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WHITEPAPER

A guide to creating collaborative working cultures

Collaboration drives innovation and helps increase productivity. So, what's the secret to building environments in which collaboration can flourish? Our whitepaper provides some practical tips.



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Gail Power - Head of Operations



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What's the secret to building environments in which collaboration can flourish?

There are two really important words to describe the modern workplace and they both begin with c: collaboration and communication. The modern workplace is a highly collaborative one – managers and employees are now spending 50% more time collaborating than they did 20 years ago, according to data amassed by Harvard Business Review over that time. Collaboration, by its very nature, necessitates communication, be it verbal, written, face-to-face, via messaging, on Skype, on Slack... Collaboration and communication go hand in hand.

There are several contributing factors to this rapid increase in collaboration. Organisations have gone global and teams now have to collaborate across countries and across time zones. The silo mentality that was so prevalent 30-40 years ago has gone or only exists in pockets. People, teams and departments need to work together. They need to collaborate, share knowledge, insights and challenges. No one person holds all the answers, not even the CEO of a company – they too have to collaborate nowadays.

Technology is, of course, a big driver behind all this collaboration. It is because of technology that we can do videoconferencing with colleagues on the other side of the world. It is because of technology that we can work collectively and contemporaneously on documents, with all parties being able to pitch in and keep up with progress. When email burst onto the scene at the tail end of last century, it was the start of many electronic tools that would foster collaboration and communication.

The design of modern workplaces also has its part to play. Open plan office spaces, hot-desking, breakout areas – it all aids and encourages facilitation.

And as younger generations increasingly make up a greater part of the workforce, collaboration is going to keep growing. Millennials and Gen Z are big fans of collaboration and constant communications. It's how they like to lead their lives, both in work and out of work.

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There is a huge variation in terms of how much collaboration exists from company to company and even within companies, from team to team. Not all organisations or teams understand the benefits of collaboration, but those that do, are reaping the results.



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A collaborative organisation unlocks the potential, capacity and knowledge of every employee

Google is, of course, a classic example of a highly successful company that is also highly collaborative. It has produced and commissioned reports exploring the benefits of collaboration, including one called 'The Collaborative Economy', carried out by Deloitte on behalf of Google. One of the reports opening sentences is this: 'A collaborative organisation unlocks the potential, capacity and knowledge of every employee, thereby generating value, innovation and improving productivity in its workplace'.

The report, which had an Australian focus, has plenty of statistics to back up its claims that collaboration leads to greater innovation and productivity. Here are a few of them:

- Collaboration could be worth an extra \$9 billion a year by improving strategies
- Collaborative employees on average work 15% faster. Plus 73% do better work, 60% are more innovative and 56% are more satisfied
- Businesses with a collaborative strategy are twice as likely to outgrow their competitors and are more likely to improve their profit

These are pretty compelling statistics. However, research by UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School in the US, culminating in a report called 'Creating a Collaborative Organizational Culture, (<http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/~media/Files/documents/executive-development/unc-white-paper-creating-a-collaborative-organizational-culture.pdf>) says it's very easy for organisations to get collaboration wrong. Or to put it more accurately, too often organisations view collaboration as being important for select projects, rather than being an integral part of the organizational culture. The report says: "Most organizations relegate collaboration to an activity best used on complex, high- impact projects. A truly collaborative environment involves all organizational levels and is infused in an organization's cultural identity and day-to-day operations."

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Key to collaborative cultures: trust, communication and a shared vision and purpose



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Benefits of collaboration

The report goes on to list the benefits of proper, organisational-wide collaboration. They are:

- ✓ Fully engaged workers who are eager to take on new projects and challenges and who embrace change
- ✓ Improved organisational flexibility and agility
- ✓ Improved employee health, wellness and performance
- ✓ More productive and energized meetings
- ✓ Extremely high retention rates
- ✓ A competitive advantage when attracting top talent
- ✓ The ability to develop and bring products faster to the market
- ✓ Increased top-line revenue and better profitability

So, what do HR and L&D professionals need to think about and do to ensure collaboration can thrive in their organisations?

According to the UNC Kenan-Flagler report, there are three building blocks that are key to collaborative cultures: trust, communication and a shared vision and purpose.

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HR measures trust levels in their organisation



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Trust

True, effective collaboration can only happen where there is trust. And individuals need to have enough trust in each other to allow themselves to be vulnerable. Why is it important that people can be vulnerable? People need to be able to honestly and openly express any concerns, fears and differences of opinion. If they don't feel able to express their concerns, fears and differences of opinion, they will not be able to collaborate properly. They may even switch off from collaboration altogether. The report recommends that HR measures trust levels in their organisation through employee surveys and confidential one on one interviews.

Communication

As we said earlier, collaboration and communication go hand in hand. HR, L&D and organisational leaders need to communicate the message of collaboration effectively to all stakeholders. They must define it, communicate how it needs to happen and why. Collaboration requires a culture of open, ongoing communication.

However, it is important that employees don't feel that collaboration is being imposed upon them or they will put up barriers. Communicate the benefits. Showcase examples of good collaboration and demonstrate the success stories.

Even though you need to define collaboration and say how it needs to happen, acknowledge that people will want to collaborate in different ways, within that framework. Encourage the communication and collaboration skills that your organisation requires, but recognise that it will take time to get everyone on board.

Shared vision and purpose

Involve employees in the collaborative agenda. Involve them in setting the shared vision and purpose. If you can do this, then they will be engaged with the process and it is far more likely to be embedded. Show employees what the bigger picture is, but also show them what their part in it is - they need to have a clear understanding of how their work and their collaboration fits in with the collective purpose of the organisation.

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And of course, HR and L&D, need to be collaborating themselves. In fact, it is critical that HR and L&D collaborate, both as an internal function and with the wider business. HR and L&D can definitely not afford to have a silo mentality – practitioners need to be part of the business, talking and collaborating with all stakeholders, all the time, from the CEO through to the most junior employees.

Research by the benchmarking organisation, Towards Maturity, demonstrates the value of collaboration. It found that L&D leaders who work together with business leaders to solve performance problems are more able to demonstrate the value of learning. However, the research, a 2016 In-Focus report called ‘Making an Impact: How L&D leaders can demonstrate value’, also found that only 31% of L&D leaders are collaborating with business leaders to identify the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that need improving.



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“True learning impact comes from authentic collaborations between learning and business leaders, as they work together to achieve common goals.”

- Laura Overton, founder and CEO of Towards Maturity

Laura Overton, founder and CEO of Towards Maturity, commented on these findings. “True learning impact comes from authentic collaborations between learning and business leaders, as they work together to achieve common goals.”

HR and L&D practitioners should not only be collaborating with business leaders to identify KPIs, they also need to collaborate with business leaders to establish if those KPIs are being met by learning initiatives. And HR and L&D need to collaborate with all stakeholders - leaders, managers and the workforce – in order to know the impact of learning initiatives. That can only be established by being in close communication and collaboration with all stakeholders, not by analysing data from an HR/L&D perspective and operating within a learning silo.

And, as was said in the UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School report, in order for collaboration to be effective, it cannot be restricted to one off events. It needs to be an integral part of company culture. HR and L&D need to be constantly collaborating with everyone in the business – only then can it really have the ear of the business and impact on organisational success.

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12 habits of highly collaborative organisations

- 1 Lead by example. Leaders collaborate.
- 2 Focus on individual and organisational benefits. Employees know how having a collaborative environment will benefit them.
- 3 Emphasise behaviour and strategy before technology. The why and how of collaboration comes first. Technology is an enabler.
- 4 Learn how to get out of the way. Micromanaging stifles collaboration. Employees are empowered.
- 5 Give employees a voice. Employees have a platform.
- 6 Integrate collaboration into organisational workflow.
- 7 Create a supportive environment. Reward collaboration and teamwork.
- 8 Examine behaviours the organisation is rewarding. Focus on metrics that align different business units.
- 9 Practice persistence. Collaboration needs to be organisational-wide, rather than confined to specific projects or teams.
- 10 Adapt and evolve. Highly collaborative organisations recognise that collaboration is a perpetual state in their organisations and adapt and evolve as needed.
- 11 Recognise that employee collaboration benefits customers. Happy employees are better performing employees.
- 12 Acknowledge that collaboration generally makes the world a better place.

Source: Kenan-Flagler Business School's report 'Creating a Collaborative Organisational Culture'

To find out more about how DPG can help you **Develop Yourself**, call us **0330 660 0220** or visit **www.dpgplc.co.uk**

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