

When Leaders Struggle with Collaboration

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Summary. It's not uncommon for talented leaders to find collaboration unnatural. After all, rugged individualism set them apart and propelled their careers. And for many, that same focus on distinguishing themselves later becomes their demise. Most of an enterprise's... [**more**](#)

A client of Luis's, let's call him Charlie, a senior executive reporting directly to the CEO, was recently given feedback that despite his outstanding performance, his colleagues struggled to work with him. Charlie's drive to deliver results, his no-nonsense

approach to offering his viewpoints, and the intensity with which he approached most everything made him appear unnecessarily competitive, despite that being the furthest thing from his intent. As a result, without realizing it, Charlie lost the trust of some of his most critical stakeholders: his peers.

Charlie isn't alone in his struggle. As consultants and executive coaches to high-performing executives, we see this frequently. It's not uncommon for talented leaders to find collaboration unnatural. After all, rugged individualism set them apart and propelled their careers. And for many, that same focus on distinguishing themselves later becomes their demise.

Harvard Business Review research reveals that the top reasons for collaboration failure include silos (67%), no collaborative vision from leaders (32%), and senior managers not wanting to give up control (32%). Today's workplace has become more collaborative than ever, with functional and divisional boundaries blurred beyond recognition, yet 39% of employees worldwide say people in their organization don't collaborate enough. Most of an enterprise's competitive value is created and delivered at organizational "seams," where functions come together to form capabilities (think marketing, consumer analytics, and R&D, together developing innovation capability). That requires leaders of those functions to collaborate across the silos to deliver that value.

If you're a leader who struggles to collaborate with your peers, you first need to understand why that is, then work to develop that skill.

Why collaboration doesn't come easy

Before you can improve, it's critical to reflect on why collaboration doesn't come naturally to you. Here are some common reasons we've seen among leaders we've worked with.

You're competitive and fear being overshadowed.

You've likely enjoyed a track record of winning and being the best. Nevertheless, the notion of sharing the spotlight with others makes you anxious. Perhaps your sense of identity and success has been reinforced by years of individual achievement.

Still, it's essential to realize that at higher organizational altitudes, success is achieved through integrated efforts. Pay close attention when you fear that others might outshine you or that your contribution won't be distinguished. Understanding the inner narrative telling you that your uniqueness will be blunted is the first step to changing it. At this level of the organization, you must believe that your contribution will be amplified if it's blended with others' contributions.

You've relied heavily on hierarchy to get things done.

Perhaps you've operated in your own functional silo and, despite caring for those you lead, have been successful in directing the work of others toward the results you've achieved. Or perhaps you grew up professionally in a culture that prizes hierarchy and deference to authority.

Recognize that at this level of the organization, influencing your peers is critical and very different from the positional authority you hold over your direct reports. You must be less directive, and more curious and conversational. One of Ron's clients who struggled with this issue had it said of him by a peer in his 360 feedback, "He barks orders at me as though I report to him." When Ron shared the feedback with his client and asked if he ever modulated his approach between direct reports and peers, his response was telling. He said, "Well, I assumed my peers understood that I respect their authority and expertise, but apparently, I was wrong." He'd failed to realize that such respect has to be mutually earned and doesn't just come along with rank.

You've focused more on results than relationships.

Human beings are hardwired for connection to other humans, but it's common for high-achieving individuals to be guarded when it comes to relationships. If you've prided yourself on not needing to be liked by others, dig deeper into why that might be. Spend time reflecting on the relationships in your life, both inside and outside of work. Where have you built meaningful connections? Where have you avoided them? Are there certain relationships where connection is easier for you?

Pay special attention to places where you avoid relationships. One client of Luis's, who grew up in India as the youngest of five children, had difficulty building collaborative relationships with people in authority. He was combative and defensive. When Luis asked him about some of his formative struggles in life, he realized that he saw his father and his brothers as "bosses" and was resentfully viewing his peers in the same way.

You have a hard time trusting.

You believe that attention to detail is your strength, and you've had some unfavorable outcomes in the past when delegating to others, which leads you to be extra careful now. You fear uncertainty and want to make sure your decisions are on solid ground. Take the example of Mario; a successful lawyer tasked with reviewing and closing critical contracts worth millions for the company. Unfortunately, as someone who felt a strong need for control, he managed to turn trivial issues into deal-breaking problems. Underlying Mario's inability to trust others with much of anything was a deeper narrative: "People will take advantage of me if I let them." Until he learned to challenge it, this assumption was the lens through which Mario saw others. Given the high stakes of your role, it's understandable to be sensitized to what might go wrong. However, there is a difference between having healthy skepticism and assuming bad intentions. When you ascribe ill motives, you send a strong message of mistrust.

You don't know how.

It may well be that collaboration is simply something you've never learned. It's a complex set of skills and attributes. It combines active listening, managing conflict, shared problem solving, self-regulation, humility, curiosity, and a caring orientation toward others. Perhaps you've cultivated some of these things, but not enough of all of them for others to see you as genuinely collaborative. Make a careful inventory of behaviors for which you know you lack sufficient skill or orientation. This will help you narrow your development focus as you prioritize learning to be more collaborative.

Once you've determined what keeps you from collaborating comfortably, you can take steps to develop your collaboration skills and rebuild lost trust with others who've struggled to work with you. Remember what you learned above about *why* you struggle — those insights will inform where you begin your learning journey. The first set of strategies will help you consider the reputational capital you want to build or rebuild. The second set will focus on tangible ways to strengthen your collaborative connections with others.

First, determine what you want to be known for.

Your current behaviors are a reflection of the person that, consciously or unconsciously, you believe you are. So, if you want to be known as a collaborator, you first need to adopt the mindset of a collaborator. Here are some ways to get started:

Be open to change and new ideas.

Taking new perspectives is a prerequisite to empathy and compassion. Ask questions to challenge your point of view and clarify the other person's. Doing so sends a strong signal that you care about their perspective.

Value others equally.

Put yourself in an environment where your deep expertise has minimal credibility and you “have to be like everyone else.”

Putting yourself in a place of mutual interdependence will help you feel what it’s like to be on a level playing field. For example, you could join a team or club outside of work — a hobby group or a local recreation league for a sport you play. As you do so, journal about what you’re feeling and learning. Note places where you’re enjoying yourself and places where you feel uncomfortable.

Become someone others can rely on.

No matter who you are, you still need others to succeed, and others need you. Acknowledge that interdependency by deepening stakeholder relationships. Identify critical players you rely on and those who depend on you. Spend time with them. When you’re with them, notice what your brain is doing — questioning motives, guarding, or feeling comfortable and curious. Identify the conditions that lead you to be more open. Building and maintaining trusting relationships is the foundation of sustainable collaboration.

Then, act on what you’ve learned.

So that others will see you as a genuinely collaborative leader, take actions to accelerate your reputation as a team player. The key here is to be genuine. If you do these steps in a performative way, people will see right through it, which will set your reputation back further.

Create moments of generosity.

Look for intentional ways to contribute to others when you get nothing in return. For example, offer a favor, support someone’s strategic agenda, or share ideas and resources. Notice what it feels like to give without getting. How did the recipient of your

kindness respond? If this is new behavior for you, don't be surprised if others are a bit cautious at first. They might not yet appreciate this "new you," so be patient and give it time.

Share the spotlight and give credit.

Find ways to purposefully cede the stage to someone else when it's shining on you. This exposes new talent to new audiences and builds that person's confidence and sense of pride. In addition, this helps others experience you as a leader who doesn't hog the limelight. (But remember, if you do it *just* to be seen that way, it will backfire.)

Doing this also benefits your organization. Teams that share the spotlight with each other more frequently have greater retention, and their organizations have higher growth because they collaborate more.

Ask for advice.

Approach one of your key stakeholders with a challenge you need help with. This models vulnerability, demonstrates humility, and shows that you understand you need others. If you're struggling with a particular individual, an easy way to build trust is by asking them for advice. Later, let them know how you applied it. Colleagues who believe you genuinely need them are more likely to seek your help and support your ideas in public settings.

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Take heart if you're a leader needing to strengthen your collaboration. You can do it, even if it feels like an unnatural act. You've already achieved some success, which is evidence that you can work hard and learn. In today's hyper-connected world, lone wolves are becoming a thing of the past. Today, inclusive, humble, and other-oriented leaders are seen as the most credible and influential. Effectively collaborating is key to becoming and remaining a leader of lasting impact.

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