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There's a Difference Between Cooperation and Collaboration

Everyone seems to agree that collaboration across functions is critical for major projects and initiatives. The reality, however, is that meshing the skills and resources of different departments, each focused on its own distinct targets, to achieve a larger organizational goal is much easier said than done. In fact, it takes much more than people being willing to get together, share information, and cooperate. It more importantly involves making tough decisions and trade-offs about what and what not to do, in order to adjust workloads across areas with different priorities and bosses. And despite all the well-meaning cooperative behaviors, this is often where interdepartmental collaboration breaks down.

Consider the following situations:

- A large insurance company developed a new suite of products to meet unique customer needs. But as the products were rolled out, it became clear that the product development and marketing teams had not worked closely enough with the IT and customer service teams that were supposed to support these products. These teams knew about the general product development strategy, but they were not included in the detailed planning and roll out decisions, so they were left scrambling to catch up by the time the products were launched. As a result, customers experienced delays and errors in processing, the call centers were unprepared for questions, and the   overall end-to-end cost of the new products ended up being much higher than planned.

- A global manufacturing firm wanted to customize a product component for one of its major customers. Doing so required extensive design reconfiguration, with changes to electronics, cooling, power, weight, pricing, and product delivery. Although every function agreed to take on the changes that affected them, they all worked on them independently and with different time frames. What each function didn't realize was that their changes triggered adjustments for other departments, and this led to a continual cycle of design changes. As a consequence, the product manager was unable to finalize an integrated design and still couldn't give the customer a firm quote or delivery schedule 18 months later.

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The odd thing about these examples (and countless others) is that the managers in these companies had been through various kinds of training about collaboration, teamwork, and the like. But despite all of this education, they were still unable to truly achieve the desired outcome because they confused pleasant, cooperative behavior with collaboration. In the insurance company, the product developers kept the back office and customer service people informed, but they didn't actively engage them in a joint effort. In the manufacturing firm, the design ball was passed from function to function with the assumption that eventually all of the pieces would fit together – each believed the "overall solution" would be taken care of by someone else.

Having worked with hundreds of managers over the years, I've seen that very few admit to being poor collaborators, mostly because they mistake their cooperativeness for being collaborative. And indeed, most managers are cooperative, friendly, and willing to share information – but what they lack is the ability and flexibility to align their goals and resources with others in real time. Sometimes this starts at the top of the organization when senior leaders don't fully synchronize their strategies and performance measures with each other. More often, however, the collaboration challenge resides with department heads, product leaders, and major initiative managers who need to get everyone on the same page – and shouldn't wait for senior executives to force the issue for them.

To start truly collaborating, here are two steps that you should take:

First, consider the goal you're trying to achieve. Map out the end-to-end work that you think will be needed to get the outcome you want. What will your team be responsible for? What will you need from other teams in the organization? As you create this map, sketch out the possible sequencing of activities and timing that might be required. You want to create an explicit framework that will serve as a collaboration contract. When people know what's needed, in what form, and by when, they can then tell you whether it's possible or not, and then you can have a real dialogue about what can be done.

Second, convene a working session with all of the required collaborators from different areas of the company to review, revise, and make commitments to this collaboration contract. One of the biggest mistakes that managers make is trying to foster what we might call "serial collaboration", i.e. going from one function to the next and trying to cobble together an agreement. Not only is this time-consuming, but it rarely works since each change affects the next. The better alternative is to get all of the needed collaborators in the room together as early as possible to work through the plans, make adjustments, and find ways to share resources and align incentives. In fact, in the manufacturing case cited above, it was only when the product manager brought together key people from all of the critical functions and disciplines into a two-day workshop that she was able to finalize the customized design.

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The bottom line here is that cross-functional collaboration is easy to talk about but hard to do, particularly because we tend to get stuck in cooperating mode. So if you are able to map out what's needed and bring the needed parties into alignment around it, you'll not only make an impact on your organization, but begin to develop some important collaborative skills that are often in short supply.

Ron Ashkenas' blog post on *Harvard Business Review*
https://hbr.org/2015/04/theres-a-difference-between-cooperation-and-collaboration