



When Collaboration Fails and How to Fix It

Leaders can diagnose team dysfunction by looking for six common patterns.

BY ROB CROSS AND INGA CARBONI

Beth was excited when her CEO asked if she would take over a high-profile commercialization project — one expected to double the audiovisual technology company’s revenues in the coming decade and diversify its offerings. She would be replacing a valued leader who was leaving the organization. The project had been struggling, but it was still early days, and the potential upside was amazing. Beth accepted the assignment on the spot.

In her first week, Beth dug in. She found the project fully funded and staffed by 64 carefully selected people from departments across the company, including engineering, marketing, finance, and quality assurance. Three concurrent work streams — focusing on research, product development, and marketing and sales — had been established and a well-respected leader appointed for each.

Yet, 10 months later, the project was badly behind schedule and bogged down. Everyone with whom Beth spoke was frustrated with the slow pace of progress. They were all pointing fingers, but in different directions. The CEO believed the problem was a failure of leadership in the three work streams. The departing project leader blamed team members for not devoting enough time to the project. One team member said the problem was poor meeting management; another said key decisions weren’t being made in a timely manner.

What should Beth do? Appoint new work stream leaders? Relaunch the project? Restructure the group or the work? Add more people to the project team? Schedule more meetings or provide an online work platform?

It’s too soon to say. At this juncture, all Beth really knows is that the project is a collaborative effort critical to the success of the organization and that the effort is failing.

Collaborative failures can stem from a variety of conditions. Sometimes they are woven into the fabric of groups when they are formed, perhaps because team members’ incentives are misaligned or decision rights haven’t been defined. Sometimes they develop as groups evolve and their members interact, as when a group expands beyond the limits of its structure or gets bombarded with too many priorities.

Such problems are pernicious and prevalent. Work, after all, is increasingly collaborative. Research conducted by the Institute for Corporate Productivity found that 40% of high-performance organizations (that is, those that excel in revenue growth, profitability, and market share compared with their competition over a five-year time horizon) are shifting to a “high or very high degree” from traditional functions to more cross-functional project- and team-based work.¹ In addition, trends that support and drive more collaboration are gaining momentum, including the rising use of Agile methodologies, the de-layering of hierarchies, the adoption of digital tools and technologies, and the dramatic transition to remote work in response to COVID-19.

Meanwhile, more and more leaders are facing challenges like Beth’s without a thorough understanding of the underlying causes or a tool kit for addressing them. In Deloitte’s 2019 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 65% of the nearly 10,000 respondents identified the shift from functional hierarchies to team-centric and network-based organizational models as “important” or “very important.” Yet only 7% of the respondents believed that their organizations were “very ready” to execute the shift to network-based models, and only 6% rated themselves “very effective” at managing cross-functional teams.²

Our research sheds light on why groups are struggling. By and large, leaders are unleashing their teams without establishing the conditions needed to support collaboration. Moreover, when collaborative efforts break down, leaders are relying on conventional interventions that may not address the true nature of their problems.

The consequences are wide ranging. Collaborative failure hinders organizational and employee performance and productivity.³ It creates obstacles to

THE

RESEARCH

This article draws on more than a decade's worth of organizational network analysis (ONA) studies conducted across industries and geographies.

The authors used ONA to profile patterns of collaboration undermining team and unit success within organizations ranging from 2,200 to 45,000 employees.

They then conducted in-depth interviews with 100 leaders of collaborative efforts within 20 corporate members of Connected Commons, a global research consortium.

innovation, impeding both idea generation and implementation.⁴ It erodes employee engagement — contributing to stress, overload, and burnout.⁵

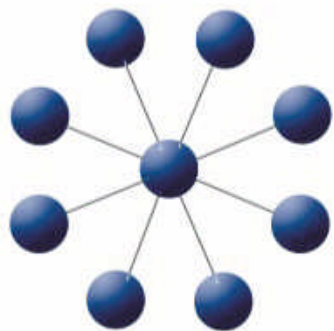
But before leaders like Beth can mitigate the consequences, they must pinpoint the causes. Until then, any solution will be hit or miss — or, worse, it could exacerbate the problem.

Using organizational network analysis (ONA) to study groups across industries and geographies, we've identified the patterns of network connectivity and collaborative practices associated with

high-performing teams and units.⁶ This research also revealed six patterns of collaborative dysfunction that have a negative impact on performance.

The six dysfunctional archetypes undermined performance in 88% of the 66 organizations we studied in both phases of this research. To better understand the patterns, we interviewed 100 leaders of collaborative efforts in 20 major companies.⁷ In this article, we share what we've learned about the types of dysfunction, a number of the drivers that create them, and a select set of remedies for addressing them.

DYSFUNCTION #1: Hub-and-Spoke Networks



Groups need formal and informal leaders, but sometimes they become the primary cause of collaborative breakdowns. ONA maps that show a preponderance of connections flowing through a group's leaders or experts reveal a dysfunctional pattern that we call *hub-and-spoke networks*.

In this pattern, hubs tend to throttle down a group's performance. They may hinder innovation by constraining the flow of information and resources through the spokes or by creating echo chambers in which ideas that penetrate the hub get an unwarranted degree of positive consideration. Overloaded leader-

hubs can also become bottlenecks, slowing the pace of work because they can't make timely decisions and eventually shift from proactive to reactive management.

Hub-and-spoke patterns often emerge when new groups are formed to address strategic initiatives or in times of change, such as mergers and reorganizations. One of our interviewees, a vice president in an insurance company, found herself in this situation when she became the leader of a new 80-member group in the finance department. The group was pulled together quickly by combining several preexisting, geographically disparate teams. It was immediately under pressure to deliver services at scale across the organization. But no time was taken to integrate the teams, nor were their structures and processes altered to accommodate their new combined scale. The VP became the central hub in the new group's network by default.

"Everybody was operating in siloed work teams, and every team was operating in different ways — some successfully, some not. There was no 'we' and no interest in changing the various ways the teams were working, because each team believed that it was already operating in a perfect manner," she recalls. "Meanwhile, everyone was relying on me for all of the coordination and decision-making. So my days

were filled with one-on-one meetings. It was tough."

The hub-and-spoke archetype can also stem from hard-to-break habits and behaviors. Ego and a strict command-and-control mindset can prompt leaders to create this pattern by micromanaging, interjecting when they do not have true expertise, or hoarding information and making too many decisions themselves. Team members can be overly dependent on leaders, too. We frequently see this when employees have been conditioned not to take risks, or to ask for approval on the smallest of decisions. Paradoxically, it can also happen when servant-minded leaders "save the day" too often and team members fall into the habit of not delivering on commitments. These behaviors are especially damaging if they become embedded in the organizational culture. Cultural mores that exaggerate the power differential between leaders and group members can heighten fears of failure, drive people to continually seek out validation from leaders, and stymie collaboration as a result.

The knee-jerk response to repairing hub-and-spoke networks is often restructuring the group or adopting a new technology to facilitate

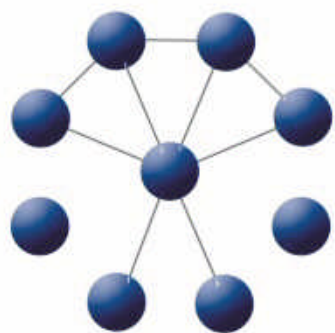
communication. But if behaviors are driving the dysfunction, behavioral change is required. When an incoming leader took over a new product development group in a life sciences company, she bumped into a fear-driven culture created by her predecessor and soon noticed that a hub-and-spoke pattern had emerged: Small teams within the group ran everything by her — they were afraid to make any sort of move without her input. So she conducted a series of workshops for the entire group and held targeted one-on-one discussions with influential employees within the various subteams. These sessions and conversations examined fear-producing behaviors such as criticizing ideas in ways that demoralized teammates (“That is a bad idea”) and the unproductive patterns these behaviors had created (for instance, not reaching out to teammates proactively to solve problems). The one-on-ones encouraged individuals to take risks and assured them that the new leader operated differently and “had their backs.” The whole group discussed ways to hold one another accountable for constructive problem-solving norms and assuming positive intent, and the leader encouraged even the most junior employee to hold *her* accountable every step of the way. Further, the group focused on a specific set of behaviors that generate energy in teams and agreed to collectively engage in these positive interactions.⁸

The structural elements of teams and organiza-

tions — the ways in which roles, decision rights, and work processes are defined — frequently create or aggravate the behavioral and cultural problems described above, resulting in hubs that obstruct collaboration. Supporting systems, especially rating systems and compensation plans, can further encourage excessive reliance on leader-hubs.

Often, the leaders of new groups are given strong decision rights and rely on strategic mandates and performance management processes to motivate followers to align with their objectives. These mechanisms help ensure that the group becomes properly established. But once group members get their footing, and particularly when groups begin to grow larger, such measures can unnecessarily slow networks down. To promote collaboration, leaders should scale back their involvement as soon as they see evidence that team members are capable of solving problems more independently. One partner in a financial advisory firm, which reorganized more than 50 offices into 11 territories, started off personally reviewing and approving all new business and hiring decisions in his territory. But as soon as the offices began consistently making business development and hiring decisions that reflected the needs of the entire organization, not just of their territory, he altered the decision rights — giving them to office managers — and stepped out of the process wherever his direct input wasn’t adding value.

DYSFUNCTION #2: Disenfranchised Nodes



Often, we see ONA maps in which some of the connections between nodes are stunted or missing altogether. The people who occupy the poorly connected nodes are isolated from the group: They may not receive the resources they need to do their work or the same opportunities to contribute to the group as their better-connected colleagues. As a result, work is not completed as efficiently as it should be, and the expertise of isolated team members is not fully utilized. We’ve named this archetype of collaborative dysfunction *disenfranchised nodes*.

Group members can become disenfranchised for various reasons. Sometimes their leaders or their colleagues cast them as outsiders because they are new to the group or because they are unlike other group members. Sometimes, as we have often seen with remote workers and contract employees, they are disconnected by virtue of their status within the group or their physical location.

A senior manager in the financial practice of a global strategic and operational effectiveness consulting company experienced this dysfunction firsthand when he joined a team that had recently

expanded from a single group of 40 colocated team members to 140 members spread over four locations. Initially, the leaders of the group made a concerted effort to create connections among the team members

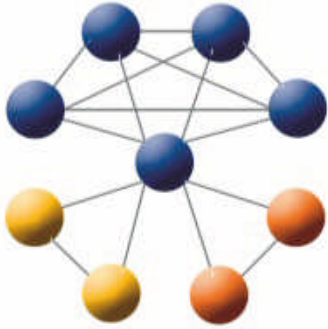
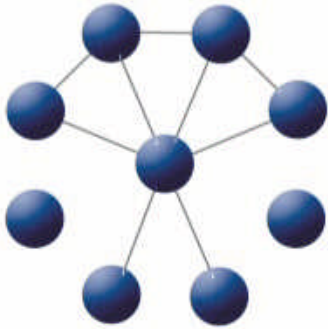
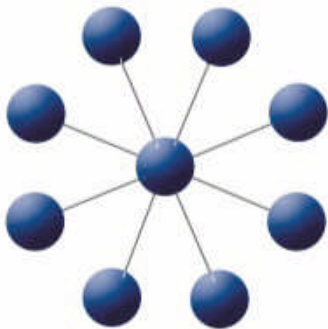
and involve them in decisions by bringing everyone together for bimonthly meetings and social gatherings. Eventually, however, the cost and the time needed to meet regularly in person proved onerous, and the meetings were replaced with conference calls. And then the calls dwindled down to a half-hour before being eliminated altogether. “Quite a lot of the team, because we were working for individual clients

and on client sites, began to feel more like individual contractors than part of the practice,” recalls the manager. “I put myself in the ‘disenfranchised’ camp.”

In this case, physical and temporal distance were the primary drivers of the dysfunction. The leaders of the financial practice addressed it by first reaching out to team members to understand why they were feeling disenfranchised. Then they

WHY IS YOUR ORGANIZATION STRUGGLING TO COLLABORATE?

Understanding the six types of collaborative dysfunction is critical to effective problem resolution.

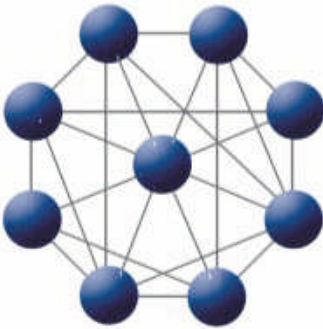
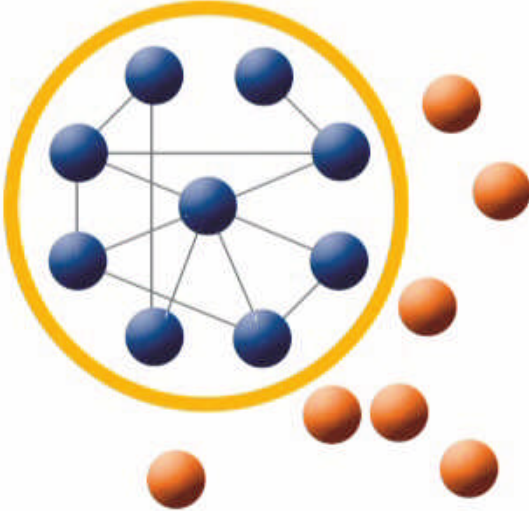
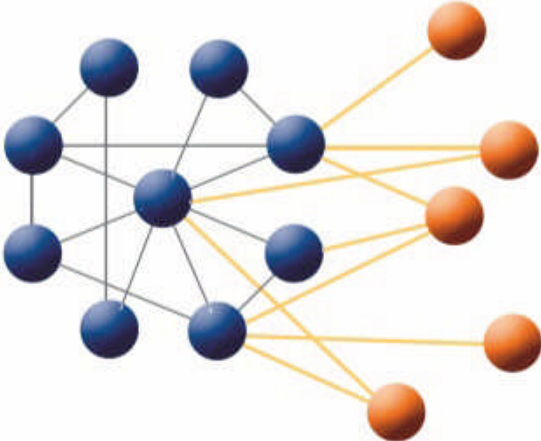


DYSFUNCTION		
HUB-AND-SPOKE NETWORKS	DISENFRANCHISED NODES	MISALIGNED NODES
ISSUE		
Excessive reliance on formal and informal leaders slows decision-making, blocks innovation, alienates team members, and overloads leaders.	Marginalized team members lack access to resources and struggle to contribute, negatively affecting group performance and the disenfranchised members’ engagement and retention.	Factions that don’t relate to one another slow down work, erode cohesion, and undermine project success.
DRIVERS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hierarchical or overly controlling leadership behaviors.• Dominance of experts.• Flaws in roles, decision rights, or incentives.• A fear-driven culture that promotes approval-seeking and validation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leaders who elevate some group members above others.• Onerous processes that cause some members to become disillusioned and withdraw.• A lack of trust in peers outside the function and/or an overreliance on familiar faces.• Disconnection by virtue of status or physical location.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agreeing on integrated objectives but then pursuing work in a way that optimizes functional or business unit goals.• Problems and solutions viewed only from one discipline’s perspective.• Clusters of like-minded teammates.• Distrust or competition among the team members.
SOLUTIONS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boost engagement in work by coaching people to assume an appropriate level of authority, and focus on what, not how.• Distribute knowledge through methodology, tools, databases, and training.• Integrate expertise through joint work.• Revise decision rights, roles, and/or incentives.• Shift work away from hubs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a process or role for recognizing and reintegrating the disenfranchised.• Embed inclusion as a group value.• Add process touch points to give individuals a greater voice or more opportunities to participate.• Use technology to overcome geographic disconnection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cocreate shared goals and priorities, and reinforce them with metrics and accountability.• Seek forums that build competence and interpersonal trust and that establish the value of group goals.• Create processes to identify and address misalignments.• Conduct exercises that enable members to connect outside the group and reset relationships.

began devoting more time to interacting with individual team members — checking in by phone more regularly and soliciting their opinions — and resumed a regular, albeit less frequent, schedule of in-person team meetings. “It wasn’t like people needed a fundamental change in their day-to-day work,” explains the manager. “Thinking back, it’s surprising how much of a difference this made,

because they were relatively small changes.”

Leader behaviors, as well as other conditions, such as onerous demands and value conflicts, can compel team members to opt out of collaboration — a sort of voluntary disenfranchisement. In such cases, interventions should be aimed at team members. For instance, to ensure that everyone is regularly heard, leaders can hold daily scrums, where all team

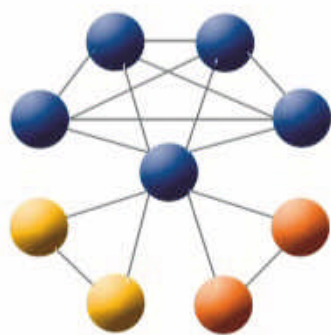
		
OVERWHELMED NODES	ISOLATED NETWORKS	PRIORITY OVERLOAD
<p>Team members cannot keep up with the collaborative demands placed upon them, leading to insufficient time for work, inefficient decision-making, excessive compromise, lower engagement, and ultimately burnout.</p>	<p>Impermeable group borders block stakeholder input and external resources/expertise, resulting in flawed decisions, innovation failures, and a lack of integration with the organization.</p>	<p>External stakeholder demands cause group members to lose sight of their mission and highest priorities, resulting in work overload that hurts the quality of execution, delays delivery, and creates employee burnout.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group growth that surpasses the limits of team and work design. • Ineffective meeting and communication norms. • Lack of effective collaborative workload metrics. • Fear of making independent decisions or of being left out. • A culture of overinclusion — both within the team and within the larger organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandated separation of the group (à la Skunk Works or Agile initiatives). • Hyperfocus on optimizing the outcome based on the group’s expertise or values rather than the end need. • Echo chamber created by amplified input from a select few stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overemphasis on agility. • Lack of North Star clarity/agreement among project leaders with competing demands. • Personal and cultural values that lead to overcommitment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redesign the group’s structure and work. • Define and respect roles and responsibilities. • Determine the impact-to-effort ratio of new activities, and empower team members to say no. • Adopt and practice meeting and communication discipline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematically engage relevant stakeholders/influencers, including both positive and negative opinion leaders. • Build in time for iteration with stakeholders. • Focus on outcomes from the stakeholder perspective. • Provide the group with greater visibility into broader organizational goals and initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map activities with external stakeholders. • Review demands based on the task and collaborative footprint. • Force decision makers to make trade-offs in the content and timing of demands. • Adopt a priority definition process and mechanism/coordinator to screen incoming requests. • Be transparent about workload and competing demands, and reset group priorities collectively.

members briefly say how their work is going, whether they are blocked on anything, and where they need help. One leader in a manufacturing company told us that he took this approach to give disenfranchised people more of a voice. “People connect both on and off work topics in ways that help them trust each other and also see ways that they should be working together. The structure really helped pull people that were drifting back in,” he says.

In addition to building participation into

processes and roles, leaders should give team members multiple opportunities to provide feedback. The head of a development group in a biopharmaceutical company uses a variety of venues to obtain feedback, including semiannual meetings, one-on-one lunches with emerging leaders, and biweekly meetings with small groups of team members. “I get all kinds of feedback,” she explains, “and I always look for an idea or a fix that I can implement within 24 hours. This makes a huge difference.”

DYSFUNCTION #3: Misaligned Nodes



When individuals and factions within a network don’t cohere, it’s often because team members struggle to create value at the intersection of different technical skills or functional interests. Worse, they may seem to agree on goals and targets when they are together (either sitting in silent disagreement or unknowingly viewing objectives from conflicting perspectives) and then go off to work in disparate ways.

ONA maps of networks that are experiencing these kinds of problems can resemble a high school in which the student body is broken up into cliques that don’t relate to one another. Often, they show nodes within cliques that are well connected to one another but are poorly connected to or entirely disconnected from other cliques.

We call this archetype *misaligned nodes*. A vice president in a software company told us that he “struggled mightily” with misaligned technical teams within the engineering function. “We would have different teams in different countries working on almost the exact same problems with the same missions, but they would be reporting to different organizations in the company,” he explains. “We were automatically — and unintentionally — setting them up as competitors.”

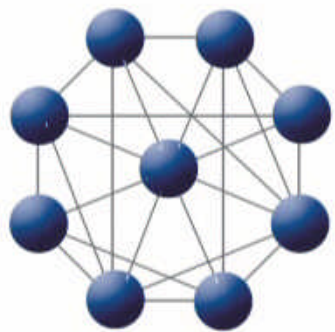
Unsurprisingly, competitive tensions emerged, creating a structural misalignment that undermined collaboration. The VP tried to solve the problem by inserting a manager between the teams, but that only added to the tension; it created a hub-and-spoke dysfunction, and team members chafed at having to submit every decision to a parental authority figure. The VP also tried reorganizing the teams, but ownership issues across business and geographic units stymied this solution — it was a premature fix.

In this case, the misalignment was caused by structural drivers, such as role design, decision-rights allocation, and incentives. Fortunately, the VP didn’t give up. He shepherded his group through a collective process of mission, mandate, and goal definition, with help from an external consultant. “We decided

what we were all about, what we should care about — and why — and what our group should look like,” he says. “After we’d gotten the basic engineering done, we turned to mapping people into roles and teams. This was pretty simple conceptually, but it was transformational because it allowed us to break through the obstacles that were keeping us apart.”

Misalignment can also be driven by a lack of awareness of the capabilities that other people provide and the value that can be produced by working together. The head of HR in a global food products business promotes that awareness in his functional teams in several ways. For example, at the start of each week, he and his direct reports pass around a “win jar” that contains sticky notes recording the past week’s successes without assigning individual credit. Each team member takes a turn reading one of the notes. This weekly exercise underscores how the team’s collaborative efforts benefit the organization, shines a light on the collective expertise the group is delivering, and provides positive reinforcement for collaboration through acknowledgment of shared successes. This executive also periodically convenes whole-team “away days” that mix educational and team-building activities with fun activities aimed at building connections.

DYSFUNCTION #4: Overwhelmed Nodes



The default belief among many leaders is “the more collaboration, the better,” but too much collaboration can gridlock projects just as surely as too little. Excessive demands on team members can lead to an inability to complete work, inefficient decision-making, and high levels of compromise. Obviously, all of this creates a drag on productivity. But it also produces disengagement and burnout, with ensuing harm to employee well-being and health. Excessive collaboration was revealed as a significant predictor of voluntary turnover in a number of the organizations we studied in other research.⁹ This archetype of collaborative dysfunction is called *overwhelmed nodes*.

A channel management executive in a global aerospace company confronted this issue when meeting overload began to bog down her team. “Everybody got pulled into a lot of things, and we got to a point where there were excessive numbers of people in multiple meetings,” she recalls. Eventually, a workshop conducted to analyze the team’s meeting load revealed that 30% to 40% of the time that team members were spending in meetings was unnecessary.

In this case, the problem was driven by poorly defined role and accountability parameters. The manufacturing executive reduced the collaborative demands on her team members by streamlining meeting attendance. “We identified the meetings that our team members needed to attend to move toward our goals. We decided who needed to be in which meetings and why they needed to be there,” she says.

Another common cause of overwhelmed nodes is growth. When groups are successful, they often expand. Eventually, however, they outgrow their structures and processes. Our interviews suggest that this begins to happen when group membership exceeds the single digits and becomes truly problematic when groups reach 20 people or more.

“In the past, I’ve had some special project teams that started with four or five people. When a team is that small, you tend to act in a very collaborative decision-making mode,” explains the engineering general manager of a manufacturing equipment company. “But when you try to scale that group to 120 people in 18 months, you discover that it’s impossible to get a unanimous opinion from them on virtually any topic. You find that collaborative decision-making gets very inefficient, and you start to see people disconnect. You can try to switch to a priority-based model in which leaders are setting priorities, communicating deliverables, and measuring key performance indicators, but then you get a lot of hurt feelings because people are left out.” To make the transitions necessary to manage growth more palatable, the general manager now includes team members in reorganization initiatives. He selects a

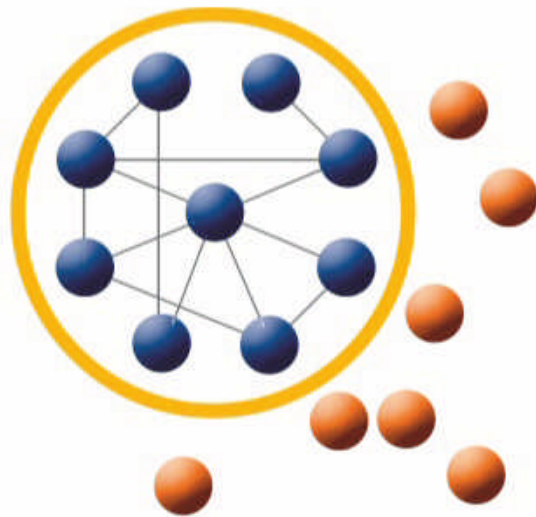
representative group of team members and works with them to determine what is going wrong with the team and how its problems should be addressed.

The overwhelmed-nodes pattern can also stem from leaders overestimating the capacity of team members or underestimating the time required for collaborative work — even as 85% or more of most people’s time is spent in collaborative activities.¹⁰ Team members, too, may contribute to this dysfunction by trying to take on more than they can handle for reasons of their own — such as a deep desire to help or a need for accomplishment, status, or control. A fear of saying no to leaders and can-do workplace mores are common drivers as well.

In many cases, effective workload analytics and metrics can remedy the dysfunction by giving leaders a clearer view of everyone’s capacity. Without them, the demands of tasks are often invisible to leaders. Task A and task B may appear to be similar in heft on a sticky note or a project plan. But task A may require coordination across four functions, three time zones, and two leaders who have different priorities, while task B involves only a few people who are colocated and have a strong working relationship.

One leader in a Silicon Valley tech company developed a four-point taxonomy to describe the level of collaborative effort that a task takes. “To define the level, we ask, ‘What’s the level of effort to build the content? What’s the level of effort then to share it, socialize it, get decisions?’” she explains. She uses the taxonomy to ensure that everyone on her team can quickly understand what their peers are doing and has an accurate view of workload.

DYSFUNCTION #5: Isolated Networks



Networks don't exist in a vacuum, but too often we find teams operating without full awareness and consideration of their larger context. They may be poorly connected to their key stakeholders or customers or disconnected altogether, lacking the insight, resources, and external expertise needed to properly define and deliver needed results.¹¹ Accordingly, we've named this archetype *isolated networks*.

The well-known silo effect is a major consequence of this collaborative dysfunction and one with which many large companies struggle.¹² Several executives at a major carmaker told us that isolated groups within the company were creating obstacles to innovation acceptance and slowing decision-making in new product development programs.

In this case, sequestering teams in spaces designed for ideation and putting them on short sprint deadlines resulted in members not reaching out to the broader organization for information and expertise critical to ensuring that innovation efforts succeed globally. In addition, excessively formal (and ultimately costly) stage-gate approval processes slowed decisions about new product development efforts, which left teams toiling without input for extended periods.

To address the collaborative dysfunction, the carmaker's executives redesigned processes to ensure that relevant external expertise was sought in a timely fashion. Rather than overstaffing these teams with experts — a solution that would have led to other problems — senior leaders brought capabilities into and out of teams as needed. One group even used a “human library,” where experts were quite literally checked out on loan. In addition, high-level decision makers stepped in earlier, engaging with prototypes rather than with traditional voluminous engineering and market studies that would delay decisions for months on end. And they staffed teams with an array of network influencers — not just the same experts called upon over and over again — to include truly passionate employees who “knew deeply what the product line stood for.”¹³

Isolation is sometimes deliberate and not problematic per se. For instance, Skunk Works and Agile initiatives may be purposely cut off from their parent organizations and the outside world to protect them from external interference or to enhance their focus. But unless this isolation is carefully designed, it can backfire by producing outputs and insights that deliver localized utility while missing more valuable, global impacts. In essence, the strategic

mandate of the group cuts it off from broader relevance and outside assistance.

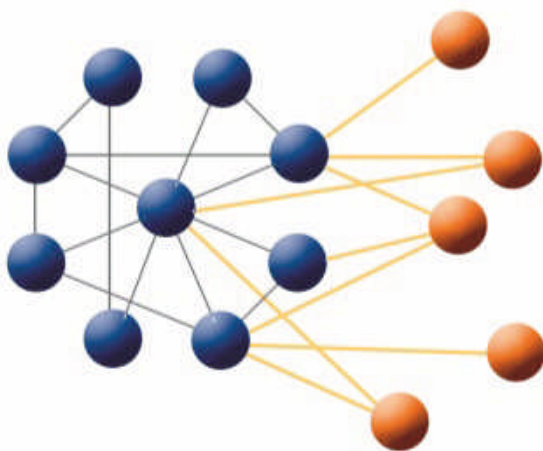
Catering to leaders' whims can lead to isolated network dysfunction as well. “Sometimes we see this ... when ideas first surface,” explains the talent acquisition director at a major health insurer. “[Leaders] get an idea that they are excited about and think will work — a shiny, bright object, like a new technology. And we end up going after it without really talking to the right people to know if it works for our organization or our customers.”

The company's executives remedied this problem with a more rigorous approach to idea development — one that incorporates some of the principles of design thinking. “Before we take off on an effort to improve our customer experience, we spend time talking about it with our customers,” she says. “We don't undertake ideas until we've ensured that they will work across the different segments of our business.”

Another driver of isolated network dysfunction is an excessive focus on internal expertise or values. The head of a center of excellence at a different health insurer identified this problem in his organization: “We have one process-improvement team that is a model of one-team culture, but the strong value doesn't extend to communication or collaboration with other areas of the organization. They think they're doing a great job, but it's very contained inside their own little group.” To remedy the situation, he has involved the team, and particularly its leader, in other process-improvement initiatives. “We are providing more visibility into what's going on outside the team, so there is a better understanding of the external connection points with things that are happening within it,” he explains.

The challenge of avoiding priority overload is often compounded by personal aspirations and cultural values. Servant-based mindsets and the desire to “just say yes” can aggravate the problem. Putting all demand requests through a prioritization process creates a psychological distance and enables clear-eyed appraisals.

DYSFUNCTION #6: Priority Overload



In optimized networks, the boundaries between the group and the external world are permeable. Priorities are determined in consultation with external stakeholders and adopted according to the capacity of the network. This ensures not only that the group is properly aligned with the rest of the organization, but also that it can efficiently and effectively deliver on its goals.

There is a problem associated with permeable borders, however: The more open a group is to its stakeholders, the greater its vulnerability to excessive stakeholder demands. When groups attempt to be responsive to too many stakeholders with competing needs and time

frames, they risk falling into a form of collaborative dysfunction we call *priority overload*. Once a group becomes overloaded in this way, team members lose sight of their mission and highest priorities — and as a result, their most important deliverables can be forgotten or ignored. As they find it increasingly difficult to juggle competing demands, their execution and performance falls off, and their engagement and well-being suffer.

The CIO of the food products company mentioned above told us that priority pressures are a constant reality in his functional arena. “We’ve got a very demanding set of stakeholders. They all think they’re more important than the next person,” he said. “Unfortunately, we can’t just say, ‘OK, we’ll throw all your demands up onto a project schedule and deliver against it.’ The fact is that all the money and time in the world can’t overcome the complexity involved in delivering on some of these requests.”

Priority overload often arises from a combination of issues: a lack of coordination among disparate stakeholders; an inability to understand the workload of requests (both the tasks and collaborative footprint); overwhelmed stakeholders who make ill-thought-out requests; and, of course, first-level leaders who agree to all requests, because being responsive has been critical to their success to date. “At the moment,” the CIO said when we first spoke, “it’s not actually the stakeholders that are my problem; it’s team leaders who don’t understand how to respond to the demand in a logical way.”

To help team leaders prioritize, the CIO started using one-on-one coaching sessions. “We identify their key stakeholders, discuss how to analyze demands, and consider the budget and resources needed to meet them,” he says. “Then we discuss how to explain it to stakeholders when they can’t meet a demand.”

To avoid priority overload in the first place, leaders should ask stakeholders to prioritize their requests before sharing them with the team; they should also explain both the level of demand involved in those requests and the capacity of the team to meet them. Some leaders do this by bringing stakeholders into a room and having them collectively shift tasks on sticky notes above and below a line that demarcates the team’s capacity. This process tends to rightsize the requests placed on the team. Even more important, it helps stakeholders see how they can combine “asks” to accomplish greater outcomes. Similar alignment can be rapidly attained through short virtual forums using polling software.

The challenge of avoiding priority overload is often compounded by personal aspirations and cultural values. Servant-based mindsets and the

desire to “just say yes” can aggravate the problem. Putting all demand requests through a prioritization process creates a psychological distance and enables clear-eyed appraisals.

Simple heuristics can help team members understand demand parameters and thus better assess requests. One example is a two-by-two matrix that plots requests by impact and effort. Another

example comes from a software development company that established a common agreement on speed and functionality for each new release. “The idea is you can turn the volume knob up to 11 on one of these ... but not both ... when making requests,” one manager told us. “Just this language has totally changed what often was a combative issue with some stakeholders.”

INCREASINGLY, WORK IS TEAMWORK. But the structures, cultures, and practices in many companies make collaboration within and across teams difficult. The various drivers of collaborative dysfunction reveal the shortcomings of standard solutions such as formal redesigns (think “spans” and “layers”), collaborative tool deployments, and the current craze for Agile methodologies that often underperform because they assume a one-size-fits-all solution. By understanding how the six dysfunctions described above play out and identifying which ones exist at your company, you’ll be on your way to creating a truly collaborative workplace.

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