

Cowboys Into Collaborators

Expanding Your Team's Skills

People can be:

- ✓ *Cowboys* - "Leave me alone to do my job!"
- ✓ *Communicators* - "Please do this, so I can do my job better," and
- ✓ *Collaborators* - "What can we do together, beyond our individual efforts?"

We believe cowboys may undermine team efforts, and teams and organizations thrive when there are more collaborators.

Cowboys

One of the most pervasive and enduring icons of our culture is the lone rider on horseback, the one detective who cracks the case, the individual who makes a significant difference. We celebrate individuality, and we call them heroes. Nowhere is this more evident than in media: The solo driver, performing incredible feats with her new SUV, Time magazine's "Man of the Year," as if one person accomplished it all alone.

Movies and advertisements appeal to our most basic (and usually unconscious) beliefs about ourselves. The cowboy (and cowgirl, to be sure) is the hero/heroine. You're the star of your own life, and you're justly proud of your wisest decisions, your best accomplishments. But, in reality, you never did it alone: You've had the support of parents, teachers, co-workers. We depend on others, whether we admit it or not.

Hardcore cowboys seldom express gratitude. They assume they're solely responsible for their results,

Cowboys: It's all about me doing my job. Everything else is secondary.

that others are mere tools. They forget the ideas that came from co-workers, the foundations laid by their forebears, the people who invested their sweat in turning the cowboy's dreams into reality.

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Advantages

There are places where cowboys are essential: Artists are generally loners, and we appreciate their works. Could any committee produce work comparable to Mozart, Michelangelo, Mendel? When you need a breakthrough, it's often by a cowboy.

Consequences

Successful cowboys are often arrogant, sometimes insufferable. In their own eyes, they have to be to survive the mediocrity they see surrounding them. Or, their arrogance is just the product of an inflated self-opinion. Furthermore, not all cowboys are creative; some are merely critical. Only introspection can help the cowboy decide whether they're creative or critical...but cowboys don't do introspection.

Identification

The typical cowboy takes all the credit for anything in which they've participated (although if they're politically savvy, they only take credit when out of earshot of others who contributed). The cowboy doesn't take criticism well; they're not sure you're even qualified to give them feedback. They often leave offended people in their wake.

The cowboy can become manager, but they're often seen as lacking "people skills." They're good at coordination (that is, creating and publishing schedules of what others must do, or setting goals and objectives), but they usually believe people will simply do what they're told to do, because it's "the right thing."

The cowboy generally speaks in terms of "I," "my" and "me:" What "I" think, what "my" idea is, what you want "me" to do.

Communicators

Communicators have a skill that cowboys either lack or choose not to employ: The ability to see things through another's eyes. They can imagine what their own behavior might look like to others.

That ability to empathize also means the communicator often understands what the other person might need or want, so they can meet it. While a cowboy dismisses the secretary as someone who can't do anything more important, the communicator knows the secretary is a human being with desires and feelings. And, that empathy pays dividends to both. The secretary prefers to work with the communicator who appreciates her work, rather than the cowboy, who ignores her.

Advantages

Communicators often make good writers, because they have the skill to "be" their readers. They can conjure an imaginary reader asking questions. To answer, the communicator makes text clearer, anticipating future readers' needs.

Communicators can step into another's shoes, to see through their eyes, to take a viewpoint that's not naturally their

Communicators can make good leaders: They make sure that those they wish to have follow are properly motivated and will promise rewards. They imagine themselves both as leader and follower, and speak the follower's language, because that makes sure they'll be heard.

Consequences

The communicator will make sure people are heard, informed, and motivated. That increases team unity and their ability to work together to get things done. A communicator will often assume that the direction the team is headed is correct, and focus on moving everybody along. On the other hand, they'll tend to avoid questioning the wisdom of the direction the team is heading because that might be seen as confrontational.

Identification

The communicator not only gets the job done, but is also aware of whether others are on the same journey, too. They'll be more persuasive, helping others to understand where the opportunities and challenges are, and why it's in the other person's self-interest to participate.

They speak in words of "you," and what "you" will derive from the experience.

Helping Cowboys Be Communicators

If you've got a cowboy or two you'd like to encourage to become communicators, you have to challenge them to try to see other perspectives, other viewpoints. Each conflict the cowboy has with another person is an opportunity to help them learn how to become a better communicator.

Conflict is an opportunity to coach the cowboy to see things from the other person's perspective. Questions you can use to stimulate those skills:

- ✓ "What do you think they want?" Help the cowboy understand the other person may have different wants, needs and values.
- ✓ "What would satisfy both of you?" Help the cowboy take the other person's satisfaction into consideration.
- ✓ "If you changed places, what would you want?" This one requires some cleverness, because the cowboy will often just project what they wish the other person would want from the cowboy's perspective.

Collaborators

The collaborator has a skill the communicator hasn't yet acquired: The ability to hear criticism from a peer without anxiety or anger. That's driven by the collaborator's understanding that, "No one of us is as smart as all of us."

Advantages

Collaborators are often the unsung stars on teams. If assessed only by the work they produce, they may appear average. But, when you look beyond, to the work that others produce because of the collaborators involvement, you'll see the immense value they add to the team.

Collaborators often contribute vital energy: They may be cheerleaders, helping others recognize and take justifiable pride in their successes. They may be playful, trying to keep the group from becoming so serious they abandon innovative, creative behaviors.

Above all, collaborators ask questions. They ask questions to draw quiet people out, the help the shy expose what they know but are afraid to contribute. They ask questions that help people grow.

Sometimes, those questions are seen as "stupid." That usually a sign they're challenging an assumption that everyone else is taking for granted. They might be wrong...but they also might be alerting you to a critical issue that everyone else has overlooked.

Consequences

Good collaborators are as precious as gold. When you have one on your team, you've got an ally to get things done, because a collaborator will listen to your ideas, too.

Collaborators actively seek out divergent and conflicting opinions and experience.

Identification

Collaborators actively seek out and solicit divergent opinions. They're not only good communicators, they also believe the end result will be better than they, alone, could create. They're most concerned about what they may've overlooked, what they don't know that they don't know.

Collaborators float trial balloons into a group of people, just to see what better ideas might emerge from the discussion.

Really good collaborators (especially when they know they're working with cowboys and communicators) will even float a poorly phrased idea, or an idea that's intentionally close but slightly wrong, so others can fill in the blanks. When that happens, the people who clean up the language or supply the missing information become virtual owners of the idea. That encourages group ownership of the idea, and therefore more whole-hearted commitment to carrying it out. A true collaborator doesn't care who gets credit, they just want to see the whole team excel.

Collaborators speak convincingly in the language of "we" and "us." They speak of how "we" will benefit; they encourage "us" to do things.

Helping Communicators Become Collaborators

The communicator is focused on everybody pulling together...even if they're pulling in a misguided direction. Since they may not even understand the best direction, nor do they ask, they can lead people

in the wrong direction. There are some key questions you can ask the communicator when they think they've done all they can:

- ✓ *"What could be missing here?"* Push them out of the safety of certainty, and get them to start asking the questions that will expose other possibilities.
- ✓ *"Who else might know?"* Urge them to go ask people who aren't part of the normal team, just to see if there's information there that could be useful.
- ✓ *"What would happen if the team membership changed?"* Get them to consider the consequences of losing a key person and how they'd deal with the new ideas, new values and new behaviors of an addition to the team.

Success Strategies

If you hope to improve the performance of your team, whether in the same office building, or scattered across continents, you start by assessing what you have, and defining where you want to end up.

- ✓ *Know Your Place* - What you can do depends on your role in the team.
- ✓ *Define Your Goal* - Set a realistic target for the behavior of the people you intend to influence.
- ✓ *Assess Your People* - Figure out where each person lies on our three-point spectrum.
- ✓ *Assess Your Self* - Rather, set up a process through which others can offer your feedback.

Know Your Place

You may be the team's leader, a mid-level team player, or an outside consultant or contractor. Where you stand with respect to the rest of the group determines how much flexibility and choice you have.

The leader/manager, of course, can hire and fire as necessary to unload deadwood. If you're a part-time team player, you won't have that much influence...but that doesn't suggest you have no influence.

In any event, if you intend to change a team for the better, you're going to have to work on coaching individuals, one at a time. Its always best to keep it low-key, as private as possible.

Ask questions. Questions invite people to collaborate with you; assertions and statements-no matter how correct-invite rebellion and resistance. You can even ask questions-if you're careful to keep it non-threatening-in a public setting (say a meeting or teleconference), without appearing to be demanding.

People often resent the idea that others want them to change. You counter that by keeping your intentions to yourself, finding and reinforcing people's beliefs in their own strengths, and asking questions that help them consider new possibilities.

Define Your Goal

Only *you* can determine what you need to achieve in order to have a better team. If you're the manager you have a certain amount of freedom in defining where you want to be, by when, and what resources you're willing to allocate to get there. If you're not the team's manager, you have to be more careful of what you do, and with whom. In either event, we recommend you work quietly and behind the scenes. Private is better than public.

Assessing Your People

Start with a list of team members with whom you work. If you're the manager, that's everybody on the team; if not, there may only be a subset of the team you need to assess. Add to that people who might be "virtual" or part-time participants (vendors, contractors, consultants, people with whom you or your team may frequently collaborate).

Next, review the three "*Identification*" sections (above) for cowboys, communicators and collaborators, and place each person on the spectrum. You might want to use a numeric scale:

- 1 Cowboy
- 2 Communicator
- 3 Collaborator

It's okay to use decimals: If someone is often a communicator, sometimes cowboy, you might rate that individual at, say, 1.6.

You may be surprised to discover how much work you need to do. If you have a lot of individuals who score on your chart at less than 1.5, you've got to start moving them into being better communicators. Consult your HR department, if you can, and ask the questions on page ii. Similarly, scores under 2.5 mean you have to move them toward being better collaborators (see page iii).

Assessing Yourself

Simply put, you can't. We all operate out of our beliefs about the world, and those same beliefs keep us from seeing our own flaws. You have to take others into your confidence, explain what you're doing, and ask them to assess you on the same scale. Get several evaluations, preferably from peers, superiors and subordinates, so you can see how you appear to others.

A client graciously included me in their annual evaluation program with all his employees.

The results were really scary. He identified flaws I thought I'd been successfully hiding.

But the feedback was invaluable, and set me on a two-year course to change some of my beliefs and practices.

I'd've never discovered those facts about myself without his honest assessment.

It can be humbling. It will be worth it, if you aspire to become a better team player, and better manager, a better person.

It's Important Work

It's a worthwhile endeavor (unless you're really a cowboy). Not only does helping people become better collaborators enrich your team, you'll find your team getting more done. And, you'll all enjoy the process of getting that work done more in the bargain. It's often the most important work you can do: Helping people become more of who they really want to be; helping them realize *themselves*. ∞