Can Collaboration Be Forced?

According to author Evan Rosen, companies may have to change how they operate to encourage employees to work together.

Collaboration is not a new concept, but social media's increasing acceptance in the workplace has ignited a fire around the practice. Some talent leaders are actively trying to manufacture collaborative situations. But is it always possible to force the issue?

According to Evan Rosen, author of "The Bounty Effect: 7 Steps to the Culture of Collaboration" and "The Culture of Collaboration," and executive director of strategy group the Culture of Collaboration Institute, a company can indeed promote collaboration, but it may require changing the organizational structure.

Can collaboration be forced? What if you have some employees who just don't want to do it?

When you force people to do something, you get a minimal result. An optimal result comes when people are inspired to do something without being forced. Part of collaboration is having the same goals. Forcing people to collaborate is a disconnect because forcing is trying to use a command-and-control message to achieve the opposite of command and control — collaboration.

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Command and control defines Industrial Age organizational structures, which are obsolete in the information age. Remnants of these include things like organization charts, performance reviews and traditional meetings. These remnants reinforce unnecessary hierarchy, internal competition and fear, all of which compromise collaboration. Rather than try and force people to collaborate, which defeats the purpose, the most effective way to transition an organization from Industrial Age command and control to information age collaborative is to change the structure. When you change the structure, the culture shifts.

What would you recommend to a leader trying to change a company to promote collaboration?

First, it's necessary to partner and collaborate with other functions. Too often functions, whether it's human resources, information technology or communications, are sort of stuck in their own silos. It's necessary to break out beyond those silos and interact. Trust is also important. Why would you trust your colleague and share your ideas with him or her if that colleague may steal your ideas so he or she can get promoted over you? Rather than reinforcing a star-oriented, internally competitive culture, recognition and reward systems need to reward collaborative behavior.

One aspect of this process is replacing performance reviews with results previews. Annual performance reviews are inefficient, and they distract the organization. Team members spend ridiculous time preparing for them to justify their jobs and existence. Whoever is conducting reviews wastes time armchair quarterbacking. Too often these reviews negatively reinforce people. You should have done this, you should have done that over the last year, and therefore we can only give you a 2 percent raise. A do-over is impossible because the year is over. Annual performance reviews are like grading on a curve. There's a limited pot for raises. Therefore, a certain number of people must be rated A, B and C. Are people likely to work together and share information and ideas to create value for the organization when they're internally competing? They're more likely to develop sharp elbows.

Business operates in real time in an information age. Doing performance reviews at the end of the year is a remnant of that Industrial Age command and control structure. We need to replace annual performance reviews with results previews. What are you as a team member going to achieve collaboratively now, this week or over the next 30 days, and how can I as a leader help you and your colleagues achieve common goals? We're positively reinforcing people, helping them create value and tapping into their desire to collaborate and contrib-

ute, and rewarding them for collaborating so that team members thrive and so does the business.

What else should the talent leader do to change that command-and-control structure?

In the workplace we should constantly be working together to create value. It used to be that companies could make a decent buck by just telling people what to do. A few people were paid to do the thinking and everybody else was paid to carry out orders. But with globalization, increased competition and the boom and bust cycles, companies are realizing that it's all hands on deck.

In simpler times, scientists and adventurers invented things like vaccines and investments in laboratories. Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877. The work occurred entirely in Edison's laboratory in New Jersey. When Apple developed the iPod, multiple teams working from multiple companies in multiple countries collaborated. In this environment, the organizational structure must ensure that everybody has access to the same data and information and provides input into how business is conducted. We need to come together on the fly to make decisions, solve problems and develop products regardless of level, role or region.

Are there scenarios where it may not make sense to collaborate? How do you identify them?

The kind of scenario that may require solitary work is if a team member is learning basic skills and studying or they're improving such skills as learning a software program, reading to get background information or context, or learning a foreign language. Private time is necessary; these skills are to help the organization collaborate more effectively and create greater value. Companies that have redesigned the physical workplace environment for collaboration blend private areas with collaborative spaces.

What are some of the biggest barriers or misconceptions about collaboration?

A big misconception is that sometimes it seems that people are the problem, but the real problem is the organizational structure, because when people are in a new structure, their behavior is more likely to change. Too often I've encountered well-intentioned change agents who overemphasize generational differences and in so doing reinforce fear and internal competition, which short circuits collaboration. It's true that younger team members grew up using certain tools, so they have some elements of tool use baked into their behavior. But it takes more than tools to collaborate, and it's quite possible to use social media without creating any value. More evolved organizations de-emphasize any generational divide by focusing instead on collaborating across generations, across functions, across levels, across regions to create greater value.

When collaboration is the goal, what is the opportunity for talent leaders?

Changing the structure of an organization from Industrial Age command and control to information age collaborative presents an incredible opportunity for talent leaders, because organizational structure and culture are core competencies of talent leaders. Human resources can partner with communications and information technology to break down barriers among levels, functions and regions. Talent leaders shift the culture from information hoarding and internal competition to information sharing and collaboration.

What are some benefits of collaboration that may not be well-known?

A key benefit of collaboration is reducing product cycle time, and that can be measured. If an organization can bring people together, break down functions among levels and regions to shorten product development time, that's real money. I was at the BMW design center in Munich when BMW was bringing the BMW X5 to market. In the X5 project, BMW used what was then a revolutionary way to produce this car. They called it telecooperation, but it was essentially collaboration. BMW had a mirror organization in a plant in South Carolina. Every job function, every person had a counterpart in Munich. They were able to get more time out of the day in producing and developing the X5 because of the time differences with people who had counterparts. They were able to reduce product development time on that vehicle from 60 to 35 months. I realized that approach was going to have a huge impact, or potentially could, for all different kinds of industries and organizations. And collaboration was at the heart of it.

Set the stage so that collaboration can flourish. Exigent circumstances provide opportunities for organizations to set the stage by changing the structure. We face many exigent circumstances these days: disruptive market forces, economic downturns, regional slowdowns, terrorist attacks, new competitors and natural disasters.

Boeing saw an opportunity to change the structure after a 6.8 magnitude earthquake hit Renton, Wash. [in 2001]. The building housing 1,400 737 engineers was nearly flattened. Boeing moved the engineers to vacant space in the 737 production plant. Traditionally the plant was a no-go zone for engineers, who embraced their white collar status. With input from team members, Boeing and its design partner Steelcase's engineers now work in open spaces along the 737 plant's mezzanine. Mechanics, engineers, leaders and production team members interact frequently and spontaneously on this wide boardwalk adjacent to workspaces on the mezzanine. Not only has Boeing redesigned the physical workspace, the company has redesigned relationships by breaking down barriers between engineers and manufacturing people. Did Boeing force collaboration among engineers and 737 production people? No. Boeing set the stage so collaboration could take hold. TM