

LEADERSHIP

SIT.VAC - CHIEF COLLABORATION OFFICER

Research shows most people don't experience collaboration at work¹. The business case is compelling and a real solution may be closer to home than leaders realise. But despite the interest in collaboration, there are scarce practical models and skills for increasing it, within the hierarchies needed for clear responsibility and decision-making.



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In Roffey Park's latest *Management Agenda* research², 82 percent of respondents agreed that their organisation needed to empower their staff more and disperse decision making, and 58 percent are already moving in that direction. But the same research identified "politics within the organisation" as the most common cause of major dissatisfaction at work (nearly 60 percent of respondents, the next closest being constant change on 48 percent). Clear Leadership (Bushe, 2009), however, provides clarity and practical skills that leaders at any level can use to quickly increase the amount of collaboration³. One study found a healthcare provider was able to increase employee engagement from the 61st to 91st percentile in three years using Clear Leadership⁴. The model has a simple but profound premise that; collaborative organisations rest on micro-relations of partnership, defined as a relationship between two or more people who all feel

responsible for the success of their common purpose. Isn't this what leaders want - followers who feel responsible for the success of their work together? And don't most people want to work with others who feel a similar commitment to their common success?

Any new partnership, be it a new business partnership, an MBA in their first job, or a new board appointment, begins with feeling "this is going to be great". From studying leaders, teams and organisations that have succeeded and failed at instilling collaboration, the issue does not appear to be motivation - most leaders and professionals say they want to work collaboratively, at least at first. Most bosses are not control freaks, nor are employees usually lazy or clashing because of personality differences. We think it's more to do with how our minds work and how we've been taught to treat each other that stops collaboration over the

long run. For any partnership to continue to function beyond the honeymoon, people have to learn from their experience together, whatever plans, goals and roles are agreed up front, reality will intrude and adaption will be required. When people seek to learn from their collective experience they usually talk about what happened in the past to identify what to do the same, and differently, in the future. It seems reasonable, but it doesn't work.

Firstly, each person involved in the same event is having a different experience. Experience is the stream of observations, thoughts, feelings and wants of each person, moment to moment. In any one group, different people may be simultaneously excited, amused, anxious and preoccupied. Have you ever listened to someone describe a meeting where it seems they were at a different meeting from you? This phenomenon of having personally

different experiences may seem obvious, but who is having the right experience? In collaboration the answer is “everyone”, which challenges our beliefs about good teams and learning from our collective experience. Shouldn't we agree on what happened to learn from it? Shouldn't we have a common experience to be a team? Actually, no - real partnerships are strengthened when we let each other have our own, unique experience without trying to change it. But because most leaders don't understand this, or have the right skills to lead learning in the midst of working, conversations attempting to learn from collective experience become contests over whose experience is the right experience. At work, the boss's experience usually becomes the 'right' one and in that moment those with different experiences start to feel less responsible for success.

Secondly, people make up stories about other people's experiences, starting a cycle. We are sense-making beings and we are compelled to make sense of the actions of others who matter to us - like those we are in partnership with. When our boss or other partners do something that we find puzzling or troubling we almost never ask them to help us understand and make sense of what they are doing. Instead we privately mull it over or talk to others about it. Once we have a story that makes sense and others agree with, we treat it as the truth about the other person. New acts of sense-making then have to fit with this story in order for things to “make sense” - so we usually only see the person in ways that confirm that further. A cycle begins that leads each person to become disconnected from the reality of their partners. Third and finally, we avoid checking out the stories because our brains are wired to assume the worst, so our stories are actually worse than the reality and we fear the situation will be made worse if talked about. When we imagine the thoughts and feelings behind the actions of others we find troubling, we tend to make up negative scenarios, and in any information vacuum, people's worst fantasies fill in. Brain imaging research and evolutionary psychology help explain this; early humans who interpreted rustling in the bushes to mean danger were more likely to survive. We have inherited the brain chemistry of our most cautious and paranoid ancestors.

In Gervase's research, he found that around 80 percent of conflicts at work are based on these inaccurate stories people make up about each other and the actions they take toward each other, are based on them⁵. He has coined the interactions people have that are based on stories they haven't checked out, interpersonal mush. It is the 'interpersonal mush', he argues, that destroys partnership even amongst the most well-intentioned people. Leaders who genuinely want powerful collaboration to flourish around them have to get serious about seeing and clearing out this mush and modelling that approach for others. This requires four skill sets: 1. Building enough awareness to catch themselves in the constant act of sense-making; 2. Describing their own experience so that others don't have to make their own sense of it;



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Has the recent behaviour of leaders in some key organisations dampened the ambition for leadership?



3. Being curious about and checking out their stories with people they need to be in partnership with; 4. Appreciating and amplifying the best in their partners. Here are two examples: First, the meeting where the leader opens with; “so we need to make a decision, but first I want to hear your views”. Of course, good leaders seek input from their teams, and some would advise that leaders should go last to allow different views to surface. Our experience however is that, if others don't know where the leader is on the issue, their level of disclosure will be guarded and incomplete, because their cautious brains will be trying to figure out what is going on in the boss's head. Instead, if the leader can clearly describe their experience - their observations, thoughts, how they feel about it and what they want - followed by genuine curiosity to hear different views, this invites a richer conversation more likely to generate better ideas and more commitment to a final decision. To generate lively, creative conversations that lead somewhere, leaders must resist the trap of feeling responsible for the experience of others and wanting to make everyone else's experience the same as theirs'. The second example is pinch, pinch, BANG. The pinch is when someone says something that feels like a tiny pinch. It's so small it's not worth mentioning - it would seem churlish. But the pinch is part of a pattern - there will be more pinches. Then BANG. The problem blows up through stories spiralling on both sides and not being checked out, resulting in a bigger misunderstanding - now it's become too big to talk about! The answer to these mush-creating exchanges is to use the Clear Leadership skills above and create the habit of regular learning conversations, to clear out the mush before it becomes toxic. When this takes hold amongst leaders, organisational learning really starts to happen, everywhere! When leaders accept that everyone creates their own experience, no one is responsible for another's experience and that partnership requires continuously checking out the stories and clearing out the mush, collaboration can be sustained over the long run. ●

1. LRN (2016) *The How Report: A Global Empirical Analysis of How Governance, Culture, and Leadership Impact Performance*. <http://howmetrics.lrn.com/#report>
2. Roffey Park Management Agenda data, 2017, pre-publication. To be published March 2017.
3. Bushe, G.R. (2009) *Clear Leadership: Sustaining Real Collaboration and Partnership at Work*
4. Bushe, G.R. & O'Malley, J. (2013) *Changing Organisational Culture through Clear Leadership*. www.clearlearning.ca/images/stories/pdf/change_culture.pdf
5. Bushe, G.R. & Grossling, F (2006) *Engaging Conflict. The Impact of Clear Leadership Training on how People Think about Conflict and its Management*. www.clearlearning.ca/images/stories/pdf/conflict.pdf

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