TOOLS AREN'T EVERYTHING
Author Evan Rosen says a culture of collaboration is a bigger deal than software.

Collaborating Takes More than Technology

A business consultant and author says working together can be a tough sell in many companies.

For proof that workplace collaboration is a tough problem to solve, check out the scores of books on the subject. Near the top of that list is *The Culture of Collaboration*, by Evan Rosen, a San Francisco-based consultant who began focusing on the subject after beginning his career in executive communications.

Rosen says he came into the collaboration issue from something of a sideways angle. He was trying to help executives get their message across, but in doing so, he discovered that they often didn't agree on the same message from one office to the next. He realized, the problem wasn't simply articulating the message, the problem was a lack of collaboration. And the reason for its absence, he discovered, usually involved the culture of the company. American society, says Rosen, encourages individualism and a star system, which inhibits the very collaboration that he maintains can make companies more effective. He explained why to technology journalist Lee Gomes.

TR: **What is the main idea underlying your perspective on collaboration?**

Rosen: Collaboration means different things to different people. When some people refer to collaboration, they're talking about technology. And that's part of the problem. Companies think that if they introduce certain technologies, that they're collaborating. But a central point in my book is that tools and technologies never create collaboration. Culture creates collaboration.

That's a interesting point, but what do you mean by that, exactly?

Organizational culture stems from our collective culture. And our collective culture in the United States is star-oriented. We read and hear about "star athletes," "star chefs" …

the list goes on. And it's a myth. Because all of these so-called stars need help from others to achieve. Star culture is the antithesis of "collaborative culture." In a star culture, the best people supposedly rise to the top in a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest fashion. Some companies regularly eliminate the bottom 5 percent of the workforce. They rank them, pitting people against each other.

But there are counterexamples, like Apple. It seems the opposite of everything you're describing—very hierarchical, with people almost fearful of the guy at the top. Yet it is a huge success.

Well, there are always examples of companies that are successful even though they're command-and-control oriented. But the question I always ask is, "How much more successful would they be if they were truly collaborative?"

But is that something you can truly find the answer to? How would you know?

You can look at examples. Collaboration is about creating value, because if we're not creating value, what's the point? When you start looking at shaving months off product development cycles—in everything from automobile manufacturing to aerospace to animation—that is real, measurable value. And that is what collaboration can deliver.
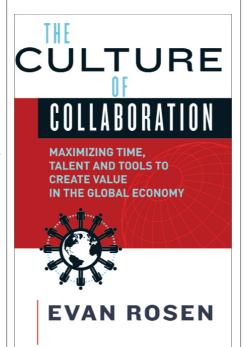
What empirical evidence is there that companies that collaborate well do better than companies that don't? The examples always seem anecdotal.

Scoring collaboration is something I am currently working on. And you're right, most of what we are dealing with is anecdotal. But we are starting to put a framework around it.

What would be a quick test someone could use to determine whether their company's culture was sufficiently collaborative or not?

If the executives are cloistered in mahogany-lined offices, and everybody else is in a cubicle, that's a clue. But perhaps even more important would be the recognition and rewards system of the company. Are they recognizing and rewarding people for internally competitive, command-and-control behavior? Or are they recognizing and rewarding people for collaborative behavior?

THE CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

MAXIMIZING TIME, TALENT AND TOOLS TO CREATE VALUE IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

EVAN ROSEN

"When I was in school, collaborating on homework was called 'cheating.' Maybe we need to take a look at how we're conditioning people to behave."

If this is as clear as you describe, why wouldn't companies see it for themselves?

The problem is that for years we have been in a society that has reinforced command-and-control. And that's the way organizations have been operating: Paying a few people to think, and paying everyone else to carry out orders.

But we've learned that just doesn't work any more. Now it's "all hands on deck." There is a realization that we need to come together to make decisions and solve problems and even develop products, regardless of level, role, or region.

But what about the approach where a strong leader sets a goal and says, "Let's all march toward that"?

There needs to be someone at the top who people can look up to as a leader. But the approach to leadership doesn't need to be command-and-control to be effective.

In fact, when people within an organization are able to participate in decisions, a company can create far greater value.

So where does this anticollaboration ethos come from?

We can't ignore our educational system. When I was in school, collaborating on homework was called "cheating." The way we operate in the university setting, and in a corporate setting, is in many ways an outgrowth of our education system.

Maybe we need to take another look at how we're conditioning people to behave later in life. Because if everything is being graded on a curve, and we are competing with everyone around us, how are we ever going to be able to effectively collaborate in an organization?

Command-and-control might not be pretty, but it gets things done. Couldn't an overemphasis on collaboration paralyze an organization?

What paralyzes an organization is when management compromises value by failing to tap ideas, expertise, and assets. What also paralyzes an organization is when requests for decisions languish in in-boxes rather than hashing out issues spontaneously. Paying a few people to think and paying everybody else to carry out orders creates far less value than breaking down barriers among silos and enabling people to engage each other spontaneously. **BI**