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Business Literature: Author's Choice

Four Traits of Collaborative Leaders

Zachary Tumin and William Bratton, coauthors of *Collaborate or Perish! Reaching across Boundaries in a Networked World*, introduce an excerpt about how managers can become collaboration catalysts from *The Collaboration Imperative: Executive Strategies for Unlocking Your Organization's True Potential*, by Ron Ricci and Carl Wiese.

Human beings have been collaborating since the first mastodon hunt, but today there is more collaboration than ever. From the marketplace to the battlefield, no one's going it alone.

The difference now is that we are where Marshall McLuhan and Alvin Toffler said we'd be — the world is an electronic village in which the power of small groups to disrupt the status quo is soaring and response times are fast approaching zero. Digital technology has changed everything.

Or has it? Technology is an essential element of collaboration, but it's no silver bullet. It can take out the friction, but in this era of big data, there are still plenty of big collaborative failures.

What makes collaboration so hard? It necessitates reaching across boundaries, building trust quickly, joining the assets of multiple networks, and making everything work together. All in an environment where you may have little or no formal authority, yet face the challenge of overcoming legacy systems, slow-moving bureaucracies, and mind-sets that favor collaboration only as a last resort.

In short, successful collaboration requires leadership. This excerpt from a book by Cisco executives Ron Ricci and Carl Wiese explains the key behaviors that leaders must exhibit to support and enhance collaboration. Every leader looking to unpack the riddle of collaboration and chart a sure path forward should read it.

— Zachary Tumin and William Bratton



An excerpt from Chapter 2 of *The Collaboration Imperative: Executive Strategies for Unlocking Your Organization's True Potential*

In order to become a chief catalyst for collaboration, you will have to model behaviors that embody the way you'd like your employees to work. For 150 years, corporations, governments and militaries were built for up-and-down leadership, with incentives and rewards that discouraged cross-organization thinking and, in many cases, actually created or encouraged internal competition. Your challenge is to develop and model the behaviors required to inspire people and teams to genuinely break through organizational silos and make collaboration a competitive advantage.

How you lead your people has a direct impact on your ability to eliminate or mitigate the types of human behaviors

that slow organizations down. In our experience, both inside Cisco and with our customers, highly collaborative leaders share four leadership traits. They:

- Focus on authentic leadership and eschew passive aggressiveness
- Relentlessly pursue transparent decision making
- View resources as instruments of action, not as possessions
- Codify the relationship between decision rights, accountability and rewards

Focus on authentic leadership and eschew passive aggressiveness. For collaboration to succeed, leaders need to be authentic. Cisco studied which characteristics of leaders on collaborative teams are most important, and we found that the most critical attribute was a leader's willingness to follow through on commitments. This involves two elements.

First, as a leader of a team, department or business unit with people, budgets and resources under your control, you must follow through on organizational commitments. Unfortunately, people don't always do what they promise. Passive aggressiveness is a subtle, nuanced form of human behavior in which people find ways to undermine others. They often give tacit agreement in a meeting, for example, but then proceed to take counterproductive action once the meeting is over. Or they might agree to help another team, but then are slow to follow through or put an underperformer on the assignment. Think of how much organizational inertia is created because leaders don't always do what they say they will do.

Second, when there is disagreement about a decision — one made by you or someone else — fight the instinct to make it personal. Ultimately, most disagreements are not personal in nature, but rather result from differing approaches to making a decision. The more you focus on communicating what drives your decision making, the more time you can spend making good decisions instead of arguing a choice with a peer. This leads us to the next leadership trait.

Relentlessly pursue transparent decision making. Decisions are always about making choices; it's critical that you are clear about how you make them. Tell people your style and thought process for navigating tricky, or even every day, decisions. In our experience, and this is backed up by research, there's a direct relationship between the agility and resilience of a team and the transparency of its decision-making processes. When you're open and transparent about the answers to three questions — who made the decision, who is accountable for the outcomes of the decision, and is that accountability real — people in organizations spend far less time questioning how or why a decision was made. Think of how much time is wasted ferreting out details when a decision is made and communicated because the people who are affected don't know who made the decision or who is accountable for its consequences.

... As a leader, your responsibility is to document the key decision paths of your organization and communicate them to your team as often as you can. There was a time in business when hoarding information was a source of organizational power. Today, the inverse is true if you want to motivate a team that is increasingly mobile, global and socially driven.

Explain the guiding principles of your decision-making style at each stage of your organization's decision paths. Share your biases and tell war stories of how your successes and failures shaped these biases. We often hear the phrase "intelligent risk taking" — nothing empowers people to take good risks more than understanding the conditions for taking the risk in the first place. Transparent decision making is critical to empowering your people.

View resources as instruments of action, not as possessions. The promise of flexibility and agility as an organization, inspired by establishing shared goals across organizational boundaries, is only attainable if you back it up by sharing resources as well.

It's hardly a new observation that people sometimes stockpile resources around their business unit or department, or are slow — perhaps even hesitant — to share those resources with other departments. There might even be incentives

in place that discourage sharing. For as long as companies have pursued profits, the size of one's organization has defined the size of one's financial opportunity. But are your resources truly applied as optimally as possible to your market opportunities in a way that best serves the total business? By unlocking these trapped resources, organizations can more quickly and successfully pursue emerging market opportunities.

Having a common approach to assess and communicate resource decisions is critical to creating a transparent environment among leaders. The more transparent the environment, the more willing leaders will be to share resources in support of the shared goals of the entire business, and the harder it will be for resisters to hoard them. This shift in approach is not an easy one for leaders to make and requires a balancing act between clear expectations, patience and follow through. Ultimately, it's as much a mindset as it is a process. The fundamental enablers of collaborative leadership are viewing resources as instruments of action rather than as possessions and aligning your company's larger shared goals to an accountability system that includes rewards and incentives for working together effectively.

Codify the relationship between decision rights, accountability and rewards. Modeling the desired collaborative behaviors — showing your employees that you walk the talk — is the goal. But what happens when you're not around? The more these behaviors are codified into an end-to-end system across your organization, the greater the odds of collaboration succeeding when you're not there to reinforce cultural norms. As you define the decision paths of your organization and build a common vocabulary to make those decision paths as transparent as possible, take the time to establish clear parameters. Who gets to make decisions? Are all decisions tied to funding? These are the types of questions to which everyone must know the answers. Publish the parameters for these decision rights and tell people which leaders have these rights — that information is crucial to breaking through any consensus logjam; decision-rights holders should have 51 percent of the vote when collaborative teams can't reach natural agreement.

Having published decision rights is just one element of an accountability system. While it's never pleasant to talk about the consequences of poor decisions, the reality is that to succeed, collaboration demands more distributed and empowered actions across your organization. With that empowerment comes not only more good outcomes but also the increased potential for bad ones. You will need to consider new ways of gaining input from teams on the quality of collaborative decision making and reward people who consistently make good decisions in a collaborative environment.

As part of their overall performance management, every Cisco employee is measured by peers and their managers on their collaboration factor, the result of which directly impacts how their performance is rated and, ultimately, the size of their total compensation. Other factors that determine the size of bonuses are tied to how well employees collectively perform in achieving certain shared goals that Cisco establishes annually, such as customer-satisfaction metrics and financial results. Collaborative cultures not only foster teamwork, they also reward it. Performance measures must strike a balance between how well employees carry out their individual roles and how much they contribute to collective outcomes.

— Ron Ricci and Carl Wiese

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THE REVIEWERS

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THIS BOOK

[The Collaboration Imperative: Executive Strategies for Unlocking Your Organization's True Potential](#) (Cisco Systems, 2011), by Ron Ricci and Carl Wiese

[Ron Ricci](#) is vice president of corporate positioning at [Cisco Systems Inc.](#) He is also the coauthor of [Momentum: How Companies Become Unstoppable Market Forces](#) (with John Volkmann, Harvard Business School Press, 2003).

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