

DENVER
**BUSINESS
 JOURNAL**

JULY 27-AUGUST 2, 2007

STRATEGIES

Beware the five killers of workplace collaboration

MANAGEMENT

BY DARRELL MULLIS AND MICHAEL HIGGINS

Innovation and collaboration come naturally to humans. Unlike animals that depend on fangs, claws or speed to keep from being eaten, we use our large brains to protect ourselves.

This capacity is especially handy in a collaborative workplace environment, because it makes us capable of amazing leaps of insight and discovery — the essential foundation blocks for innovation.

For companies operating in an increasingly global economy, encouraging a workplace with these capabilities is good business. However, many managers and business owners are disappointed that collaboration and innovation aren't happening as effectively, easily or quickly as they would like. Often, they have no idea why or what they can do to solve the problem.

Collaboration and innovation happen naturally when people talk openly and directly to each other, and take personal accountability for their own behavior and actions. Ironically, this is least likely to happen when it's most needed — in challenging and emotionally charged situations.

In assessing the degree to which your business culture exhibits the qualities that encourage collaboration and innovation, look first for evidence of the five "killers of collaboration" to see if you need to make changes.

FIVE KILLERS OF COLLABORATION

- **Blame** — "I did everything I could. Nobody got their reports to me in time. There was nothing I could do." This is the most common and easiest-to-recognize collaboration killer. It happens when individuals and teams believe that management views mistakes as intolerable.

As a manager, the most effective counter to this behavior is to demonstrate your ability to admit mistakes and correct them. Making it safe to be truthful can allow employees to avoid blaming others. Take it a step further by formalizing this culture of tolerance into a written agreement.

- **Justification/defensiveness** — "I didn't get it done because I just got hit with 10 things to do at once; it's always a zoo around here." This is the essence of an excuse culture. Defenders/justifiers feel misunderstood or underappreciated. No one sees how hard they work.

You can intervene by genuinely appreciating them for the work they do well. Ask them how they ended up with too much on their plate. Teach them how to set limits, and when and how to say no.

For companies operating in an increasingly global economy, encouraging a workplace with these capabilities is good business. However, many managers and business owners are disappointed that collaboration and innovation aren't happening as effectively, easily or quickly as they would like.

- **Seeking emotional approval/neediness** — "I hope you realize that I'm the one who is always here and doing my very best for you." This is an attempt at emotional manipulation. It kills collaboration because it creates a parent-child relationship rather than adult to adult.

In this situation, avoid being parental or judgmental. Define what you expect in the relationship. Assure the person that you'll always let them know if they're doing something you don't agree with or approve of. And make sure you back up that promise consistently.

- **Taking care of/rescuing** — "Quit picking on John, he's doing the best he can." This happens when someone who sees themselves as superior defends or takes over a task for someone they see as inferior. It creates a cycle of disappointment, resentment and sabotage. Rescuers often get burnt out because they con-

stantly take on other peoples' work rather than deal with the real problem.

In this case, be direct. Communicate clearly that you expect everyone to be an adult and that means everyone can be accountable.

Ask the rescuer if they believe the person they're taking care of is capable of adult behavior. Even if they say no, tell them you expect them to operate from that point of view.

- **Denial** — "I didn't do that. I have no idea how that happened. Nobody told me that. I don't know anything about it." Denial is the most serious and most damaging killer of collaboration. It's a refusal to acknowledge any accountability or even awareness of the problem. Denial is driven by extreme fear, and forces the outside environment to act upon the person in denial.

Dealing with denial requires simple, clear directions, and fast and frequent interventions. Don't allow prolonged denial to take root. Express and demonstrate how important truth and integrity are to you and the corporate brand. Positively reinforce displays of these qualities.

These five symptoms kill collaboration by reducing personal resourcefulness. This is especially true in challenging situations, where they impede open and direct communication in relationships.

If you find strong evidence of these symptoms in your organization, you can expect that decisions will be slower and harder to make, strategy will be more difficult to define and execute, and relationships will lack the robustness and trust needed to think and operate at the risk level needed for innovation.

If you've identified these problems, understand that they're correctable. Start change by noticing how often you and the other key players in your team or organization act out the five behaviors above. Agree that you'll call each other on these behaviors and — especially — that they'll call you on your behaviors. Then, just practice, practice, practice.

DARRELL MULLIS AND MICHAEL HIGGINS are principals with Stratactics, a Boulder management consulting firm. Reach them at dmullis@stratactics.com or mhiggins@stratactics.com.