COLLABORATION

If Your Team Agrees on Everything, Working Together Is Pointless

by Liane Davey

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Collaboration is crumpling under the weight of our expectations. What should be a messy back-and-forth process far too often falls victim to our desire to keep things harmonious and efficient. Collaboration's promise of greater innovation and better risk mitigation can go unfulfilled because of cultural norms that say everyone should be in agreement, be supportive, and smile all the time. The common version of collaboration is desperately in need of a little more conflict.

You've probably been taught to see collaboration and conflict as opposites. In some cultures the language and imagery of teamwork is ridiculously idyllic: rowers in perfect sync, or planes flying in tight formation. As a team, you're "all in the same boat." To be a good team player, you must "row in the same direction." These idealized versions of teamwork and collaboration are making many teams impotent.

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There's no point in collaboration without tension, disagreement, or conflict. What we need is collaboration where tension, disagreement, and conflict improve the value of the ideas, expose the risks inherent in the plan, and lead to enhanced trust among the participants.

It's time to change your mindset about conflict. Let go of the idea that all conflict is destructive, and embrace the idea that productive conflict creates value. If you think beyond the trite clichés, it's obvious: Collaborating is unnecessary if you agree on everything. Building on one another's ideas only gets you incremental thinking. If you avoid disagreeing, you leave faulty assumptions unexposed. As Walter Lippmann said, "Where all think alike, no one thinks very much." To maximize the benefit of collaborating, you need to diverge before you converge.

Unfortunately, our distaste for conflict is so entrenched that encouraging even modest disagreement takes significant effort. I find that three specific techniques help people embrace productive conflict. Carve out some team development time to do these exercises before your next contentious discussion.

First, discuss the different roles in the team and highlight what each role brings to the conversation. Highlight how the roles are there to drive different agendas. As an example, if you are in a cross-functional meeting with sales and production, the production person might be advocating for more standardization, control, and efficiency. The sales person advocates for the exact opposite: more flexibility, customization, and agility. When they are doing their jobs well, the sales and production leads should conflict with one another on the path to an optimized solution. One is fighting to be as responsive as possible to unique customer needs; the other fights for the consistency that breeds quality control and cost effectiveness.

As you work through each role in the team and their different motives, you'll see the light bulbs going on as people realize, "You mean I'm *supposed* to fight with that person!" Yes! "And when he's disagreeing with me, it's not because he's a jerk or trying to annoy me?" Right! If the team has the right composition, each member will be fighting for something unique. They are doing their jobs (and being good team players) by advocating in different directions, not by acquiescing. By taking the time to normalize the tensions that collaborators already feel, you liberate them to disagree, push, pull, and fight hard for the best answer.

Second, use a personality or style assessment tool to highlight differences in what people are paying attention to. In addition to differences stemming from their roles, team members will have different perspectives on an issue based on their personalities. As you explore the findings for your team, look for any tensions that might stem from personality-based diversity. Pay particular attention if you have one or two styles that are in the minority on your team. Team members with minority perspectives should be given the responsibility to speak up if the team's thinking becomes lopsided.

For example, in my work with dozens of executive teams, I've found a dearth of executives who fully appreciate the process-related issues involved in strategy and execution. I call out those who have this lens and set the expectation that they are going to challenge the

team when big ideas are insufficiently thought out or when alignment is only superficial. By describing the unique value of different perspectives, you encourage those in the minority to raise their voices.

A third approach to normalizing and encouraging productive conflict is to set ground rules around dissension. Ask your team to define the behaviors that contribute to productive conflict (i.e., conflict that improves decision making while contributing to increased trust) and those that detract from it. Cover as much territory as possible to give people a clear picture of what is, and is not, acceptable behavior on your team.

In addition to clarifying appropriate conflict behaviors, you might want to define processes or roles that will help you to have more-frequent or more-effective conflict. Some teams have success with DeBono's Six Thinking Hats, which has team members use a specified perspective (e.g., white hat is logical and fact-based; black hat is cautious and conservative; green hat is creative and provocative) to shed new light on the issue at hand. Others assign the responsibility for eliciting diverging views to a rotating chairperson or the owner of the agenda item. The key is to clearly define the process you're using and the associated expectations.

One case that would benefit from clearer expectations is the use of the devil's advocate role, which few use correctly. Most people invoke the term only to say something unpopular or distasteful. The true role of the devil's advocate (originally, the person appointed by the Pope to counter evidence of sainthood in the Roman Catholic beatification process) is to question the veracity of evidence and to propose alternate explanations for what has happened. By defining a clear devil's advocate role, you legitimize challenges to the quality and relevance of the evidence you're using to make a decision. A true devil's advocate does a great service.

Even after using these three techniques to change people's mindset about conflict, you have to go further. Giving people permission to challenge, disagree, and argue isn't enough. After all, giving someone permission to do something they don't want to do is no

guarantee that they'll do it. If you want to create productive conflict on your team and use it to generate better ideas, you need to move beyond permission to making productive conflict an obligation. Using these three techniques will be a good start.

Liane Davey is a team effectiveness advisor and professional speaker. She is the author of *The Good Fight*, *You First*, and co-author of *Leadership Solutions*. Share your comments and questions with her on Twitter at @LianeDavey.

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