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CREATING A CULTURE OF
COLLABORATION
A KEY TO INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

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As a consultant for organizational development, I have come to the conclusion that without attention to effective collaboration, the goals and results of organizations fall short. I have worked in Fortune 500 companies as well as in mid-sized businesses where this issue is central.

Business leaders are called upon to bring forth the latest innovations and ideas in the larger universe. Often, these leaders are involved in micromanaging units within the business and are therefore not available to the larger business community. In addition, top executives often do not prioritize the health of the leadership team. The most important thing that a top executive can do is to encourage open communication in team meetings where the measurement of completion and challenges create a core value of accountability. The percentage of successful innovation doubles in this atmosphere.

Without collaboration as a value, there is a competitive team. Fear and behind-the-scenes complaining occur creating barriers to business growth. Decision makers miss hearing the innovative ideas that could expand into forward movement into new areas. Many solutions are lost and will continue to be lost until the collaborative process is addressed as essential to the execution of strategic planning.

Senior leaders and chief executives tell me that they are frustrated at the low percentage of strategic plans that are executed in a sustainable way. Often the implementation aspect is neglected because of poor communication and connection between the decision makers.

Collaboration as a process in your organization is crucial for success. Motivation and productivity are down and people are wandering down paths that are distractive rather than contributing to the solutions you want. The lack of teamwork contributes to loss of money, loss of direction, slow or shrinking growth and smaller market share. Though today's business climate is challenging, it also contains opportunities to jump start results.

Leaders sometimes assume that an innovative idea, benchmarking successful companies and hiring or firing leaders will create the change they are looking for. Further, strategy is often focused in one area or the other without considering that the core issues are in the interaction, focus, communication, accountability and collaborative solutions for the leadership team, as well as the other teams in the organization

You may be frustrated and not know how to approach the lack of progress that units or teams in your organization are experiencing. The following are a few scenarios that may be familiar to you:

Scenario 1

The executive leadership team meets irregularly and when they do the communication goes from the chief executive officer or president to the employees with little push back or discussion. Often there is a sense that some do not agree or have an idea, but do not express it fully. In addition, there may be a challenge in one of the businesses that peers might be able to assist with—but it is not expressed for fear of looking bad.

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After the meeting there are small gatherings in the hall or in other offices with whispered discussions of real feelings that never get communicated to everyone.

Real collaboration is not taking place and the implementation of initiatives proceeds irregularly and runs into unexpected difficulty with everyone knowing a part of the problem, but no overview with solutions created to move forward.

Scenario 2

A new addition has been made in terms of service or production. New employees are entering the system and current employees are fearful and somewhat confused about the new focus. Communication that would create a greater understanding is neglected because so much time and focus is on the new structure and organization.

It is clear that the focus is expanding and those new skills and relationship connections will be necessary, so there is a need for specific communication, new accountability processes and new solutions. There is also a need to focus and create clear implementation time for communication, planning, and inclusion, as well as time to surface any challenges that might sabotage efforts.

Scenario 3

The technical design and implementation teams are not getting work out in a timely manner and not communicating differences of opinion about practicality on designs and construction.

There is much behind-the-scenes complaining with no solution focus. Designs are altered during construction which upsets the design team and creates animosity and poor communication. Time and money are lost in changes during the implementation process with all team members feeling undervalued and angry. Responsibility in the form of blaming is the major focus.

With collaboration, positive results are achieved when you target:

- Accountability
- Solution focused discussions and activity
- Communication/Effective Teams and Strategic Results

One or all of the above targets has been missing in all three of the scenarios described above and can be pointed to as the reason for lack of achievement.

Some of the conditions listed below bring a greater challenge to success or are ongoing issues that never seem to change.

Change management, if not done with the elements of collaboration, can become failed change management. Lack of buy-in, undercurrents of sabotage and lack of motivation, as well as fear, create an environment that creates stagnation. By instilling a culture of collaboration, the major three elements of communication, accountability and solution focus allow for a template to manage change.

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Lack of personal accountability is a major issue and exists in widespread ways throughout a business that does not value and implement a clear collaboration process. Leaders make the mistake of thinking that assigning projects without the use of collaborative processes is all that is necessary to move forward. Projects are often stymied by concerns such as taking time away from the usual job description, giving over power and authority, no channels for discussion, lack of a sense of ownership and lack of motivation. With a culture of collaboration in place these issues are dealt with openly and honestly. Rather than blaming, the focus becomes how we can work together to solve the problem. Lack of collegial communication becomes an issue when effective team collaboration is not developed. At the top of the leadership group in organizations, peers know less about each other than they know about their direct reports. Communication is at a premium and generally does not openly take place in a meeting. Often those meetings, as mentioned in one of the scenarios, do not even take place on a regular basis. Because of the lack of honesty and real work ethic that involves everyone in the room; meetings are often seen as a waste of time.

Fear of risk is one of the reasons that collaboration does not take place successfully. If the culture is based on competition, often thinking time is wasted watching your back instead of communication and innovative thinking or solutions. There are steps that need to be taken to open up for the personal risk of having a bad idea or being wrong so that the creative thinking that brings about innovation and growth is encouraged.

Lack of communication creates a lack of understanding of performance expectations. In many organizations, the performance reviews are viewed with trepidation and people walk out relieved or upset without much information that can move them forward. Low performance results often come from a lack of understanding. This leads to the issue of accountability which can only be sustainable with clarity of expectations in a collaborative culture.

The poor functioning of teams is the repercussion of not valuing collaboration by giving the process time and resources. Teams struggle to maintain and often give up— resorting to each person having their own individual focus.

You may know someone, especially a leader, who is experiencing burnout —the executive who is retired on the job. Often you think it is due to hard times, stress or challenges. More often than not, it is due to the lack of collaboration and a sense of team. What is missing is communication, accountability and a focus on solutions.

Lack of creative thinking that leads to innovation is one of the biggest barriers towards growth. Without a format for creative thinking followed by analysis and innovation, your business will miss the opportunity for moving into new realms that come with progression in the business environment. With sustainable team collaboration in place, creative thinking becomes a supported process that is allowed and encouraged. It takes its place ahead of analysis so that new ideas that are “out of the box” have a chance to be exposed before the analytical process. Innovation follows and new ideas are moved into production and implemented successfully.

When the culture of collaboration is successfully built and sustained, there are elements that continue to create success in the business. The main factors in this success are:

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- Strategic implementation
- Bottom line results
- Effective teaming
- Communication/connection
- Accountability
- High engagement in group goals/full participation
- Solution focus

Focus on leadership communication and collaboration rewrites the future of the organization by creating top performing teams committed to a common goal. Team goals are developed with a focus on implementation.

Obviously, you know that making this the infrastructure will require changes in mindset as well as behavior of all of the members of the organization. Of course, the change needs to be at the top and can be very useful with the teams who design and implement the work of the corporation.

Methodology

Our methodology recognizes that collaboration and the issues that prevent successful collaboration need to be addressed on a continual basis. Leaders come into their roles from differing backgrounds and are often in their roles because of great intelligence and genius in terms of the systems they have designed. However, they have seldom seen the interactive process with others as essential to the bottom line results and sustainability of the success of the business. Individuals are often not plugged into the concept that communication/collaboration are essential to success.

To successfully address this, individual interviews are conducted to discover how each leader sees the organization in the present and in their view of the future. Specific questions are asked of each person so that results can be measured. These preliminary consults also begin to create a mind-set for openness to change. The important aspect of any solution or process is the inclusion of tools for sustainability.

Key steps in the process are: individual interviews, two-day offsite meetings, three monthly follow-up meetings including current actions and time lines; and lastly, three months later hold a check-in meeting for follow-up and appraisal. Following this process helps organizations create a culture of collaboration that will ultimately lead to improved business results.