

Walking the Talk

Business headwinds make finding that competitive edge difficult.

Focus on an internal collaborative effort. It could make finding your edge a breeze.

Fast Focus

- The Collaborative Way focuses on creating an environment that provides mutual understanding in the workplace.
- To execute strategy and succeed, conflict (or at least constructive criticism) is necessary.
- If you want to succeed in implementing The Collaborative Way in your organization, you need to take responsibility for its success.

Those headwinds make for slow going. Even on a level path, battling an oncoming wind makes forward progress difficult. Now multiply that challenge with an uphill climb and the knowledge those winds haven't let up in a while. Aren't you glad you came along on this trek?

Whether or not you're a hiker, recent times have been brutal on everyone in our business. It's as though we're trudging up a mountain with no peak in sight. Between the ongoing soft market, the Great Recession and ObamaCare, the headwinds have worn us down. While we're still climbing out, I remain optimistic that great destinations lie ahead for great companies.

The biggest problem with the current depressing situation has been the deterioration in our general business communication skills. It would be helpful to refer to an article I wrote a few years ago, "The Tao of Collaboration" [*Leader's Edge*, April 2008]. I discussed the concept of The Collaborative Way, created by management consultant Lloyd Fickett, who—over two decades—worked with private companies dealing with rapid growth, mergers and acquisitions, competitive challenges and other market pressures. The Collaborative Way, which emerged as a powerful structure for creating an environment of teamwork, has given companies an essential competitive advantage.

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

The Collaborative Way focuses on creating an environment that provides mutual understanding and a common language in the workplace. It produces a powerful structure for ongoing coaching and learning. It includes five key practices that enable people to work more effectively as a team:

- Listening generously
- Speaking straight
- Being there for each other
- Honoring commitments
- Acknowledgment and appreciation.

Many people mislead themselves into thinking they practice these deceptively simple practices well. We all think we're straight shooters and good listeners, that we appreciate and support each other, and that we always honor our commitments. But just saying it is not enacting it. The key to success is weaving these tenets into the company's focus and organizational direction. Just as we must do when

enacting a strategic plan, we must clearly define and work from common short- and long-term objectives and goals.

For more information about the origin of The Collaborative Way and Lloyd Fickett's company, read *The Collaborative Way: A Story About Engaging the Mind and Spirit of a Company* (www.collaborativeway.com).

ENACTING THE FIVE PRACTICES

Back in April 2008, I challenged readers to take a lesson from The Collaborative Way and build an operation that would be dynamic, responsive and supportive. If you were successful, I believed, you would experience enhanced productivity and innovation, improved loyalty and satisfaction, and better results and profits. I know many who tried this approach, and those I have worked with have had success and some challenges. To assist the believers, Lloyd Fickett and his son, Jason, have followed up with a new book, *Leading The Collaborative Way: Overcoming the Seven Most Common Pitfalls*, (LF&A Publishing, 2009).

The practice does not just happen organically, without effort. Leaders must embrace the practice for it to thrive and gain the full support of everyone. So how can you support change in your company's values and culture to make them part of the everyday workplace and build a true competitive advantage?

DELIBERATE PRACTICE

Many firms start using the concepts after reading about it or going through the orientation program, but that is not enough. The first problem firms generally encounter is the failure to deliberately and consistently practice Collaborative Way principles. You need to make a daily conscious effort and not get trapped in the business-as-usual mode. As a leader in your company, your actions will set the example for everyone else.

THE VALUE OF COACHING

The Collaborative Way, like any change effort, has to be coached if you want it to make a meaningful difference in your organization. One problem many people have is the tendency to avoid making anyone uncomfortable. That's difficult because coaching requires you to address behaviors that are in opposition to the values you are trying to establish. While CEOs and senior leaders may say they do this constantly in their leadership role, coaching The Collaborative Way style has to be done throughout all levels in your firm by all employees. Employees of firms that have successfully enacted this idea constantly coach other employees in their relentless pursuit of deliberately practicing the Collaborative Way.

CONFRONTING DIFFICULT ISSUES

Many people believe the use of this method is really an excuse to avoid confronting difficult issues. The practice is not about being nice to people or avoiding upsetting them. The purpose is to support an organization in fully engaging its collective capabilities to help achieve its vision and goals.

Any good leader knows that, to execute strategy and succeed, conflict (or at least constructive criticism) is necessary. This method provides the tools to effectively deal with the conflict and come to a resolution that's best for the company. Understand, the word collaborative does not mean harmony.

Collaboration is not about being passive or nice, it is about working together to produce the best possible solutions. Don't let concerns and discomfort get in the way of sharing an idea.

LEADING UP

“Leading up” is the most difficult issue faced by any organization, yet it is one of the most critical aspects for a company to be successful in the long term. This practice empowers you to speak straight to your bosses or those of a higher rank. Problems occur because people are either afraid and don't know how to speak straight, or they assume their bosses know what they know. Leading up has three fundamentals.

1. Bring breakdowns and opportunities to your boss's attention. You are empowered to act when you feel the need to let your boss know about a problem. Lay out the facts so your boss can make the best decision. Not that your boss has to agree with you all the time, but it is important that he hears from you about the relevant breakdown or opportunity.

2. Address your boss's indecision. If you feel your boss is putting off making a decision and that the situation is detrimental to the company, you need to lead up. At companies that practice The Collaborative Way, employees are comfortable having a direct conversation with bosses about decisions that need to be made. This is what leading up is all about.

3. Calling out when you think your boss is making a mistake. We have all been in a position when we feel like our boss has made a mistake. To effectively practice leading up, you have to understand that, under The Collaborative Way, it is your job to make sure you are heard by your boss. It is still your boss's job to make the final call, but your responsibility is to make sure all facts are shared.

DEALING WITH DEFENSIVENESS

We can all recall a situation in which someone acted defensively toward us or—if we are candid with ourselves—when we went on the defensive toward someone else. Given that defensiveness is a normal part of how we relate, it must be dealt with directly, or else it will have a negative impact on a relationship or a company. At a minimum, defensiveness constrains collaborative interaction. People often become defensive because they perceive they are being attacked or they feel the need to defend a statement or action.

Effective use of The Collaborative Way teaches people how to recognize when you're being defensive and how to turn a defensive statement into one that focuses on the issue that you are trying to solve. In simplest terms, it requires you to refrain from the current conversation, acknowledge that you are defensive and, finally and most important, be able to state the reason or concern that made you defensive.

The other key is for you to recognize when another person is defensive toward you and how to change the tone of the discussion to one of collaboration to resolve the issue at hand. Letting someone continue to be defensive has long-term negative effects on relationships and on a company's ability to make good decisions. It also reinforces the defensive person's belief that his or her reaction is acceptable, leading to defensiveness becoming the norm when the person feels threatened.

LEADING THE DECISION PROCESS

Your job as a CEO or manager is to lead. Simple enough, right? Yet if you don't consciously lead the decision-making process, you can inadvertently undermine the hard work you have done to build a collaborative work environment. When leading the decision process, you must explain to your employees why you are using the process you have chosen.

Decision-making processes generally follow one of the following paths:

- **Directive**—One person makes the decision. Asking for others' advice or opinions is not necessary.
- **Voting**—The majority makes the final decision.
- **Consultative**—One person makes the decision after consulting with others, but ultimately it is that person's decision.
- **Alignment**—Each member of the group makes the decision together.

There is not one correct way to lead and direct. Different situations require different processes. Each method can be appropriate based on the situation and time constraints. The majority of decisions (with the exception of the directive approach, which at times must be used) can best be described as the "Ideal Collaborative Decision Process." This includes:

- Free discussion (diversity of views)
- Clear decision (focused action)
- Full support (post-decision alignment).

This model is adopted from Andrew Grove's book *High Output Management* (Vintage, 1995). This is not the only model to follow. The point is that without a clear decision-making process that is understood and embraced by your employees, it will be hard for you to build and maintain credibility in leading your company.

TAKING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

To me, taking personal responsibility is the overarching key. If you want to succeed in implementing The Collaborative Way in your organization, you need to take responsibility for its success. Here is where there is often a breakdown, and it comes down to the difference between responsibility and accountability.

Accountability refers to the things for which people agree to be held accountable. You have a certain amount of accountability based on your job description. Accountability is a function of agreement, while responsibility is a chosen relationship. No one can make you responsible or assign it to you. You must choose to be responsible. You can hold people accountable, but you can't make them responsible.

Given this distinction, being responsible for the success of The Collaborative Way means choosing to confront whatever situation occurs, taking ownership of it and recognizing your opportunities to engage with it in a way that supports the practice.

Life isn't easy, and neither is business. We face challenging times, but to wait for the next hard market or for ObamaCare to disappear is a pipe dream, not reality. As that great '70s rock band The Cars

sang, “Let the Good Times Roll.” The reality is there are no shortcuts. You need to make your own good times, especially in this environment. And to do that, you need effective leadership tools.

We all have different backgrounds, quirky personalities and different views on how the world should work; therefore, we often make hard times and issues even more difficult. The Collaborative Way will not make all your problems go away, but it will help you create an environment conducive to collaboration and learn how to intentionally work together better. It is a proven method to allow you to create a competitive advantage and, not incidentally, create a more satisfying workplace for your employees.

In this era of continuing headwinds, we need powerful engines of forward momentum such as those found in this model.

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