

BUSINESS CENTRAL

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Two Heads are Better than One

Collaboration will be the key to your business success in the workplace of the future.

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Don't get too attached to your corner office or cubicle. The workplace of the future has no room for barriers between people. In fact, oceans, continents, and time zones will be of little consequence as you conduct business in the years to come. How quickly you can tap into the expertise and energy of your stakeholders, including employees, vendors, and customers, to solve a problem or brainstorm new initiatives, will determine how quickly your business will triumph.

A New World of Work

What will the workplace of the future look like? Consider this:

- Top-down organizational charts will be replaced with spider-web-like connections between people whose job titles no longer define their place within the organization. Work groups will form for a finite project and disband at its conclusion. New groups will emerge as business dictates. Ideas will be solicited from throughout the company, not just within a specific department.
- The goals of the company are everyone's business and are created to reflect each employee's specific contribution. Personnel will become nimble workers, able to re-train or re-tool as needed for goal attainment. People will be hired for their brains, energy, and attitude, and not just for technical skills.
- Employees will work in a variety of venues. Portability will be the norm. In the company's building there will be fewer personal office spaces and more shared spaces to promote intentional and accidental collaboration.
- Technology will continue to support communication and collaboration through new programs and applications and across all manner of devices. An eagerness to learn and incorporate these new tools into everyday operations will distinguish the high achievers.
- Analytics will play an increasingly important role in determining sales, marketing, and production goals as the digital world makes gathering this data so much easier.

Is Your Business Ready for a Collaborative Future?

To what extent do your operational practices invite collaboration among departments or with interested others? If I asked your executive team would they all nod and say, "Yes, of course, we collaborate in many areas." And what if the same question was asked of your employees? Would their perspective be the same?

I recently heard this story about a business that professed to be collaborative. They wanted to create a name for a new service they were about to launch. They invited all employees to submit their ideas for the name. They ended up with 148 ideas. A committee was appointed to select the semifinalists. They submitted their top three choices to the CEO. The CEO declined to choose any of the employee-generated ideas and instead picked one of his own. This CEO not only broke the spirit of the employees, he lost their trust and proved, beyond any doubt, that collaboration was not a core driver in his business.

Yet, in workplaces where collaboration is a core value, we see results such as these reported by IBM:
How does collaboration yield results? By fostering innovation. In fact, true innovation is virtually impossible without collaboration. And innovation is indispensable to success. Business leaders recognize this. In IBM's recent CEO study, more than three quarters of the 765 chief executive officers queried cited collaboration and partnering as very important to their innovation efforts.

In today's competitive environment, sharing information and expertise can be critical in driving both individual and organizational success. From forward-thinking business leaders to younger workers who have grown up in the Web-based world, working collaboratively is now business as usual.

Are You Convinced Yet?

The future is calling you to collaborate. Innovation is best achieved through collaboration, and employees feel more connected to companies that encourage collaboration. There is no downside to creating a stronger practice of collaboration.

Here are six ways for you to increase collaboration and the positive outcomes it will produce.

- *Gain buy-in from the CEO and other senior staff.* Have them lead the charge for collaboration and engage in collaborative events with staff and others. Their role modeling will engender goodwill from staff and greatly influence middle managers to do the same with their staff. Create methods to identify great collaborative thinking and recognize and reward those who are successfully collaborating throughout the organization. Hold these instances up for all to see and emulate.
- *Invest in technology.* Look to your IT professionals to advise you on the best new products that make information sharing, virtual meetings, real-time collaboration, and cross-device efficiency, seamless. Collaborative technology is a burgeoning industry – take it seriously, and incorporate as much as you can into your business.
- *Create spaces in your building for collaboration to occur naturally.* Maybe you are not ready to knock down all of your walls - that IS rather extreme! However, one of the greatest benefits reported from open-air concept employees is the ability to instantly connect with others. Snippets of overheard conversations provide opportunities for co-workers to add their thoughts and engage in real-time problem solving. Offer space for distance workers to use when they want to touch base with the home office.
- *Hire more millennial generation employees* and let your current millennial workers lead the charge. They are experts at using technology to stay connected and will be early adopters of other new technologies. You will also need to educate other members of your workforce on the benefits of collaboration and how it will help them be more effective in their positions. After all, they have had years of experience in a workplace that emphasized individual accomplishments.
- *Create opportunities for employees to build relationships throughout the organization* in ways that seem organic. This could include community service projects, departmental competitions or get-togethers, annual meetings, or social events. Employees who feel a level of personal comfort with each other will be more willing and able to collaborate.
- *Remember to include your customers and vendors in your collaborative goals.* Their perspectives on your business policies and practices can be invaluable. Plus, the additional contact between your employees and vendors and customers can further cement your business relationship.

Intentional and celebrated collaboration will bring higher employee engagement, stronger ties to your customers and supporters, and untold business success. How soon can you begin?

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