

How Collaboration Offers Big Benefits For Large And Small Businesses

Do You Need To Step Up Individual And Business Performance?

by Mike Rohan

Business change is everywhere. Technology. Competition. Markets.

Yet one business aspect largely remains unchanged—the people factor.

People still work and relate to one another the way they always have. Individuals have their own goals and priorities. They want to use their experience and get rewarded.

All this can lead to conflict within an organization *and* externally with customers and suppliers. Conflict slows teamwork, blocks creative solutions and hinders improvement.

Collaboration offers businesses a way to ratchet up human performance. The business climate is full of accelerating change, multiple priorities and limited time. Leaders can create an atmosphere to manage change with collaboration. Some benefits from successful collaboration include:

- Increased employee commitment
- Effective decision-making
- Creative problem-solving
- Supportive atmosphere
- Purposeful work processes

What Is Collaboration?

Encarta, the MSN Internet dictionary defines collaboration as: “the act of working together with one or more people in order to achieve something.” A more current definition might read: “Collaboration: a process that *cooperatively engages*

stakeholders to get *dynamic change* and *sustainable results*.”

The Military Model

What does effective collaboration look like? Feel like? The United States military provides one glimpse of collaboration at work. From my firsthand experience as a combat pilot, military air crews demonstrate a valuable collaboration model for business. Combat air crews pre-plan, anticipate change, understand individual/team roles, share responsibility and critique themselves and one another *after* the mission during debriefing.

A Participatory Process

An Industry Week February 2006 article titled “Learning from Toyota—Again” attributes success to Toyota’s company-wide understanding and commitment to a participatory process. They illustrate success in a cultural shift toward collaboration and continuous improvement, both internally and externally.

Physicians Who Collaborate

SSM Health Care sees value in collaboration, too. The St. Louis-based organization created a forum to collaborate with its physicians.

As health care providers, they share a common goal to improve health care delivery and provide exceptional care to patients and the overall community. Around that common goal, however, they have individual interests that are not the same, which can be a source of unhealthy conflict. By creating a forum for collaboration, SSM hopes to work with its

Management

Tips for Getting Started: Collaboration.

- Begin at the beginning. Start with an independent assessment to determine needs and value potential.
- Be open to change. Take time to become familiar and comfortable with the process.
- Check out organizations already using collaboration. Find out more before deciding if you want to proceed.
- Use a facilitator. An experienced third-party individual guides the process, inspires everyone to participate and reports progress to leaders.

physicians to craft solutions that respect and advance the interests of both parties. Bob Porter, executive vice president, strategy and business development at SSM Health Care, says, “We are still learning how to work differently within these forums, how to develop the skills. But we already see how participants recognize how we are linked; how our interdependence on each other has significant value in finding solutions.”

Small Business Collaboration

Does collaboration work for small- to medium-sized companies, too? “Yes, it’s really worked well for us,” says Tad DeWalt, continuous improvement coordinator at

DACA Machine and Tool, an award-winning, female-owned business located in Dutzow, Mo.

“We started with 28 employees and now employ 62. We are part of the aerospace industry supply chain and one of our key customers is Boeing in St. Louis. We participate in the mentor-protégé program established by the U.S. Department of Defense.” That program encourages major defense contractors like Boeing to provide developmental assistance to small businesses that qualify. “Collaboration is vital to our continuous improvement program,” Tad continues. “Continuous improvement and close working relationships help us, our suppliers and their suppliers improve and grow. It’s hard work—it’s been four years of training. But the results are there: we do quality work plus every employee understands the big picture and knows how their job contributes to results.”

Accelerating change, multiple priorities and limited time are facts of business life. These companies show that collaboration married with other improvement processes can ratchet up human performance. Collaboration among employees, customers and suppliers offers an answer that can transform a business to better performance and results.

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