

SIX INGREDIENTS FOR COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Thomas Kayser

Regardless of your managerial level, I'm sure you have seen and received a number of "call to action" memos over the years on a host of critical topics. Exhibit 1 is an example, representing a serious business challenge from the CEO. The request cuts right to the heart of the competitiveness of the enterprise, and results will be tracked and monitored by the senior team. The message is authentic and blame-free; the tone is motivating. Accountabilities are laid out. It stresses a shared business goal bigger than any single person or department. The fires of commitment are stoked by noting that that success in meeting the challenge will be a huge enabler of competitive strength and that everyone benefits from a stronger company. It is a call aimed at unleashing the collaborative genius of everyone because sound ideas and insights to simplifying the business are anywhere and everywhere. People are expected to act with mutual trust and integrity. The ingredients for collaborative action have been set in place.

No one doubts the need for—or the rationale behind—this call for help, yet its chances of success are poor. When these kinds of initiatives do filter down in a traditional command-and-control organization—where the top tells the middle what to demand from the bottom—all too often too many managers become paralyzed in their attempt to carry out the tasks that need to be done, and little or nothing happens. Why is this so?

Collaboration Knowledge and Skills Are at a Premium

My 30 years of experience at Xerox, leading and facilitating every possible type of organization effectiveness intervention, have led me to a single conclusion, and my debates with colleagues both inside and outside Xerox, my interaction with clients as part of my current consulting practice, and my review of the business literature all validate that conclusion time after

MEMORANDUM

To: My Senior Executive Team & All Departmental Sr. Team Members

From: Chief Executive Officer

Subject: Business Simplification

Date: February 16, 2011

My direct reports and I recently held the first in a series of Strategy Alignment Workshops.

The first workshop was extremely well received and I believe it's fair to say that the participants supported and understood the strategy. Without a doubt the biggest issue raised—one that surfaced in every subgroup in one way or another—was around the theme of business simplification. It's a huge barrier, and it is a nonnegotiable requirement that we address it.

- Our internal complexity makes it very difficult for our customers to deal with us. They tell us repeatedly, and in no uncertain terms, that they love our offerings but can't deal with our bureaucracy. We all have war stories to document just how bad this has become over the years.
- Our employees are frustrated as well. They want to do the right thing—for the customer and for our company—but our maze of process strangulation, complexity, and layers of decision makers get in the way.
- We waste precious resources on processes that have outlived their value—things we continue to do even long after anyone can explain why we do them.
- Finally, despite our well-intentioned rhetoric around delegation, we're requiring too many decisions to be escalated. We've created useless bureaucracy instead of setting clear parameters and then helping our people collaborate and do what they know is right.

The real tragedy in all of this is that we are doing it to ourselves. Competition doesn't create our bureaucracy. Customers don't ask for complexity. Our employees yearn for simplicity. In this case, Pogo had it right: "We have met the enemy and they are us."

Fortunately, we have the power to change. We all need to reemphasize and draw upon our culture of collaboration to champion simplification:

- To look for ways to remove complexity
- To empower our people to make more decisions
- To challenge "the way we've always done it"
- To push back on reports and forms and processes that "they" want
- And to refuse to do dumb things

No one of us can do this alone; collaboratively, however, we can and we must. We need to work together to dramatically simplify the way we conduct business. Everyone receiving this memo recognizes the problem. Every one of us is responsible for adding to the problem, either through active participation or through benign neglect. Yet none of us has felt accountable. Now, to be clear, the ultimate accountability for successful results resides with me and my senior executive team, but each of you down the line are equally accountable to your leaders for project results you agree to deliver.

So my expectation is that you will address this opportunity with your teams and collaboratively discuss, identify, and commit to ripping out the red tape that resides within your area of control. For areas outside of your control, collaborate with your value chain partners to ensure all opportunities are realized. We must address simplification—collaboratively, decisively, quickly, and continuously. If we don't, complexity will eat us alive; if we do, simplification will become a huge enabler of competitive strength in our markets and we will all benefit from that success.

Sincerely,

CEO

EXHIBIT 1. MEMO FROM THE CEO

Calls to action fall flat for lack of the necessary mental maps.

time. Calls to action like the one presented here fall flat because new and experienced managers alike lack the necessary mental maps. People have neither the keen understanding nor the skills to execute the six ingredients needed to be a collaborative leader capable of building collaborative partnerships within and across work teams.

New managers most often do not have this know-how simply because of their managerial inexperience. Many experienced managers, on the other hand, lack collaborative skills and insights because they grew up in centralized, rigid, status-oriented firms where large merit increases, promotions, bonuses, lavish offices, and other forms of reward and recognition went to those managers who were best at dictating and directing. In those order-giving organizations, nurturing collaboration and teamwork was not a highly valued managerial behavior. Instead, it was looked upon as being soft and weak, as well as a sure-fire career killer, and so skill development in building and facilitating collaborative partnerships was quashed.

Figuring out ways to handle critical, organization-wide projects like that business simplification initiative is a huge task requiring the collaborative genius of your entire organization. So are developing ways to do things right the first time, every time; creating products and services that delight your customers and distress your competitors; forming and implementing strategies and structures to capture and hold market

share; and studying and reconfiguring work processes to slice costs and improve quality. Whether your establishment is in the public sector or the private sector, is a producer of goods or of services, or is for-profit or nonprofit—a culture of collaboration up, down, sideways, and diagonally within and across every corner of your organization is mandatory for success in today’s global marketplace. You cannot afford to have it any other way.

What Makes a World-Class Organization Tick? Collaboration!

The literal, sterile definition of *collaboration* is “to co-labor; to labor together.” But that definition is too simple. Over time, through many debates and discussions, I’ve evolved the following definition, which has proven quite practical in my work with teams and organizations:

Collaboration is a joint effort between two or more people, free from hidden agendas, to produce an output in response to a common goal or shared priority. Often this output is greater than what any of the individuals could have produced working alone.

Collaboration works best when relationships are treated as genuine partnerships. That is, all parties

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Collaboration doesn't just happen.

are involved in creating superior new value together rather than merely performing one-for-one exchanges whereby a person simply gets something back for what is put in. In a true collaborative partnership, obligations are broadly distributed, the possibilities for cooperation are extensive, understanding and solidarity grows among the collaborative partners, communication is frequent and intensive, and the interpersonal context is rich.

Six Ingredients Required for Collaborative Partnership

As part of my work at Xerox I conducted hundreds and hundreds of team building sessions involving several thousand managers, from executives down to first-line managers. While the problems and the desired outcomes for each session were different, many times the issue of intra- or interteam collaboration came up for processing.

When that was the case, I'd begin the team's self-discovery and analysis by first reviewing the definition of collaboration shown earlier. Then I'd ask, "Given our definition, what ingredients are essential for collaboration to grow and flourish within or across teams?" As participants shared their viewpoints round-robin style, I wrote them on flip charts and then we combined them into themes. While it is just the first step in working the problem, it oriented the team to a bigger picture—*collaboration doesn't just happen; "the bed has to be cultivated before the flowers can grow."*

Over time some clear-cut themes began to emerge; these were then shared with successive teams to consider and to process along with their own perspectives. Eventually, six solid collaborative ingredients evolved, and they have stood the test of time in my work. The conceptual model depicted in Figure 1 highlights and integrates the six ingredients necessary for building collaborative partnerships in work teams, in interdisciplinary project teams, and between people and teams in different units. This model demonstrates how the "bed is made" for collaboration to flourish.

I've broken the six ingredients into two natural groups of three to make the model easier to understand: "Structural Ingredients" and "Behavioral Ingredients." The "Structural Ingredients" are the mechanics of collaboration and need to be planned and orchestrated to ensure they are in place. The "Behavioral Ingredients" represent the relationship values all participants need to bring to the task for successful collaboration to occur.

Notice how the ingredients within and across both categories are shown as being multiplicative, not additive. This signifies the synergistic effect of collaborative power. Remove any one of the dimensions and the multiplier effect is drastically reduced. All six ingredients bolster one another to produce high-powered collaborative partnerships.

Examining each of the ingredients in more detail will demonstrate why all six are fundamental to successful collaborative partnerships in organizations.

The Three Structural Ingredients

- Shared goals
- Interdependence and complementary skills
- Accountability

Shared Goals

For collaboration to take root, any project's goals (or goal) must be seen as important by the collaborative

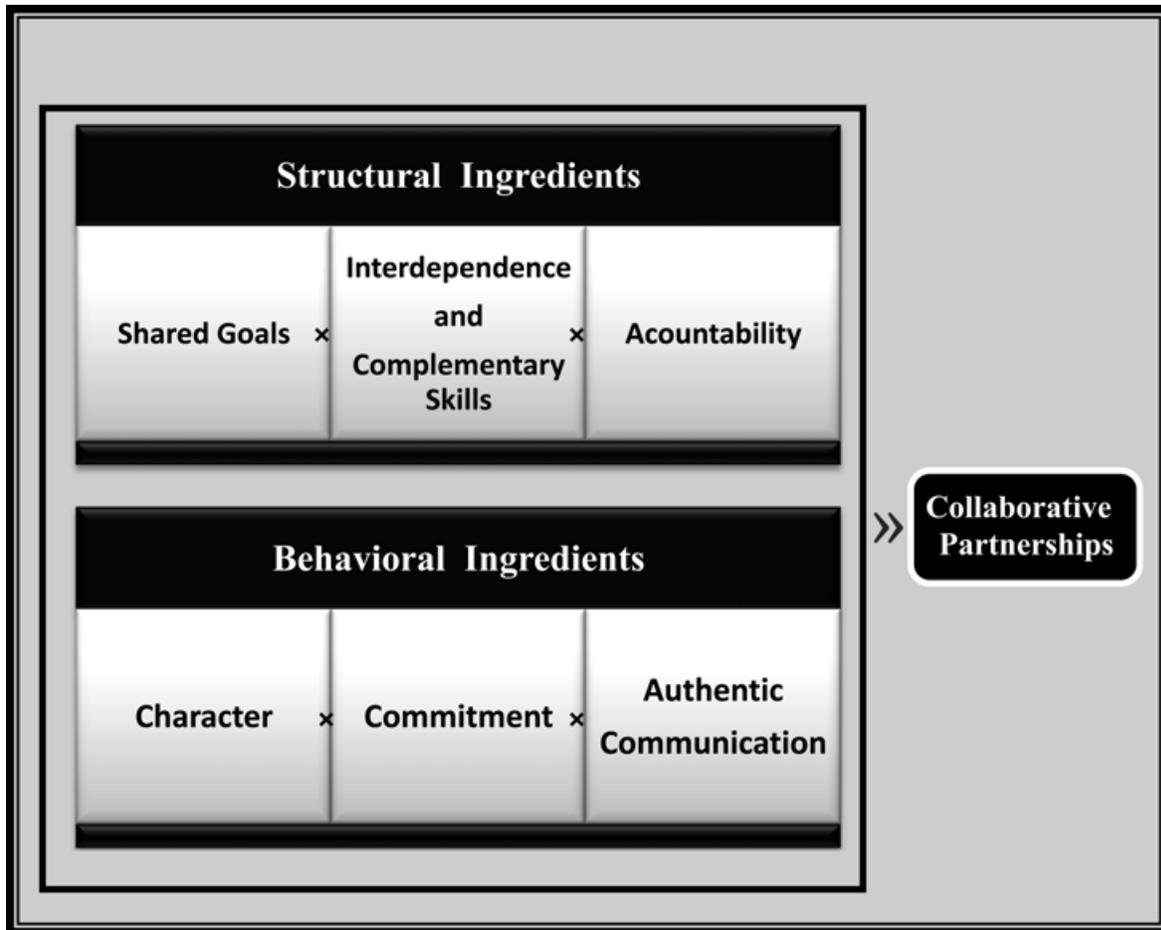


FIGURE 1. SIX INGREDIENTS FOR COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS

partners. Therefore, as a leader trying to set up a collaborative partnership, you not only need to be sure shared goals exist but that they align with some personal desire or work objective of each partner. Shared goals not only define what *we* are trying to do together, they also create purpose and meaning for the larger cause—which in the current example is business simplification. They energize the partners intellectually and emotionally to buy in to the principle: “This team’s success is my success and my success is this team’s success.”

Using common language, data, symbols, storytelling, and metaphors you can bring clarity and understanding to the goals and evoke positive emotion for them. The articulated shared goals become a rallying cry for all partners: “We are a key part of something bigger.”

Interdependence and Complementary Skills

Interdependence and complementary skills go hand-in-hand. Without both actively in place, collaboration grinds to a halt. Independent big egos coupled with redundant skills leads to either unresolved conflict or stalemate as people, worried about their role in the endeavor, fight to maintain their position and self-esteem. As many organizations know only too well from experience, this is not a successful formula for improving the business, or serving customers, clients, or the citizenry.

Regarding *interdependence*, collaborative partners require each other’s knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences to achieve the task or project’s shared goals. Shared goals motivate everyone to work toward success for the project; people realize that no team-

mate can accomplish alone what the partnership can accomplish together.

Likewise *complementary contributions* are a necessity to achieving the shared goals. Each collaborative partner is considered an asset because each brings something different to contribute to the relationship. Their motives for entering the relationship are positive: to pursue an opportunity that will improve the larger business—not negative: to pursue a selfish goal at the expense of the larger business or that undermines the larger business.

Accountability

No group of individuals can ever become a team of collaborative partners until they unequivocally embrace the dimension of accountability for the results they collectively produce. This is a demanding test because accountability serves as an invisible structural link tying every partner to every other. Accountability binds them as one, advances commitment, puts a premium on individual trustworthiness, and slams the door on future back-pedaling or “cover your butt” excuse making should things get sticky or failure be a possibility.

Accountability in a collaborative partnership arises from the time and energy teammates spend in vigorous debate and discussion devoted to understanding and taking ownership of the shared goals and in figuring out how best to accomplish them together.

In a collaborative team, the partners hold themselves accountable for maximizing their individual contributions *and* for multiplying those individual contributions into a synergistic output greater than could be produced working as an additive, compliant group.

The leader of a collaborative team does not have to drive and push for results. Instead, the collaborative leader makes sure the team is perking along at the highest level by acting as a facilitator, helper, barrier buster, and cheerleader. Accountability rests with all the teammates *and the leader is considered a vital teammate with important complementary knowledge and skills*. In collaborative partnerships, “We all are in this

together; we all hold ourselves accountable, as a team, for our results.”

The Three Behavioral Ingredients

- Character
- Commitment
- Authentic communications

Character

Character, or integrity, is the most critical of the behavioral elements. And if you think about it, how could collaborative partnerships ever be formed and operate in a reliable manner without all people involved being of high character? Short answer, they can't. Character is a key to building and sustaining mutual trust, and mutual trust, in turn, is *the behavioral core* of collaboration with no strings attached.

The late UCLA basketball coach John Wooden always urged, “Be more concerned with finding the right way than having it your way.” Yes, character is front and center relative to collaboration and it's more than just mouthing the right words. It means acting toward each other in honorable ways that justify and enhance team-wide mutual trust; it means holding deep-seated values about the power of collaboration that are above reproach, and it means living those ideals by “checking your ego and selfish interests at the door” to be an essential part of a relationship striving together to expand 10 + 10 from equaling 20 to 10 x 10, equaling 100 or more!

Commitment

Commitment builds from each person being counted on to be an active partner in the experience of creating something of value together. Commitment means teammates are willing to obligate themselves to a truly engaging purpose, larger than just personal self-interest. They are willing to give of themselves to achieve a common project goal or to help the collective enterprise succeed. When that internal fire burns, partners easily demonstrate their commitment to the collaborative relationship by investing in each other in pursuit of *our* shared goals. They invest in three ways—often at great personal sacrifice—for the greater good.

Partners *invest tangibly* by devoting time, money, people, facilities, and other resources to the relationship. They *invest intellectually* by freely sharing knowledge and information at their disposal as well as their ideas and their considered perspectives. They *invest emotionally* by caring for and about each other as human beings, by being both teachers and leaders, by “having each other’s backs,” by being trustworthy.

Authentic Communications

Authentic communications are open, honest, nonjudgmental, and nonevaluative; they attack issues and not people. Collaborative partners understand that messengers who bring bad news are *not* shot, because shooting the messenger stifles the free-flowing communications that must be cultivated in any ongoing collaborative relationship. Collaborative partners routinely propose and build on ideas; they transparently seek and share information; they listen closely to each other; they test for understanding; they use constructive disagreement and fruitful friction to avoid groupthink, conformity, and compromise.

Authentic communications must be accepted as a non-negotiable rule within collaborative partnerships, because this is the surest way to show respect for each other, to prove no single person claims possession of all the answers, and to minimize the promotion of self-interests.

In Closing

Collaboration is not a pipe dream; it is real; it is a difference maker in terms business effectiveness. However, extolling its virtues and urging executives, managers, professionals, and individual contributors to be more collaborative won’t cut it. It takes planning and facilitative leadership to bring everything together and make collaboration operate at its full potential.

The garden bed for superior collaboration must be prepared first. That means anyone assigned leadership for a cross-disciplinary project or desiring to upgrade task

Collaboration is not a pipe dream.

collaboration within a work team has some substantial work to do.

The leader first must contemplate and design the *structural elements* of collaborative partnerships—shared goals, interdependence and complementary skills, and accountability—to be certain they reinforce each other and will act as the engine driving the collaborative effort.

Then, within the planned structure, the leader must think long and hard about the *behavioral side*, that is, “Who can contribute here.” Bringing people on board who fulfill the behavioral requirements by having the necessary character, commitment to the shared goals, and the authentic communication skills to be worthy collaborative partners is crucial. While many may be considered, it’s best to choose the smallest number of people “with the right stuff” needed to achieve the shared goals.

With the collaborative bed fully cultivated, the leader then has to move into a leadership role grounded in being a facilitator and not a commander and controller. The solutions necessary to achieving the shared goals lie within the team members. Therefore, the leader’s task as a facilitative leader is to promote, unleash, and leverage the wisdom, innovation, and creativity each teammate brings to the collaborative partnership.

The six ingredients model is highly instructive because it clarifies the underpinnings of collaborative partnership. It shows all the ingredients as interlaced, yielding a considerable multiplier effect that produces the synergy inherent in genuine collaborative partnerships.



Thomas Kayser is author of two new books: “Building Team Power: How to Unleash the Collaborative Genius of Teams for Increased Engagement, Productivity, and Results” (from which this article was excerpted), and “Mining Group Gold: How to Cash In on the Collaborative Brain Power of a Team for Innovation and Results.” Recently retired from the Xerox Corporation after 30 years of service, Kayser is an expert in organizational behavior and change, group facilitation, team-building design and facilitation, and executive coaching. At Xerox, he was intimately involved in implementing and refining the worldwide Total Quality effort that led to Xerox winning the esteemed Malcolm Baldrige Award. Contact him at kayser1@roadrunner.com.