

Changing Your Rules Of Belonging: Collaboration

A concept like 'collaboration' can have such an innately positive connotation that increasing it can appear to be an obvious goal. However, collaboration is not necessarily good or bad in the absence of context. Too much collaboration can be just as damaging, even more so, than not enough.

I once did some consulting for a government-funded drug and alcohol addiction service provider where nothing ever got done because they insisted that everyone should work together on everything. It was a rule of belonging in that group; if a single member of the team was left out of any working session on any topic, they felt excluded and marginalised and were upset for days and sometimes weeks afterwards. In that context, more collaboration would have been a disaster and the entire organisation would have ground to a screaming halt. They needed much less collaboration, not more.

However, in my experience, it is more typical for a group to be seeking a greater degree of collaboration. The main mistake I see many, many groups make is failing to distinguish between the tasks that benefit more from individual work and those that benefit more from group work. All too frequently they lump it all together and people get frustrated by feeling like they have to collaborate on everything. With the fast and increasing pace of work these days, none of us has time to consult with dozens of people about everything we're doing. Where we genuinely do need collaboration, however, we need to do it all-in, and really well – then everyone benefits.

The key question to ask is this: What work (which specific tasks or initiatives) require greater collaboration to deliver the results we need?

Here's a typical example of shifting from a current to a desired rule of belonging around collaboration:

The rule we have now: We earn belonging around here by pointing out the mistakes of our colleagues.

The impact of this rule: We have low trust between colleagues. our people don't collaborate. They're busy trying to look smart by criticising each other's work.

The problem: our strategy requires a higher degree of collaboration than we currently have on our most critical initiatives. If our people don't actively help each other more, there's no way we can be successful.

The goal: To increase collaboration on critical initiatives.

The rule we want: We earn belonging around here by helping each other and working together on critical initiatives.

If you want to change the culture of your team, you have to change the rules of belonging.



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