Sophie strode down the hall to Randy’s office. “Randy, what is this?” she asked as she waved a sheaf of papers. Randy looked up and said, “I have no idea. What are you waving around?”

“Your plans for your group!”

“Oh, my predicted project portfolio for the next six months?”

“Yes! When were you going to talk to me? I’m the development manager! If you’re not testing the systems we’re developing, what the heck are you doing?”

“Well, this is what I’ve been trying to discuss with you for the past few weeks, but you haven’t made time to see me. So, I thought I’d publish my portfolio and get your attention. It worked, eh?”

Sophie and Randy are working together, but they are not collaborating. Collaboration—the ability to work jointly with others—is something we talk about a lot. We demand it in job descriptions. We assume the people who run the business do it. We expect it of teams. But, how do people really collaborate?

Assuming you can get people to sit down together, a good way to think about collaboration is to think first about the steps to collaboration.

**Steps to Collaboration**

In *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*, Robert C. Solomon claims there are five steps to building a trusting relationship, as shown in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solomon’s Steps</th>
<th>Why this step works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deliver what you promise to deliver.</td>
<td>If you can’t keep your promises, you are not trustworthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be consistent in your actions and reactions.</td>
<td>People who act and react in inconsistent ways are not trustworthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make integrity a cornerstone of your work.</td>
<td>Without integrity, can there be trust?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be willing to discuss, influence, and negotiate.</td>
<td>Avoid becoming stuck on a position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in yourself and your colleagues.</td>
<td>Extending trust is a great way to earn it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

Notice that the last step is extending trust. Sophie is surprised by Randy’s plans. He is promising to deliver some work—just not the work she wants done. But, Sophie hasn’t been consistent in her actions and reactions, because she hasn’t made time to work with him. If she refuses to make time to work on the portfolio with Randy, she hasn’t been trustworthy.

**Barriers to Collaboration**

In my experience, team size matters, too. If you have a small team—fewer than ten people—you have a good chance of making collaboration work. But, if you are trying to get ten or more people together to collaborate, it’s much harder. That’s because it’s just about impossible to create a team of ten or more people. Groups of more than nine people splinter into smaller groups of three to seven people.

In addition to team size, there are several barriers to collaboration that organizations impose—perhaps unintentionally—on people:
Playing a zero-sum game: A zero-sum game is a game where one person wins everything while another person loses everything. When you rank projects, there is only one No. 1 project. In a real sense, one project wins and the others lose. That’s the only zero-sum game you want to play in an organization. Otherwise, you are not optimizing the work at the highest level. If people can’t decide which projects are ranked first, second, and third, they are preventing the organization from making progress. In that case, your competitors win.

Hiding information: Sometimes, people think that if they keep information hidden from others, they can enhance their position in the organization. And, for a short time, they may be able to do so. But, in the long term, hiding information prevents people from collaborating. Remember, although you might be negotiating with a peer about a problem, it’s in the organization’s best interests to have all the information out and available.

Incentives prevent teamwork: I’ve worked with managers whose salespeople were paid when an order was booked, not when it was shipped. There was no incentive for salespeople to sell what the development team had already created. In fact, there was tremendous incentive to sell new things that hadn’t been invented yet.

You’ve probably met project managers who had management by objectives (MBOs) that only dealt with the project’s release date. Those project managers worked with development managers whose MBOs were about features and with test managers whose MBOs were about defects. They have no incentive to collaborate in this situation. In fact, it is not in anyone’s interest to collaborate. Except for the poor customer who desperately wants them to collaborate.

Decisions don’t stick: It’s even worse when a group of people get together, make a decision (or several decisions), and then someone with more positional power changes that decision. Who wants to bother collaborating in that situation? Any decision you make is as likely to get thrown out as stick.

The time-space continuum prevents true collaboration: Many of you work in geographically distributed teams. You know how hard it is to collaborate on product development when you are not in the same place. It’s even more difficult for managers to collaborate on decisions when they are not in the same place.

One CIO had five remote teams run by directors: two in the US, one in the UK, one in Poland, and one in Bangalore. Each director had his own MBO, which was not in concert with the others, and they never met as a group. Some subset of directors would get together and make a decision; the next day, when the others met, they made a different decision.

The CIO had finally had enough. “I want you folks to work together on this!” he mandated. Once he called the meeting, the directors were finally able to air their concerns and explain why they’d made their original decisions. Collaboration cannot occur without interaction among all the players at one time.

Rewind Randy and Sophie
Once Sophie realized she’d ignored Randy, she decided to make the effort to collaborate on the project portfolio.

They picked a mutually convenient time to meet. They each considered the principles behind their decision making. Luckily, they did have a common goal. They discussed how to make the entire organization successful with their planned portfolio, and they agreed on when to review the portfolio again.

As Sophie and Randy worked through their plans for the next quarter, they kept reminding each other about pending deliverables and showing each other their progress. When one of Sophie’s projects encountered trouble, she explained the problem to Randy. They were able to make other plans and manage the problem.
Once they realized the power of collaboration, they brought others in across the organization, not only to manage the project portfolio but also to collaborate on product roadmaps and do a little strategic planning.

It doesn’t matter where you are in the organization; collaboration is necessary. If you’re a tester, you need to work with developers and vice versa. If you’re a product owner, you need to work with your users. If you’re a manager, you need to work with your teams. The higher the stakes, the more collaboration will help you.

Sidebar: Real Collaboration Can Produce Team Flow
When people collaborate, you can see the team members get into flow. I once worked on a large project where we all had the same vision of the product; we all worked together, delivering small, working chunks of code into the code base; we had demos for one another; and we treated one another with respect and had a great time.

We were in team flow. Because we had small, frequent deliverables, we could see how each person delivered on a daily or almost-daily basis. Because we had the same vision, we were able to be consistent in our actions and reactions. Any time anyone outside the team asked us to cut corners (this is where integrity is key), we had our vision against which to check our work. And, even though we had plenty of disagreements, we stuck to a principle, rather than to a position. We delivered a new software-hardware combination product in nine months—a record for the organization.

Watch out for the inadvertent organizational barriers to collaboration. And don’t just work together—try real collaboration.

References

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