

less conflict, lower stress, an improved competitive advantage, a higher level of performance, and a healthier bottom line.

Twelve Habits of Highly Collaborative Organizations

1. **Lead by example.** In highly collaborative organizations, leaders use and demonstrate collaboration tools and strategies and encourage employees at all organizational levels to do the same.
2. **Focus on individual and organizational benefits.** Highly collaborative organizations communicate to employees about how they will personally benefit from a collaborative environment—how it will improve their lives and make their jobs easier—as well as how it will take the organization to the next level.
3. **Emphasize behavior and strategy before technology.** Highly collaborative organizations formulate a strategy (the “why” and “how” of collaboration for their organization) before rushing to buy the latest collaboration platform. The technology should support the strategy.
4. **Learn how to get out of the way.** Leaders and managers in highly collaborative organizations understand that micromanaging stifles collaboration. Best practices and guidelines are fine, but let employees do their work, their way. Empower employees.
5. **Give employees a voice.** In order for someone to feel like they have a voice, they have to have a platform and be acknowledged. This is a simple idea but gets lost quickly at the speed of business.
6. **Integrate collaboration into organizational workflow.** Collaboration should not be viewed as another competency that must be incorporated into an employee’s skill set. It should be integrated into all aspects of their work.
7. **Create a supportive environment.** Collaboration and teamwork should be rewarded. For example, make a percentage of an employee’s bonus tied to how well he or she collaborates with others.

Twelve Habits of Highly Collaborative Organizations (...continued)

8. Examine behaviors the organization is rewarding. Highly collaborative organizations focus on metrics that align different business units.
9. Practice persistence. Collaboration should not be confined to teams, employee levels, or pilot programs. Highly collaborative organizations make collaboration a corporate-wide initiative.
10. Adapt and evolve. Highly collaborative organizations recognize that collaboration is a perpetual state in their organizations and adapt and evolve as needed.
(Continued...)
11. Recognize that employee collaboration benefits customers. Happy employees are better performing employees, and this translates into more satisfied, happier customers.
12. Acknowledge that collaboration generally makes the world a better place. Highly collaborative organizations recognize that collaboration lowers stress, increases retention and loyalty, and improves the bottom line.

(Source: Adapted from Morgan, 2013.)

How to Encourage Collaboration in the Workplace

IF HR and talent management professionals focus solely on improving the building blocks that are critical to creating a truly collaborative work environment, they will see happier employees. To build and sustain a culture of collaboration, however, HR and talent management professionals may want to consider using the following steps.

1. Define what a collaborative environment looks like for the organization.
2. Offer training that teaches specific collaborative skills.

3. Make sure the metrics for success are aligned among different business units.
4. Ensure that leaders understand their role in facilitating collaboration and maintaining a collaborative environment.

Define What a Collaborative Environment Looks Like for the Organization

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It also probably lacked a strategy. The same is true when creating an organizational culture of collaboration. Without a strategy and a roadmap that articulates clear goals, employees will have plenty of good intentions, but will fail to act on them.

The “why” for creating a culture of collaboration has already been discussed - collaboration improves employee morale, retention, competitive advantage, and an organization’s bottom line. The next step is to create the “how” that is unique to each organization—the strategy. The strategy and the roadmap must be designed with the input and buy-in of all employees, not just senior leaders.

When creating a strategy, a good exercise to use is visualization. Carol Kinsey Goman, an executive coach, author, and keynote speaker, writes in an article for the *Reliable Plant*, that visualization is a team sport. It will help create a shared purpose and vision, and when the exercise includes all employees, it will increase the likelihood that they will enthusiastically buy-in (Goman, n.d.).

The roadmap provides guidelines for how the strategy will be executed. It should include goals, timelines, and individual roles and responsibilities, but it should not be too detailed. It should provide enough to give employees direction, but not enough to create roadblocks.

Offer Training that Teaches Specific Collaborative Skills

HR and talent management professionals can encourage a collaborative workplace by working with employees to improve collaborative skills. The building blocks discussed earlier—trust, communication, and a shared vision and purpose—can be improved with the help of employee development opportunities and activities. Other collaborative skills that can also be taught include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- How to embrace change.

- How to ask for input from others.
- How to share information with others.
- How to listen for understanding.
- How to provide constructive feedback.
- How to use negotiation skills.
- How to recognize and reward others.
- How to improve self-awareness.
- How to reach consensus.

These skills may be part of an organization’s professional development for employees on a management track, but for a collaborative culture to be realized, they must be part of all employees’ professional development plans. A collaborative culture gives every employee a voice, and so every employee must possess the skills necessary to be able to collaborate. HR and talent management professionals should conduct a needs analysis of where the organization stands in terms of collaboration skills for all employees, and a plan should then be developed that will improve any weaknesses uncovered in the needs analysis.

Make Sure the Metrics for Success Are Aligned Among Business Units

For an organization to truly be collaborative, metrics must align among various functions of the business. If metrics are not aligned, employees may engage in anti-collaborative behaviors, which may result in silos, intentional lack of inclusion and transparency, and territoriality. An example of this can be seen when examining the classic organizational friction between sales and operations.

Sales professionals usually are rewarded by sales volume, margins, and profitability. For that reason, they are motivated to sell things to customers that may fall outside the normal product offering. This “yes we can” type of customization can be critical to closing a deal. Once the sales professional closes the deal, something collaboratively destructive can happen. The sales professional is rewarded in the way of compensation, accolades, increased influence, and in some cases, a promotion.

The operations person on the other hand, is rewarded for things like process, execution, and speed of delivery. They invest their time in systems and processes that support how they are ultimately rewarded and compensated. This customized deal is great for the sales person to meet his goal but comes at the expense of the operations person who has to invest extra time and resources to deliver it. A very dangerous zero sum game dynamic has been created. For one person to win, the other person has to lose. This causes a number of collaborative issues and leads to silos, territoriality, and even conflict.

For these reasons, it is important for HR professionals and organizations to examine what behaviors are being driven by incentives and compensation plans.

Ensure that Leaders Understand Their Role in Facilitating Collaboration and Maintaining a Collaborative Environment

Although this new definition of collaboration emphasizes giving every employee in an organization a voice, leaders still play a pivotal role in facilitating and maintaining a collaborative environment. In their white paper, *Building a Collaborative Workplace*, authors Shawn Callahan, Mark Schenk, and Nancy White offer six behaviors that leaders display that help build collaboration in the workplace. Leaders who support collaboration in their organizations:

1. Pay attention to collaborative strategies and model collaborative skills and behaviors.
2. Do not sacrifice long-term goals for short-term fixes when faced with a crisis. They recognize that short-term fixes sabotage collaboration.
3. Invest resources that support and encourage collaboration.
4. Act as role models, teachers, and coaches of collaboration.
5. Reward collaborative behavior.
6. Ensure that collaborative talents are recruited and nurtured (Callahan, Schenk and White, 2008).

A seventh behavior that could be added to that list is accountability. To ensure that leaders at all levels actively encourage and maintain collaboration in the workplace, they must be held accountable to invest in, model, and reward collaborative behavior exhibited by their employees consistently. This accountability will ensure that the collaborative culture endures.

How to Improve Workplace Collaboration

- **Lead by example.** Be sure that those in leadership positions have the requisite communication and collaboration skills.
- **Build a sense of community.** Employees need a personal connection to one another. Be sure to provide opportunities for co-workers to get to know each other in a casual, non-working setting.
- **Train employees to collaborate.** According to a study by ESI International, 81 percent of the organizations surveyed said their employees needed to improve communication skills and nearly half needed to improve leadership and critical thinking skills.
- **Clarify roles and responsibilities.** Collaboration is greatly facilitated when everyone is on the same page. HR and talent managers should ensure that goals are outlined, responsibilities are articulated, and deadlines are set.
- **Tap into individual talent.** To optimize collaboration, assign roles that fit each person's strengths. Build teams based on what each person can bring to the table.
- **Hold productive meetings.** Good meetings have clear objectives and an agenda. They should serve to motivate people.
- **Don't micromanage.** Respect employees and give them autonomy to do their jobs.
- **Consider using collaboration tools and software.** It is rarely possible to have all employees involved at one place at one time. Consider investing in a collaborative software system to provide a centralized hub for communication and project management.

Conclusion

A truly collaborative environment involves every employee at every level and department, and is infused in an organization's culture and reflected in its daily operations. It can help recruit, retain, and motivate employees; increase productivity; bring new products and services to the market faster; increase customer satisfaction and loyalty; and improve an organization's bottom line. And because it lowers stress, it makes for a better work environment overall.