

Perspectives

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A case for collaboration

Effective collaboration requires an initial investment in time and resources, as well as an open mind. But the outcomes are well worth it.

In today's technology-driven marketplace, relationships and workflows are blasting through geographic boundaries. The need for speed-to-market is increasing exponentially. And with economic uncertainty on everyone's minds, companies are under more pressure than ever to perform. How can you create breakthrough solutions faster and more reliably?

Collaboration.

Meet your new team

Gone are the days when divisional teams can afford to sit comfortably in their silos and concentrate on a single slice of the business. Today's market simply moves too fast. Internal product development, marketing, sales and other knowledge centers need to work in concert just to keep up, let alone outpace the competition.

To make greater strides, you'll want to engage external stakeholders as well as a unified team working on your behalf. Your supply chain, agency partners and others need to agree to work together as an extension of your organization, rather than as separate entities with individual agendas.

The best collaborators are those who share your vision, mission and values.

If you're not used to collaborating on this level, the idea can seem daunting. And in fact, it does take commitment and effort. Here are a few suggestions that can help make your foray into collaboration smoother and more successful:

When you ensure that everyone understands not only their individual accountabilities but how they're interrelated, team members will see themselves as valuable components of your larger vision.

Cultivate a collaborative culture

Before you can expect outside partners to join in on a project, you need to demonstrate a collaborative culture internally. A clearly articulated vision and mission statement and set of values can help align internal team members and set the foundation for productive new partnerships. When you ensure that everyone understands not only their individual accountabilities but how they're interrelated, team members will see themselves as valuable components of your larger vision.

Revamp processes and workflows

Do your processes encourage enterprise-wide communication and cross-company cooperation? Or do they reinforce individual fiefdoms and an outdated vertical structure? Collaboration is a powerful force. In fact, it's been heralded as a 21st century success-maker. So, while adjusting internal processes may seem a Herculean proposition, spending the time to make changes now can pay off down the road.

Know who's in the driver's seat

Internally, this could be anyone from a project manager to the CEO, but someone needs to be the contact person and champion for your initiative. This way, you've given everyone in your organization an easy starting point for connecting. Similarly, when bringing external vendors together on a project, someone from inside your organization must be the driver—defining participants' roles, the rules of engagement and who will make the ultimate decisions. To move your project forward efficiently, be sure to empower decision makers to act, and be prepared to back them up.

Choose like-minded partners

The best collaborators are those who share your vision and values, and who agree on the objectives you're working toward. If someone is out of alignment with any of these, they are unlikely to make an effective team player. Consider looking for someone else to fill that spot.

Maintain alignment throughout the project

As your initiative progresses through various phases, the group will need to maintain alignment. What is the problem? How will we solve it? Which strategic approach is best? This takes open communication, mutual respect and the anchor of solid objectives. With multiple players, each holding a unique point of view and area of expertise, it's easy to see why decision makers need to be identified and fully empowered at the project's outset.

Working collaboratively puts every party in the spotlight. ... Everyone is motivated to show up at his or her best.

Consider complementary skill sets

Duplicating resources is not only inefficient, but can cause confusion and even damage relationships if two partners share a competency but only one is called upon to use it. When each party is clear about why they've been invited to the table, they can bring their very best forward and engage respectfully and effectively with other team members despite any skill set overlap.

Engage the right people at the right time

Not everyone needs to be in every meeting, or in on every decision. Ownership of information, presentations and recommendations will shift as the project progresses. Team members not invited to a specific meeting can and should remain engaged in other aspects of the work. That said, communication is key. If any partner is out of the loop, it can delay your entire project.

Put realistic measurement rubrics in place

Everyone on the team shares responsibility for the project's success or failure. But wins can only be identified when realistic measures are in place. Establish measurement strategies and benchmarks at the outset, and be faithful in your follow-through. In this way, the whole group learns and can fine-tune for the future.

The benefits of a job well done

Once established, the benefits of effective collaboration far outweigh the potential difficulties caused by ingrained habits and processes. Here are just a few:

Move faster toward your goals

Working with partners, whether internal or external, who are experts in their fields keeps you from reinventing existing wheels. Each team member will have a specialized point of view that can help you uncover multiple solutions. When team members are working individually, these ideas can remain fixed—small, incremental steps toward your goal. But when people work together, the same ideas can evolve, become multidimensional and drive you quickly to new places.

Produce breakthrough work

If two heads are better than one, imagine what a larger group could come up with. Not only are ideas generated faster, they take you farther outside of the box as you tap the combined knowledge and creativity of many specialists.

Leverage healthy competition

Working collaboratively puts every party in the spotlight. When a team member doesn't perform, the whole team knows and can suffer for it. Because of this, everyone is motivated to show up at his or her best.

See the ROI

At first, collaboration may sound expensive. Breaking down cultural barriers. Restructuring processes. Orchestrating a diverse cast of characters. Indeed, effective collaboration does require an initial investment as well as an open mind. But if collaboration is handled well, the outcomes can be worth it, playing out in more creative solutions, dynamic new relationships, greater market share and financial success.

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