

Relationships and Collaboration: The New Bottom Line of Business

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A business culture is a set of fundamental values and assumptions that individuals share and that guide their talk, behavior and decision-making. Listen to the way individual talks when he / she is not at a formal stage or setting and you can guess his/her mental models. To create a psychology of real collaboration, it is necessary for participants to share a set of values and assumptions congruent with collaboration; in addition, people have to generate behaviors and structures that embody the set of understandings between them.

Collaboration is a mutually practical and beneficial relationship between two parties that can work together toward a common outcome by sharing work, knowledge, responsibility, decision-making and accountability for producing desired results. To achieve such a beautiful condition, communication and face to face interaction is mandatory, showing up to meetings to coordinate what needs to be done in order for each party to achieve its own goal. The purpose of collaboration is to create and share joint strategies to serve and support others, addressing concerns, tasks and challenges that go beyond the purview of any particular participant.

For authentic collaboration to occur, participants must be able to learn from and with each other, especially in difficult situations. They must also be able to jointly design the process by which they will collaborate. If you are into the learning, change or transformation business, you don't have any other alternative but to collaborate! The maximum is collaborating or you will not learn!

The psychology of collaboration is easy. It is about cultivating a mutually beneficial relationship between individuals and organizations that jointly create ways to work together to meet their related interest. These individuals learn, do research and share knowledge with each other in order to achieve extraordinary results.

Adapting the terminology of my teachers Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, in *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, you can distinguish between exposed (talked) and genuine (action) collaboration. In

exposed collaboration, the parties declare their relationship to be collaboration. In genuine or real collaboration, the participants act in concrete ways that are congruent with their idea of collaboration.

The single common factor to every successful collaboration initiative is that relationships have to be nurtured. If relationships are really cultivated, collaboration is going to get better. If it gets worse, the ground is lost. Thus, leaders must be genuine and consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups, especially with people different from themselves.

Effective leaders constantly foster purposeful interaction, collaboration, problem solving and work hard to materialize consensus. Conflicting and destroying does not require any skills. As a matter of fact, they are signs of a troublesome character. Creating, building and cultivating collaboration, when manifested, are the hints of a solid human being who has creative and original ideas for developing a relationship, a house, a family or a business.

In the book *Relationship: The New Bottom Line in Business*, especially the first chapter, “The Soul at Work,” Lewin and Regine talk about complexity science. They say that this new science we find at work, which leads to a new theory of business that place different people, relationships and collaboration is a social psychology that emphasizes how people interact with each other, the kinds of relationships they form and their capacity to collaborate with a linked purpose.

In a linear, mechanistic, twenty century world, things or organizations could exist independently of each other, and when they interacted, they did it following simple rules and regulations. In a non-linear dynamic twenty first century, everything exists only in relationship to everything else, and the interactions among people and organizations within the market system lead to complex, loosely-coupled and unpredictable, yet constructive outcomes.

In this new world, interactions, relationships and collaboration among participants are the organizing principles. The single principle is the following: tell me if you are willing to truly collaborate and I will share what we can jointly do.

Partnerships are required elements for a new style in business and in public management. These behaviors cannot be turned into fixed packages that are stuffed with much traditional professionals. They require genuine connections with colleagues and even with competitors. You can't fake them and expect to get results.

Creating a system of relationships and collaboration requires changing two interaction factors:

1. The conversations by which people interact.
2. The loosely-coupled structure and the frequency of the interaction that shapes the profoundness of the relationships.

Effective collaboration requires people to shift their mind-set from one of control to one of learning. However, collaboration is often psychologically threatening because it requires people to give up their preconceived ideas, stigma, stereotypes, prejudices and fears of what the results should or will be to take full advantage of the collaboration venture. Under conditions of psychological threat, people cling to the very conditions that make collaboration less likely.

Traditional thinking undermines the possibility and the outcomes that people say they want.

Putting our differences to work is the fastest and the smarter way to innovation, leadership, and joint high performance. The miracle of collaboration is in the combining of elements, ideas and perspectives that are very different to create solutions for the customers, for the stakeholders and for the market that offer great advantage for all the parties involved.

Some action items are easy:

1. Keep the guiding rules of engagement simple.
2. Make it cool to get involved.
3. Learn to listen, trust and manage your talk.
4. Cultivate face-to-face interactions.
5. Take the initiative to communicate and promote collaboration.
6. Maintain telephones and emails lines open.

Rich communication sustains relationships, promotes collaboration, builds trust, and helps to get to know more about each other, appreciating differences for impacting the bottom line of business.

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