



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03ENG
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
JANUARY 17, 2017

ARTICLE **COLLABORATION**

How Managers Can Make Group Projects More Efficient

by Amy Jen Su

COLLABORATION

How Managers Can Make Group Projects More Efficient

by Amy Jen Su

JANUARY 17, 2017



We may have hit a saturation point when it comes to collaboration. Consider the following:

- Research out of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce shows that time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities [has ballooned by 50% or more](#) over the last two decades.

- A recent article in The Economist called this trend the “[collaboration curse](#),” asserting that “making employees collaborate has gone too far.”
- Research has found that although some teams have a collaborative culture, [they are not skilled in the practice of collaboration itself](#). The authors of that research, Lynda Gratton and Tamara Erickson, noted that “[people] were encouraged to cooperate, and they wanted to cooperate, but they didn’t know how to work together very well.”

As a manager or team leader, how do you reap the benefits of effective collaboration without inviting inefficiencies and messiness?

Don’t engage in collaboration for the sake of collaboration. Remember the reasons *why* we collaborate. No one person has the best ideas. Putting many heads onto a complex problem is often the best way to come up with a solution. Many hands can make light work.

Respect others’ time and show up prepared. It can be tempting to want to include everyone on a project, but if you’re the lead of a team or meeting, you need to be thoughtful about who is in the room. Bring together the people who are closest to the problem — those who understand the issue at the root level. Be clear about who is coming and why, and spend time preparing how you’re going to tackle a problem.

In some situations, it may make sense to stay open-ended and brainstorm with team members by saying:

- What do you think? What’s your perspective?
- I’m not looking for an answer right now and I don’t have one yet. I wanted to get this on your radar and give you some time to think about this.

In other cases, we can save people’s time and provide leadership by sharing our views and asking others to weigh in:

- I value your input. Here’s what I’m thinking. What am I not taking into consideration or factoring in?
- Here’s a potential direction and how we could get there. What resonates and what doesn’t?

Listen, be open to change, or respectfully disagree. Reaping the value of others’ thinking requires that we listen and make it safe for people to share their views. In the New York Times Magazine article “[What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team](#),” researchers found that high-performance teams typically had environments of “psychological safety...a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up...a climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.”

Listening is a key part of the collaborative process. However, collaborative listening does not mean agreeing blindly. Instead, use what you heard to broaden your possible responses by:

- **Seeking more information:** “I wasn’t aware of that piece of information. I’d like to dig into that a bit more.”
- **Shifting your original view:** “Last week what I believed based on the data was X. With this new perspective and information, I am thinking about this quite differently. My view has changed.”
- **Communicating disagreement with respect:** “I have always valued your judgment. In digesting what you shared, I am finding I just can’t get comfortable with that direction. Ultimately, this is coming down to a difference of opinion.”

Acknowledge decision making and other potential ownership rights. While it’s important that you hear out and value others’ perspectives, the reality is that not everything is or should be a consensus-based decision. If you’re going to make the final decision, tell people that up front. You can’t get people fired up and excited only to have them find out afterward that you had 51% of the vote. Collaboration becomes messy when there is ambiguity over who is accountable for which decisions, [causing decision making to stall](#).

In addition to decision making, there are a host of other potential ownership rights at stake in a collaborative project. When these go unspoken, collaboration turns sour, feelings get hurt, turf battles ensue, and people become passive-aggressive. Where possible, have the courage to discuss and negotiate:

- Who is the relationship owner or point person for stakeholders in this project or account?
- How will we recognize and acknowledge the value of each member’s contributions?
- How will we share credit or visibility opportunities?
- How will we share in any assets, intellectual property, or business value created in the collaboration?

Pull through, prioritize, and inform. Don’t stop at the point of having a great discussion. Ensure that meetings end with people knowing who is going to do what and by when. Furthermore, before moving on to the next thing, remember to loop back with colleagues and let them know what you’ve done with the valuable information, contacts, or resources they’ve provided. A thank you, acknowledgement, or quick status update can go a long way toward minimizing confusion or potential resentments down the road.

Effective collaboration is about leadership. The best collaborators sit at the intersection of high IQ and high EQ. Likewise, as Gratton and Erickson point out in their research, “groups with high levels of collaborative behavior...[have team leaders] who are both task and relationship oriented.”

By considering the situations where more minds are better than one, bringing the right people to the table, staying open to listening, demonstrating courage to negotiate, and making sure work gets prioritized, leaders can get the benefits of collaboration without getting mired in its messiness.

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#), a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book [The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day](#), and co-author of [Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence](#) with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.
