

‘Socrates Would Have Found Little Truth in Email.’

By: Eric Lai

Q&A With Collaboration Guru Evan Rosen

Evan Rosen is a business strategy consultant and author of *The Bounty Effect: 7 Steps to The Culture of Collaboration*® and *The Culture of Collaboration: Maximizing Time, Talent and Tools to Create Value in the Global Economy*. He writes for major business publications as well as *The Culture of Collaboration*® blog.



How do most companies collaborate today?

Many companies are falling short in creating value because they're not collaborating effectively—and here's why.

The structure of most organizations is much the same as it was during the industrial age. Back then, command and control seemed to make more sense, because barriers of time and distance were significant. Command-and-control structure and culture emphasizes formality, hierarchy, silos, and rewarding people for internally competing. In the industrial age, it seemed more efficient to send down orders from headquarters and pay a few people to think and pay everybody else to carry out orders.

Now we're in the information age, and technology has made time and distance barriers far less significant. We have the technological ability to engage one another spontaneously regardless of level, role, or region. We can create far greater value by coming together in concert than by sending work down the line or sending requests for decisions up the line. Yet, the structure of most organizations still reinforces command and control. People internally compete. They hoard ideas and information. The person with the biggest title runs meetings and makes decisions. So leaders forget to tap the expertise and insights of front-line people, because getting broad input into decisions and spontaneously engaging people regardless of level, role, or region is not yet part of the organizational structure and culture.

Many companies pay lip service to embracing collaboration because 'collaboration' has become a buzzword. The reality is that many companies have pockets of collaborative activity, but their overall structures and cultures remain command and control.

Photo: Cindy Chew

THE NEW WAY WE ...

... COLLABORATE

... DO MEDICINE

... PROVIDE CUSTOMER SERVICE

... IMPROVE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

... DELIVER EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

What are the disadvantages of a command-and-control culture?

The disadvantages of command-and-control structure and culture are that opportunities to maximize value are lost. Unlike workers in the industrial age, every team member is a knowledge worker in the information age. Everybody has something to contribute in making decisions and improving processes, products, and services. Technology advances have made contributing collaboratively much easier. And in today's complex global economy and marketplace, it's all hands on deck.

I'll give you an example of how industrial age command-and-control structure manifests itself in organizations. The type of organization chart most organizations use is based on one that stemmed from the growth of railroads in the mid-19th century. The problem with the traditional org chart is that it tells us not only who reports to whom, but often also who can communicate with whom. The linear nature of the org chart creates silos. Looking at the org chart, we can even see the silos. And silos prevent organizations from maximizing technology, including unified communications [UC]—and they short-circuit collaboration and inhibit value creation.

The traditional org chart is a remnant of industrial age command and control that is obsolete in the information age. In *The Bounty Effect*, I discuss replacing the traditional org chart with a new kind of org chart that emphasizes interrelationships and interdependency. Replacing the org chart is one element in adopting a collaborative structure and culture.

How much of the culture is determined by the collaboration tools that companies use?

Tools and technologies extend and enhance collaboration, but they rarely create collaboration without the right structure and culture. Let's take UC as an example. UC lets team members connect spontaneously through video, voice, and instant messaging. These capabilities are less effective in a culture that embraces formality and hierarchy and in which team members are expected to go through channels. In contrast, UC can create incredible value when the organizational culture and structure encourage team members to engage one another, make decisions together, and improve processes, products, and services in concert regardless of level, role, or region.

What are the harmful effects to a company that still relies heavily on email for communication and collaboration?

The Greek philosopher Socrates believed that the way to truth is through dialogue. Socrates rejected writing because it meant—quite literally in ancient Athens—that ideas were set in stone or wax and that the process of developing those ideas was dead. Email is the modern equivalent of setting ideas in stone. If given the choice, Socrates would have found a lot more truth in using real-time tools rather than email.

Email is essentially an updated version of the old memorandum. In command-and-control organizations, people send an email and wait for a response. An email is often a report or a request for a decision. There is no real-time dialogue in email, so Socrates would have found little truth in email.

One form of the truth for companies making decisions today is accurate information. And accurate information is dynamic rather than set in stone. As market forces shift—sometimes hour to hour—what can be considered accurate information also shifts. Therefore, organizations adopting a collaborative structure favor real-time collaboration over the pass-along approach to work and interaction. They require real-time dialogue because it reaches the truth faster and allows better, faster decisions.

Tech firms are often early adopters of new forms of collaboration technology. How much more collaborative are they?

It depends on the structure and culture of each technology firm. Some companies believe that by using social media, they're automatically more collaborative. I define collaboration as working together to create value while sharing virtual or physical space. And it's quite possible to use collaborative tools without creating any value.

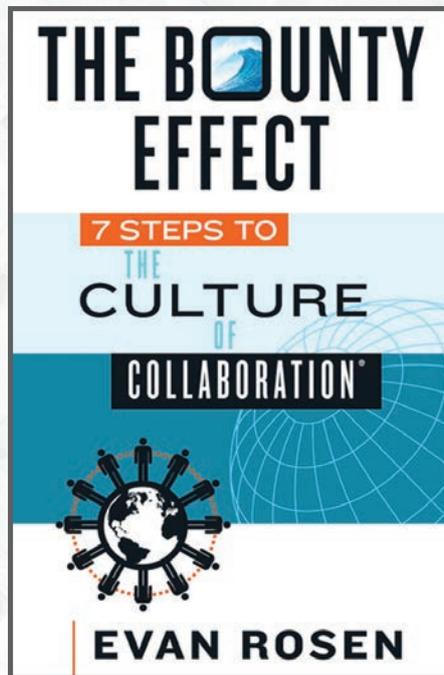
Technology companies are pretty good at adopting technology. But many of them face the same problem confronting companies in other industries: Their organizational structure prevents them from using technology to maximize collaborative potential. When it comes to collaboration, the most evolved organizations are those that adopt collaborative structure and culture—and then fit collaborative tools into work styles.

What is the major shift that you see happening today, and why is it happening?

Today's marketplace and economy are too complex to go it alone. Most businesses face exigent circumstances, which are those requiring immediate action. These include disruptive market forces, new competitors, regional slowdowns, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and boom-and-bust cycles. Exigent circumstances are opportunities to replace obsolete organizational structures and cultures designed for the industrial age with infinitely more valuable information age organizational structures based on collaboration.

You may be familiar with *Mutiny on the Bounty*; maybe you've read the book or watched one of the three movies, all of which are based on a true story. The mutiny was an exigent circumstance that forced Captain William Bligh to change the structure and culture of his organization from command and control to collaborative. Changing the structure and culture was essential to surviving.

This 'Bounty Effect' provides an opportunity for every organization. In today's complex global economy and marketplace, organizations must adopt collaborative structures and cultures to survive and thrive.



In your book *The Bounty Effect*, you outline seven steps to create a culture of collaboration. What are they?

The seven steps are 'Plan, People, Principles, Practices, Processes, Planet, and Payoff.'

Which steps are most crucial? Which are most often overlooked?

The most crucial steps are Principles, Practices, and Processes; in my book I refer to these as the 'core change zone,' where much of the structural shift occurs. Principles give rise to practices that, in turn, lead to processes.

As far as which steps companies overlook most often, I would have to say all of them.

Which companies are doing this transformation well?

Several companies are doing aspects of collaboration well. *The Bounty Effect* includes profiles of how some organizations—including Boeing, Ford

Motor Company, Patagonia, and others—have adopted key elements of collaborative structure and culture.

For example, Boeing has broken down barriers so that engineers and production workers can collaborate. Ford collaborates with competitors. Patagonia collaborates with suppliers to provide transparency for customers. But every company has the same challenge: to adopt an entirely collaborative structure and culture.

How should the new collaboration technologies best be applied?

Video is crucial to extending and enhancing collaboration. Almost every organization I've encountered that is evolving from a collaboration standpoint has integrated video conferencing and telepresence into work styles. It's one thing to use video conferencing for meetings—there's nothing particularly collaborative about that. It's another thing entirely to integrate video and UC into the way people work so that they're comfortable connecting spontaneously to innovate processes and collaboratively create products and services. [A]

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