Getting a GRIP on Collaboration

By Douglas B. Richardson

Let’s start by belaboring the obvious: collaboration is good. Authorities as diverse as Benjamin Franklin (“If we don’t hang together, we’ll all hang separately.”) and Jonathan Winters (“We’ve got to get organized!”) have emphasized that, except in situations calling clearly for the unique skills of an individual contributor, coordinated team play produces greater synergy, greater efficiency, better results and a greater sense of ownership by all involved.

With the benefits of collaboration so evident, why are so many of us such lousy – or at least reluctant – collaborators? A whole lot of lawyers, leaders, managers and project leaders get hung out to dry because, the knock goes, they just don’t play well with others. We’ve all heard the shots these non-collaborative types take: Too autonomous. Loner. Loose cannon. Self-aggrandizing. Aloof. Not a team player. Rebellious. Opinionated. Stubborn. Has to have things his or her own way. Turfy. Hard-nosed. Unaccommodating.

A lot of these devastating criticisms actually may be bad raps. They may assume negative attitudes and intentions where the real culprits are confusion or basic personal temperament. Collaboration, in fact, is not a simple moral virtue, but rather a complex interplay of factors it’s worth taking the time to unravel.

For a start, we must appreciate that while collaboration appears to be a team activity with team rewards, it’s really built on the attitudes and behaviors of a bunch of individuals. It’s only when we aggregate all these individual actions that we have an outcome that appears to have a collective purpose. It’s like summarizing millions of separate stock transactions and saying, “The stock market was bullish today.”

An individual can and will collaborate only if two conditions are met: 1) he or she is motivated to collaborate; and 2) he or she understands what to do in order to collaborate effectively. Let’s look at the first issue: why doesn’t everyone commit constantly to ardent, unhesitating collaboration? Easy: they’re afraid it may not be safe. The majority of us make our decisions based on the WIIFM Principle. That stands for “What’s in it for me?” This basic tenet of human nature is not meant to suggest selfishness, but rather the universal human tendency to constantly weigh the likely rewards and risks of any action. Obviously, if the downsides clearly outweigh the benefits, most of us will choose not to act. What are trickier are those situations where we can’t tell what the consequences of our actions will be. Whenever we can’t accurately assess risks and rewards, or if the same behavior gets us a stroke one time and a poke the next, we tend to withhold our trust and decline to take the initiative. This lack of trust may not take the form of open resistance, which makes it hard for the leader to understand why everyone is nodding their heads yes, yes, yes and yet nothing is getting done.

How does a leader fix this reluctance to trust among team members? The classic recipe is open and frequent communication, clear and consistent standards and feedback, plus the ability to make individuals feel as if they really matter. Just as collaboration is not really a mass activity, trust is not really a group norm: it is a foundation built person-by-person until it coalesces into a climate of collective trust. Such collective trust is hard to create — especially during periods of change and uncertainty — and easy to destroy. Without trust, however, true collaboration is impossible; the best the leader can hope for is compliance.

In addition, there are some personality types who naturally are resistant to collaborative activity. By nature, many of us are highly autonomous: we simply get more satisfaction from individual achievement than from team triumphs. For these folks, results mean more than relationships. They play golf, not basketball. They tend toward careers as individual contributors, as lawyers, accountants, doctors or other subject-matter experts who “do it themselves.” As leaders, they would rather coordinate (“Be reasonable, do it my way.”) than collaborate. As
team players, they just want to be left alone to their own thing.

The best way to get autonomous people to collaborate more effectively is through very clear role clarity with very distinct boundary lines of responsibility and accountability. Savvy autonomous people know they can’t do everything themselves, so the skilled leader’s challenge is to create complementary roles among them so that they retain some sense of a personal win even as the as-a-whole wins. There are, for example, very effective project teams made up of lawyers collaborating on major legal cases — although the interplay of individual egos makes such teams look rather different than, say, a social work agency.

Suppose we can get past the motivational issue and assemble a team of contributors willing and able to function collaboratively. Will they automatically function together like a well-oiled machine? Not unless all players’ trust and commitment is supported with a clear and concise understanding of exactly what they are supposed to do. Before putting a project in motion, the skilled leader should take steps to assure that every participant is fully informed regarding all relevant factors in the collaboration equation.

To do this, the leader may want to work systematically through what I call the GRIP model with all members of the team. GRIP is simply a logical sequence of questions that elicit and communicate practical information instrumental to team success (the model is also handy for troubleshooting any task or project that has jumped the tracks):

1. **Is there GOAL CLARITY?**
   - Do we all understand both what we are doing and why we are doing it?
   - Do we all agree on our goals, objectives and priorities?
   - Do we have our priorities and our tactics in order?

2. **Is there ROLE CLARITY?**
   - Have we inventoried our skills and experience to determine the capabilities at our disposal?
   - Do we all know what each of us is supposed to do at all stages of the task?
   - Do we all agree that we are the right person for our role? Is this a good “fit?”
   - Do we understand the connections and relationships between our roles?
   - Are we clear about leadership and authority — who has it, and why?
   - Do we know how we will allocate authority, responsibility and accountability?

3. **INTERACTIONS: What about morale, motivation, trust and commitment?**
   - Are all voices being heard and respected? are all styles accepted?
   - Are individual needs being met in addition to team objectives?
   - What are our behavioral norms and values? (are they positive or negative?)
   - Are we having any fun?
   - Are we behaving professionally and respectfully? how do we curb unproductive behaviors?
   - Does our work provide avenues for growth and personal development?

4. **PROCESSES: Do we all know what to do, how to do it, how we interact with others and how we’ll measure progress and performance?**
   - Have we created plans, priorities, procedures and standards for each deliverable?
   - Do we have clear and open channels of communication — up, down, and sideways? how do we fix ‘em if we don’t?
   - Do we have sufficient resources? (ptm = people, time & money)
   - How will we monitor and coordinate our efforts?
   - How will we provide each other with feedback? (form, formality, frequency, causes and consequences)

   - Do we have good ways to test our assumptions and reality-test progress?
   - Have we thought through possible contingency plans if things go off course?

The GRIP model cascades. That is, without Goal Clarity, nothing else will work worth a darn. With good Goal Clarity but poor Role Clarity, failure and friction are inevitable. Goals and Roles may be clear, but if everyone is bummed out — if Interactions haven’t been fully considered — morale will soon flag, and compliance or acquiescence is the best that can be hoped for. And, of course, absent clear Processes that define and measure activity, all the other team virtues are just nice-sounding lip music.

It is better and easier to engineer GRIP from the beginning, rather than try to trouble-shoot it in after the team fails to jell, buy-in and collaborate. Each of the questions is important; any unasked question or untested assumption is a vulnerable spot waiting for Murphy’s Law to take hold.

On the other hand, as the GRIP model suggests, adequate attention to the Interactions piece can do wonders for morale, trust and commitment. This model is hardly rocket science or the ultimate in sophistication, but it does encourage thorough planning and thinking. In terms of effective team collaboration, it really does make sense to “get a GRIP.”

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