

Dealing with Resistance to Collaboration

“The key elements in the art of working together are how to deal with change, how to deal with conflict, and how to reach our potential ... the needs of the team are best met when we meet the needs of individual persons.”

– Max De Pree

Recently we pulled the pin on a collaborative project that had great potential. The numbers stacked up. There were clear goals, timeframes and processes. It was disappointing, but sometimes walking away is the best choice when your ‘collaborative partners’ refuse to collaborate!

Even after implementing an exhaustive toolbox of communication strategies, building trust, giving the parties the benefit of time and circumstance, making allowances, taking on board the extra load and so on, they were not prepared to work with others even for their own benefit! Sometimes considerable effort can be expended with disappointing results.

While the complexity of human behaviour makes cooperation challenging, there are numerous ways to promote collaboration. However, sometimes finding common ground, building bridges and fostering relationships aren’t enough. What happens when it is all give on one side and all take on the other? Attitudes play a huge role.

The primary obstacle to collaboration is resistance to change for a number of reasons:

- dislike uncertainty associated with change (such as taking challenging risks);
- insecurity or fear of expected consequences of change (so they live in their comfort zone of inaction);
- investment in the status quo (to protect their egos and avoid the challenges of growth);
- lack of understanding or agreement with the potential consequences of proposed changes (so they don’t have to learn new things).



“... collaborative people understand how their expertise contributes to collaborative work and know instinctively when to defer to those with complimentary skills. Challenges for collaborative leaders include resisting the control paradigm and inviting input from all levels and functions.”

– Evan Rosen,
‘The Culture of Collaboration’ (2007)

So what happens if you find yourself in a similar situation? Your partners or team members won’t collaborate or communicate.

What do you do when you are faced with people who don’t possess a ‘collaborative mentality’ and refuse to improve their communication skills? Are trouble-makers or dissenters? What if the only view that counts is theirs? What happens when they don’t perform their assigned tasks and this impacts on the group? What if you’ve exhausted all attempts to engage them, had courageous conversations and validated their contributions but they still resist being a team player?

Dealing with Resistance to Collaboration (Cont'd)

There is no easy answer or a single strategy! Sometimes, you have to **assess the situation from a cost-benefit point of view** and see if you can still work with someone who is resisting being a team player and **evaluate whether the benefit will outweigh the cost**, including the stress and frustration. The reality is in some situations these 'resisters' *do* have an important contribution to make to a joint project/vision/outcome and **it may be possible to work around them while still moving forward**.

“Overcoming barriers to performance is how groups become teams.” – Katzenbach & Smith

However, a point may be reached where the project is either stalled or moving forward with such momentum that the 'resister' has to decide whether to **'go with the flow' and change; leave or risk being left behind**; or someone else may have to **make a decision for the benefit of the group**. Decisive action may mean a lost opportunity or implementing damage control. Sometimes a resister's sabotage on the outcome and management of a project can be minimized by:

- **limiting their scope of influence** (isolating them as necessary so the members of the core group can progress);
- **coaching** them; or
- providing them with **ultimatums or incentives** to cooperate.



Despite the occasional unwillingness of some people to engage with others and collaborate for mutual gain, the benefits far outweigh the difficulties!

Bryan Gibson, Principal - Collaborate Australia

“We can't make people better by trying to eliminate their weaknesses, but we can help them perform better by building on their strengths.” - Peter Drucker

If you would like to learn more about collaborating, read our article on **Effective Teams** on our **Downloads** page; visit our **Collaborative Solutions** and **Communication Strategies** pages; and sign up for our **free bi-monthly Newsletter “Getting to Agreement”** which is packed with tips, advice, and topics such as communication focus, collaboration, mediation, negotiation strategies, questions and answers from subscribers and clients, recommended reading, case studies and website updates. Full of practical "how to" tools and techniques for communicating more effectively and achieving satisfying outcomes.