

The Challenges of Collaboration

Collaborative leaders have to pull off a difficult balancing act: Respecting and valuing the differences of colleagues, while, at the same time, smoothing out some of those differences in the interests of making the business relationships work more efficiently. But the payoff is often business success now and in the future. It's up to HR leaders to help make such collaboration occur.

By David Archer and Alex Cameron

In his first day in office, President Barack Obama distributed a memo that described the management style of his new administration.

Addressed to the "Heads of all Executive Departments and Agencies," it stated the administration "will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government."

It's quite a challenge -- and it echoes the move towards employee engagement and partnering that has been taking root in the private sector over the last few years -- and its scale and its consequences for leaders and for HR professionals who work with them are enormous.

Turbulent times call for a new kind of leadership -- a collaborative style -- one which doesn't come naturally to most leaders who have been schooled in the old maxims of "look after your own" and "winner takes all."

Crucially, there are new and persistent demands upon leaders as the global recession bites and employees, shareholders and voters call for leaders to look after their particular interests. The way leaders respond to this will test whether their interest in partnering and collaboration is anything more than fashionable window dressing.

It may also determine the fate of the organizations they run, so HR executives need to be aware of the consequences of this emerging style of leadership when they are looking at recruitment, promotion or development programs.

Defining Collaboration for Leaders

At its most basic, being a successful collaborative leader is about delivering results across boundaries. This inevitably involves sharing control, handling conflict and creating value from differences. Collaborative leadership is a sophisticated art -- but mastering this complexity lies at the heart of business success now and in the future.

In March 2008, in the middle of the first phase of the credit crunch turmoil, a San Francisco-based finance company raised \$17.9 billion by listing on the New York Stock Exchange. At the time, it was the world's biggest IPO.

That company was Visa -- an entirely collaborative venture founded a quarter of a century earlier by visionary CEO Dee Hock. It's been called "a corporation whose product is coordination" -- a highly decentralized, largely self-organizing group of member companies that both cooperate and compete under the Visa banner.

All members issue their own credit cards and are free to price and market them in whatever way they wish. At the same time there's a high degree of cooperation -- each member has to agree to accept any Visa card, regardless of issuer, and everyone participates in a central clearinghouse that handles transactions and customer billing. It's a formula that has proved remarkably successful. Visa is the world's largest credit-card network and its products are used in more than 170 countries.

Hock set up the radical Visa structure back in 1970 -- a time when credit-card



companies were locked in desperate competition, sending out pre-approved cards to any customers they could lay their hands on, according to an article in *Fast Company*.

"Command-and-control organizations were not only archaic and increasingly irrelevant,' he says in *The Trillion-Dollar Vision of Dee Hock*. "They were becoming a public menace, antithetical to the human spirit and destructive of the biosphere. I was convinced we were on the brink of an epidemic of institutional failure."

So, Hock decided "the organization had to be based on biological concepts to evolve, in effect, to invent and organize itself."

With those principles well established, he tested the concept of self-organization by resigning from Visa in 1984 to follow his own pursuits (and to develop his theory of 'chaordic' organizations - a synthesis of chaos and order). According to *Fast Company*, "Visa never missed a beat."

The Ultimate Partner

The biological comparison is an interesting one. From a cursory look at collaboration in nature, it doesn't seem so difficult -- all sorts of creatures collaborate and we're not just talking ants, bees and termites.

At its most basic, collaboration is displayed throughout the animal kingdom in pair bonding. Many organisms also form wider social groups that offer greater protection and allow roles such as food gathering or looking after young to be shared.

But the life form that really excites us from the collaborative point of view is pretty unprepossessing -- it's slime mold, the nasty reddish jelly-like stuff you sometimes find under half-rotted bark. Slime mold has fascinated scientists for decades.

Slime mold has been hard to classify, as it's not a mold at all. It is a single-celled, amoeba-like organism that spends most of its time minding its own business. But when resources are scarce, individual slime mold cells cooperate to form a more complex organism that behaves as one. "

What's more, when slime mold cells get together, they can display surprising levels of apparent intelligence such as solving the puzzle of a maze by stretching between two food sources at either end. Then when the crisis is over, they split up and go back to existing as single cellular organisms once more.

The point is that slime mold displays emergent behavior -- the intelligence it demonstrates comes about by aggregating a mass of relatively simple elements. No single element is directing the show; rather, this complex behavior emerges from the level of individual cells.

It has clearly got the hang of how to be a good partner. Slime mold knows when to be independent and when to collaborate. It doesn't spend all of its time as a team -- each single cell manages perfectly well on its own for large stretches of time. But when slime mold cells get together, they can do amazing things.

So Why is Collaboration So Hard?

If a single-celled organism can do it, why is working together in a spirit of openness so difficult for many leaders?

Well, for most, it's not part of their upbringing or business experience. This is because deep down, people are tribal. We feel most comfortable within our own tribe -- our family, our extended family, our friends and people like us. Strangers from other tribes -- a different background, a different culture, a different race -- may provoke suspicion and mistrust.

The world of work often operates on similarly tribal lines. People are comfortable within their own functional teams or cultures -- designers are wary of accountants, while policy people don't usually mix with IT experts. Just as different tribes might engage in trading, or even come to a temporary alliance, interaction between the different work functions tends to happen at the edges.

When you don't perceive others as being "like me," collaboration doesn't come easily. The more people on a team who don't know anyone else, the less likely team members are to share knowledge.

But in a collaborative system, diversity is part of the deal. There are at least two tribes, and often more -- and all have to learn to get along without hostilities breaking out. Overcoming the initial distrust and appreciating difference is a sophisticated skill. It requires greater attention, effort and fluency than dealing with your own tribe, and often it needs to be reinforced by stronger policing.

A new business relationship can't be expected to get beyond tribal issues immediately -- after all, it's taken a very long time for human civilization to progress from warring tribes to the beginnings of global community. And while some people find that collaboration comes naturally to them, most do not. They have to learn it -- and that is where HR's expertise and support is vital.

Why Collaboration Matters Now

All the evidence is that developing collaborative-leadership capability in an organization is a challenge that's well worth taking. As an HR leader, to help work groups and executives succeed in achieving tasks and completing projects together that they could not have done on their own is one of the most satisfying experiences in the world.

We all need to get better at leading collaboratively if we are to succeed as leaders, especially in a recession and a post-recessionary world.

And if we go back to where we started this article, Obama's memo makes it clear that more and more of the top jobs will demand candidates with track records of working in complex multi-agency environments. If you want to go far as a leadership-development professional in the 21st century, you need to be able to build collaborative-leadership capability.

The first step is to assess the leadership capability that already exists and the best way to do that is usually with a 360-degree feedback tool. However traditional 360-degree questionnaires often don't get to the heart of the collaborative-leadership dilemma -- the difficulty of sharing control.

From our research, we have identified six attributes that distinguish successful collaborative leaders:-

- * Patience;
- * Collective decision-making;
- * Quick thinking;
- * Tenacity;
- * Relationship building; and
- * Conflict handling.

Using 360-degree feedback based around these or similar attributes gives leaders new insights into their strengths and weakness when it comes to collaboration and delivering results across boundaries. Informed by this data, leaders and their HR partners can create coaching and development plans that build on existing strengths and respond to the identified weaknesses.

It is our belief that, although everyone can improve their skills in working collaboratively across boundaries, not all leaders are able to make the leap into being great role models for collaborative leadership.

And sometimes HR executives have to make tough calls to help individuals see that their value to the organization lies in roles where they don't have to work through complex relationships. It's better to make that decision early on, rather than put someone in a position where they can damage critical business relationships for years to come.

Building such a capability will give an organization at least three advantages in today's interdependent world. First, it means gaining the capacity to form new alliances fast, even with organizations that historically may have disliked or distrusted each other. Second, it gives an organization the ability to repair broken relationships with suppliers and customers; and third, and perhaps most importantly, it gives the organization the critical capability to handle and resolve the inevitable conflicts that will arise when resources are limited.

These collaborative-leadership skills don't come naturally to leaders who have risen to power in times of growth and opportunity -- but they can be learned. Such a capability is moving up on the priority lists of many company boards and HR professionals, as they recognize the necessity to have these skills embedded within the organization, fast.

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