

Creating a Collaborative Workplace: Amplifying Teamwork in Your Organization

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Let's begin with a question. Are you experiencing barriers to working collaboratively, even though you know collaboration is necessary? If you answered yes, this article is for you.

We all know that contemporary work requires collaboration. In our fast-paced, knowledge-intensive workplaces, success requires people to integrate and leverage their efforts. However, knowing that collaboration is essential and being able to foster collaboration, are two different things. Indeed, collaborative failures are commonplace.

As an academic and practitioner, the question I hold is: *how can we design organizations to foster necessary collaborative work?* Two core assumptions are inherent in my question. The first is that organizations must understand their collaborative work needs. In other words, to support purposeful collaboration, leaders must first step back and reflect on the basic question: what work will benefit from a collaborative effort? While seemingly simple, this question requires leaders to rethink the very nature of how work is framed, assigned and distributed. A second core assumption is that collaborative work cannot simply be overlaid *on top of* traditional contexts. Rather, collaborative efforts require a system of norms, relationships, processes, technologies, spaces, and structures that are quite different from the ways organizations have worked in the past.¹

Below, I share the learnings I am acquiring through my research and practice around how collaboration is changing, and the ecosystem of supports that enable it.

What is collaboration and how is it changing?

The simple truth is that as our workplace challenges become more complex, our work becomes more collaborative. Complex challenges require the will, effort, and expertise of people from many parts of your organizations. Indeed, in today's dynamic orders, collaboration across multiple and ever shifting configurations of people is becoming the way that work gets done. It's now typical for people to be assigned to several collaborative initiatives simultaneously, while playing a different role on each. In turn, this enhanced interactivity is changing the very nature of what collaboration is.

Traditionally collaboration across boundaries has been understood as an overlay activity, designed to link people in work that was important, yet peripheral. Yet, as work is increasingly accomplished through ever-shifting teams, our focus must shift from thinking about teams as

¹ Please refer to my article "Designing for Collaboration" for a more thorough treatment. It can be found on the Queen's IRC website at: <http://irc.queensu.ca/articles/designing-collaboration>.

single, relatively stable units, to thinking about collaboration as a workplace system; a continuously evolving team of teams.

What capabilities support collaboration as a workplace system – a team of teams?

To excel at enabling fluid and dynamic collaboration, three new capabilities are emerging. The first capability defines how collaborative projects are identified and formed, the second with how they are configured, and the third with how collaborators approach their work to solve nebulous challenges. Below I share some of the collaborative practices of pioneering firms.

Capability 1: Identifying collaborative work

In traditional contexts, work is largely defined through a yearly priority setting exercise. Once complete, managers get on with the task of executing and managing to the plan. Most work falls within functional boundaries, with cross functional teams added to tackle peripheral projects.

Yet in fast moving environments, fixed and centrally controlled projects lack relevance as soon as needs and competitive conditions shift. Defining the work—*what's value added*, who should be involved, and for how long—becomes an ongoing and emergent activity; a core skill. To denote its active nature, Edmondson (2012) refers to the process of forming teams as the verb *teaming*; an activity that has more in common with a group of basketball players self-organizing for a pickup game than an established team operating with set plays.

Just how are value-added initiatives identified? Fieldwork reveals that local managers are best positioned to notice strategic opportunities and respond by refocusing collaborative linkages. With time and talent at a premium, managers are best positioned to shift their limited resources to performance enhancing collaborations, while at the same time reducing the performance drag of low-value interactions. In turn, employees are best suited and situated to interpret local needs and respond by joining with the relevant players.

Underpinning this core capability is the notion that those at the nexus of need—managers and leaders for strategic imperatives and employees for local initiatives—must actively reorient their efforts to be maximally responsive to evolving priorities. At every level of the organization, starting with the top, efforts are directed to ensuring that people are joining around the right work, and pivoting as insights suggest that efforts should be redirected. In this way, defining the collaborative work—continuously questioning what's value added—is the pressing need underpinning collaborative endeavors.

Capability 2: Configuring and orienting teams, and enabling them to access essential resources

Traditional advice suggests that collaborative performance is aided by having the right mix of expertise in a bounded group, to promote both the efficiency and effectiveness that comes from familiarity; knowing each member's knowledge, capabilities and working habits. Yet teams with stable membership and an intra-team focus are also less likely to seek and integrate external expertise as their challenges morph. What's becoming more important in dynamic contexts, is that collaborative boundaries are porous, and membership is fluid, to access and integrate expertise as needed. As Edmondson (2012) explains, when organizations tackle out of the ordinary initiatives, "It's just not possible to identify the right skills and knowledge in advance and to trust that the circumstances will not change" (p. 4). Under these conditions the emphasis shifts from composing stable teams to enabling the relevant players to engage fluidly as the work unfolds.

Edmondson (2012) describes the dual role of forming and populating teams, and supporting them to get up to speed quickly, as scoping and scaffolding. *Scoping* is the continuous and iterative management responsibility associated with figuring out who should serve, for how long, and when their expertise is best freed up to be utilized elsewhere. Teams must also be properly *scaffolded*, or supported, with a platform of protocols, tools, shared spaces, and roles, designed to help orient members to each other and align around their work. By way of example, Valentine and Edmondson (2015) studied the use of scaffolds in 10 emergency rooms; a setting in which physicians, nurses, and technicians worked in constantly shifting configurations, yet depended on each other to offer high quality, emergency medical care. They found that a scaffolding of pre-set roles, into which clinicians slipped, and standardized processes and protocols, to guide how clinicians worked, enhanced their overall effectiveness. Results included increased accountability, improved efficiency, and reduced wait times for patients.

How, once formed, do we encourage teams to seek outside expertise? A number of social and relational factors in the wider organizational context appear to be critical. The first is that organizations should cultivate weak ties. Weak ties are linkages, more akin to acquaintances than friends. Through weak ties, collaborators are more apt and able to recognize, seek, and access resources to support their challenges. Organizations that are adept at supporting the development of weak ties bring people together and mix them up in a wide variety of ways—for example through town halls, summits, clubs, and on-line forums. These wise organizations appreciate that social connections pave the way for people to reach out to others on the one hand, and make the time to share what they know on the other.

Closely tied to the development of weak ties is the creation of a climate of psychological safety—a shared and pervasive belief that interpersonal exchanges will be safe and respectful. Quite simply, people will be more likely to seek out essential knowledge from others when they trust that their requests will be welcomed and appreciated. Conversely, nothing stops outreach faster than a climate of inaccessibility; when doors are closed and access is limited, so too is knowledge exchange.

How can a climate of psychological safety be cultivated? Apart from the natural inclinations of people, psychologically safe environments can be role modeled by management and embedded in organizational values, processes and protocols. For example, Hargadon and Becky (2006) found that help-seeking behaviours were actively encouraged, and indeed expected, within the creative firms they studied. By way of example, IDEO's Design Methodology Handbook instructs designers with exploratory problems to "Set up at least two introductory brainstormers [brainstorming meetings] to get the best minds in the company, the collective consciousness of the office, working on your problem" (as cited in Hargadon & Becky, 2006, p. 490). In organizations like IDEO, help-seeking is a value espoused by leaders, as well as a protocol that nudges collaborators to reach out to peers to gain relevant intelligence. Not surprisingly, leaders and managers have been found to have an inordinate influence on the development of an engaging and psychologically safe climate, as they are the climate setters and keepers of corporate culture.

Capability 3: Solving nebulous, cross-boundary challenges

Traditionally organizations have favoured approaches to work that rely on planning and execution, over learning and innovation. Years ago, March's (1996) seminal work on organizational learning styles found that firms tend to favour continuous improvement processes that exploit past learning, over investing in innovation processes. However, as workplace challenges become more complex and the problem space more volatile, new approaches to working, favouring innovative learning over execution, are spreading from creative firms to a wide variety of contexts.

While innovative learning may be the aim it is hard to achieve, precisely because it requires creative thinking and acting among the cross-boundary players. Collaborators, joining from different parts of an organization, necessarily work from a place of diversity and difference. While diversity is the fodder for collective creativity, we also know that differences—in the form of divergent aims, interests, tools, techniques, languages, values, and world views—can cause misunderstanding and misalignment.

So how do collaborators facilitate productive learning interactions? First, there is no substitute for collaborators rolling up their sleeves and engaging with each other. It is through conversing, improvising, and experimenting that collaborators share and absorb each other's domain logic. Hargadon & Sutton (1997), in their seminal study of cross-disciplinary product development teams at IDEO, illustrated how the collaborators used prototypes, sketches, notes, and drawings to share their ideas and generate innovative solutions. To support their work, the IDEO designers were scaffolded by a process called design thinking. Protocols inherent in this methodology included iterative learning, embracing ambiguity, and taking an optimistic stance, amongst others.

A second prescription is associated with the social and relational dynamics of the team setting. As described earlier, when the problem space has heightened risk—due to complex challenges that require cross-boundary interdependence, limited information, and evolving expectations—psychological safety is the buffer that enables members to actively share and reflect. On point, and in a rather innovative study design, Pentland (2012) compared the interaction patterns of successful and unsuccessful teams in a diverse range of settings, from creative organizations to hospitals. Team members were equipped with electronic badges that collected detailed data on each member's interactivity patterns for up to a six-week period. The badges produced what Pentland referred to as *sociometrics*—a sophisticated network map of how collaborators interact; their tone of voice, body language, ratios of talking to listening or interrupting, and even levels of empathy. Strikingly, Pentland and his team found that the regularity, ease, and care in which members communicated with each other, was the core factor that differentiated high from low performing teams.

A third prescription for facilitating productive cross-boundary learning concerns the use of process. Process has long been recognized as a tool for enabling collaborators to work in alignment, by specifying process steps, tools, and ground rules. While process remains important, what's shifting is that contemporary processes are favouring learning over planning, and iterative action, over one-time execution. Field studies point to several important attributes of learning-oriented problem-solving approaches. The first is that rather than guiding collaborators through a sequential cycle—of diagnosis, followed by planning, followed execution—learning oriented processes encourage iterative rounds of experimentation to evolve new insights. Rather than waiting to execute once a plan has been laboriously prescribed, collaborators learn as they execute, and improvise to correct. By way of example, IDEO's design thinking process enables designers to empathize deeply with user needs first, before prototyping and testing successive iterations of potential solutions.

While the specifics of the learning processes adopted by firms differ, what's important is that the approach is standardized to provide a stable platform, or scaffold—of tools, approaches, steps, ground rules and roles—from which collaborators can work interchangeably. Just like collaborating jazz musicians rely on a deep and internalized understanding of the rules of musical progressions, cross-boundary collaborators too must work from a common approach. While their problems will necessarily differ, the approaches and tools they use and reuse must remain dependably stable, changing only as the users adapt and perfect them.

A final prescription to enhance collective learning amongst cross-boundary collaborators focuses on roles. In many settings, core roles are embedded in the problem-solving methodology—such as facilitators, coaches, or project managers—to guide and align the collaborators as they work. Field work also points to the importance of the senior leadership's role in setting the overall tone for collaborative work, by reinforcing a strong sense of joint purpose, defining collaborative projects, role modelling collaborative behaviors, and embedding essential protocols for collaborative learning into routines and other practices.

Summary

A fundamentally new understanding of collaboration is emerging; one that requires a shift from supporting single, stable teams, to understanding how to support and enable a team of teams. With this shift, three new capabilities are emerging around how collaborative work is discovered and framed, resourced, and enabled. No longer a programmatic and centrally controlled task, leaders and employees at the nexus of need must continuously identify and frame high value initiatives. Once identified, the process of scouting enables leaders to resource the teams with the right caliber of expertise and to shift resources as the project unfolds. Scaffolds, in the form of stable roles, processes, tools, and protocols, guide and offer a foundation for collaborative work. Learning is enhanced through a climate of psychological safety, and supported by a processes, tools and roles that favour iteration over planning.

About the Author



Brenda Barker Scott is a groundbreaker with a passion for creating workplaces that inspire, connect and grow people. Over her twenty-year career in teaching and consulting, Brenda has led ambitious renewal efforts aimed at enhancing innovation and collaboration with provincial governments and agencies, school boards, not for profits and private firms. When working with leadership teams, she combines strong theoretical knowledge with practical methodologies to ensure that the right people are engaged in the right conversations to design robust and workable strategies. Brenda is co-author of *Building Smart Teams: A Roadmap to High Performance* (Sage 2004), and is currently undertaking field research exploring the design features of collaborative and high performance in organizations.

Brenda is a facilitator for several Queen's IRC programs, including [Designing Collaborative Workplaces](#), [Organizational Design](#) and [Organization Development Fundamentals](#).

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