

The Deblieux Report

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If you want it done right, you...

How did you finish the title sentence? Most likely, you whispered, “you have to do it yourself.” It means you are a normal workplace leader. It may also mean you are out of date.

History

Doing it yourself to do it right is rooted deep within you. It is very likely a habit that helped you become a workplace leader. Someone, somewhere along your career path noticed that you were the person who got things done. They saw you coming in early, leaving late, and making sure that things got done the way they were supposed to get done. Their observations led them to conclude that your DNA included a leadership strain.

They found a way to promote you. You should thank them. You should also tell them that they forgot to tell you that what made you strong as a worker may make you weak as a leader.

Future

Your future as a leader depends on one word – **collaboration**. It is no longer a do it yourself world. Collaboration is THE operative word from Linux, to Wikipedia, to the Arab Spring, to the workplace. It is more than an idea. It is the way of work life.

Collaboration is slowly eroding and reinventing the role of the workplace leader. It is not asking. It is demanding. It expects you to embrace it, learn it, and practice it.

Defined

Collaboration is a process of two or more people working together with shared information to achieve a common goal.

Collaboration implies, but does not necessarily require equality. At some point in every project a decision must be made. In a group it may be made by a majority vote. In a manager-employee project, it may be made by the manager. In each scenario, however, participants must feel that their participation and input is valued, considered, and appreciated.

Balance

You have to know when to use collaboration. You must make a conscious decision about whether or not to use it. More importantly, your team must be able to reasonably predict what your choice will be in a

variety of situations. They must trust that once you commit to collaborate, you will follow through on your commitment.

A crisis situation may require you to revert to a command and control leadership style. A long-term development project may require collaboration. The word “may” is crucial. A complex crisis may require multiple inputs from multiple sources that need to be heard in an open, shared collaborative context. On the other hand, a long-term development project may require a “bet the farm” decision that is not compatible with collaboration.

You set the stage. You decide which approach is best. Command and control is the default process for the “if you want it done right” leader. Collaboration is the default practice for an effective leader.

Secret

The secret value of collaboration is that it gives everyone on the team a fair opportunity to place their knowledge, skills, and abilities on the table for objective consideration.

Collaboration creates value for the individual contributions of each team member. In the end, the specific contribution or idea may not be used – but it is always heard and valued. When your ideas are valued, you share them freely. When your idea is heard, you are more likely to support a final decision even if it does not include your contribution. In sports parlance, you do not have to be the one that scores the winning goal, but you do have to believe that you are an important part of the winning effort.

Tenets

The first and most important tenet of collaboration is an open mind and effective listening. Collaboration requires a concerted effort to let the others say all they have to say and, in fact, to encourage them to clarify their point. It goes against our natural instinct to start talking before we finish listening.

The second and nearly equal tenet of collaboration is that it strives to find the best solution or approach without regard for the rank of the contributor. Collaboration is not about everyone agreeing. It is about everyone contributing to find the best answer based on an open discussion.

Linux, Wikipedia and other collaborative web based services have perfected this concept. They invite total strangers from around the world to submit, discuss, and refine ideas until they “get it right.” Their process requires civility and respect. They shun title and rank.

The third tenet of collaboration is that the quest for an answer has no preconceived boundaries. In a collaborative discussion any and all resources are available; people from the outside (i.e., customers, other departments, suppliers, etc.) are invited and encouraged to participate; and, unconventional resources are tapped.

Vulnerability is the fourth tenet. Collaboration requires an ability to see and accept another point of view. Participants must be free to concede their position without fear of ridicule or retribution. Without this freedom, participants withdraw. They stop discussing before a discussion is truly finished. They agree to do things that they are not committed to doing.

The fifth tenet of collaboration is evaluation. Effective collaboration is an on-going process. It monitors results. It adjusts to changing circumstances. It supports an early end to unsuccessful ventures.

In short, collaboration is not for the faint of heart. It requires a carefully planned approach with participants who share a common goal of working together to find an elusive best solution.

Leadership

As a workplace leader, you cannot “play” with collaboration. You are either in the water or out of the pool. Employees see right through a half-hearted commitment to collaboration. They play along with it to get along, but they disengage quickly and thoroughly.

You do not have to collaborate every time on everything. You are a leader. You get paid to make decisions. You also get paid to effectively combine the collective knowledge of your team to support the strategic goals of your organization. Your team needs to know when you are in a collaborative mode and when you are not. You must declare your intentions boldly and clearly.

When you decide to collaborate, your team must hear words, and see actions that demonstrate collaboration. You cannot fake collaboration.

When you are in a collaborative leadership mode, you use words like we, us, and our. You invite everyone to participate including those who are normally quiet and reserved. You interrupt those who interrupt others to let them finish a thought. You stop cold any effort to demean, diminish, or ridicule a contribution.

Importantly, you refuse to let the village know-it-all (i.e., Cliff on Cheers!) control the discussion.

Starting

A collaborative discussion starts with a declaration. It starts with you declaring, “We need to work together to figure out...” The thing that you aim to figure out must be stated as a clear end-result goal. The team must know what it is working toward. “We need to figure out a way to do a better job,” is not a clear end-result. “We need to figure out a way to increase customer satisfaction ratings by 25% by the end of the quarter,” is.

You must decide if you are the right person to lead the collaborative effort. Very often, the manager is the wrong person to lead a collaborative effort. As a manager, you have too many preconceived notions about what is possible and what is not. You symbolize a gate-keeper who has the power to judge ideas to the detriment of the career of an individual. And, you are not in the trenches every day. Your distance away from the problem, no matter how slight, limits the accuracy and validity of your technical expertise.

Finally, you must hone your skills as a facilitator. To facilitate means to “make easier.” It means to “bring about.” When you facilitate, your contributions are temporarily less important than those of others. You must work less at making your own points and more at helping others to express theirs. You cannot respond to points with counterpoints. You must use effective listening (i.e., I think what I am hearing you say is...) to assure that everyone gets the full meaning of a contribution. You must keep track of the collective knowledge that flows from the discussion to build toward a successful end-result.

Critically, in your role as a facilitator, you must verify the collective thought of the team. You must confirm (i.e., periodic group votes) that the discussion is truly collaborative and working toward a position that will result in commitment and action.

Conclusion

In many situations, the sentence is, “If you want it done right, you have to lead a collaborative effort.”

Are you a collaborator? Your answer is important. It is less important than the answer from your team.

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