

# collaborate!



## quite a dance

David, the reporter from Business Legends, took a bathroom break while George returned three calls before resuming their interview. Settled at the conference table in George's seating area again with pen and pad in hand, David looked like an eager student.

"David, you're making this a great experience. Your insightful questions and attentive listening are adding to the value of what I have to offer. I feel energized, and I anticipate an enlightening piece of work when you're done."

"May I quote you on that?" David asked, his pen faking vigorous writing on the still-blank page.

George chuckled. "Sure. Now, what's on the agenda for this hour?"

"I'd like to find out what keeps your company ahead of the competition year after year. I'm sure it's not just one thing, and I understand about the foundational relationship stuff you've talked about, but it just seems like there has to be something else—something really practical that keeps you on the cutting edge."

"You're right," George began, "about it not being just one thing. But don't think for a moment that the foundational relationship stuff isn't practical. That's the problem with students getting their education from a book. They can parrot back the concept, but they never really get it; it remains a flat, two-dimensional abstraction in their mental files.

"The foundational relationship stuff is intensely practical. It's not soft, and it's not easy. In fact, it can get really messy at times, because we're trying to go where few have the courage to go. The cycle of trust and transparency becomes extremely durable if you stay with it, but it's delicate in the beginning, and we don't start as experts."

"I think I smell more than a magazine feature in the making," David said. "You're dealing with ideas that are far too important for a quick once over. But for the moment, this article is all the space I have to work with. Is there



some kind of activity, some kind of visible behavior I could describe that would show the foundational stuff in action?"

George's eyebrows furrowed together for a moment. "What comes to mind when you think of collaborating?" he asked.

"Two or more people working together on a common project—sort of a partnership, I guess."

"That's part of it," George said, "but several people could work together on a common project and never really collaborate. The end result of their efforts might be okay, but it wouldn't reach the level of excellence it could; it wouldn't be brilliant."

"So when you say 'collaborate,' you're describing the quality of the process, some special ingredient that makes magic?"

George's familiar smile widened into a broad grin. "Exactly! It is like magic. And once you've experienced it, it's hard to settle for anything less. It borrows the old saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and takes it to a new level."

"Aren't you going to tell me the special ingredient?"

"Just waiting for you to ask. And it's an ingredient that is formed by blending two others."

David couldn't stop himself. "And both of these rest on some kind of foundation, right?"

"What doesn't? Character underlies all of our relational performance. But collaboration's magic ingredient? Actually, it's the blend of two behaviors: being highly cooperative and highly assertive. At the same time. Continuously. Either one without the other won't get it done. Combining them is a simple concept, but it's a high-level skill. We practice it constantly."



“Highly cooperative and highly assertive,” David repeated quietly as he finished writing. “Let me imagine what that would look like. Everyone speaks up but does it nicely?”

“Yes,” George said, “everyone is required to participate boldly—put his pieces on the table. But he can’t be protective of them or hoard them or hesitate to embrace someone else’s idea in favor of his own. Even when we strongly pitch the merits of an idea, we understand that we are speaking propositionally rather than positionally; it’s just one candidate among many—all of which could be improved upon.

“The goal is not for my idea to win; the goal is to find the best way possible through the strength of diversity that is committed to the best outcome for the team.”

“Highly cooperative and highly assertive,” David repeated again. “That’s quite a combination, complementary opposites.”

“Exactly,” George said. “The synthesis of complementary opposites yields incredible power. When people with differing gifts and preferences respect each other enough to challenge and defer to each other, the synergy is outstanding.”

“Speak up and defer. Sounds like quite a dance,” David added.

George raised his Earl Grey again. “Exactly!”

## understanding the journey

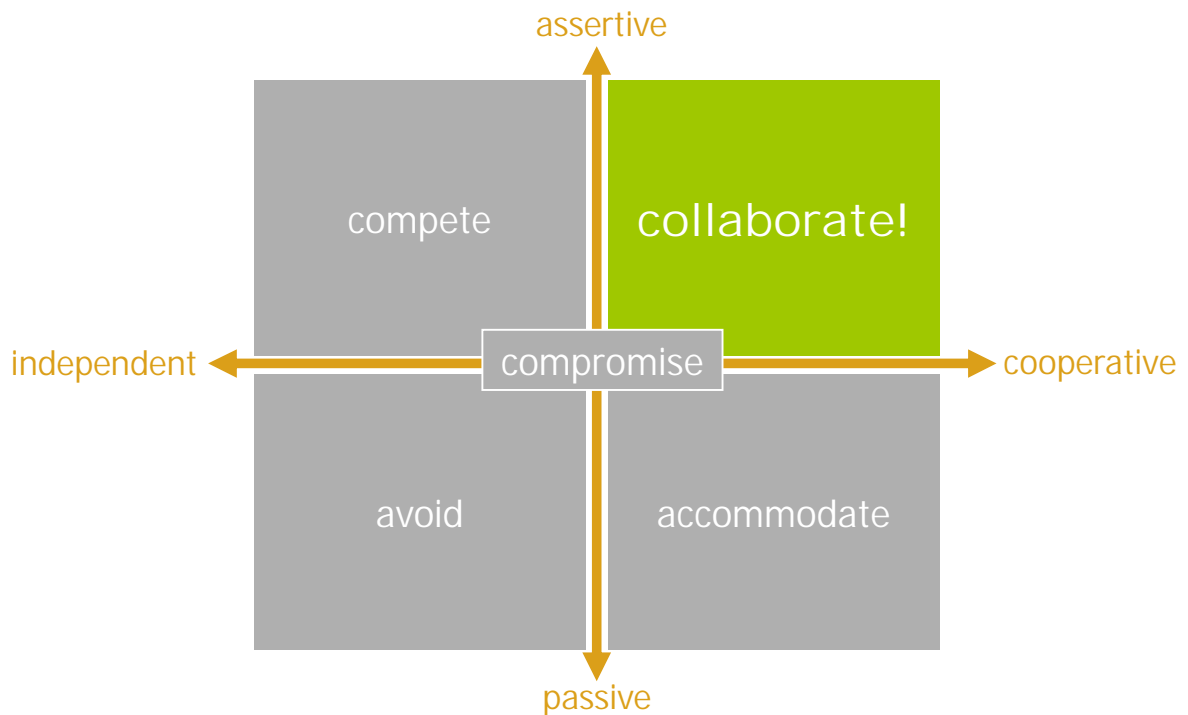
After learning to **connect!** with your team and to **invest!** in them, you are now ready to effectively **empower!** them.

**collaborate!** is much more than simply sharing resources or responsibility for a project. When your team learns to **collaborate!** effectively, they grow in their ability to contribute, and the final product or service moves through the threshold of excellence toward perfection.

Although the concept is relatively easy to grasp, it is difficult to execute consistently, requiring the development of character, chemistry and competency to overcome our natural tendencies to egocentric performance.

The chart below shows the various styles people use for handling conflict. Each of the more natural styles—Competing, Avoiding, Compromising and Accommodating—has its own set of positive and negative attributes. Each could be an appropriate choice in a given situation, but collaboration maximizes team effectiveness and develops a community of excellence. It is clearly the style of choice for finding a better way to proceed.

## collaborate!



**collaborate!** applies to any and all stages of decision-making and project life cycles. A collaborative meeting may be intense, but it is not:

- a free-for-all,
- an opportunity for collaborators to come to their own opinion,
- the art of compromise, or
- a consensus-building exercise.

Rather, the purpose of **collaborate!** is to assist the group's leader in discovering a better way for the benefit of the entire team. It is primarily characterized by the combination of highly cooperative and highly assertive behavior. Some simple rules facilitate it.

#### Process Rules

Rule 1: Establish the specific problem to be solved.

If a collaborative meeting doesn't begin with a carefully defined problem statement, an early priority should be preparing one so that the process can be focused and productive.

Rule 2: Deliberately include diverse temperaments to help bring a complete picture.

Understanding temperament styles enables you to assemble a much stronger collaborative team. MBTI, DISC, and others provide unique windows into how people process information and relate to each other. When certain strengths are not included in the collaboration, there are likely to be holes in the process. Deliberately designing a collaborative team to include multiple temperaments encourages generating multiple options in search of a better way forward.

Rule 3: Determine the person ultimately responsible for the results.

If this is not a given, it should be one of the first items of business, because everyone should know who is leading the process. Although all opinions are valued, they don't have equal weight. The leader with the ultimate responsibility for results will determine the pace and direction—with the help of a facilitator if the leader desires one.

Rule 4: Be cooperative.

Competition is a high value in many settings, but it can kill the spirit of teamwork needed for collaboration. In being assertive, you want to

#### Ask permission:

- "Could I give you another perspective?"
- "May I give you an alternative?"
- "May I ask you a question?"

give your idea its best shot at adoption, but in being cooperative, you clearly favor a better idea—or whatever idea the group chooses. You subordinate your personal preferences for the sake of the team, making your goal a team victory over a personal one.

**Avoid opposing:**

- “But” (the great eraser)
- “I disagree.”
- “That’s not true (right, correct, etc.).”

In terms of observable behaviors, being cooperative affects the stance you take when you speak. Avoid being positional, oppositional, or manipulative. Instead, be propositional, recognizing that your

statements are suggestions open for review and refinement. Ideally, everyone should be able to say, “I avoided being positional, oppositional or manipulative, and I allowed others to determine the relevance of my contributions.”

**Rule 5: Be assertive.**

Timidity may have value in some settings, but collaboration is not one of them. Assertive engagement is needed to get everyone’s best contribution.

This is a comfortable environment for outward-rapid processors, but inward-careful processors may be intimidated by the pace of the discussion. When they withhold their contributions because they fear voicing a half-baked idea, their silence can be interpreted as agreement or disinterest—neither of which may be accurate.

Whoever is leading a collaborative discussion needs to encourage inward-careful processors to contribute. One way to do this is to say, “We know this is not your final answer and that you would rather mull over the complexities before speaking out, but we really need the value of your thinking at the moment. Just give us a tentative response that you can reverse later after more thought.”

Another way is to periodically take a five-minute break in which people can think, go over their notes, scribble thoughts, look something up, discuss a point with someone else—whatever they need to feel more comfortable contributing. Ideally, everyone should be able to say, “I openly voiced my mind and heart, knowing that I was wrong or incomplete to some degree. I gracefully confronted others for their benefit and the team’s benefit.”

Rule 6: Welcome criticism without defense.

When you choose to trust the good intent of everyone on your team, you assume that criticism of your performance or your idea is not a personal attack or intended to diminish your value. If you treat it as an external data point that adds depth to your perspective, you can welcome it and learn from it.

Becoming defensive not only indicates immaturity but also discourages others from providing input that could be corrective or growth producing. Ideally, everyone should be able to say, "I welcomed criticism without defense."

#### Attitude Rules

Rule 1: Recognize the limitations of any single perspective—especially your own.

It is natural to assume that your perspective is correct; it is the culmination of a lifetime of experience. More importantly, it is the only perspective directly available to you, and it is your friend; you have made peace, however tenuous, with its inconsistencies and taken comfort in some of its unique sensitivities and subtle connections. It represents your individual discernment.

The natural assumption that your perspective is correct is both hidden and pervasive, compounding its seriousness. No one has an entirely correct perspective; all are flawed and at best are painfully incomplete. Thoughtful examination reveals the error, but without the discipline of critical thinking to provide this thoughtful examination, the assumption remains unchallenged.

#### Demonstrate humility:

- "I could be wrong."
- "In my opinion..."
- "From my perspective..."

Humility acknowledges your dependence. It recognizes that no single individual—regardless of how talented or experienced—has a complete picture. We need each other to contribute missing pieces to our problem-solving puzzle. Ideally, everyone should be able to say, "A better way exists outside of me, and I want to find it."

Rule 2: Value the experience, knowledge and insight other perspectives bring.

Every person is a unique blend of experience, knowledge and insight. Discounting or avoiding different perspectives can sabotage collaboration.

Express acceptance:

- "I see where you are coming from."
- "I welcome what you are saying."
- "I can accept that."

Collaboration thrives in an atmosphere that values differing perspectives as producers of additional knowledge and insight. Ideally, everyone should be able to say, "I need others to help me find, understand, and apply truth."

Rule 3: Personally commit to the process and its outcomes.

An attitude of submission to the team and its leader helps each participant recognize the importance of honoring the process. When you understand that you are committed to the outcomes, you will strive to make the outcomes as good as possible. Ideally, everyone should be able to say, "I fully own the decisions and next steps."

Rule 4: Commit to understand before trying to be understood.

Steven Covey's fifth habit in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Not only are both elements of this process important, the order is crucial. Most stalled negotiations, whether in the board room or around the kitchen table, don't progress because everyone is primarily concerned with being understood. Dialogues of the deaf leave participants exhausted and frustrated that no one "gets it." This underscores the importance of our **listen!** model and its emphasis on comprehending and considering before giving feedback.

Listening to understand is like choosing to jog downhill rather than uphill. Negotiations and relationships are so much easier when you are committed to understanding first. It breaks the deadlock and allows real communication to flow easily. Ideally, everyone should be able to say, "I validated others by actively listening and exploring for understanding."

Ask questions:

- "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"
- "Why do you feel that way?"
- "Would you please help me to fully understand your perspective?"



## going further

1. Describe a time when you were part of a team effort where everyone was highly motivated and actively contributed their unique abilities to the success of the project. How did you feel about this team?

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2. View the **collaborate!** chart. Do you most naturally avoid, accommodate, compromise, compete or collaborate? In what direction do you tend to go when you're under pressure?

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3. How might a lack of collaboration have hindered your team dynamics? Your team's performance?

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4. Identify a current problem you're trying to solve. Gather several team members to work on solving the problem. Tell them what behavior of **collaborate!** you'll personally be working on (e.g., being more cooperative or more assertive) and that you'd like their input at the end of your time together.

5. How do you think your team relationships would improve if collaboration defined your environment?

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6. Discuss these questions with your coach.

7. Additional Resources:

- The Five Dysfunctions of a Team (Lencioni)