The Importance of Establishing a Collaborative Work Environment

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For centuries the vast majority of business working environments have strongly favoured supporting the idea of ways or work focussing on the individual. Individual motivation. Individual creativity. Individual performance and performance management of individuals. However, in today's connected digital workplace, collaboration and communication are two key strategies driving business performance and productivity.

People thrive when the work environment encourages working together; communicating amongst themselves and collectively focussing on agreed outcomes. When organisations focus on the core concepts of collaboration, individual team members can become deeply committed to their individual roles within team structures. They naturally feel that they are part of something far bigger than themselves; bigger and far more important than their department or business unit. They become essential parts of a powerful group dynamic.

Marissa Mayer, the former president and CEO of Yahoo (2012-2017) once said, "To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side."

So important has the collaborative working model become, that in a recent report published by McKinsey and IDC, it has been revealed that Collaboration and Communication, when brought into a synergy, can drive performance improvements in excess of 30% by making it easier and faster to find the right knowledge, information and people and to rapidly share that information as a means to aiding sound decision-making.

Employee Resistance to Collaboration in the Workplace

Implementing a collaborative working environment and work ethic carries with it the realities of employee resistance or kick-back. In the modern, digitally-enable workplace, a lot of this resistance involves the use of technologies. Bottom-line is that many employees simply don't want to learn a new technology. Many will claim that they are already overwhelmed by existing technologies or that they don't have the time nor the inclination to learn how to use new technologies.

Overcoming this natural resistance to change is the real challenge. And its not easy. And its certainly not only about overcoming the resistance to adopt new technologies.

The starting point of the change programme is to clearly communicate to employees that the changes are not about technologies for technology's sake. It's about improving the way that people work; making work a more pleasant and rewarding experience. The majority of employees are in their own individual comfort zones. They have a certain way of doing their work and they probably feel that the process or the method of their work shouldn't be disrupted in any way. Some may even feel that the introduction of a new technology may be a step towards automation and making their role redundant. Alternatively, new technologies can be interpreted to mean that the employee will be expected to do more work, not less work. Employees need to be brought to understand that collaboration carries with it a great deal of self-interest. They need to believe that collaboration has significant personal benefits and not merely for the benefit of the organisation.

Building Team Cohesion

Why should individuals stop working in isolation and become part of a collaborating team? For starters, each member of a team needs to grasp the compelling and convincing reason to become part of the greater organisation's vision or mission. If that vision or mission is big and bold and exciting, it will be far easier to inspire and motivate team members to wish to play a part in what it is that the organisation sees in its future. A strong leader, able to communicate the organisation's goals and objectives, can mould individuals and teams to become passionate about achieving these outcomes. If the advantages and benefits of collaboration and the use of technologies to catalyse cooperation are not clearly communicated, employees will find many reasons not to work together and not to embrace the new technologies.

Build a Culture of Innovation

One of the cornerstones of the collaborative workspace is to have a culture of innovation. Much of this will depend on the leadership qualities of the departmental manager or business unit head. When employees feel really connected with their leader, they are individually and collectively far more likely to perform, to impress one another or the management team; to exceed all expectations of them. For teams to grow in their ability to cooperate and collaborate there needs to be an environment that is conducive to free-thinking; one that is open to new ideas or to questioning the stratus quo. Team dynamics must be non-judgmental and team members must at all time feel free to express themselves and their ideas. There must be a collective belief that no matter the challenges or obstacles, collectively the team can overcome these and excel at innovation.

Celebrate & Leverage Individual Strengths

Focussing on individual team member weaknesses and trying to overcome these through training, coaching or even discipline, can be hugely counterproductive. Conversely, working with individual team members' strengths and using these to mould high-performance teams will almost certainly be the favoured approach. One highly recommended technique for building collaborative teams is for individual team members to take formal personality-type tests such as Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram method, and to share their results in an open forum. This will lead to robust discussions and to a true, positive-outcomes team-building exercise. Individuals will not only get to know themselves far better, but they will get to know their colleagues is a far deeper and more significant way. When team members know precisely who to go to for what, based on the individual's strengths, people will connect in ways that will set them up to succeed because they will each tackle tasks that leverage their respective strengths.

Communicate Expectations

Core to the concept of collaborative working, is that individual team members must know their specific roles and responsibilities and precisely what will be expected of them in the context of the greater team. These clear definitions go a log way towards creating an environment conducive to skills, experience and talent synergies and the avoidance of conflicts. The true collaborative working style means that team members all actively participate in the shared responsibility of the defined results or outcomes. A well-bonded group focusses their combined efforts and they not only achieve business results, they build a form of *camaraderie* and team morale, the building blocks of organisational culture.

Stimulate Social Interaction

Whilst 'old school' management thinking still finds social media in the workplace to be anathema, there are countless modern studies that find that social interaction amongst co-workers and collaborative workers drives significant performance improvements, greater employee engagement, employee retention and overall employee satisfaction. These all impact positively on the bottom line of most organisations.

Involvement in Decision Making

When individual team members perceive their individual role within the group as important and significant, they become more diligent; they perform more efficiently and more effectively. An important strategy to build truly cohesive teams is to ensure that as many team members as possible are included in as many significant decisions as possible. This will demand a high level of communication between all team members and the leader or management. A powerful method of achieving this is the daily 'Scrum' or huddle where individual team members can discuss their daily goals and objectives and any specific challenges that they may foresee. The technique goes a long way towards ensuring that team members are not duplicating tasks and that they are taking advantage of collective experience.

In a world of workplace diversity, opening social channels also enables greater understanding of diverse cultures, traditions and the nuances of language. Social interaction between employees can go a long way towards breaking down prejudice and mistrust and the development of greater cooperation.

Reward Collaboration

To support and underpin collaborative working methods, it is important that management identifies, recognises and rewards collective accomplishment whilst simultaneously demolishing all vestiges of historical individualism. Building a culture of collaboration requires sustained effort of celebrating and rewarding team achievements. This goes for all manner of incentives and motivational initiatives.

Enabling The Collaborative Environment

"The digital workplace breaks down communication barriers, positioning you to transform the employee experience by fostering efficiency, innovation, and growth."

One of the biggest obstacles to enabling the collaborative work environment has been the lack of appropriate internal communications platforms. In the ideal world (and quoting from Deloitte)

What is needed is a centralised hub where corporate communications and social networks can be synchronised with the organisation's business and team collaboration tools. What's more, the ideal platform will facilitate top-down and bottom-up communication, whilst simultaneously combining vital corporate messaging as well as providing powerful peer-to-peer interactions so vital to collaborative work methods.

In other words, a type of efficient, effective intranet that addresses both the organisation and the employees' needs. One that integrates easily into the organisation's existing systems; is easily configurable and easily customisable. It should also be cost efficient.

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