The Dynamics of Collaboration in an Organization

It is difficult to provide generic advice on collaboration. The scale and diversity of larger organizations means that different teams may require a different approach.

The fundamentals may be the same, but the specifics can be quite varied, so it is best considered as two distinct discussions.

The first, focused on collaboration within a team (team collaboration), and the second between teams (enterprise collaboration), and the behaviors and dynamics of each are slightly different.

Team collaboration refers to a single team that performs a specific function within an organization (IT, Facilities, HR, Finance, Sales, Marketing, etc.).

People are collaborating with colleagues who work within their team, but not with other teams or departments.

Enterprise collaboration means that teams are collaborating with other teams. This means that the channels of information that flow between teams require more organization and structure, primarily to limit noise and ensure that the content remains relevant.

The Dynamics of Team Collaboration

Most teams are naturally collaborative and are happy to share knowledge, information, and support each other.

However, teamwork and collaboration are not the same thing. Teamwork is usually carried out under a single authority, a team leader or manager, who organizes resources, disseminates information, prioritizes work, and supports team members and resolves conflicts.

In a collaborative environment, such as a large open-source project, there is no manager or single authority. Instead, seniority, experience and contribution to the project are ultimately what drives decision making.

Team collaboration includes open communication, knowledge sharing, and using collaboration tools as a communication platform, creating the opportunity for any individual to shine through their contribution to the work being done. Team collaboration delivers distinct advantages, which positively affect the way that the team works.

One of these distinct advantages is conflict resolution. In traditional teamwork environments conflicts often start with an email trail, followed by a meeting where the manager must arbitrate to resolve the conflict. In a collaborative environment where email is reserved for external communication, the conflict happens in an open team forum where others can join the conversation, and more often than not, team consensus lead to a frictionless resolution.

When team members are encouraged to post to an open forum, instead of emailing a select audience, people think twice about what they post. This leads to better conversations, improved communication and effective knowledge capture.

Encouraging team members to communicate through an open forum has the additional benefit of driving ideation. Team members are usually happy to make

suggestions and propose ideas, and this should always be encouraged, but ideas might not get a fair hearing, or may be rejected unreasonably. When team members are encouraged to submit ideas in an open forum, team consensus will separate the good from the bad quickly.

An idea that initially seemed poor can plant a seed for a great idea to develop, and therefore instead of having their original idea rejected, the initiator has contributed to a better idea that can be implemented.

This applies to ideas presented by different departments, as through a collaborative platform these ideas can be given a proper hearing and may be vital in offering an alternative perspective or novel suggestions.

There is also no question about the origin of new ideas, so people can be recognized for their input. An open forum creates healthy competition, providing the opportunity for anyone to shine. A supportive collaborative culture is critical to ensure every team member has a voice and continues to contribute.

Collaboration in an open forum allows teams to truly get to know each other. This is especially important for remote workers and geographically dispersed teams and has become particularly significant during the covid-19 pandemic. Teams can continue to work independently, while participating in conversations and contributing their knowledge, expertise, and ideas.

Some teams are naturally collaborative and need little encouragement to participate. Software development teams are a prime example, as team members must share source code, knowledge and know-how to work effectively. At the other end of the spectrum, teams that carry out transactional or administrative work can often operate in isolation and have less need for collaboration.

The Dynamics of Enterprise Collaboration

Enterprise collaboration is where different teams within an organization are collaborating with other teams or departments.

Many organizations operate a traditional 'command and control' hierarchy, with a management approach that relies on authority and instruction, but these structures are not conducive to collaboration.

In a collaborative organization, communication is open and transparent, so everyone is involved in the conversation and the flow of information.

The organization has a system in place to facilitate open discussion, typically enabled by a collaboration tool where conversations are visible to anyone with permission to see the information being posted. Everyone, from the CEO down, favors open forums for conversation, instead of closed channels such as emails or meetings. Collaboration can have a profound effect on an organization's culture, opening lines of communication that are missing in non-collaborative environments.

While team collaboration is relatively easy to deploy, enterprise collaboration is more challenging to get right.

Strong, top-down leadership and clear commitment are required to build a collaborative culture. Politics and team dynamics will be disrupted within a collaborative environment. Some teams will resist collaboration and may find it difficult to adapt when information is flowing freely across hierarchical structures and boundaries.

However, it is worth persevering, as collaboration builds trust between teams. Once embedded, teams will be more aware of what's going on within your organization and within other business units, and the activities that must be prioritized to reach organization goals.

If you'd like more detail on the dynamics of collaboration in an organization, our founder and CEO Gerry Sweeny has published an e-book on collaboration [30 mins].
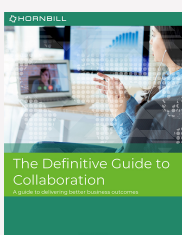
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