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Collaboration: Avoiding Misconceptions to Ensure Success

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Abstract

The history of collaboration goes back thousands of years. However, even with such a rich history there still seems to be misconceptions, which cause breakdown in collaboration and failure. We have seen this recently with different events that have taken place within the world we live in. This paper will provide insights into what some of those key misconceptions are of collaboration. I will also provide some key components to ensuring that these misconceptions can be avoided and successful collaboration will occur. There is still much research that needs to be done surrounding collaboration; this paper provides some direction on future research opportunities.

Introduction

Although collaboration is by no means a new word or concept, it has become a major buzzword and hot topic of late. One of the reasons it has become such an important topic is we are seeing a lack of execution with true collaboration. “Throughout history, progress and even survival, have at times depended on collaboration (www.communitycollaboration.net/id20.htm).” The efforts of FEMA following Hurricane Katrina, the War in Iraq, the use of steroids in professional sports and the rating of video games are all areas where we are and have seen major breakdowns in collaboration.

Problem Statement

This paper takes a high level look at what are some of the key misconceptions of collaboration that can impact success. Collaboration is more than people getting together to decide on something, it is engagement, interaction and execution. To often people feel collaboration is consensus, it is not and that is just one misconception.

Purpose of Study

If I can provide a clearer understanding of the misconceptions of collaboration, I can begin to provide a clearer understanding of what must be done in the future to ensure that collaboration is a successful process. To help understand what collaboration is I would like to provide my own definition after reading a number of articles. Collaboration is a process by which two or more individuals provide their insights, expertise and observations to a selected leader or group to come up with a solution or outcome that provides the greatest benefit to that group's needs. According to an official definition of "collaboration", it means to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort, to cooperate reasonably, as with an enemy occupation force in one's country (<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=Collaboration>).

As I read article after article, I found that collaboration is one of those concepts where many have laid out what the keys are to successful collaboration. However, I did not find a lot written about the misconceptions about collaboration. I am not sure if this is because people do not want to talk about it or they just assume people know what they are doing when it comes to collaboration. I found that where the word "collaboration" was mentioned, you often would find the word "community." Thus, it is absolutely critical

that we speak about and understand the misconceptions of collaboration or else we put this whole concept of community in jeopardy.

Methodology

As stated earlier, after conducting some preliminary research, I wanted to get a more realistic understanding of what people think about collaboration today. Thus, I created a quick question survey that allowed a wide range of people to provide me with their insights about collaboration. Here are the key misconceptions that I came away with after reviewing all of their responses:

- Collaboration equals consensus
- Collaboration saves time
- Collaboration is easy
- Technology is the answer to successful collaboration

These misconceptions are often labeled as barriers to collaboration. I found that in the responses that I received from the small questionnaire that I sent out, these were the key misconceptions that people mentioned. This was one of two questions where there was consistency across the board. It is important to understand a little more about each of these misconceptions.

According to Wikipedia, consensus has two common meanings. One is a general agreement among the members of a given group or community. The other is as a theory and practice of getting such agreements. We can have successful collaboration without having consensus but it is very difficult to have successful consensus without collaboration. For that reason, it is vitally important that when deciding whether or not

collaboration needs to occur, there must be a commitment to those who will be collaborating by key leaders. The leaders final decisions must be supported and understood. Leaders do need consensus on the expectations otherwise you are setting collaboration up for failure. There cannot be turf wars if collaboration is to be successful. If you have consensus, consider it a bonus, not an expected outcome of collaboration. There must be clear expectations set before that actual collaboration takes place.

Although leaders within an organization or community would like to think that if they collaborate, they would save time, they are often disappointed when timelines come and go. The fact of the matter is that time is not necessarily saved or extended, what is improved is the likelihood of the right outcomes. Timesavings can be realized after collaboration, when that actual implementation occurs. Thus, setting the expectation of a collaborating team that it is to save time would be detrimental right from the beginning. One of the common items that repeatedly came up either in articles or answers from the questionnaire is that conflict will happen with collaboration. In order to ensure that there is successful collaboration, you must allow for some time to resolve the conflict.

The misconception that collaboration is easy really has no validity and shows a lack of understanding of what true collaboration is. In reality, collaboration can provide lots of frustration and can expose barriers to success. The key to ensuring that collaboration does not create levels of unnecessary frustration is to ensure that expectations are clearly defined upfront. There are assumptions that the reason that collaboration maybe easy is that you are only including a few people. The reality is that as you include more people in a process, the complexity increases. With this complexity there comes feelings of uneasiness and frustration. This can open the threat of failure within collaboration.

There has been a very serious push for technology to come to the rescue of collaboration. The reality is that in some ways technology has caused enormous barriers in collaboration. Collaboration depends on the very human aspect of coming together. Collaboration must be set-up, designed and executed all by humans. Technology can and will help to facilitate collaboration efforts but it is not the answer in and of itself. The problem is that people can really hide behind technology. This hiding can lead to disastrous results. The other important part about this misconception is that there is the potential that not all those involved have the same capabilities when using technology. For example, they're maybe a couple of team members who have worked with software such as Microsoft's, Live Meeting. They will be proficient in how this type of technology can help to facilitate the collaboration process. On the other hand, there may be a couple of members who have just recently become familiar with how to use email. This can cause collaboration to potentially take longer and potentially force a change in who is involved. As I mentioned before, collaboration itself is not a time saving process so any extra training for those who are less technological inclined would simply need to be a part of the expectations and plan.

Research Question

The study has provided an opportunity to now dial down on different aspects of collaboration to begin to create theories and practice that can help improve success rates of collaboration. This study was in response to the following question: Why is it that often times collaboration fails? There are many reasons why collaboration can fail or succeed. Understanding what to watch out for and prepare for can increase the potential for success.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The first component is to ensure that there are clear expectations for the collaboration that must take place. With the setting of these expectations comes the ability to set the proper message and direction for the collaboration team. Goals or “expectations” reflect the combined power of participants to achieve the desired result. They need to be clear, measurable, mutually agreed upon and broken down into both short-term and long-term targets (Gaining Momentum part 2). Identifying these expectations ensure, that those involved understand the difference between consensus and collaboration. It ensures that people understand the time commitment involved and that it is not a destination but rather a journey. Setting expectations should also provide a clear picture that the road to success with collaboration will not be easy. Research has demonstrated that the process of agreeing upon collaborative goals can be extremely difficult because of the variety of goals and constraints that different organizations and their individual representatives bring to a negotiating table (Eden, Huxham, & Vangen, 1996).

The next component of a successful collaboration is a conflict resolution process.

Most companies respond to the challenge of improving collaboration in entirely the wrong way. They focus on the symptoms rather than on the root cause of failures in cooperation: conflict. The fact is, you can’t improve collaboration until you’ve addressed the issue of conflict. (Weiss and Hughes, pg 93, 2005)

One of the common responses that I received from my questionnaire was that conflict is and should be a part of collaboration. This is a sign that people are free to speak their minds and share their inputs and insights. The importance of understanding that conflict will arise and being prepared to manage through it is critical. It can provide opportunities

to make real improvements and create solutions that have dramatic impact. If conflict is not managed correctly communication begins to break down. When this breakdown occurs, people begin to pick sides and this is not healthy for collaboration. This breakdown can also cause for the organization to lose precious time and money. An interesting thing about conflict is how technology can either be a great help or an extreme negative especially with collaboration. It is important to not allow for technology to be the driving force behind conflict resolution. Emails and chat rooms are the easy way out. Face to face meetings and even the use of videoconference are truly important to ensure that there is common ground and immediate responses can be provided. Technology has really hampered the conflict resolution process on many collaboration projects.

One of the areas that there must be more research on is the component surrounding the leadership within collaboration. For the most part what has been written is that the key to having a successful collaboration is to have a skilled leader. Collaboration success comes with a skilled leader who can truly manage the different relationships within the collaboration group. This leader must also be able to manage conflict without influencing the group into a place of consensus.

All participants in the initial group have a stake in leadership and in the outcomes. As the collaboration grows, new participants need to feel a sense of responsibility for the success of the group, even if they choose not to take a leadership role. (Community Collaboration Manual, 1991)

I want to make it very clear that there are many other key components to ensuring successful collaboration takes place. My goal was to provide context around the misconceptions of collaboration. Within this context I wanted to provide some key

components that will help to ensure these misconceptions of collaboration are eliminated. Getting collaboration right promises tremendous benefits: a unified face to customers, faster internal decision making, reduced costs through shared resources, and the development of more innovative products (Weiss & Hughes, p. 93, 2005). We see almost on a daily basis throughout the world both the importance of collaboration and the failure when it is not done correctly. I have truly found that watching the suffering of those who have been impacted by some of the failures of collaboration at the highest levels of government, education and business has caused me to want to clearly understand and be a leader within a collaborative community. This is not an easy task but it is worth doing. As I continue my research on collaboration there is one area that I want to explore in-depth. That area is around accountability.

Accountability means specifying results anticipated at the outset, and then continuously monitoring progress so mid-course corrections can be made. An evaluation of collaboration efforts and results should be planned from the outset to help collaborators decide how various efforts should be modified, expanded or dropped. (Community Collaboration Manual, 1991)

I look forward to the opportunities that I will have in the future to participate in collaboration. I know that as I become more educated on this process, I have an obligation to educate others.

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Evolving a Model for Probability of Detection within a Search Box for a Search and Rescue Mission Parallel Sweep Search

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Abstract

Most search and rescue missions take place on terrain that has vegetation. The next logical step for evolving a model for the probability of detection that was originally developed using minimally vegetated (desert) areas is to use the existing methodology simulating an actual field experiment that took place in vegetated area. Work done at the Chief Logan State Park in 2002 provided the actual field experiment. The results from the model simulating the search object placement of the field experiment show that the model can be evolved into terrain with vegetation.

Introduction and Problem Description

The greater number of search and rescue missions take place on vegetated terrain. The next logical step for evolving a model for the probability of detection (using simulation) that was originally developed by Wardlow (2005) on minimally vegetated (desert/above timber line) areas is to use the existing simulation methodology with the Digital Elevation Models (DEMs) for the terrain on which an actual field experiment took place in vegetated area. A literature search found an actual field experiment that was conducted by Robe and Frost (2002) at Chief Logan State Park in West Virginia. This experiment provided the vehicle for this next step in the evolution for the Wardlow model.