working closely with others. Group work both creates synergy and tests our patience; charges the creative juices, and forces us to finetune our communication skills. So at the most basic level of collaboration, we find the toughest personal challenges. But since that is what the whole edifice of collaboration throughout corporations or industries is built on, that foundation better be solid. Some building blocks:

- **Personal Mastery.** The elements of self-management that are covered in Daniel Goleman’s books about Emotional Intelligence are central to effective collaboration. Mastering anger; learning to empathize with others and pick up cues about how they are feeling and what they are thinking; and understanding when it is appropriate to put one’s own agenda aside and open up to the ideas of others ... these personal skills are the foundation of harmonious teamwork.
- **Communication Skills.** Yeah, yeah, yeah, you already heard this a thousand times this year. But we’ll say it again: The ability to put your thoughts into words, clearly, accurately and sensitively ... in person and in writing, is basic to working with others. Among the most important communication skills: active listening. Practice paying close attention when others are talking to you: note the cues they give you through tone and body language. Rephrase what you just heard them say. “So, what I’m getting is that you think our chances of succeeding with this plan are being compromised by the schedule estimates?”

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Check in to make sure you understand their meaning. Sometimes you might be surprised. “No, that’s not what I meant!” is a common response to the active listener’s thoughtful query.

- **Character.** What quality did Ford Motor Company determine was most needed to improve their business productivity? Compassion. What did Nokia list among the top ten factors contributing to their success? Humility. Lester Thurow (professor of management and economics at MIT) wrote in the 3 October 2000 edition of the *Boston Globe*, “Humbleness means that no matter how good you are, you recognize that you have a long way to go before you’re really good and that you recognize that no matter how good you are, a lot of your success is traceable to good luck. Arrogance— ‘We make no mistakes’ and ‘We’re on top because we are good’ —is the opposite of humbleness and always leads to disaster.” And in his research on the characteristics of the superior project manager, Dr. Frank Toney of the Executive Initiative Institute found that honesty was more valuable than technical know-how. An honest project manager, he noted, could get more buy-in and loyalty from a team, because they trusted him or her.

Team skills

Some of the factors that most affect our ability to collaborate in groups are personal, and some are organizational. Let’s examine the organizational issues first.

The Reward System. It’s hard for teams to function as a unit when they are being rewarded as individuals, but that is still the case in many, if not most companies today. This entrenched organizational behavior is counterproductive in many ways. To begin with, individual performance objectives are arbitrary in a project context, since they cannot account for the interdependence of the team’s tasks. As we generally use them, individual performance goals are simply subgoals based on the functional process measures of more senior managers. The most radical—yet most obvious- change is to base all performance appraisals and review systems on the team, and make the team accountable for team results. For true teamwork to occur, people need common purposes, measurable goals and a common fate. Thus moving toward a project-oriented organization means creating a team-oriented appraisal and reward system. Because the team is in the best position to control the task, the team should be the primary focus of any performance measurement. Functional expertise is very much a prerequisite to team participation but it is appraising performance based on the team’s results that encourages people to wear two hats.

By measuring performance in the context of the whole process, we can begin to overcome the functional silo mindset, which encourages people to focus on their function to the exclusion of the project customer. In the project-oriented company, all employees take responsibility for interpreting the voice of the customer and acting on that to feed new ideas back into the system.

Individual contributors to projects will ultimately benefit from the institution of a team-based reward system, but there will also be changes and dislocations for them to adjust to as they give up certain tasks and take on responsibility and authority to meet customer needs, while gaining the required expertise.

Glenn M. Parker of human resource consulting and research giant Watson Wyatt recommends reward structures that foster collaboration, in which individuals are acknowledged, but primarily for being strong team player— those who “help the crowd stand out, rather than standing out from the crowd.”

On the personal level, **information hoarding**—a relic of the days when competition for scarce information resources meant that whoever held the info had the power—is one of the most serious barriers to success in a collaborative workgroup. Failing to freely give out information— even when it’s not required or asked for— hobbles the creative process and slows down the speed of the work. In the knowledge- based organization, the free flow of information is like oxygen: no fire can ignite without it. Many studies are now

finding that the biggest barrier to effective knowledge management in organizations is simply a culture that rewards knowledge-hoarding. To counteract this, communicate freely: post, copy, and publish what you know, when you know it. The need-to-know culture is dead ... and so will your project be if it operates on that basis, unless you work for the Defense Department.

Boundary breakers

When the need arises to communicate across disciplines, departments, and business units, and among teams, project managers ought to be at their best. After all, this is the niche that project management was created to fill. Unfortunately, boundary-spanning skills aren't often taught to new PMs. Instead they have to be learned by painful trail and error.

Here, from the Learning Mastery website (www.learnmaster.com) are some examples:

Engagement skills: Not only dialogue, listening, and mediating conflict, but also managing agreements and commitments.

Collaborative learning: Social (learning through doing and discussing in groups), reflective (taking time to process the underlying meanings of learnings) and experiential (just-in-time and on-the-job learning, usually in a team context), collaborative learning ensures that knowledge is shared and lays the foundation for new knowledge creation.

Systems thinking: Knowing how to apply a concept or insight to many layers of an organization, from the individual to the extended enterprise—and beyond.

Cultural insight: Seeing, understanding, and acting upon cultural differences that might otherwise impede communication.

To this list, I would add a mastery, on the team level, of the newest tools for collaborative learning, communication, and work. Tomorrow's collaborative ventures will be largely virtual; no technophobes need apply.

IF WE LAY A COLLABORATIVE groundwork in our personal behavior, team dynamics, and across internal barriers, when the company or project is ready for the collaborative commerce leap, its No. 1 hurdle will already be behind us.

Excerpted from People on Projects, December 2001