

# The CEO Refresher

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## So You Want to be an Oxymoron? - What You Need to be a Collaborative Leader

by Philip Anderson

Traditionally business leadership has been about individual decisiveness, clarity of vision, clear command of a situation. Collaboration could have been viewed as a weakness, involving too many people and too much time.

Today the tables have turned. The collaborative leader has come of age.

The pressure and pace of globalisation means the ability to build, orchestrate and sustain networks of fruitful collaboration is emerging as a critical competence for the modern leader.

A more collaborative approach to leadership is also driven by a new generation of employees. These technically savvy and community orientated individuals - sometimes referred to as Generation Y or the Net Generation - have different work expectations from previous generations.

At first glance the term 'collaborative leader' appears to be an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms. Think about your organisation. Those who tend to get promoted are often people who have risen to business challenges at times of stress or crisis. The very act of climbing the corporate ladder is often a competitive game, demanding technical and political skills; a game in which self promotion is a major driver. Despite this, people who are successful at climbing the corporate ladder can also be good at collaboration.

Recent research (1) by the Global Business Partnership Alliance (GBPA) revealed that everyone can be collaborative. There is not a 'non-collaborative' personality type. 'Collaborativeness' as an individual is a learned rather than instinctive behaviour. However, the research also revealed that certain things have to be in place for effective collaboration to take place – what GBPA has called 'the logical levels for collaboration'. There has to be a purpose for collaboration, that creates the need or desire to collaborate in the first place - plus a firm set of beliefs, the skills, capacity and the right environment to collaborate.

### **New talents**

So what defines today's collaborative leader? GBPA's research revealed five key talents or attributes of fundamental importance to a leader who wants to be more collaborative:

#### **Holding the vision and setting direction**

The collaborative leader focuses on creating a compelling picture of the desired outcome, encouraging all key stakeholders to input, challenge and comment, continually refining expanding and enriching the picture. The leader needs to ensure that everyone is clear what sort of future is to be achieved, and then challenge the team or the business's people to work out how that can be achieved. Ideally, the vision stretches all participants and challenges all involved to do things differently – business as usual will not suffice.

#### **Empowering your team**

Involving a team in key decisions is fundamental in getting team members to believe they are valued, belong and can make a difference. The collaborative leader leaves space for all involved, especially the team responsible for producing the results, to determine their own

process and methodology. However it is not empowering simply to be given freedom and responsibility. Individuals also need to feel equipped for the task; so the collaborative leader ensures skills and resources for the task, and supports their acquisition. Collaborative leaders coach and give direction; they find out what matters to the team and use this information to drive and inspire.

### **Creating freedom within a framework**

Collaborative leaders create an environment where people can be themselves, bringing their own ideas and style to a role. A critical part of engendering freedom to act, is to accept the freedom to fail – not just to tolerate a ‘brave attempt’ but to celebrate it as an opportunity for all to learn, or potentially to collaborate to forge a new way forward. The collaborative leader may find himself as a critical gatekeeper protecting the culture and environment created within a business from the cultural norms outside this immediate environment. This may involve personal risk, and indeed the use of political skill and power in a manner counter to the very ideals he is trying to foster within the business.

### **Acting as a role model**

Like it or not, individuals look to senior leaders within an organisation to determine how to behave. If you want people to collaborate you have to be seen to do so consistently – a collaborative leader models the collaborative way. Collaborative leaders acknowledge that they do not have all the answers. Showing the team that you do not have all the answers involves vulnerability and personal risk. Yet this vulnerability can motivate people to ask for help, think for themselves and take individual acts of leadership to make a difference. Behaving in this way demands self belief and courage. If a chief executive wishes his or her business to operate more collaboratively, without silos, the way that the senior executive team behave and work together will set the tone that is reflected in the behaviour of their people in the business.

### **Building relationships**

To foster a collaborative environment, a collaborative leader builds relationships with their team based on trust, openness and respect. This rapport building is a two-way process and involves the collaborative leader sharing personal motivations as well as having a genuine interest in the motivation of their team. A leader who knows the aspirations, values and vision of their team, as well as business aims and objectives, will be able to appeal to the logical and emotional drivers within a person. Thus the skill of the collaborative leader is not only to be open, but to manage communication in a manner that respects the situation of all the parties with whom he or she is collaborating.

Yet collaborative leadership is not the only form of leadership to be encouraged. Many successful individuals use a repertoire of leadership styles to ensure productive relationships and increased business performance. Getting the right balance is the trick.

A true collaborative leadership style encourages people to work together to achieve common goals. When the culture is collaborative and people feel empowered to contribute ideas, employees feel a sense of trust, belonging and a clear sense of what is expected of them - which leads to greater loyalty, motivation and determination to deliver.

The stark alternative is for a leader to adapt a non-collaborative style – to go it alone, demand compliance, be confrontational and combative, impose controlling processes and control and judge people.

Put like that, it’s easy to see why numerous recent surveys of CEOs cite ‘enhanced collaboration’ as the key capability in building successful organisations today.

### **Reference**

(1) *Being collaborative* is one of a series of *Discovery* research reports produced by GBPA for its members. The supporting tools provide leaders, teams and individuals with an insight into their propensity to collaborate - available online [www.gbpalliance.com/collaborative-tools](http://www.gbpalliance.com/collaborative-tools).

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**Philip Anderson** is the chairman of the Global Business Partnership Alliance (GBPA). GBPA is a research-led advisory organisation, focused on discovering new insights and developing practical tools/frameworks to enable better understanding of how to address the challenges of internal and inter-company collaboration and business partnering.

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