

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP: A PROCESS FOR SUCCESS IN A TURBULENT WORLD

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Do you know how to provide collaborative leadership in a disciplined fashion? And how does one define disciplined collaboration? The current business and leadership literature touts the importance of collaborating in our turbulent world. Large and small businesses and teams struggle to wrap their heads around just what collaboration is. Many see collaboration or collaborative leadership as a challenge that can be met through technology, whether it is through social media or virtual conferencing, while others recognize the benefits of restructuring an office space so that it appears more open. However, technology and physical space are only superficial means to address the challenge of disciplined collaboration. Collaboration - and successful collaborative leadership - does not derive from "where" or through "which" media people interact. Instead, it is about "how" people interact. And that "how" must be disciplined.

Disciplined Collaboration

Disciplined collaboration holds a central place in Jim Collins' work, "Great by Choice." "Great by Choice" is the result of a grand research project that seeks to discover how some companies have continued to thrive in spite of uncertainty, chaos, and luck - good or bad. It's a centrally-important issue in our turbulent world, where change is so rapid and unpredictable. Collaborative leadership has been cited as a vital skill that teams and companies must use in order to constantly create, innovate and adapt to change. Innovation is often seen as the fruit of collaboration; however, this is a dangerously limited perspective. Collaboration is much more valuable than a means to achieve innovation. Disciplined collaboration is an invaluable process that teams can utilize to successfully innovate, solve problems, make decisions, plan and execute.

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Above all, disciplined collaboration is a creative planning and decision-making process. In "Great by Choice," Collins defines discipline as "consistency of action." For teams and companies, Collins' definition implies that collaboration and collaborative leadership processes be consistent. "The great task, rarely achieved," Collins writes, "is to blend creative intensity with relentless discipline so as to amplify the creativity rather than destroy it." He goes on to point out that "the signature of mediocrity is not an unwillingness to change; the signature of mediocrity is chronic inconsistency." That inconsistency begins in the planning and decision-making process. And in a world of complex challenges that are best met by teams rather than individuals, that consistency requires a disciplined collaboration process.

Dynamism and Iteration

A disciplined collaborative planning process requires certain elements. Altogether, there are many elements in a planning process; however, some of the elements most successfully impact an effective collaborative leadership process -- these are the elements that allow the process to be dynamic, iterative, participatory and cognitively diverse.

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The process for disciplined collaboration and collaborative leadership should also be iterative. Iteration is similar to dynamism, but is not the same. Iteration is the plan improvement process within the overall planning process, while dynamism refers to the adaptation of the plan after it is executed. Iteration occurs during planning, while dynamic adaptation occurs during the execution of the plan. Teams that collaborate during planning, and those who utilize collaborative leadership, will iterate the plan before its execution, enabling those individuals to more effectively execute and adapt those plans.

Nominal Group Aggregation

Of course, disciplined collaboration requires participation by more than one individual - this is what makes collaborative leadership so challenging. How do a group of individuals come together to produce a plan or make a decision?

Fundamentally, it requires a collaborative leadership process for generating ideas at the individual or very small group level (2-5 persons), and then combining and vetting these ideas at a larger group level (5-15 people). This process is called nominal group aggregation.

Nominal group aggregation is a delicate process because everyone has their own ideas - some better than others. In collaborative groups, some individuals voice their ideas forcefully, while others hold back on valuable insight, fearing they won't be heard or appreciated. However, successful collaborative leadership techniques can overcome such obstacles, and these techniques must be part of a disciplined collaborative process. Disciplined collaboration is not about achieving consensus; instead, it is about producing the best plan to achieve the objective. Consensus can lead in any direction, while disciplined collaboration yields a plan that leads in the right direction.

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Cognitive Diversity and Simplicity

Finding the correct direction to proceed requires another element of the collaborative planning process: cognitive diversity. Collaborative leadership will not be successful if you are collaborating with a team of individuals that think alike, have similar backgrounds and experience, occupy the same hierarchical positions, and so forth. Creativity and innovation require divergent thinking and dialogue. Therefore, disciplined collaboration must adhere to a process that harnesses cognitive diversity. Utilize your collaborative leadership skills to incorporate a balanced mixture of experience, knowledge and positions for the collaborative process. Consider that two heads are actually not more valuable than one if both heads think alike and see the world in the same way.

As Maslow famously quipped, "to a hammer, everything looks like a nail", so make sure that you have a complete toolbox when planning collaboratively.

There is one additional important element. The process must be simple. To collaborate effectively and efficiently, people need a simple process. If a team has to spend time organizing and training about how they are going to collaborate and then struggle to become proficient at that process, then efficiency and effectiveness suffer. Collaborative leadership entails using a process that is simple to learn and apply, consistently applying that process throughout the organization. Disciplined collaboration will become a widely-practiced behavior; and that behavior will ultimately become a healthy collaborative culture.

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Achieve Collaboration through Discipline

Disciplined collaboration yields more than a plan or decision; it engages the team to execute successfully. Disciplined collaboration is the first step in achieving success as a team. Western business professionals tend to seek autonomy, to have the freedom to solve problems and perform tasks on their own and in their own way. However, our complex, turbulent world requires collaboration in order to create, innovate and succeed. Humans also need to be connected to each other, to be a valuable part of a larger whole. Disciplined collaboration is the key to satisfying these often conflicting needs in modern organizations. On one hand, collaborative leadership provides each individual with the opportunity to contribute their own insights and then, once a final plan is created, to go forth and execute in their own semi-autonomous way.

On the other hand, what each individual executes becomes a well-coordinated part of the overall objective. To fulfill these basic human needs, the team must always achieve collaboration through a disciplined process.

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