



Six Traps That Destroy Collaboration

Joel Garfinkle - 7/9/13

Collaboration infuses energy and idea creation into companies. It also repels the stodginess, rigidity and traditional thinking that cause a company's downfall.

In spite of great effort, businesses may see collaboration break down. When talent managers can identify factors that inhibit collaboration, they can fix flaws in organizational culture that hinder performance. Here are six areas to evaluate:

Lack of compromise fosters an inability to see others' point of view or the merits of divergent ideas.

Collaboration involves give and take. It also may require participants to assume multiple roles such as learner, encourager, innovative spark and consensus builder. Team members need to have a sense of shared purpose and not work under preconceived outcomes, as inflexibility contributes to failure.

Rigid organizational structures can create divisions that compete instead of cooperate. Companies with an "us vs. them" culture within groups may not take to cross-group collaboration quickly. Talent managers may have to work to develop core competencies and awareness of how all units — and collaborative teams — bring about goal achievement and organizational success. Evaluate the business to see where cross-pollination and commingling will facilitate collaboration.

Convoluted communication lines stop effective communication. Do policies require redundant reports and emails? Are systems outdated and not user-friendly? Is the company taking advantage of social media to capture Generation Y's strengths? Do critical meetings conflict with the ideal times to talk with colleagues in, for instance, Hong Kong or South Africa? Make dialogue and communication easier to empower collaboration. While collaboration tools will help, the culture also must promote sharing.

Office setup can physically block communication and reduce feelings of unity. Does the team need to knock on doors, walk to other buildings or meet in cramped cubicles to get together? A more open floor plan invites more collaboration. Menlo Innovations of Ann Arbor, Mich., promotes working together by creating a work environment with no offices, cubes or doors.

Negativity crushes collaboration. Teams need more positive comments than negative ones to have cohesion. Power politics, hidden agendas and lack of personal accountability contribute to negativity. Make sure team members welcome and support new ideas. Create an atmosphere of respect where members trust they can share innovative thoughts and ideas without fear of reprisal.

Ownership and control issues destroy the necessary atmosphere of respect and trust. When a person, team or division owns an idea and is convinced it is best, there can be no dialogue, compromise or respect. In a culture where information is power, organizations run the risk of people hoarding information. The right data or knowledge does not get to the right decision-maker. Establish personal accountability where each individual is responsible for supporting collaborative work. Create buy-in and measure success by joint outcome. Rewards should be shared among all participants. Carefully evaluate who has final ownership and ultimate responsibility to foster the best collaboration.

Joel Garfinkle is an executive coach and the author of Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level. He can be reached at editor@talentmgt.com.