

Collaborative Leadership

Creating a workplace where teamwork flourishes

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Collaboration is not simply the domain of the lower levels of the organization. It is also the responsibility of senior leadership. Executive direction is required to build the sustainable collaboration required to create a healthy organization. Companies that master the art of collaboration are characterized by clear communication, mutually supportive relationships and healthy retention of talented people.



A manager's ability to model the tenets of teamwork is more important than his (or her) ability to talk about them. Pay attention to how well you manage relationships with your peers. Do you foster good interdepartmental cooperation or have you taken internal competition to an unhealthy level? Whatever your position, remember that staff members are looking to you for an example of how to appropriately collaborate.

Collaborative leadership requires that managers demonstrate a willingness to learn and grow. It positions them as partners willing to constantly develop new skills and competencies. But learning cannot be arbitrary. Wise leaders create individual development plans for managers so they are working to build a set of competencies that enable them to keep the enterprise progressing and well-aligned. Individual development plans enable managers to plot learning that directly parallels the course that the organization is taking. Managerial education will follow the strategic direction that the enterprise is taking. This enables the organization to have a management team that not only understands the philosophical underpinnings of strategic intent, but also has the concrete skill set required to make strategic operations reality.

My book, "Rules of Engagement: Timeless Tips for Team

Leaders," provides practical strategies for managers throughout the enterprise. Many of these pointers will be especially helpful for senior managers interested in creating organizational transformations, directing energy to customer retention and customer satisfaction. Four of those rules are presented in this article.

Rules of Engagement

Strategy is critical to sustainable success in a collaborative environment. Let us begin with the rule that focuses on the importance of this element. The first rule is: **Have a strategic focus.** Many team leaders make the mistake of getting wrapped up in projects and tasks without understanding how they are connected to the larger organization's strategy. Once you, the leader, understand both long- and short-term strategy, you are then responsible for helping your team grasp its importance.

When managers understand strategy, they also understand why it is important to do things exceedingly well. Excellence cannot be overrated. Comprehending strategy helps you remain aware of the fact that your department's work does not happen in a vacuum. You understand that not only are your deliverables important, but so are those of other departments. While this may sound basic, it can escape many myopic leaders. They become consumed with their piece of the puzzle and forget how interconnected the entire company must remain if it is to succeed.

If you wonder whether this is a potential problem for you and your staff, ask the people who rely on your work about when and how they get what they need from your team. Are they pleased? What else do they need from you and your team? Once you get the feedback, share it with your team and use it to improve outcomes. Not only does this reinforce

an understanding of strategy, it models a high level of communication, cooperation and responsiveness. And this leads us to our next rule of engagement.

As stated earlier, your work does not happen in a vacuum. Hence, the next rule: **Provide an organizational context for the team's work.** Your work happens in the context of a much larger organization that may have what appear to be competing or conflicting goals. Take the time to connect the dots for your team members. Help them understand how each project and each individual contribution supports the larger organization. This instills people with a sense of purpose. It also provides answers to many of the questions, spoken and unspoken, about the rationale for decisions.

Once team members understand the connectedness of their efforts to others in the company, they should be better able to build rapport throughout the enterprise. Team members will have the knowledge to communicate with colleagues and customers. Their outcomes will also evolve because of their understanding of how much the work matters.

The aforementioned improvements based on feedback require a capacity for change. Not only change for you as the leader, but also for every team member. This rule is stated as: **Build the capacity for change.** Building your capacity for change occurs when you know that change is a process, not an event. It happens when you understand your reactions to change and can channel those reactions into positive action. You are then responsible for helping team members understand the dynamics of change, how change impacts them and how best to channel their energy.

Team members look to you for guidance in tumultuous times. Whether the upset is because of competition in the marketplace, a merger or increased internal demands, your team is relying on you for a model of acceptable approaches to the new stressors. They look to you for direction. When possible, introduce change in small, manageable bites. Overwhelming people with too much information, too many new processes and advanced practices will only frustrate them. If team members become too frustrated, they will eventually disengage. That is the last thing you want when you are trying to build a collaborative workplace.

Building the capacity for change also necessitates an understanding of how people adapt. There will be team members who are eager to jump in and get started. They see innovations as positive opportunities. There will be others who

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demonstrate skepticism. They will consider the change, weigh the pros and cons and then decide to give it a try. There are still others who will present outright cynicism. These are the people who are fearful, reluctant to try new approaches and stuck in a mode that is typically not beneficial to the team or the enterprise. Your job is to understand their fears and constantly communicate with the team

to clarify the change, their roles and responsibilities.

Accountability is critical to individual, team and corporate success. Not only are team members accountable to one another, they also are accountable to the company. This is expressed in the quality of the work delivered, the care delivered to customers and the overall commitment displayed. The rule that addresses this is stated as: **Promote accountability.** Holding people to high standards is one of your primary leadership responsibilities. Not only must you track deadlines, quality and customer satisfaction, you must also monitor how well the team works together.

Coaching is one of the tools team leaders use to assist team members when they are not measuring up. It is equally important for you to coach when things are going well. This positive recognition keeps team members encouraged. Whether the coaching is corrective or congratulatory, it is a tool for keeping levels of accountability high. It lets employees know that their performance is always on your radar screen. Accountability applies to you as well. Be certain that you are holding yourself to the same high standards. Otherwise, your hypocrisy will eventually be discovered.

Conclusion

Collaboration is as much the responsibility of the senior leadership team as it is for middle managers. All leaders have a role in creating a workplace where teamwork can flourish. This happens most effectively when the most senior managers are willing to rethink their interpretations of team development and their unique roles in making collaboration happen. The rules presented provide four methods for making teamwork more tangible. Use them and you will be able to build stronger connections. ■

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