

The challenges of post-pandemic collaboration

In the last 20 years, the importance of effective collaboration has become an accepted norm for leaders everywhere. Over these years we have come to identify three enablers that contribute to productive collaborative systems. These are trusting relationships, conflicts that are effectively managed, and control that is shared appropriately among all the parties in the collaboration. But none of us predicted the sudden requirement to work remotely, the fragmentation of our teams and communication using video technologies without the option to meet in person. And this was no short-term blip but has set long-term habits and changed expectations of working practices for many people.

Sociologists will study this period for years, but we already know some specific impacts of remote working:

- Many individuals have valued the new choices about how they use their time and balance their work-life pressures, while others found that the limitations of their home situation impacted their productivity and motivation at work
- Informal time together with colleagues has been severely reduced and so has the associated distracting time wasted, but the intangible value of informal group communication and the consequences of losing it have become evident as time has passed
- Video technology has facilitated greater amounts of efficient communication and transactional decision making, but its limitations when it comes to allowing groups to debate and address complex problems have emerged
- Most people appointed during lockdown did not have the induction that would normally establish the relationships necessary for supportive collaborative working.
- And for many teams, the difficulties and conflicts that emerged under lockdown went unaddressed. It's been easier for some to behave in an uncollaborative manner or to behave badly at a distance through technology, and it's easy to avoid resolving tricky relationship issues.

So remote working has had both good and bad impact on all of us, but the longer-term affects will take much more time to become clear. As we enter a post pandemic world, it is timely to try to understand the changes that have taken place to the norms of behaviours and the expectations of individuals. These new habits will potentially lead to new ways of collaborating, but first we need to understand our collaboration capability post pandemic. Consider the three enablers of collaboration.

Building relationships. The relationships that bound collaborative groups together have often been weakened. The lack of informal interaction means that communication has become transactional without the trust and sophistication required for true collaboration. Trust is built on personal relationship experience and this experience has been limited or intermediated by technology, so post-pandemic collaboration is potentially built on less firm foundations.

Handling conflicts. The unresolved issues that emerged during lockdown can't stay unresolved indefinitely now that individuals are meeting face to face again. Collaboration requires that relationships are strong. This means that conflicts need to be mediated and resolution achieved in order to build trust. But this will mean some difficult conversations that many people will be out of practice in holding.

Sharing control. This is the ultimate enabler of all collaborative situations and a product of trusting relationships and conflicts that are effectively managed. We all must accept that you can't go back to 2020 – people and society have moved on. Relationships have changed too, so assumptions based on past experience are dangerous. As people come together once again, relationship problems will emerge, and they must be faced with skilful leadership and with empathy.

Some people loved lockdown and so the motivation to make the effort to meet as groups 'In Real Life' will be mixed. Technology has proved that it is now an essential part of the collaboration landscape, but it cannot be the whole solution. For leaders, the focus post-pandemic is to redefine and manage key relationships with the aim of rebuilding deeper levels of trust and resolving on-going conflicts. This will enable individuals to access the holy grail of collaboration – sharing control for mutual benefit. But the devil is in the detail, and the most important skill when working together is listening to truly understand the post pandemic attitudes and behaviours that will drive collaboration.