



5 Keys to Great Collaboration!

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In my work with leaders across a wide range of industries, functions, and levels, I've seen that they often run into situations that require collaborative problem solving approaches. I have found that the collaborative approach—while preferable in most situations--has predictable downsides and rabbit holes. These five components should minimize the times that your collaborative approaches derail!

Invite the right people to the table. As the leader of a collaborative problem solving meeting, it is important to make sure that all the relevant perspectives are represented around the table. Often, this involves bringing in an outside voice to the discussion, someone who can provide a 'contrarian' perspective and can ask about the unknowns that the group thinks they already know about. To ensure the right folks are at the table, ask the first participants you identify, "Who else needs to be at the table to solve this problem?" Lacking all the right people can undermine the collaborative result.

For example, when consulting with the head of IT at a major window manufacturer, my coaching client identified the problem for his IT department as, "we need to find outside offices, because there is not enough space for our team to sit together in the HQ building." This led him to exploring outside office space in the area and signing a lease on a set of offices.

That's when the person in charge of corporate branding got wind of the solution and stepped in to label the outside office space 'substandard', not consistent with the brand. Though my coaching client had invited engineering, facilities, and others to the table, he had not asked who else should be involved and he did not seek out contrarian points of view. This led, predictably, to identifying the solution he had in mind at the beginning--to find outside space. He then was forced to go back to the drawing board and to invite a broader spectrum of people to look at this space problem.

Ask the right questions. In many collaborative problem situations, you just need someone to ask the right question, framed in a way that sheds light on the situation. As a leader, you can encourage contrarian questions, tap people you know will freely speak their minds, and focus on input, rather than solutions at this stage. The most effective types of questions to use and encourage in others are those known as open-ended, which cannot be answered 'yes' or 'no'. For example, asking questions like, "how can we best meet our mutual needs?" or "what do you think our biggest challenges will be in 10 years?" usually leads to many ideas and possibilities.

One factor that works against us in collaborative problem solving is that our brains are designed to actively screen out unimportant information and focus only on the most critical stuff; they also fill in gaps between things so that they make sense. However, often the most helpful information is that which our brains do not think is the most critical, and often the most insightful questions exist in the gaps that we normally just fill in.

For example, how many times have you read over an email and then sent it, only to discover that it was missing a word in the context of a sentence, or you had inserted the wrong word that started with the same letter of the word you wanted to use? These both happen when our brains automatically fill in gaps; we literally need to read emails word for word to double check them. A number of years ago, a colleague and I were working with Buick to help them think about how to engineer their dealerships to be more customer-focused. To accomplish this, we used hidden cameras to capture interactions with salespeople. At one point, we turned off the visual and just listened to the various sounds on the video. Up until that point, the annoying background sounds were not part of the data to which our brains were attending. With just the audio, however, it became apparent how the noise negatively affected the overall customer experience.

Agree on the problem. In almost every problem solving situation, the participants have pre-conceived ideas about what the problem is and how to solve it. Most participants arrive at a collaborative problem solving session already enamored with a particular solution. For my coaching client at the window manufacturer previously mentioned, it was “to find space outside the building for my team.” To make sure that every collaborative discussion is framed accurately, start by asking each participant to write down what they think the problem is. The way each describes the problem will usually be written in a way that suggests a particular solution, like needing to go outside the building to find office space.

As the leader, ask clarifying questions to help get down to the underlying problem the group needs to solve. For example, when someone indicates that the problem is, “I need space outside the building to house my team,” you can ask, “why is that a problem?” The response might be, “because I want the team to be in one location, and there is no space available in the building large enough to accommodate them.” Okay, so the underlying problem is that the team needs to be in one location, right? Assuming that all participants around the table agree that this is the problem, they can then start generating solutions to this problem. One of those solutions would be to find space outside the building, but other solutions could include: constructing a building expansion for this and perhaps other teams that have outgrown their space, using shared desk space and working from home a couple days a week, or finding a group that has more space than it needs right now to switch with your team.

Apply the solution. After generating several options to the agreed upon problem, the next step is to choose a solution and apply it to the problem. For the window manufacturer, exchanging places between IT and engineering groups was the option that worked. Both groups had adequate room in the near term with this option, and corporate branding was happy.

Accept the consequences. Though we can usually identify the facets that we know are important, and the facets that we think are important, but we don't know enough about them, it is difficult to identify the ‘unknown unknowns’. As a result, we often are in a position where we need to move forward on a decision, knowing that there are unknown unknowns that might have consequences. Being unexpectedly wrong is not a place that most leaders want to be, but this cannot be totally avoided.

The key here is to accept the consequences, and then to quickly recognize the bad decision and adjust the strategy going forward. Recognize that, even if you asked all the questions perfectly and involved the perfect group of collaborators on the front end, the decisions you reach will not be right much more often than successfully calling ‘heads’ in a coin toss. However, if you use these five keys to great collaboration, you will have made the best decision possible, under the circumstances.