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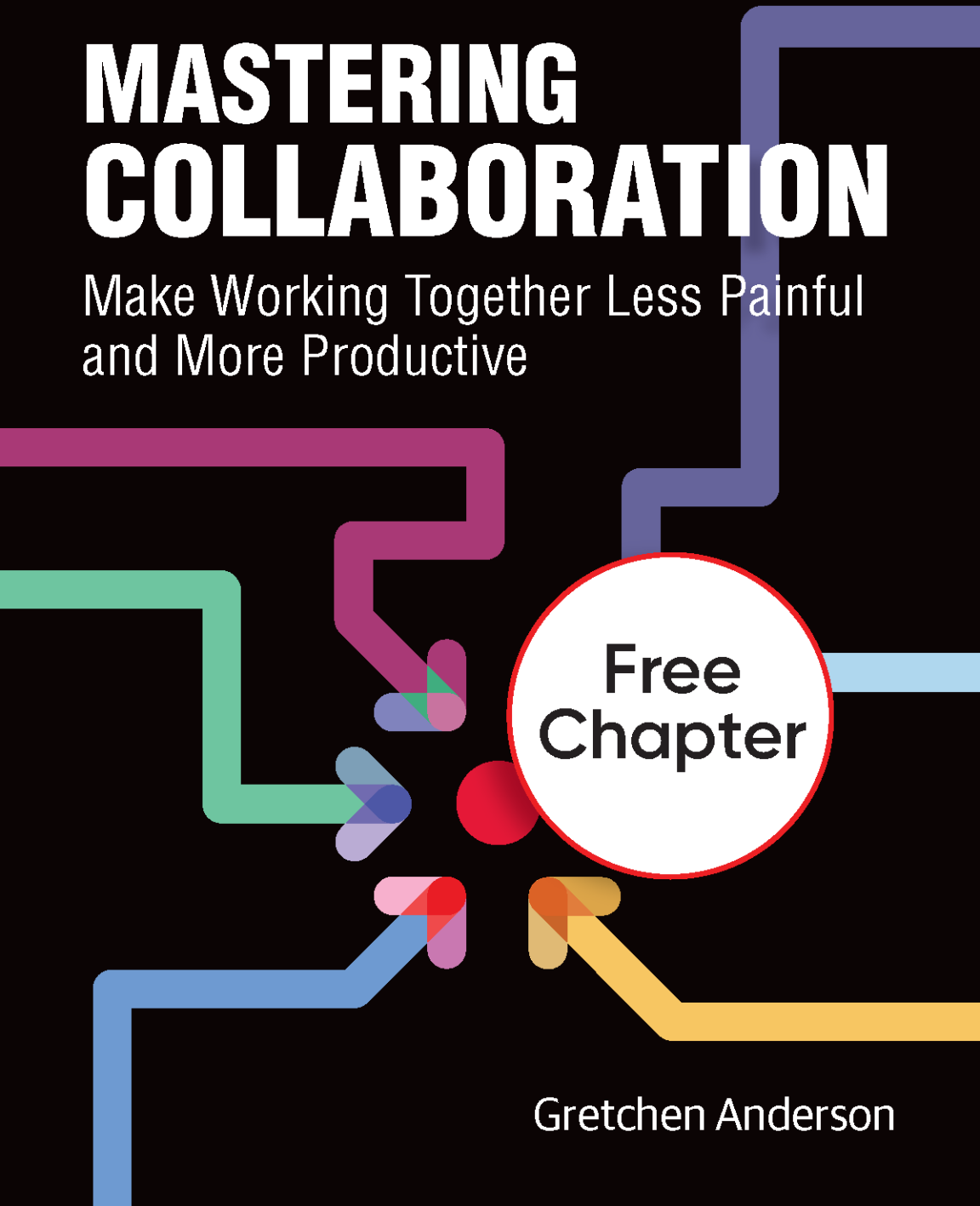
MASTERING COLLABORATION

Make Working Together Less Painful and More Productive



Gretchen Anderson

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by Gretchen Anderson

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Enlist Everyone

This chapter will show how being more inclusive makes teams stronger by widening their perspective and making them more invested in the team's success. Managing groups of people who are very different can present some challenges and create conflict. You can take steps to help teams work through their differences, at least enough to make working together less painful, by enlisting everyone in a constructive way.

Now I know what you're thinking: *Everyone? That sounds...messy*. In meaningful collaborations "everyone" cannot literally mean *everyone*, but as a general principle the more you include people who are affected by, and invested in, the topic at hand, the better your results will be. Enlisting everyone, done right, actually helps.

Casting a wide net and including more people actually helps you move faster. That sounds counterintuitive, but consider for a moment that everyone may already be "helping" you, just not in a way that is *actually* helpful. Group dynamics, especially in competitive corporate culture, lead people to see efforts that exclude them as potential threats or a drain on resources that feel tight. At first, the people that you haven't engaged (for whatever reason) might stand off to the side, neither helping nor hurting your efforts. But it doesn't take much for those who feel excluded to stake out a position on the opposite bank, and work against what you are trying to do.

We tend to assume that anyone not working with us is a neutral party, but if those parties think they *should* be involved, they won't stay neutral. Often in a rush to just "get to it," we leapfrog over interested parties, only to find that we must spend large amounts of time and energy trying to get their buy-in later. Their participation takes place after the fact, in the form of combative reviews of "finished" work, or worse, competitive efforts that spring up and muddy the waters.

This isn't necessarily because these people don't believe in what you're doing. Rather, their reaction is a normal response to having a perspective that isn't being heard. When we have a real interest in an effort, we can't help but want to contribute, and if we aren't given a chance, it can bring up an emotional response that is hard to corral productively. By engaging "everyone" in approaching a problem, you increase their commitment to the end product and reduce the drag on momentum.

Including "everyone" doesn't mean every person is always fully involved, however: it means widening the funnel of inputs to the process, enlisting varied perspectives to generate solutions, and getting a larger set of people to vet ideas to find their faults and make your case stronger. Everyone *can* help if you make room for different perspectives and ways of engaging. Some people may be dedicating their full attention to the problem, pushing solutions forward, while others may be advising or providing feedback on work. The purpose of including everyone is to get a sufficiently diverse set of perspectives on a problem to mitigate risks and drive innovative solutions.

Enlist Everyone to Reduce Risks

A recent "innovation" from Doritos stands as a great reminder of how limiting the variety of orientations to a problem can have ridiculous results. The maker of tasty chips completed some customer research and found a surprising problem. Many women reported not feeling comfortable eating Doritos in public, saying that crunching loudly and licking the delicious chemical flavor powder from their fingertips just didn't seem ladylike. So the brand announced a plan to address this problem by creating Lady Doritos—a less crunchy, less finger-lickin' good version of the product. They had successfully dealt with every issue identified. Or had they?

Now, mind you, the problem wasn't that women weren't *buying* the chips, but that they had an aversion to eating them publicly. Both the analysis of the findings and the proposed solution stink of a team that lacks diversity. And I don't just mean women. I suspect that those involved were all "product people" whose only hammer is a new product type, and every nail a gap in the product line. Thankfully, the resulting internet backlash kept this idea from moving forward. Doritos could have avoided the PR gaffe, however, if they'd included people not responsible for product development in their team, because the issue is a messaging opportunity, not a product/market fit problem. A simple ad campaign showing women enthusiastically enjoying the chips in meetings, at the park, on

the bus—all while smiling and laughing—would have gone a long way and probably required a lot less investment.

Blair Reeves, a Principal Product Manager at SAS and coauthor of *Building Products for the Enterprise: Product Management in Enterprise Software* (O'Reilly), says sometimes the blind spot comes in defining the very problem itself. Prior to getting into product management, Reeves worked in international development in Cameroon. He recalls how projects to improve infrastructure among communities often moved forward without partnership or input from the people within them. The so-called solutions may not have been used or sustained once implemented because the people didn't see them as something they had ownership of. When Reeves began asking communities about their priorities, he found that they were different than had been assumed. Issues like AIDS and HIV education weren't as big for them as his organization assumed; instead, the people wanted help with combating malaria and building latrines—issues that were more disruptive for them day-to-day.

Asking a diverse group that's closer to the problem is one way to spot and avoid potential missteps. A group that's too homogenous may make incorrect assumptions or apply too narrow a lens to finding solutions. You should also be sure that the team understands and seeks out the right skill sets, rather than assuming those skills are already present or blindly trying to "make do" with those that are.

Enlist Everyone to Boost Engagement

Including those who are affected by the outcomes of the work is also a boon to morale. Reeves not only discovered the community's real priorities, but also found that when he started asking people about the problem, they were easier to engage in the solutions. People we work with are no different. When you can invite more people to thoughtfully consider a problem or enlist their help to test solutions, they become more active and interested. It seems obvious that when people are shown or informed of work only once it's finished, they care less about it (unless, of course, they actively hate it), and yet sharing work that can't be changed much is standard for many office cultures.

Companies know that having more engaged employees is beneficial—that's why they spend so much time and money measuring engagement. Marc Benioff of Salesforce found his organization faced with the challenge of employee engagement at senior levels of leadership, something that corporations pay a great deal of attention to. Higher engagement can multiply productivity and qual-

ity so much that substantial amounts of time and money are spent monitoring and supporting people's experience at work. Benioff wanted to nip his engagement problem in the bud, so he took pains to create a virtual space to understand what was fueling the issue and address it. He says, "In the end the dialogue lasted for weeks beyond the actual meeting. More important, by fostering a discussion across the entire organization, [I've] been able to better align the whole workforce around its mission. The event served as a catalyst for the creation of a more open and empowered culture at the company." Clearly, senior leaders at Salesforce are busy people whose typical focus is on the products and services they create, but without taking time to come together as a group and establish shared understanding and priorities, their day-to-day efforts would have been affected.

Collaboration is an approach to problem solving, but it's just as valuable as a cultural force that helps employees achieve purpose and meaning—not just productivity—in their jobs.

Enlisting Everyone Brings Up Cultural Differences

So, *maybe* enlisting "everyone" has some advantages, but employing this principle can also bring up issues around diversity and inclusion for the group. As a master of collaboration, it is important that you stay aware of dynamics that can reduce its benefits.

In the study of cultural differences, there's a force known as the *Power Distance Index*, first identified by business anthropologist Geert Hofstede, which measures the degree to which a group values hierarchy and ascribes power to leaders. A country like the US has relatively low power distance because we value flatter organization and independence over bowing to authority. Japan, on the other hand, rates very high, as the culture demands a great deal of respect for elders and authority.

In his book *Outliers* (Little, Brown and Company), Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of Korean Air's "cockpit culture" during the late 1990s, when the airline was experiencing more plane crashes than any other airline. Analysis showed that the cultural norm of giving in to superiors rather than challenging them meant that junior pilots who spotted problems failed to raise them. In *Fortune*, Gladwell said:

What they were struggling with was a cultural legacy, that Korean culture is hierarchical. You are obliged to be deferential toward your elders and superiors in a way that would be unimaginable in the US.

But Boeing and Airbus design modern, complex airplanes to be flown by two equals. That works beautifully in low-power-distance cultures [like the US, where hierarchies aren't as relevant]. But in cultures that have high power distance, it's very difficult.

When the airline made some adjustments, their problem went away. They flattened out the Power Distance Index by reinforcing the value of junior aviators, and "a small miracle happened," Gladwell writes. "Korean Air turned itself around. Today, the airline is a member in good standing of the prestigious SkyTeam alliance. Its safety record since 1999 is spotless. In 2006, Korean Air was given the Phoenix Award by Air Transport World in recognition of its transformation. Aviation experts will tell you that Korean Air is now as safe as any airline in the world."

How we react to power isn't the only difference you're likely to run into. If you're beginning to see the value of widening the circle of collaborators and making sure they are active, respected participants, you might be wondering how to define the right level of "everyone" for your teams. Getting diversity means including people with a variety of:

- Experiences in industry and skills
- Cultural backgrounds
- Introversion and extroversion
- Working styles
- Primary languages
- Ownership, from end users to senior leaders and everyone in between

Helping teams deal with these differences requires being open to talking about differences, creating norms that bridge gaps, and having productive conflict. When people acknowledge to themselves and others where their perspective is coming from, it's easier for the group to not reject it as an outlier. Discussion about how the group will handle certain differences is also healthy. Creating explicit norms about everything from group versus individual working time to

how decisions get made gives the group common ground. It's important to model, and hold each other accountable for, respecting these team norms.

Tools to Create the Right Environment for Collaboration: Tools to Help Enlist Everyone

Understanding what kind of team you have, how they think, and what they are missing is critical to being inclusive. Here are some tools you can use to set your team up and give them what they need to have a healthy, diverse environment.

Understanding Behavioral Differences: Variation 1

Knowing the skills that you have on the team and what you lack is key, but many times, the source of friction in teams is behavioral or cultural. It is useful to have the team identify and work through their issues with each other up front.

You will need small sticky notes, large sticky note pads or a whiteboard surface, and Sharpies for each person.

1. Ask each person to write down, one per sticky note, characteristics of the worst teams they have worked with.
2. Next, ask each person to write down aspects of the best, most high-performing team they have worked on.
3. Have each person present their negative and positive experiences to the team, grouping them together into negative and positive qualities on a large sticky note pad or under a heading on the whiteboard.
4. The facilitator should look for where people have alignment and divergence, grouping similar examples together to show the team where they agree and where they differ.
5. Review the items that are similar, and discuss what rule or norm the team would like to agree to. For example, if there's a lot of negativity around "too many meetings," establish specific times when meetings will be held, versus when people can have heads-down time.

6. Decide how to hold each other accountable for upholding the norms and what the consequences for breaking rules are. For example, is there a formal apology for missing meetings without prior notification?
7. Revisit the norms after a few weeks to see whether the team feels the need to change or add any new rules to help remove friction.

Understanding Behavioral Differences: Variation 2

If your team members aren't all comfortable sharing their experiences in prior teams (perhaps because some of them have worked together before, or are unwilling to speak up about negative feelings), consider this variation of the exercise to establish team norms.

In this exercise, you will have people identify their preferences or behaviors on several dimensions to see where there are similarities or differences. Then you can discuss and decide as a team what the shared expectation should be.

You will need small sticky notes, large sticky note pads or a whiteboard surface, and Sharpies for each person.

1. Create and label a horizontal line for each of the following categories, which are the main areas teams struggle over and typically develop norms around (see Figure 1-1):

    - **Interruptions.** How do team members feel about being interrupted with questions?
    - **Core Hours.** What are the hours the team should agree to be together in the office and/or available online? Team members may decide to work before or after core hours, as their schedules allow, but these are the hours that the team commits to each other.
    - **Meeting Times.** When should the team have typical meetings like stand-ups, weekly reviews, or other rituals?
    - **Authority and Decision-Making.** Who should make final decisions about important agreements for the team?

- **Disagreeing.** How comfortable are you with expressing disagreement about a decision?
- **Feedback.** How comfortable are you with receiving direct negative feedback?

2. Have each team member write their name or initials on a sticky note and place one (or in the case of indicating hours, two) on each line to indicate where their preferences fall.
3. Look at where there are overlaps and agreement, and where people diverge. Discuss these and create team norms accordingly.

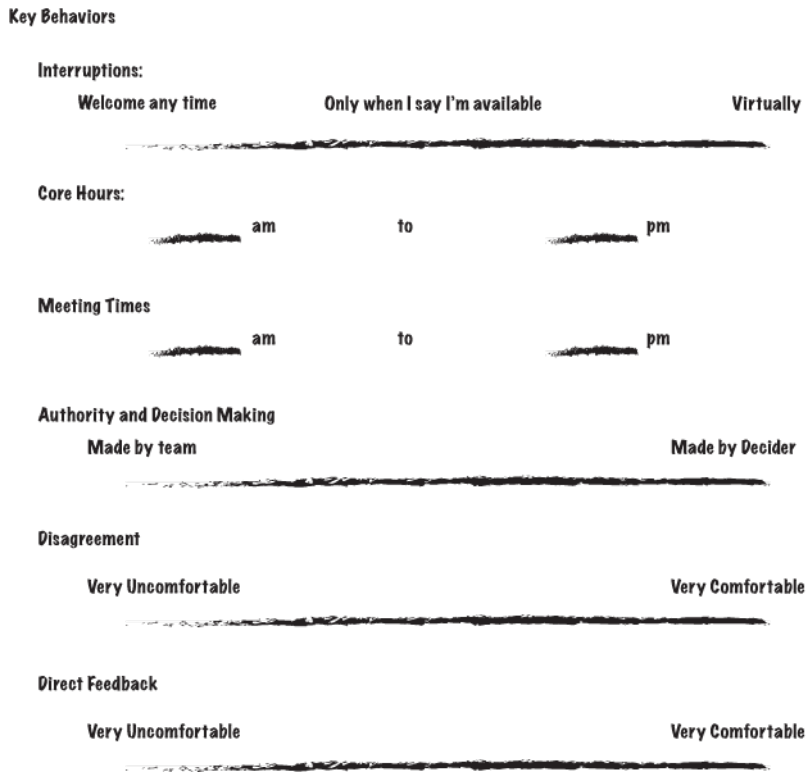

Figure 1-1. Main areas teams struggle over and develop norms around

Cross Cultures, Don't Overthrow Them

At some point in your journey to master collaboration, you will have a realization: people are a problem. Working with power structures can be challenging, especially if you don't happen to have a lot of authority in the system. And people are irrational and messy, which is why organizations create structures in the first place—to help guide our decisions and establish ways to control and command. Cyd Harrell, as someone who has made a big push in the last few years to bring innovation and inclusivity to the US government, knows all about these kinds of structures. As a leader at 18F, the digital services arm of the government, Harrell has worked with huge governmental agencies, elected officials, and political appointees, and she's seen firsthand the challenges of bringing a collaborative approach to command-and-control cultures.

"Some kinds of hierarchy are not conducive to good collaboration," she says, "but you have to find a way through anyway. That culture exists for a reason, and many of your stakeholders have a great deal invested in it." It's important to note that not all organizations are chasing less hierarchy and flatter structures. Civil servants and employees at government agencies typically have a much longer tenure than you find in Silicon Valley, and many people work hard for years to attain a level of authority and power—which they aren't eager to shove aside in the interest of being "transparent" and nonhierarchical. These organizations have succeeded in large-scale, often high-risk, situations because they employ what Harrell calls a "submit and review" approach, in which ideas are taken to a final state where a gatekeeper has the power to approve or reject them in a single blow. In that model, more senior people are seen as experts whose point of view demands organization-wide alignment. Conversely, those who are elected or appointed might serve short tenures with a great deal of authority, but priorities and perspectives change once that person has been replaced or voted out of office. Both of these forces tend to make collaboration hard, or nearly impossible.

But, Harrell says, at the same time, you can't get around these cultural forces. Approaching collaboration in this setting without respecting the system and structures is likely to have bad effects. When I offered some ideas I've seen used to break through power imbalances and help create a different vibe in a team, Harrell was quick to correct me. "You can't make changing the culture central to your success" in an environment where so many are so invested in its structure. And trying to get around it by going to a senior influencer might land you in hot water for violating the chain of command. Asking people lower on the

totem pole to speak up in front of more senior people can also backfire, since the system doesn't reward new ideas as much as it rewards supporting the hierarchy.

The US government is one such culture, and during her tenure Harrell has learned how to navigate it rather than fight it. Her approach is simple: have a great deal of empathy for your stakeholders, however reluctant they are, and create a space where the normal rules and systems are paused or changed. Or, work within the command-and-control system, but constantly seek input and reviews from people along the way by asking for their expert input. The trick is to acknowledge to yourself and the team that the situation simply requires another iteration or two to bring the sticky stakeholder along. Since you are always showing "finished" work, you must be willing to be "wrong" so that you can have a meaningful conversation about what's not working and how it might be fixed.

But cultural differences can also be more geographically influenced, such as in teams that are large and international or dispersed. Erin Meyer is an author and researcher who's done a lot to map out the ways in which cultures differ, which in turn helps us negotiate them. Her work is useful for those who are navigating national cultural differences in teams, from how to give negative feedback to how to build a schedule. More typically, though, teams are made up of people who differ culturally not only in terms of their countries of origin but also in their backgrounds and skills, so it may be most useful to focus on individual behaviors.

Some companies have collaboration built into their cultures from the start. Netflix began with an unusual business model—mailing customers DVDs of movies from their queue—and transitioned to streaming media at a time when physical media was losing adoption. The company has recently undergone another transition and begun creating their own movies and TV shows to stream. The resilience of their business model and technology are impressive, and much of the credit for the company's success is attributed to their strong culture, which values collaboration highly. This culture is embodied in a famous "deck" of slides that was shared openly on the internet and is now published on the company's website. Andrea Mangini, Director of Product Design, offered her observations about how that culture works on the inside, as someone relatively new to the company. She says that people are constantly showing their work and inviting others to weigh in. People value getting feedback; in fact, not seeking out the opinions of others is frowned upon. Because the emphasis on collaboration has been at the core of the company since the start, it's second nature to many employees. The company sees so much value in breaking down silos that they're

not as concerned about duplicating efforts and optimizing the creation of new ideas.

No matter your environment, by being intentional about involving "everyone" and making your differences productive through team norms, you get the diversity you need while maintaining the sanity you deserve. By understanding power differences and openly discussing cultural differences—whether they are based on nationality, background, or skill set—you will help create a more harmonious collaboration.

Troubleshooting Issues with Enlisting Everyone

Bringing many different people together can surface many emotional and interpersonal issues in the team and with stakeholders. This section discusses some ideas you can use to mitigate these issues and keep the team focused.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE IN TEAMS

However you've decided to set up your core team, it's likely that at some point, one or more members will turn out to be trouble. Whether it's someone who dominates or someone you can't seem to get to speak up, difficult people are a fact of collaborative life. Thorsten Borek and his team at Neon Sprints in Hamburg, Germany, have created a simple framework to understand the problematic people who show up to collaborate (or not, as we'll see). I have recreated their framework here with permission because it's simply too useful not to share. The framework has five main types of difficult people, and ways you can handle them gracefully:

The leader

Leaders can't help but take over in a meeting, controlling conversations and dominating ideas. Whether they are literally the boss or just act like it, their presence is likely stifling to others and a pain to facilitate. The key here is to understand that their motivations are *power-driven*, meaning that they seek to be seen as powerful by others. To handle leaders, Borek suggests giving them an important task—the keyword being *important*. These folks should be asked to lead a discussion about key decision criteria, or to make critical decisions.

The know-it-all

Know-it-alls are those who constantly drag the discussion in a specific direction or bring up what seems like minutia when the group is talking

about the big picture. They make other participants cringe because they take things off-track even though they may be saying important things. Understand that these people are *knowledge-driven*, and need a way to channel and share their expertise with the group productively. Handling know-it-alls means giving them an outlet in a collaboration. Consider giving them a chance to present their knowledge of constraints as part of framing a problem, or let them share insights about a specific technology you are considering. Truly disruptive people may need to be handled with care, and included only in places where they won't drown everyone else out all the time.

The introvert

You may not always notice introverts as problems in your team, because they tend to be nice and quiet, eagerly following along and agreeing with whatever the last person said. Introverts are *instruction-driven*, meaning they may not be extroverted or confident enough to participate in messy, free-form discussions. Giving them very clear instructions, or running through an exercise together before asking them to do it on their own, will help build up their comfort level and confidence. They can also be enlisted to help out the group in many ways, since they highly value helping the group get along.

The negativist

Negativists are people who, no matter what, can't help but resist what is happening every step of the way. These people will question the process being used ad nauseum, or insist that every idea offered has already been tried. Often these folks are *resistance-driven* because they've not been listened to, either by you or by others in the past. Handle negative people with care, making them into valued experts and enlisting them to prepare and strategize ahead of time. But these people may also prove difficult to change, so consider asking them to serve as a critic of the effort, rather than an idea generator, to best take advantage of their energy.

The indecisive

This type of team member typically is well integrated in how the team works and eager to participate in discussions. Frequently indecisives will introduce different perspectives on a subject or ask to consider more aspects of the matter at hand. However, when asked to make a decision, they have a really hard time making up their mind. And once they do

decide, in 9 out of 10 cases they'll ask to change that decision after a few minutes, potentially asking the team for more input "just to be sure." The indecisive team member is *safety-driven* and needs constant reassurance about proceedings and decisions.

It's worth getting to know your team members and stakeholders well enough to understand what they value and what drives them. You can do this in a variety of ways—from 1:1 interviews, to asking people who have experience with individuals what they think, to trying out different approaches and seeing what works.

HANDLING A CRITICAL STAKEHOLDER WHO WON'T ENGAGE

Sometimes, despite your invitations, a person just won't show interest or participate in the effort. Many people I spoke to described having an important stakeholder or subject-matter expert either fail to attend sessions (even short ones) or express deep skepticism of the enterprise.

The cause of this lack of engagement can vary. Often it's just that these stakeholders have competing priorities, and yours doesn't rise to the top of the pile. This happens with people whose expertise is in high demand. When I dug in with one such person, I learned that their days had a *Groundhog Day* quality, where they were called upon over and over again to deliver the same perspective, the same information across many groups, and each new request felt even less interesting and valuable than the last.

So what can I do?

Understand their priorities

When you can't get the attention of someone critical to the effort, it's worth spending some time trying to understand what they are devoting attention to. You can frame your project in ways to align with what they care about to get more support. You can do this by speaking with them directly, but if they aren't engaging with you, try speaking to those around them who are likely to know what their focus is. It also may be necessary to acknowledge that their other priorities are more important. You may need to wait until they have the time and space to devote to your effort.

Burn a cycle

When a key stakeholder won't give you the time of day because they don't believe the work is needed, trying to force them to play ball probably won't work. Instead, run through a cycle of exploration to move quickly from the

fuzzy frontend questions and assumptions to asserting a hypothesis about the solution or creating a prototype. This answer need not be (and probably won't be) the right one, so beware of investing a lot of time or making it very high-fidelity. What you might find is that once you assert a "truth" developed by the collaboration, you'll suddenly get the stakeholder's attention—although it's likely to be negative. But this is the time to make sure that person feels like their input and knowledge is what's required to solve the problem. When I work with people in complex domains, I often show them things early on that are wrong or incomplete so that they'll be compelled to step in to provide guidance and fill in what's missing. If you prepare yourself to take an extra cycle or two to draw people in, you save yourself the frustration of having more finished work "rejected" by someone who could have been helpful earlier on.

Join forces or have a runoff

As a consultant, I've been hired by large organizations a shocking number of times to work on problems that other people were already trying to solve. When you discover this, consider merging or aligning your efforts with the other team(s) in the spirit of sharing the load to move faster. Or, alert leadership about the redundancy, because it may be something they aren't aware of. In my experience, however, this isn't always a case of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing. Some companies intentionally set up different teams to see what different solutions emerge. In this case, you should know your work is in a runoff, and proceed anyway. Make sure that the ideas are being compared fairly, though—try to ensure that leaders aren't comparing the cookie dough from one team with the freshly baked cookies from another. It also may be a good idea to reach out to the other teams so everyone understands what's happening.

MANAGING SOMEONE WHO IS SPREAD TOO THIN

Having team members who are spread too thin will stress any team. One of the strengths of Agile/Sprint methodology is the insistence on 100% dedication to the team. This is a great goal, but all too often I run into people who have too much on their plates. When your collaborators have varying levels of dedication to the cause, you may run into resentment ("X isn't pulling their weight") or dismay ("I want to do more, but I can't!").

So what can I do?

Speak to a manager

You can try to ask the person who oversees the employee to help clear the person's plate, for everyone's sanity. Don't do this behind the employee's back, but rather include them in the discussion about how everyone wants to make sure priorities are aligned. This isn't the employee's problem, it's the resource manager's.

Spread the gospel for them

When a key player is trapped in a cycle of being the subject-matter expert, you can help them by aggregating some of their requests for them, and aligning their input sessions (at least up front) into a single learning session so they can get off the hamster wheel. You could also offer to attend meetings with other groups to consolidate. And, while you're there, consider recording video and compiling great notes that they can use as a first line of defense for requests for their time. This should also serve to create a bond, and hopefully they'll repay you by giving you just enough attention later.

Change their status

If someone really can't be spared the needed time to focus on your collaboration, then it's a good idea to be explicit about making them an advisor who can review and weigh in, but who isn't part of the core team. It's also worth seeing if they have a protégé or colleague who might be better able to participate, even if that person's at a lower level of expertise.

NAVIGATING CULTURAL CONFLICTS

The main objective of many personnel managers is to minimize dust-ups between employees and promote healthy teams—the irony being, of course, that avoiding conflict ends up creating more issues than it solves. If the business of business were really without contention, and everyone agreed all the time, then we could have delegated it all to robots and retired in our utopia long ago. But the reality is, we need to express and work through differences of opinion to get to better answers—the very heart of what this book is about.

But what happens when your teams, whether intrinsically or through coaching, won't fully engage in healthy debate? If you notice that there are few points of disagreement in your team, it's time to stir the pot. Otherwise, productivity

will actually suffer, as energy spent *not* arguing takes away from accomplishing goals.

You need to strike a balance among team members where there is productive tension and conflict about specific ideas, not individual people.

So what can I do?

Talk cross-culturally

A lot of what underlies the willingness to speak up, or not, may be cultural. In the spirit of openness, it might be a good idea for your team to spend time together talking openly about what their expectations are, and sharing their previous experiences. Erin Meyer has fantastic advice in her book, *The Culture Map* (PublicAffairs), and online about helping teams embrace productive conflict despite cultural differences. She suggests using specific language, like "Help me understand your point" in place of "I disagree with that," to depersonalize and invite intellectual discussion among those who might otherwise give in.

Map it out

Meyer also suggests mapping out the differences in the team explicitly. Her model is specific to national cultural differences, which may be both irrelevant and overly simplistic for your purposes. But if you replace the nationalities with specific team members and their individual predispositions, you can use this tool to help team members better understand where they're each coming from.

Remove the boss

Some people may be more reticent to express themselves when an authority figure is in the room. Help your diverse teams feel comfortable by making sure they have space to engage with each other where they don't feel like they are being watched or need to align with a superior.

Establish team norms

Establishing team norms about things like when meetings will be held, or what the definition of "done" is, is a key practice. For managing conflict, it can be good to discuss and decide what the team considers healthy, and not, when facing a conflict. I've seen norms such as "Ask for explanations over offering attacks" that are the result of a diverse team striving to be inclusive of different views.

Work asynchronously.

Some conflict arises when people try to do too much all together. Keep an eye on people's energy levels, be aware of those who may do better work on their own, and then come back to share and critique. Make time and space for people to be away from one another and keep their discussion focused on the content of work and decisions.

Conclusion

Collaboration at its core is about including diverse perspectives and people. Being inclusive makes teams stronger; you have more to draw on and get more people invested in the success of the effort. But groups often need help bringing their differences together productively. You can help teams be open with each other and develop shared norms to govern behaviors. You can also model what respecting differences and healthy tension looks like so that the group doesn't just stick to what's "safe" because it's easier. In the next chapter, we'll look at how to give people clear roles to channel their energies and contribute to a healthier environment.

Key Takeaways

- Being inclusive of many different kinds of people, skill sets, and perspectives is a core part of collaboration that helps mitigate risks, engage the team, and find blind spots before they become a problem.
- Inclusivity can challenge the status quo of how people interact and may bring about interpersonal conflicts that are destructive to the team.
- Working in different cultures that aren't naturally conducive to collaboration is challenging, but don't get caught up in making changing the culture your mission. Instead, focus on practical, tactical changes that create a local space for teams to be productive and deliver results. Culture change will happen as a by-product of good results over time.

About the Author

Gretchen Anderson consults with clients to inform their product strategy and improve team collaboration skills. She spent the first part of her career in design consulting at firms like frog design, Cooper, and LUNAR. She was Head of Design at PG&E, California's largest energy company; she has led the design of the hardware and software of a next-generation surgical system; and served as VP of Product at GreatSchools.org. Gretchen is a Bay Area native who left only long enough to get a bachelor's degree from Harvard in History & Literature.

Colophon

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- Avoid common pitfalls in the collaboration process
- Align communication approaches to ensure that collaboration is effective and inclusive
- Structure events or meetings for different types of collaboration depending on the people involved
- Practice giving and receiving critiques to foster inclusion without resorting to consensus-based decisions

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"Mastering Collaboration *makes a clear and compelling case that collaboration is not just a squishy 'nice to have,' but rather a mission-critical skill for modern organizations. Even better, it provides actionable strategies and tools that you can begin using right away to improve the way you communicate and collaborate with your colleagues.*"

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