Collaboration

"Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean."

- Ryunosule Satoro

Performance Frontiers

"Politeness is the poison of collaboration."

- Edwin Land

Steve Jobs famously scrapped the original design of the Pixar Campus in 2000. The plan was to have three buildings: one each for the computer scientists, the animators and the executives. Instead, Jobs demanded one large building with a central atrium where everyone could intermingle. Ed Catmull, Pixar's President, said "The philosophy behind this design is that it's good to put the most important function at the heart of the building... Well, what's our most important function? It's the interaction of our employees."

That was over twenty years ago now – and by all accounts Pixar has seen remarkable success in the interim. And, in tandem this, we have seen the stocks of collaboration as an organisation's superpower only seem to rise with each passing year. Quite apart from its importance for team performance, in a market driven by innovation, any way we can improve creativity, cross-pollinisation and idea generation has become indispensable.

A Deloitte study has found that companies that prioritise collaboration are five times more likely to have a considerable increase in employment, and twice as likely to be profitable and outgrow their competitors. Research shows that collaboration supports us through crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. And, as Forbes reports, the UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future said at the World Government Summit "We are moving out of the Age of Information into the Age of Imagination." We need practices that stimulate imagination, and we need them yesterday.

So, let's get into the details.

What Is Collaboration?

Organisational research has long focused on a threefold typology for how people interact in workplaces: collaboration, coordination and cooperation. What's important to note here is that not every way in which we work together is collaboration. And this has consequences for how we think about designing our workplace and our workday.

While the research literature shows some variance in how these terms are defined, Castaner and Oliveira in a review of nine major management journals provide the following synthesis of the terms:

Collaboration

Collaboration refers to voluntarily helping other partners to achieve common goals or one or more of their private goals.

Coordination

Coordination refers to the joint determination of common goals, while **cooperation** refers to the implementation of those goals.

We can see that collaboration is the most open-ended in scope, requiring a mindset of voluntarily helping each other, ongoing shared work, goal-directed behaviours, and creative problem solving. Rather than simply getting on the same page about what you need to do (e.g., a routine team meeting - coordination) or completing your day-to-day tasks in sync (e.g., a workflow - cooperation), collaboration requires us to lean in and find how we can help or contribute to the goals in question. Often this calls for creativity, thinking together and group navigation of problems to find a pathway to achieving our goals.

Unpacking Collaboration

The benefits of collaboration are immense. On an organisational level, we see that a focus on collaboration enhances a range of performance metrics and is a key driver of creativity and innovation. On a personal level, high levels of collaboration improve wellbeing, increase social cohesion and generate trust.

It follows that everyone wants to know: how do we enhance the quality of our collaborations? Often this might mean breaking people out of silos and getting them to start working together more. However, that is not always the case – sometimes, we can have too much collaboration, collaboration for the wrong types of tasks or poor-quality collaborations.

The first question we want to ask ourselves is where do we need collaboration? The nature of this interaction means it can be time-consuming and there is a risk of filling up the day in meetings to the detriment of other important work. In most roles, we need a combination of both collaboration and deep individual problem solving or task-time to be effective. When considering your types of work, think about the following:

- Do I need diverse perspectives on this task, challenge or opportunity?
- Is creativity important for getting the best solution?
- Are there multiple expertise in the organisation we can draw on?
- Should we be leaning on the wisdom of the group?

If the answer is yes to any of these, collaboration might be appropriate. As leaders, we want to get really clear about how and when the team will benefit from each of collaborating, coordinating and cooperating. Once we've mapped out where collaboration is going to give us the best results, and built some cadences around when we should be working in this space, we can then start thinking about the quality of our collaborations.

How do we apply it for Leaders

What we see is that there are certain conditions we need to focus on for our collaborations to reach their potential. In order for collaboration to work, we need:

- **Passion for the collab** – Your team needs to believe in the value of collaboration for them to truly make the best of it. As much as the research shows the benefits of collaboration, it will mean nothing if your team does not feel it. Work to instil this deep sense of collective potential through working together and energising each other.

- **Openness in our approach to the problem** – Solving complex problems requires curiosity and openness to the full range of possibilities. We have to start our collaborations from a space of openness allowing for divergence (of ideas) before convergence. For high performing teams, there is often a component of moving past the expert mindset in our thinking. As research has found "the greater the proportion of experts a team had, the more likely it was to disintegrate into nonproductive conflict or stalemate." Despite our expertise, we want to be inquiring.

- **Creativity to operationalisation** – Harvesting our creative bounty requires us to be able to move from the creative space to a place where we can implement to achieve our goals. Often tools can support us to do this by taking our brainstorming and formulating it in a manner which allows us to progress our priorities. Incorporate this as part of the collaboration process.

- **Diverse voices** - Diversity in our collaboration is crucial to getting the best ideas. Research shows that collaboration diversity is a strong factor for boosting innovation. Just having diverse people in the room does not guarantee that everyone will contribute though. We need to have the foundations of trust and psychological safety to ensure people feel comfortable volunteering what they think. If we have an inclusive culture, we are able to have task conflict without relationship conflict and get the most from our collective knowledge.

Challenges

One risk that recent work trends, such as remote and hybrid work, have brought into focus is collaboration overload. In many organisations, people are suffering under the weight of meetings and collabs unable to find the time for focused individual work. Confusing collaboration among other interactions can be one of the big contributors to this situation. If we take the time to map our roles, what's required of us and how we should be spending our time to achieve our goals, it's possible to be purposeful about when we collaborate versus coordinating and cooperating (or working individually!).

Collaboration, when done right, has immense benefits and can be a secret weapon for many organisations. To get the most out of this crucial practice though, we need to be mindful of both when, and how we are doing it.