

Adapting to the challenge of collaborative working

Brenda Hales

Collaboration introduces significant additional layers of complexity for projects. This article presents practical ways we can adjust our approach, knowing that 'today's colleague could be tomorrow's competitor'.

One of the recurring themes in my work with people who are managing projects is the difficulty of managing collaborations.

While project managers have accepted that global competition, multiple cultures, complex team working and the need for faster and more creative solutions is generating the need for new alliances and associations, making these collaborations work is challenging.

Old organisational boundaries are being breached, relationships are constantly changing, alliances are uncertain and there is an intricate web of constantly reconfiguring human networks. The challenge to those heading up projects is how to negotiate a way through these constant shifts and how to support all of the disparate team members to work together to face the challenges. After all, today's colleague could be tomorrow's competitor.

When faced with such challenges it is all too frequent a response for projects to work longer and harder using the old time-cost-quality paradigms. At other times it results in the next quest for the 'silver bullet' – on come the latest collaborative tools or the next 'black belt' type process.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines collaboration as to work jointly, and it is this that I see as the biggest challenge for projects every day in my work as a coach. The question keeps coming

Brenda Hales is a coaching associate with a number of organisations, including Transition Coaching. She has over 20 years' project experience, the last seven coaching and developing people.

Email:

brenda.hales@btinternet.com



back to: "How do we adapt to working well together when everything keeps changing?"

There are many tried and trusted ways to improve team performance. However, it is becoming clear that there are some issues that need particular focus in order to enhance the probability of successfully negotiating a way through collaborations.

Accepting dual membership

In any collaboration, people are not only members of the team for a delineated and often short period, but they remain a member of their base organisation or core team. This dual, sometimes even multiple alliance needs to be accepted, respected, encouraged and brought into awareness, particularly if it is challenging to the current collaboration.

Often issues are only problems because we see them that way. It can be really fascinating to see things from an alternative perspective to your own. Try re-framing, looking at the problem from a different perspective and really search for ways to see it as an opportunity. The paradox is that the problem may become an opportunity if only you can see it that way.

So the person whose next role is with a competitor might not be trusted with some creative idea for competitive reasons. But what if you took

the opportunity to see this person as the ideal ambassador for your organisation in their next role? Might they include you into the next collaboration, especially if they had your really creative idea? This is not to break the bounds of commercial realities but it is to challenge your fixed ways of thinking, make you more able to adapt to new opportunities. This re-framing is also a fine way to challenge yours and your team's thinking and it will enhance your creativity.

Listen to others to hear what they are really saying

What is 'is', no matter how much we might like it to be different. Appreciative enquiry into the 'what is' will take you further into the other's experience and will help you build solid relationships. Gadeken, in his keynote paper on outstanding project managers, highlights the top six qualities of the outstanding project managers of which four are almost directly related to awareness of others and relationships.

Really listening empathically to the 'what is', not through our own filters of what we want to hear, is one of the key ways we make sure that we are seeking deep and aware understanding of others. It is from this interest in others that we form strong and resilient relationships that are based on the mutual foundations of respect and trust. It is this that enables us to build in resilience when we meet the next problem. The best project risk mitigation strategy ever discovered has got to be the human relationship.

Model trust and openly articulate all objectives

Clarity about the objective of the collaboration enables people to know the boundaries. They enable people not to inadvertently stray and damage trust. Make sure the objectives are regularly re-visited and addressed as they will change. It is preferable for all objectives to be in the open, for they will influence events even if unacknowledged. This applies even to where you disagree.

Kouzes and Posner write in *The Leadership Challenge* that trust is 'the central issue in human relationships within and outside organizations. Without trust you cannot lead'. The challenge is

first to be worthy of trust and secondly to operate in the expectation of both being trusted and being able to trust others.

Inevitably disbelief, disappointment and disagreements will occur. Address the issues, never the person, in an open, clear and honest way. If you do this then the paradox is that you will enhance trust, in terms of both the individual event but more importantly in the modelling of your process of resolving misunderstandings. If team members trust you to undertake this process fairly, they will take more risks, volunteer more of themselves and make deeper commitments to your project.

Balance tasks and relationships

There are tasks that must be completed but always balance these so that they are not to the detriment of relationships.

Project managers tend to focus on the task and the content. Project leaders know that this must be strongly tipped in favour of the relationships. Miss a task and it is likely you can find an alternative or do something different. Damage a relationship and you may never recover.

Similarly utilise collaborative infrastructure tools but don't believe their marketing hype. Tools and processes can only ever deliver better infrastructure. People are the vital component – how they work together is one of the most critical processes for collaboration success.

Are collaborations led or managed?

Coordinating work requires a manager to ensure tasks are allocated. Cooperative working needs a manager to ensure that it is mutually supportive. Collaboration requires the team to accept your leadership, to enable the team to successfully forge ways of overcoming new and unexpected challenges.

For it is in this meeting of equals, this sense of interdependence, with jointly valued contributions that real value will multiply. Leaders know they are operating in the realm of personal alchemy, teams operating well together add up to much more than the simple sum of their parts.

To operate well in a team requires us to operate from an emotional perspective, Daniel Goleman, one of the major proponents of enhanced human

interactions, writes:

"Emotional intelligence – the ability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively – consists of four fundamental capabilities: self awareness, self management, social awareness, and social skill." Leaders know that the more they recognise their own strengths and weaknesses, the greater is their capacity to understand how they interpret, influence and react in all the areas outlined above.

We must all remember that nearly every decision or view we take is subjective. The more we learn about ourselves the more aware of this we can become, the more choices we can then create. This is the foundation stone of emotional intelligence, one of your most useful attributes for leading collaborations.

I encourage you not to take pre-determined positions on any of the above but rather to stay actively engaged – first to understand the challenge, then to encourage everyone in the team to make an

adaptive response. Most of all I hope you can enjoy this endlessly fascinating journey of discovery called collaboration.

Further reading:

Gadepken, Owen, *What the Defense Systems Management College Has Learned From Ten Years of Project Leadership Research*, Proceedings of PMI Research Conference (2000)

Goleman, Daniel, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Broadway Books (1997)

Heifetz, Ronald A and Laurie, Donald L, *The Work of Leadership*, Harvard Business Review on Leadership (Jan-Feb 1997)

Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, Jossey-Bass (2002)

• **This article is relevant to section 7 of the APM Body of Knowledge 5th edition.**