

Collaboration Is Risky. Now, Get on with It. by Whitney Johnson

Last week I arrived home from work to see my 8th grade son toiling away on a science fair project with his classmate Marc. As I observed their breezy back-and-forth, one at the computer, the other laying out the poster board, both fully engaged, no ego involved, I found myself taken back. In part, because as a parent, I'm always a little surprised when children do their homework without parental micro-management, but also because these two 8th graders made collaboration look like child's play.

And yet that's not always our experience in the office. Rather than the free-wheeling interchange of ideas and labor we anticipate — we're grown-ups after all — working together is typically everything but easy.

Why is teamwork so difficult?

Because collaboration is actually a pretty risky business. Perhaps, like me, you are generally of the mindset that two heads are better than one. But because your ideas frequently get co-opted, there's a risk-reward imbalance that makes you reluctant to engage. Or maybe you've reached out to a potential collaborator only to have your lack of expertise exploited. So, rather than ever again experiencing the one-two punch of ignorance and vulnerability, you'd prefer to soldier on alone. In both instances, the fundamental barrier to collaboration is a lack of trust.

How do we lay the groundwork for trust so that when we need to collaborate we can quickly slip into a workable partnership? Based on my experience, here are a few suggestions.

1. Start with simple exchanges where the cost of betrayal is low. A perfect example of this is Twitter. In this farmer's market of ideas, we can place our 140-character wares on display, and begin to identify those who potentially see the world as we do. As we find ourselves repeatedly transacting with certain people, we may agree to co-author a blog post. This type of short-term alliance allows us to further test our working relationship, which might later lead to collaboration on an article, and so forth. All too often, however, we go from I like your tweets to Let's write a book together. Certainly I have.

In the workplace, start simply. Share an idea. Ask for advice on a subject about which you know relatively little. Observe what happens. By starting with one-off transactions, we can gauge, at a very low cost, whether a potential collaborator will treat what we bring to the table, and what we don't, with respect.

2. Remember that our collaborators are competent. Once we've worked on a few limited scope projects and hammered out the rules of engagement, it's important to give authority to our collaborators. If we find we're micromanaging, maybe we didn't pick our

partners as well as we thought, but maybe we're going on the offensive because we feel vulnerable. If so, we need to just stop. Booker T. Washington wrote, "Few things help an individual more than to let him know that you trust him." We picked these partners because we believed we could trust them, and when we micromanage, we're saying loud and clear "I don't trust you."

3. Don't take advantage of our collaborators' deficiencies. If we choose to work with someone because they can do what we can't, the almost certain corollary is that we will do something well that they don't. It was not too long ago that I believed people who couldn't spell were dumb. Then I discovered that some people thought I was dumb because I have a poor sense of direction. Am I dumb? No, are people who don't spell well dumb? No. It may be enticing, nonetheless, to begin to poke at our collaborator's lack of knowledge in an area. But "the art of being wise," said William James, "Is the art of knowing what to overlook."

4. Give others their due, and expect yours in return. If we are collaborating in the context of work, cash payment is merely the baseline. If we really want to engender trust, we will give our collaborators credit for their contribution, acknowledging their solid execution, and especially their ideas. If rendered in public, and behind their back, even better. As Peter Drucker said, "The leaders who work most effectively, don't think 'I', they think 'we'...'we' gets the credit. That is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done."

The old saying, "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself," is often true. Yet most of the really important stuff we want to get done professionally and personally requires we enter into the risky business of collaboration. While barriers to collaboration are manifold, the underlying deterrent is lack of trust. When we're willing to do the work of finding collaborators with whom we can entrust both our expertise, and lack thereof, we can create something much grander than we could have on our own — the reward will be more than worth the risk.

For additional resources on this topic, I recommend "The Tools Cooperation and Change" and Nurturing Trust — Leveraging Knowledge.