

How Do We Move Toward a More Collaborative Culture?

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A reader of last week's article contacted me. "I've noticed in several of your articles that you advocate collaboration. We don't do much of that in my organization, and it's probably my fault. I'm a 'take-charge' leader. I don't like to waste time. I give orders and expect folks to make things happen."

"Things aren't getting much better here, so I'm willing to try something different. Can you help me figure out how to be more collaborative in my approach?"

I complimented this reader. The first step towards making productive change is to admit that what you are currently doing isn't delivering the quality outcomes you'd like to see.

If you have something similar, here's what I suggest. First, you'll need to break the habit of trying to solve every problem by yourself. You are unwittingly serving as a negative role model to others in your organization. Since they see you solving problems alone, they presume that's what you prefer. You'll send a strong signal by engaging others in considering solutions to organizational problems.

Here's a terrific way to make collaboration a more common experience in your organization. The idea is adapted from Susan Scott's 2002 book entitled *Fierce Conversations*. Use this approach with a single colleague, with your leadership team, or with a special task team that you've chartered to address a specific challenge or problem.

The first few times you use this tool, I suggest writing out your thoughts, so you can present this to your colleague(s) with clarity.

What's the issue? In a few phrases, identify the essence of the situation or problem. Is it a concern, a challenge, an opportunity, or a recurring problem that is becoming more troublesome?

Why is the issue significant? What's at stake? How does this affect income, expenses, people, products, services, customers, suppliers, family, timing, the future, or other relevant factors? What is the future impact if the issue is not resolved?

What outcome would I like in resolving this issue? What general kind of improvement do I desire? How will addressing this issue help meet the organization's mission, vision, values, strategic plan, and goals?

What background information is relevant? Summarize how, when, where, and why the issue started. Who are the key players? What forces are at work? How has the issue developed? What is the current situation? If there are constraints or boundaries to observe, what are they?

What have we done up until this point? What actions have we taken so far? What options am I considering?

Here's the help I want from you! What outcome do I want from the group? For example, do I seek alternative solutions, confidence regarding the right decision, identification of possible consequences, where to find more information, or critique of the current plan?

Can you see how this approach would engage the other people you're involved with? The dialogue that develops will likely be intriguing. Each person will probably want to offer up his or her ideas.

Can you recognize the change you've introduced simply by asking the questions (and sharing whatever answers you have)? You've invited additional caring, creative minds to noodle on the possibilities.

That's a major advantage of collaboration. You alone might be able to think of perhaps two or three different ways to deal with a given situation. Adding others to think with you will create many more possibilities.

Further, the group will likely think of potentially unintended outcomes that you alone might have overlooked. The group will develop contingency plans for addressing any negatives that might develop as the plan is executed.

I can imagine your resistance, "But won't this approach consume huge amounts of time?" Yes, it will take more time than what you do now. But for that bit of cost, you gain very beneficial short-term and long-term outcomes.

In the short term, you'll have a better resolution to the situation than if you relied solely on your creativity. Further, the individuals who were involved in considering the possibilities will be far more engaged and motivated to execute the chosen behavior than they would have been if you just delivered your orders.

In the long term, you'll have role-modeled (and thus have encouraged) others to initiate collaborative problem-solving. Problems will be more thoroughly addressed. Fewer problems will arise because people will act to prevent situations that are left until they are important enough to command your attention.

Give this process a try. Then, please let me know how it serves you and the people in your organization!