What does collaboration look like in today's work context?

"None of us is as smart as all of us."

Ken Blanchard

The ability to collaborate is considered a key leadership attribute in contemporary workplaces. It is our proven best ally in a world that constantly serves up complex and complicated problems.

Yet while most of us have a sense of what "collaboration" means, is it the same understanding our work colleagues share? Or are we merely assuming we're on the same page? And what about the impact of hybrid working and evolving technologies? Have they changed how we need to approach collaboration?

One way to bring us into alignment on what it means to collaborate is to consider how to set up the process by using a collaboration framework.

A Collaborative Framework

One framework, recently developed by Barker-Scott and Manning (2024), identifies three core collaborative functions as: collaborative work, collaborative relationships, and collaborative behaviours. Our collaborative relationships set us up for optimal interaction; our collaborative behaviours "set the expectation for how people are meant to contribute beyond their roles to support collective efforts"; and collaborative work has the dual function of centralised/strategic thinking and localised/operational action. With this both/and approach, it's important that leaders work as partners to teams rather than as directors.

It's also important to understand that **collaboration can act as both a structure and an iterative process**, which may result in some tensions, e.g., formality versus flexibility, or internal versus external affiliations.

The very first step to good collaboration, though, is to assess if the targeted work or task actually requires interdependence and engagement, or if it would be better served by autonomy and independence. Because *how we think* about approaching the object of the collaboration will either set us up for success or failure, especially regarding accountabilities.

Levels of Collaboration

At its essence, collaboration requires the individual to show attention to other people's beliefs and assertions, while maintaining relational attributes such as trustworthiness, and approachability, etc.

These skills translate across a number of levels, such as:

Interorganisational and cross functional collaboration – at this level, collaborations have been described as "loosely coupled and nested systems that continually change… and are fraught with strategic interests."

Cross-Team collaboration – where we engage in complex problem solving

Intra-team collaboration – where we use our compatibilities and strengths to meet goals

Challenges to Collaboration

Two obstacles we often encounter to the success of our collaborations are Identity and Power, which are interrelated and interdependent.
So getting curious about the individual and collaborative power dynamics at play can boost our self-awareness of potential roadblocks.

When we talk about identity, we might ask:
- Who belongs in this collaboration?
- Which identity am I bringing to the table? Personal and/or organisational?
- How does my identity filter the way I am communicating?
- How does my identity align with other individuals in the group?
- How does my identity align with, and contribute to, the group identity?

When we talk about power, we might ask:
- Do I feel equal?
- Who feels more equal?
- When is the group power fluid and when is it immutable?
- How does feeling more or less equal affect my interactions?

Collaboration Technologies

We are stepping into a future where collaboration between people in the workplace is not our only consideration. Firstly, we need to accommodate remote and hybrid workers – both synchronous and asynchronous. And more recently, the interface between digital employees (chat bots, virtual assistants, etc.) and human employees. It's important we don't conflate connectivity and interdependency with collaboration.

Collaboration Roadmap

It can be useful to have a navigation aid to help us find our way to being better collaborators. So, here are some strong indicators that we are collaborating well within a work environment at inter-team and inter-organisational levels:

Metacognitive (regulative)
- **Planning activities** – managing ambiguity, goal setting
- **Coordinating** – managing the relation of joint to individual participation for collective collaboration
- **Monitoring and reflecting** – time management, differentiating between self and group monitoring
- **Consciously Sharing Tools and Resources** – using and sharing diverse tools
- **Gathering and Sharing Information** – logging and sharing data
- **High Synchrony/Creating a Common ground** – creating physiological synchrony i.e., aligning our physical responses with each other for better collaborative learning

Cognitive
- **Elaborating and Negotiating to Reach Consensus** – diversity of voice, co-construction, negotiating
- **Establishing a Positive Atmosphere and Cohesion** – observing contra-productive behaviour, logging behavioural data, defining tasks to reduce ambiguity

Affective
- **Managing Emotions** – navigating ambiguity, using emotion-sharing as a team regulator to develop empathy

Behavioural
- **Individual and Joint Participation** – observing the distribution of participation, managing accountability and equality, fostering interactivity, engagement

The important takeaway from these approaches is to acknowledge that **collaboration isn't a practice that occurs solely through intention to do so. It requires thoughtful framing, the building and conditioning of a collaboration muscle (capabilities), and constant reflection and refinement**.

"Identity, power, and strategy are common themes that arise through the evaluation of interaction among collaboration members."

Joann Keyton

Performance Frontiers