

A-to-Z strategies for Building Collaboration

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Most leaders agree that effective collaboration is more important than ever in today's turbulent business environment. In a "do-more-with-less" reality, it takes ongoing teamwork to produce innovative, cost-effective and targeted products and services. In fact, a company's very survival may depend on how well it can combine the potential of its people and the quality of the information they possess with their ability (and willingness) to share that knowledge throughout the organization.

But, here's the problem . . .

The collaboration that is so critical to organizations is being blocked by knowledge-hoarding silo structures and the accompanying "silo mentality" that has become synonymous with power struggles, lack of cooperation and loss of productivity.

So, what's to be done? Here, from A to Z, are my most successful strategies, based on 25 years of helping clients around the world tear down silos, reduce conflicts and increase collaboration.

A. Find ways to **ACKNOWLEDGE** collaborative contributors. Recognize and promote people who learn, teach and share. And, penalize those who do not. In all best-practices companies, those hoarding knowledge and failing to build on ideas of others face visible and serious career consequences. In those top companies, employees who share knowledge, teach, mentor, and work across departmental boundaries are recognized and rewarded.

B. Watch your **BODY LANGUAGE**. All leaders express enthusiasm, warmth and confidence – as well as arrogance, indifference and displeasure through their facial expressions, gestures, touch and use of space. If leaders want to be perceived as credible and collaborative, they need to make sure that their verbal messages are supported (not sabotaged) by their nonverbal signals.

C. Focus on the **CUSTOMER**. Nothing is more important in an organization – whether it's a for-profit company or a non-profit group – than staying close to the end-user of the service or product you offer. When you build collaborative relationships with your customers, you give them power and co-ownership of your organization's success.

D. **DIVERSITY** is crucial to harnessing the full power of collaboration. Experiments at the University of Michigan found that, when challenged with a difficult problem, groups composed of highly adept members performed *worse* than groups whose members had varying levels of skill and knowledge. The reason for this seemingly odd outcome has to do with the power of diverse thinking. Group members who think alike or are trained in similar disciplines with similar knowledge bases run the risk of becoming insular in their ideas. Instead of exploring alternatives, a confirmation bias takes over and members tend to reinforce one another's predisposition. Diversity causes people to consider perspectives and possibilities that would otherwise be ignored.

E. **ELIMINATE** the barriers to a free flow of ideas. Everyone has knowledge that is important to someone else, and you never know whose input is going to become an essential part of the solution. When insights and opinions are ridiculed, criticized or ignored, people feel threatened and "punished" for contributing. They typically react by withdrawing from the conversation. Conversely, when people are free to ask "dumb" questions, challenge the status quo and offer novel – even bizarre – suggestions, then sharing knowledge becomes a collaborative process of blending diverse opinion, expertise and perspectives.

F. To enhance collaboration, analyze and learn from **FAILURE**. The goal is not to eliminate all errors, but to analyze mistakes in order to create systems that more quickly detect and correct mistakes before they become fatal.

G. Collaboration takes **GUIDANCE** by managers who know how to harness the energies and talents of others while keeping their own egos in check. Successful organizations require leaders at all levels who manage by influence and inclusion rather than by position.

H. Eliminate **HOARDING** by challenging the “knowledge is power” attitude. Knowledge is no longer a commodity like gold, which holds (or increases) its worth over time. It’s more like milk – fluid, evolving and stamped with an expiration date. And, by the way, there is nothing *less* powerful than hanging on to knowledge whose time has expired.

I. Focus on **INNOVATION**. Creativity is triggered by a cross-pollination of ideas. It is in the combination and collision of ideas that creative breakthroughs most often occur. When an organization focuses on innovation, it does so by bringing together people with different backgrounds, perspectives and expertise – breaking down barriers and silos in the process.

J. **JOIN** the social media revolution and utilize Web 2.0 technologies – tools and processes that allow people to share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives in order to collaborate and to self organize.

K. Realize that there are two kinds of **KNOWLEDGE** in your organization: Explicit knowledge can be transferred in a document or entered in a database. Tacit knowledge needs a conversation, a story, a relationship. Make sure you are developing strategies to capture both.

L. **LEADERS** at all levels of an organization can nurture collaboration within their own work group or staff. And the most successful of these leaders do so by taking the time and effort necessary to make people feel safe and valued. They emphasize people’s strengths while encouraging the sharing of mistakes and lessons learned. They set clear expectations for outcomes and clarify individual roles. They help all members recognize what each of them brings to the team. They model openness, vulnerability and honesty. They tell stories of group successes and personal challenges. And most of all, they encourage and respect everyone’s contribution.

M. **MIX** it up by rotating personnel in various jobs and departments around the organization, by creating cross-functional teams, and by inviting managers from other areas of the organization to attend (or lead) your team meetings.

N. Employees with multiple **NETWORKS** throughout the organization facilitate collaboration. You can accelerate the flow of knowledge and information across boundaries by encouraging workplace relationships and communities. Use a tool like Social Network Analysis (SNA) to create a visual model of current networks so you can reinforce the connections and help fill the gaps.

O. Insist on **OPEN** and transparent communication. In an organization, the way information is handled determines whether it becomes an obstacle to or an enabler of collaboration. Employees today need access to information at any time from any place.

P. Collaboration is a **PARTNERSHIP**. As one savvy leader put it, “To make collaboration work, you’ve got to treat people the way you want to be treated. It’s pretty simple, really. Treat all employees as your partners. Because they are.”

Q. Ask the right **QUESTIONS**. At the beginning of a project, ask: What information/knowledge do we need? Who are the experts? Who in the organization has done

this before? Do we have this on a database? Who else will need to know what we learn? How do we plan to share/hand off what we learn?

R. The success of any organization or team – its creativity, productivity and effectiveness – hinges on the strength of the **RELATIONSHIPS** of its members. Collaboration is enhanced when employees get to know one another as individuals. So, when you hold offsite retreats, organization-wide celebrations or workplace events with “social” time built in, be sure to provide opportunities for personal relationships to develop. Taking time to build this “social capital” at the beginning of a project increases the effectiveness of a team later on.

S. Collaboration is communicated best through **STORIES** – of successes, failures, opportunities, challenges, and knowledge accumulated through experience. Find those stories throughout your organization. Record them. Share them.

T. **TRUST** is the foundation for collaboration. It is the conduit through which knowledge flows. Without trust, an organization loses its emotional “glue.” In a culture of suspicion people withhold information, hide behind psychological walls, withdraw from participation. If you want to create a networked organization, the first and most crucial step is to build a culture of trust.

U. Combating silo mentality requires **UNIFYING** goals. Business unit leaders must understand the overarching goals of the total organization and the importance of working in concert with other areas to achieve those crucial strategic objectives.

V. The incentive to collaborate is the **VALUE** of the exchange to both the organization and the individual. When the assets and benefits of productive collaboration are made visible, silos melt away.

W. Your **WORKPLACE** layout encourages or impedes the way the organization communicates. To facilitate knowledge sharing, you need to create environments that stimulate both arranged and chance encounters. Attractive break-out areas, coffee bars, comfortable cafeteria chairs, even wide landings on staircases – all of these increase the likelihood that employees will meet and linger to talk.

X. Take a tip from **XEROX**. It discovered that real learning doesn’t take place in the classroom – or in any formal setting. In fact, people were found to learn more from comparing experiences in the hallways than from reading the company’s official manuals, going online to a knowledge repository or attending training sessions.

Y. Collaboration is crucial for **YOUR** success. We’ve witnessing the death of “The Lone Ranger” leadership model, where one person comes in with all the answers to save the day. We now know that no leader, regardless of how brilliant and talented, is smarter than the collective genius of the workforce.

Z. Forget about reaching the **ZENITH**. Collaborative cultures are learning cultures – and knowledge sharing is an ongoing process, not an end point.

About the author:

Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D., is an author and keynote speaker who addresses association, government, and business audiences around the world. Carol is the author of 10 business books. Her latest is “The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work”. E-mail your comments or questions by [clicking here](#).