

Why It's So Hard to Collaborate

05 Jan 2014 by Daniel Dow

By Charles H. Green

Many words are written in an attempt to describe the next new thing. These days that list includes trust, authenticity, collaboration, holistic, personal, sustainability, engagement, and relationship capitalism.

You could make a case that the “most likely to succeed” is collaboration.

Why Collaboration Seems An Obvious Winner

For one thing, the economic benefits of collaboration seem somewhat obvious. Philip Evans of BCG [Boston Consulting Group] has written about the massive cost advantage accruing to Toyota vs. the US auto producers due to their ability to collaborate with their suppliers. Steven M. R. Covey, Jr., has written about the stark cost and speed savings available to those who seek it. I’ve written about it at some length too, and, in fact, collaboration is one of the four Trust Principles in my own work.

Furthermore, it’s not hard to understand what collaboration looks like. It means cooperating, not fighting. Our mothers taught us that regarding our siblings, and our teachers taught us about playing nicely together in the playground. There’s a sense that “we know how to do this.”

So — Why Don’t We Collaborate?

We know why to do it. We know how to do it (or at least we think we do). So why don’t we do it? I learned an axiom about ten years ago from Phil McGee: if you see negativity happening, the odds are good that you’ll find fear at the heart of it. Personal fear.

At this level, I can’t presume to speak for others, so I’ll have to just put out there why I fail to collaborate. And I do fail—constantly. The more calm I get, the more I am capable of noticing just how anti-instinctive it is for me to collaborate.

Let’s say someone calls me to say, “Hi, I see you wrote something about collaboration; maybe we could collaborate on writing more about that, get to know each other, maybe work together in some way?”

My first instant reaction—if I’m honest—is negative. This person is trying to steal my thunder, trying to get something from me. I careen back and forth between dismissing the person and fearing he’ll overpower me. Is he worthy of my time? Worse yet—am I worthy of his?

I know the benefits: I’ll learn and grow, and have more chances for good things to happen by behaving collaboratively than not.

And I know how to do it: Just say, “Hey, that could be really interesting, let’s talk,” and then do so, from a place of curiosity.

And yet—those first instincts rise in me.

I've gotten much better at it. I almost always notice those instincts now, right away. Not that long ago, I just lived in them.

Sometimes I get over it and say/do the right thing within 30-60 seconds. Other times, it may take up to a day of thinking on it before I end up doing the right thing.

Yet there are still those times I have managed to put things off indefinitely. Or others where the opportunity is now long-gone, and exists only on my should've guilt list.

The Logic of Avoiding Collaboration

I don't really think it's just me. In the face of astonishingly obvious economic benefits, and a fairly obvious set of "how-to's," I think the main reason we don't collaborate is simple.

Simple fear.

There are two simple approaches to lowering fear. One is to mitigate risk. The other is to stop being so fearful. The first one is getting most of the press; we need more of the second.

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