How to Build Long-Lasting Collaborations

Key Concept

Effective collaboration is at the heart of the best organizations. It’s not enough, however, to launch new collaborative relationships. Ongoing, long-lasting collaborations have a greater return on an organization’s productivity and performance than new collaborations. Managers must understand how to help collaborations to last — and new research shows that the actions and activities that make collaborations last are not the same as those that enable new collaborations.

Idea Summary

The factors that bring people together into a collaborative venture are varied. One is proximity and shared goals: people within a department, for example, have more opportunities to work together than people across different departments. Another factor is similarity: people who are similar to each other, either because they have the same or similar age, gender, education or ethnicity, have similar knowledge and experiences or values, or shared attitudes, are more likely to seek each other for a collaborative venture.

People who have connections — who know many people and, often, have access to funds — are sought after for collaboration. Mutual connections also play a factor: two people who share mutual professional acquaintances, for example, are more likely to work together.

These factors, however, bring people together, but do they necessarily result in long-lasting ties — in other words, the repeated collaborations among partners that, as mentioned above, are most productive?

According to new research: not necessarily. Although the research was focused on an academic setting — collaborations among researchers at a university over a period of 15 years — the results illuminate some of the similarities and (importantly) the differences between the factors that enable collaborations to be
formed and those that ensure collaborations will endure.

For example, proximity and shared goals has a minimal impact on longevity. Two people who work in the same department are more likely to form a collaborative team, but that does not mean that they are more likely to stay together longer.

Likewise, similarity is another key factor that encourages the forming of collaborations, but whether or not the collaborators repeat the experience depends on the kind of similarity. People who have the same educational or ethnic background, gender or generation are more likely to come together in a collaborative effort but this factor proves irrelevant to whether or not the relationship will be long-lasting.

The correlation between similar knowledge and experience, and shared attitudes is a bit more complicated. Shared knowledge or attitudes help people come together and stay together up to a certain point: if too much is shared, then the collaborators bring little or nothing new that their counterparts don't already have. While the collaboration might not be completely fruitless in such cases, there are diminishing returns.

The same U-shape correlation — positive up to a certain point and then negative — occurs with connections. When a person has too many ties (and corresponding access to funding), they are unable to give the time and attention necessary to a new collaboration. Collaboration works best with people who have good ties and access to funding, but not so much that they make poor partners.

Finally, there are factors of longevity of collaborations that occur after the collaborations — specifically inertia and outcomes.

Inertia can set in a collaboration or relationship. The collaboration is not really fruitful anymore (for whatever reason), and yet the collaboration continues out of habit, knowledge about the counterpart (no surprises), and the accumulation of shared experiences. Strength and different dimensions make a difference; strong relationships and relationships along several dimensions (such as business partners who are also romantically involved, to take a simple example) add to the inertia.

Likewise, if the collaboration or relationship has led to a successful outcome or outcomes, it is stronger and more likely to last. Unlike with inertia, however, longevity in this case is an unequivocal positive development.

**Business Application**

Long-term collaboration enhances productivity and results, partly because collaborators working well together are more likely to stay with an organization. The company does not bear the financial costs of replacing employees.
Executives and managers who want to see their people build long-lasting collaborations have to understand the difference between getting individuals to work together on one project and getting those same individuals to seek each other out on a continuous basis for more projects.

Repeated collaborations occur when individuals are somewhat proximate but of more importance are such factors as a similar knowledge and attitudes (but not identical) and the strength and layers of the relationship.

The best way to encourage persistent collaborations, according to the researchers, is to create activities that “look less like mixers or speed dates and more like team-building exercises.” Communication, interdependence, and complementarity are key. People need the time not only to develop trust in each other, but also to understand the different facets of another person. Someone who is just like you is not the kind of person that makes a good repeat collaborator.

Off-site retreats can help start to build the trust and interdependence needed for long-term collaboration. In the workplace, collaborators must be involved in activities that put them in interdependent roles and helps them form a shared identity. Having individuals in groups rotate roles further reinforces the connection by letting individuals explore new facets of their counterparts.

Ongoing interactivity and knowledge sharing is vital. The more collaborators share and interact, the deeper the commitment to the collaboration, resulting in a strong, more long-lasting collaboration.

Managers must not be satisfied with the creation of a new collaboration. They must be mindful of the factors that specifically ensure long and fruitful partnerships among their people.

Further Reading


Further Relevant Resources
Linus Dahlander's profile at European School of Management and Technology (ESMT)
Daniel McFarland's profile at Stanford Graduate School of Business
Stanford Graduate School of Business Executive Education