



# **Collaboration at Work: *What's an Elephant Between Coworkers?***

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## Collaboration at Work

### What's An Elephant Between Coworkers?

*By Daniel Robin*

Have you ever noticed how your perceptions and those of others often don't match?

It is said that we all hold "a piece of the elephant" (and the elephant likes it). This is why collaboration is necessary and usually advantageous at work: to gain access to unfamiliar territory and the new resources that live in other people. Indeed, to get things done, learn, and improve, your colleagues – yes, even your boss – could actually come in handy from time to time.

Collaboration is more than just working together *cooperatively* ("teamwork"), more than going along (accommodating) or getting along ... it is that remarkable and unpredictable chaos, complexity, and creative stuff that makes life interesting. Admittedly, sometimes *too* interesting.

#### **Look Within, or Look Out!**

Reflect for a moment on your own workplace. When was the last time you had a conversation that didn't go well? Do you normally come back to those less-than-delightful moments to gain a sense of resolution? How, usually? Do you resolve it inside your own head or do you get in their face? Where there's been some interpersonal friction, most of us tend toward one extreme or the

other to cover up the fact that we feel either threatened or embarrassed.

Even if you attempt resolution inside your own head ("Oh, he's just a jerk!"), or through a third party ("Can you believe what a jerk he is?!"), or *with* the person directly ("I'm sorry, but I don't feel complete about X; perhaps there's been a misunderstanding..."), you aren't *necessarily* collaborating.

So, what *is* collaboration, and when does it make sense to collaborate? There are at least four situations where a collaborative approach is essential:

- **When you need to increase cooperation –**

collaboration helps deal with differences *before* they lead to resistance or begin to prevent understanding.

Skills: handling resistance, empathic listening, and verifying understanding.

- **When you want stewardship (not micro-delegation or micro-management) –** whether kicking off an important project or change initiative, stewards "go slow to go fast" with the right input from all the right players upfront. [ "Stewardship" just means fully delegating so they truly own and commit to carrying out the action, and getting the desired results. ]

Skills: asking goal-oriented questions, forming clear & complete agreements, rapport.

- **When you need a more complete perspective –**

collaboration allows for useful reflection and feedback, so

rather than hallucinating (filling in blind spots from your own perceptions), you can push back on limited assumptions and gain new awareness.

Skills: Distinguishing observation from interpretation, giving feedback and recognition, rapport.

- **When there has been a breakdown or problem with another person** – collaboration provides the most tactful way of building accountability, trust, and safety while bringing about lasting change.

Skills: Dealing with negativity and blame, establishing accountability, and using the “gentle art of confrontation.”

### ***Work with me here***

[Can you think of any more “collaborate or else” situations? If so, send me an email at [daniel@abetterworkplace.com](mailto:daniel@abetterworkplace.com). These four instances have withstood the test of reader scrutiny since Feb. 1999.]

For each of these scenarios, there would typically be a consequence to *not* collaborating. For example, when there’s a breakdown and the pathway starts getting cluttered by the debris of stormy interpersonal weather, take time out to clear it. A cooling-off period is wise, but don’t postpone collaboration indefinitely or what was once merely cool will soon turn frozen and immovable as a “hardening of the attitudes” sets in. Then you’ll need that elephant or other power tools to drag away the heavy interpersonal roadblocks.



And if you still have strong feelings, it may be helpful to work it out human to human rather than through electronic (or animal) means. Email and voicemail have their place, but it is too easy to misunderstand intent without a “live,” interactive conversation. It is nearly impossible for others to accurately “read” your voice tone and body language in email or voicemail.

**Keeping “current”** in the relationship – no accumulation of serious withholds or violations of trust – and **skillful communication** happens to be a key to effective, high-quality collaboration and teamwork.



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