

Can Collaboration Be Overdone?

There clearly has been a shift in society from a time of “rugged individualism” to a belief that the “whole is greater than the sum of the parts”.

More plainly put, as a society, and in business, we once placed a premium on being able to do something ourselves. Inventors wanted sole credit for their creations. Over time - particularly in the later part of the 20th century - a greater emphasis began to be placed on teams and groups.

The success of efforts like “continuous improvement” and “total quality” relied on the perspective and contribution of every member of a work team or on an assembly line.

As society or individual organizations try to shift from an individual to a group approach, not everyone has the skills to be an effective team member. So, the business world often turns to the educational system to better prepare their future employees to be ready to work as part of a team.

I personally saw this with my sons, particularly as they were going through college. Whereas in the past, students had to work independently to complete a project, now projects have become team-based. Team members must learn how to organize the workload, bring the quiet members into the conversation, make decisions effectively and hold people accountable.

So, this group/team experience worked its way through the educational system and up into the business world. The problem with the pendulum swinging from individualism to collaboration is that sometimes things go too far in the new direction. If I am a hammer I see every situation as a nail. The parallel is that every situation in the business world requires a group or team to solve or fix it collaboratively.

But not every situation is a nail that requires a hammer. First, we (i.e. the team or group) need to ensure we are using the same definition to describe a situation, then determine if we can further define it. After that, we must determine how good we are in this area. This will help us identify where we will likely excel and where we may struggle.

According to Google, “collaborating” is defined as the act of working with someone to produce or create something. E·A·S·I·Consult® along with Dr. Warner Burke at Columbia University, has developed a test to measure learning agility, which is the ability to engage in learning behaviors that allow you to reframe situations quickly and to respond.

There are nine different dimensions, or ways, someone demonstrates learning agility, according to Burke. One of those ways is through collaboration. Collaboration or **collaborating, according to Burke means, “finding ways to work with others that generate unique opportunities for learning”**.

His definition of collaborating is very similar to Google’s, although Google suggests that something is being produced or created, while the focus of Burke’s definition is learning itself. I would suggest you could be learning while you are producing. However, production of something does not guarantee personal learning. You may or may not learn as you produce or create. **Burke says if you can’t describe what you learned then you didn’t learn anything.**

I said earlier that collaboration or collaborating is a broad concept. Warner Burke has identified four components of the concept:

- Being able to leverage the skills, knowledge and talent of others
- Being able to work with colleagues from different backgrounds and job functions to share perspectives
- Being able to work with people in other parts of the organization
- Being able to seek a variety of stakeholders for their point of view

The value of a tool like the Burke Learning Agility Inventory® (Burke LAI®) is that it can allow a team to determine the aspects of collaborating at which they are skilled and that will come easily as they work together, and which areas in which they will struggle.

In addition, to the specifics on collaborating, the Burke LAI will also give a team information about the other eight areas of learning agility that will also affect their ability to collaborate. This includes dimensions like interpersonal risk-taking, feedback-seeking and flexibility.

So, back to my original question - can collaborating be overdone? Yes, sometimes.

Rather than assuming that if something involves a group of people, it should be a collaboration, you need to decide whether collaborating is appropriate. *Does this situation require you to produce or create something? **Using Burke’s definition, does the situation require you to engage in learning behaviors that allow you to reframe situations quickly to respond?*** If the answer to one or both of these questions is yes, then you may want to use **the Burke LAI to further determine the group’s collaborating strengths and those areas** of collaboration they will need to develop. Another consideration is that effective collaboration requires group process skills. Group dynamics play an important role in the success of

collaborative work. For this reason, you may need to find a resource to help serve as a professional facilitator as the group is trying to build collaboration skills.

About the Author

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