



Seven Ways to be a More Collaborative Leader

by Elizabeth J. Agnew, MS

Many of us believe in collaborative principles, and some of us believe we operate according to those principles. But if we really stop and think: what does it mean to be collaborative, what arises? It's a nebulous term that surfaces frequently but with little substance. Here are seven ways for you to add a little more meaning to the term "collaborative" while becoming a more effective leader in the process.

1. Reframe your role

As we imagine ourselves as leaders, the picture often comes with unarticulated assumptions, judgments, beliefs about what our roles are, and are not, about. Is your role as leader to delegate, motivate, inspire, redirect, dictate, or teach? What does it include and what is outside boundaries of your leadership?

A collaborative leader sees their role as a facilitator and coach. It is not one of control or dictatorship, but one of guidance and empowerment. A facilitator (note the root word *facile*) is someone who makes it easier for others to do their jobs effectively; someone who enables work to be accomplished.

Think of your leadership role as one of coach and facilitator.

2. Be explicit

You can help someone else be more effective by being explicit. About everything. Be explicit about your intentions and motivations for sharing information, your expectations, your disappointment and excitement about someone's performance.

Collaboration requires transparency. People can't work together if they're not on the same page, and they won't be on the same page if you're not explicit about the work. Often we don't even notice when we're being implicit because it's so ingrained in our work culture to limit people's exposure to information. Simply start to notice when you're leaving certain things implicit. See what happens when you simply make something that is typically left implicit explicit.

3. Set the context

In order to trust a situation and to understand how they fit into it, people need to have the background information. Every situation has context, and making that context explicit helps create environments of trust and safety, thus fostering growth and development. This is one way to be explicit, and it also helps you practice your emotional awareness.

4. Tune in emotionally

Emotional intelligence is absolutely essential to effective leadership. If you are in touch with them, your emotions can serve as a weathervane for the stickiest of leadership situations. Your emotions can also be the messenger of your intuition. Harnessed constructively, the wisdom contained within emotions can benefit the tough conversations you have to have with those around you.

5. Build and maintain ownership

People know when something is theirs. It is usually an easy, intuitive process to decide if something is ours. Is the computer on which you're reading this article yours? How about the chair you're sitting in? It becomes a little trickier when you're assessing your ownership of an intangible object. For example, is this article yours? You might think no, because you didn't write it, but I did give it to you. How about your most recent meeting at work? Was that your meeting, or were you just showing up to someone else's meeting?

Building joint ownership for work products and processes is critical to leading collaboratively. If you can help encourage people to really own their work, the rest falls in place because people care for what they own.

6. Hold people accountable

Some leaders assume that collaborative teams are always easy on each other because collaboration can have a warm and fuzzy connotation. In reality, the opposite is true. High performing collaborative teams hold each other accountable, are candid about their desires and limitations, and have open relationships rich with feedback – both the positive and negative kind.

It is not easy to belong to a collaborative team where each contributor is required to show up to both themselves and the team in a way they hadn't before. Create a high accountability environment for the best results. People will start to step up, and they'll also think twice before committing to something, therefore becoming more impeccable with their word.

7. Assume the best

Collaborative teams don't rely on someone's authority to get work done. They rely on cohesion and joint ownership among the team. Even if you are in a position of authority, relying on your authority to convince others to perform is draining and ineffective.

Assuming the best about people's intentions can help you take proactive measures to help others do good work. If someone is defensive, they're probably feeling attacked. If someone is withdrawing, they probably feel disconnected. If someone is not meeting their goals, they probably need more guidance or support. When others appear to be a certain way, look at the problem from the perspective of what you can do to help it, and assume the best about the person. It will result in getting the best from them

Leading from a collaborative paradigm can feel like more work up front, but is easier and more rewarding in the long run.

Liz works with individuals and organizations in technical fields needing tailored leadership development that speaks their language. Liz has logged hundreds of hours coaching individuals from companies such as Jet Propulsion Laboratories, Google, HP, SETI, Lockheed Martin, VNUS and Sun Microsystems. Her background includes experience in adult education, team facilitation, and public speaking. She offers complimentary coaching consultations – call or email today to schedule yours.