

Not Everyone's a Team Player. Here's What to Say to Them to Get Them on Board

Henry Ford once said, "Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success." Nevertheless, not everyone in a company defines success as "working together," nor is every team member interested in coming together or keeping together. And if you're the collaborative boss who is working with a non-collaborative colleague, you need to understand what's getting in the way, and how to speak up before it impacts both business outcomes and workplace relationships.

If you consider yourself a collaborative leader, you might be confused about why others don't follow suit. Some professionals are more driven by competition than cooperation, while others don't feel like there is enough trust or psychological safety to collaborate effectively. Others feel like collaboration favors mediocre performers over superstars. Employees may be discouraged by the challenges associated with collaborating across global teams, where others weigh the amount of time collaboration can take compared to going it alone, and choose the speedier route. For many people, collaboration can feel like just one more thing on their growing to-do list.

It's also important to consider when non-collaborators might have a point: collaboration might not always be what's needed. Nevertheless, you can't just let your non-collaborators off the hook. Why? Because the benefits to collaboration are too important and abundant. As Dr. Jaclyn Kostner writes, "Collaboration can positively impact each of the gold standards of performance -- profitability, profit growth and sales growth -- to determine a company's overall performance in the marketplace."

With all of those assets on the line, you need to be willing and able to address folks whose "go it alone" behaviors may be costing your team, your project, and your company.

Here are four considerations for addressing non-collaborative colleagues:

1. Define what you mean by "collaboration."

The term "collaboration" is an interpretation of behaviors, and different people will interpret collaborative behaviors differently from one another. You might think of collaboration as "sharing all information as soon as it is obtained" while your colleague thinks of collaboration as "sharing information as needed to move the project along." Engage your colleague in a conversation about that: "I'd like to discuss our collaboration, and I realize that what I think collaboration is and what you think it is might differ. Would you share how you think about collaboration?"

2. Name what you notice, without blaming or shaming.

Approach your colleague using morally neutral language, "I" statements and a forward-looking suggestion. Think about the difference in potential impact between telling your colleague "In our marketing meetings, you never ask me for my opinions!" and "In our marketing meetings, I would like more opportunities to contribute my opinions to the discussion. I think that my input could move our initiative forward. How could we make that happen?"

3. Make a specific request.

Ask for one or two concrete behavior changes from your colleague -- not a laundry list. You might request that your colleague shares a particular resource with you to reduce costs, or invites a representative from your department to participate in their team meetings to increase knowledge sharing, and that's it for now.

4. Give and invite feedback.

Once you notice your colleague or direct report engaging in a behavior that you see as collaborative, give immediate positive feedback to help lock it in. In my Harvard Business Review article, I write about how important it is to acknowledge positive change. "Start looking for evidence that your employee has taken your advice to heart. Speak up the very first time you notice them acting differently."

If you see a missed opportunity, address it immediately as well. And in order to be truly collaborative, actively seek feedback as well. You need to be "brave enough to ask, 'How am I contributing to this problem?' and then model how to receive the feedback."

To be a truly collaborative leader and colleague, you need to be willing to get clear on what collaboration means for you and others, address non-collaborative behaviors when you see them, and offer feedback when you see someone making the positive changes you've requested to create a more collaborative environment.