

Collaborative Workplace Advantage

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In our workshops, we emphasize the skills of participatory management and collaborative leadership. With collaborative approaches – contrast with one-way, autocratic or dictatorial – leaders at all levels use an inclusive style that *balances assertiveness* (focus on goal or task achievement) with gaining cooperation and commitment (flexibility and consideration in relating to others).

There are several sharp advantages to this approach and (the best part) there are no significant downsides, except perhaps an upfront investment of time that is perpetually scarce. This is one of the few areas of business where there are no real tradeoffs or conflicts of interest: if you include people and treat them with respect, you won't pay a price (it doesn't cost you or the company any more); in fact, inclusion and participation makes for a better, more enjoyable *and* productive workplace. It also gets things done with far better quality, if that matters.

Let's say I have a project deadline this Friday, but I haven't yet received key information from another department. I made the request last week, but the due date is fast-approaching and they're not honoring *my* timeline. (The nerve! They think they have *better* things to do!?!). Sure, they understand how important this is [to me],

but so far, no accommodation. It turns out that, apparently, I just didn't include them early enough in the project to get their full buy-in. Trying to negotiate now starts to sound like begging or blame. I can appeal to their "team spirit" and espouse "all win" platitudes, but this push-pull dynamic will, at best, end in compromise: I'll probably get what I need a bit too late, and they'll grumble at having to postpone other work to deliver our precious data.

What works better? If I had brought them in as partners and established an up front, early agreement, it would likely save us both time and trouble in the long-run. Nicknamed "go slow to go fast," including others at the right time doesn't require *extra* time (though you may perceive that it is a cost, with skill, it is in fact an investment), nor is it giving in to *their* wishes at your expense. It is simply more effective, and clears the runway for future sustained success.

Might Makes ... A Mess

Sure, you can still force "cooperation," especially if you have positional power, but why needlessly risk backlash, resentment or substandard results. Since no one person can have all the answers, the chain-of-command approach often "orders" mediocre quality. "I did what you *told* me to do" (unstated subtext: "so you got what you deserved").

Understanding other people and using your "soft skills" doesn't make you a "soft" leader. Quite to the contrary, in fact; with practice, collaborative approaches can be *more* powerful, enabling you to lead more strongly and quickly toward the desired results. The more rapport you have, for example, the more room there is for intensity and passion in leading strongly toward your goals, even and especially

if there's disagreement about methods or priorities. This is simply because there's more of a genuine win-win when the other person feels included, consulted, respected.

Interpersonally, you can be *more* directive once you demonstrate that *their* views have been acknowledged. It's the core psychology of negotiation: we listen better once we've been heard.

Since You Asked

In subtle but powerful ways, asking questions takes the attention off you and opens a more collaborative, two-way exchange. Effective leaders use a coaching approach to draw out the other person's answers and make abundant use of that person's will and wisdom. Employees and executives *both* appreciate skillful facilitation and coaching as a "best practice" for bringing focus and a sense of partnership to projects and goals.

To collaborate, so-called "emotional intelligence" is no oxymoron. People skills are the maker-breaker for those wishing to succeed in business and advance in their career. However, be sure not to spend time discussing issues in depth that do not deserve it, and be aware that not everyone knows how nor necessarily values collaboration.

Due to the unpredictable and chaotic nature of human interactions, skillful collaboration creates a context, a "social environment" that allows people's differences to be the source of strength and unity rather than stress and conflict.

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