



Why collaboration is harder than it sounds

Did you know there's two definitions of collaboration in the Oxford dictionary?

The first is "the action of working with someone to produce something". Which is what we mean when we say we want collaboration. The second is "traitorous communication with an enemy". Which is sometimes how it feels when collaboration isn't working. Even the dictionary makes it clear that collaboration might not be as simple as it sounds.

When it's "the action of working with someone to produce something", we all benefit from:

- **Transparency** – I know we use this word a lot, but great collaboration fosters great communication and a consistent sharing of important information.
- **Psychological safety** – done over time, collaboration reduces the eye rolling, cutting off, and belittling of ideas as we all get to appreciate each other's different styles and perspectives.
- **Trust** – ongoing negotiation and co-working that works well reduces cynicism and protectionism and builds trust amongst individuals and teams.
- **Participation** – one of the great

complaints of 2021 is the lack of participation by the vast majority of the workforce. Collaboration offers a great sense of belonging, shaping your culture and retaining your people.

- **Quality** – diversity creates more robust decisions and designs more robust solutions.

If collaboration feels more like "traitorous communication with an enemy", then these are the most likely factors at play:

Midlevel leaders are not truly equipped for collaboration yet.

Even experienced and influential midlevel leaders – what I call the B-Suite



Written by Rebecca Houghton,

author of 'Impact: 10 Ways to Level up your Leadership' (\$29.95), is a Leadership and Talent Expert and founder of BoldHR. Rebecca builds B-Suite leaders with C-Suite impact by working at an organisational, team and individual level.

– can struggle with collaboration, and without them it is doomed to failure. They are the ones with the discretionary decision making and operational controls that make collaboration actually work. Or not work, as is often the case.

- They have been trained to communicate up and down rather than across – and the art of negotiation is a far cry from the art of direction.
- They are largely focused on tasks rather than relationships, which means they don't take time to understand the strengths, motivation or experience of others.
- They are trained to prize control, so letting go of it and truly empowering others does not come as easily as it might.
- They are bred for productivity – and collaboration can often, especially initially, feel like a time-suck, so they can be resistant.

Because they are so experienced, B-Suite Leaders often haven't received any re-training, they've just been told to collaborate. Those with high emotional intelligence have managed to make the switch (this is only about 25% according to a 2005 study by Tamm + Luyet). The other 75% continue to struggle on their own.

Today's workplace is making collaboration harder

- Disconnected workplaces and remote or hybrid working are making silo's worse by eliminating what organic interaction teams once had.
- Video meetings instead of passing conversation now accounts for 20% more time in people's diaries (that's a full working day if you are full time), which is eroding our ability to spend more time on collaboration.

- After two years of uncertainty, exhaustion is now rife, and in businesses where collaboration isn't yet the norm, it will be deprioritised by staff just 'surviving' on auto-pilot.

So what can we do to establish collaboration in our organisation and reap the rewards for our people and our workplace?

DO Make time to develop and embed a culture of collaboration – it's not organic

- **Define and communicate** success as a greater purpose that goes beyond the day-to-day work of individuals and silos. Then communicate it constantly, consistently, and to all levels of your organisation.
- **Involve** broader groups of staff in your conversations, both about how to collaborate and during the collaborations themselves. Yes, collaboration works better with trust, but collaborating also helps to foster trust if its lacking.
- **Clarify responsibilities.** We are asking people to shift from individual to collaborative ways of working, which means creating complex interdependencies. Without properly defined responsibilities, you'll rapidly see a refusal to collaborate with certain individuals, them and us mentality arising, and complaints that individual efforts lack recognition.
- **Equip** your leaders and teams to collaborate by training them in the art of negotiation, compromise and communication. Then invest additional time in equipping your leaders with the mindset that collaboration requires them to release some of their

traditional approaches. Without that, collaboration will feel like an add-on to most, and will be unconsciously undermined by leadership.

DON'T buy into quick-fixes and silver bullets – they only work on werewolves.

- **Don't Restructure** to enable collaboration. In most cases collaboration is undermined by behaviour, which is often at its worst when faced with something that isn't familiar. Structure and role clarity is often blamed for behaviours such as opting out, getting competitive, not paying enough attention, playing politics, seeking personal credit, or getting too rigid in your views. Structure won't change that, it'll just act as a distraction from the real issue – behaviour.
- **Don't expect it to be easy.** We are asking people to adopt a community mindset when we often still reward them for individual performance. It's confusing. When we ask people to step outside their comfort zone and collaborate with others, the walls go up. Conflicts in working style become more apparent, and as most of us are conflict-avoidant, leaning in to collaborate can feel more like "communication with an enemy".
- **Don't give up.** There's no such thing as 'a collaborate'. Collaboration is not a one-off task, but an ongoing action and ultimately, a behaviour that will really shift the needle. Unless you're putting in conscious, designed effort to create a hybrid way to collaborate, and you stick at it, collaboration will struggle to find purchase in your business. ■