Creating a Collaborative Culture

Collaboration

What is collaboration? We can define it as “A joint effort of a group, aimed at achieving a goal” (Effective Collaboration)

Collaboration is defined as:

• The recursive interaction of knowledge and
• Mutual learning between two or more people,
• Who are working together in an intellectual endeavor
• Toward a common goal
• Which is typically creative in nature.

Collaboration is something that happens among people, whether we plan it or not. The goal of Intelligent Swarming is to facilitate collaboration by enabling relevant connections. The traditional escalation mode actually hinders collaboration with its hierarchies and impermeable silos, promoting competition between teams, rewarding egos and how much people know.

“Great things in business are never done by one person; they’re done by a team of people.” - Steve Jobs

In his book The Smart Swarm, Peter Miller indicates three mechanisms of a smart swarm: decentralized control, distributed problem solving, and multiple interactions. Although Miller’s swarms are derived from nature (ants, bees, fish, and so on), we also see these mechanisms in an Intelligent Swarm: knowledge workers working together to solve issues, which can only happen in interaction with different types of experts.

In Intelligent Swarming, collaboration is self-organized. There is no higher-order authority that tells the knowledge worker to work together and with whom, as often happens in a project team. Knowledge workers operate autonomously; they can ask for help and offer help when it is needed. Managers should allow for this collaboration and provide the tools to support it.

Collaboration in the Intelligent Swarming process can happen in various ways. Globally the options are: asking for help (raising a hand), asking a specific person for help, or offering help.

Note that not every question or issue needs collaboration, and there is certainly no point in collaborating for the sake of collaboration. Collaboration takes time because more interaction (communication) is needed among the collaborators. When the knowledge worker knows the answer to a question, and/or has access to a knowledge article, he or she should solve the issue in the most efficient way.
Communication is an essential component of collaboration, though it is not the same. Communication is needed to align the team members to the task to be done and the intended outcome. Communication is also needed to understand and solve the issue and share knowledge. If the members of the swarm are not in the same location, having good communication and collaboration channels is essential (see Tools and Integration).

Collaborative Culture

Having a collaborative culture is a prerequisite for implementing Intelligent Swarming. In a competitive and siloed environment it will be hard (if not impossible) to ask knowledge workers to collaborate and share their knowledge.

Organizations who have successfully implemented KCS have some experience in building collaborative cultures. The KCS Principles and Core Concepts document describes the non-negotiable foundations of a knowledge-sharing environment. Much like KCS, as organizations embrace Intelligent Swarming, they must make decisions on how to approach certain challenges - some of which may be unique to their business or institution. These principles and concepts are the criteria by which we can test how well specific practices and techniques align with the Intelligent Swarming philosophy. The four principles are:

1. **Abundance**: The more we share, the more we learn.
2. **Create Value**: Work tasks in the context of the bigger picture: communicate and understand the why.
3. **Demand Driven**: Knowledge is a by-product of interaction, not something we create just in case.
4. **Trust**: Engage, empower, motivate.

Patrick Lencioni wrote the famous business novel The Five Dysfunctions of a Team about teamwork, or better: what can go wrong with teamwork. The absence of trust is an important one of these dysfunctions. In an Intelligent Swarming situation, there is often little time to build trust organically. Sometimes knowledge workers have to work with colleagues they’ve never met before, who may be in a different organization, geography, or time zone. Knowledge workers may feel hesitant to work with someone more senior than they are. While we can ease some of these concerns with rich People Profiles and reputation models, a culture of collaboration will help knowledge workers embrace the new swarming processes, increase knowledge sharing in and across teams, and break down organizational silos.

A collaborative culture is based on openness, transparency, and building trust. It focuses its energy on the search for solutions to challenges and leveraging opportunities rather than placing blame or searching for the “guilty.” As more teams work distributed (often an inhibitor to collaboration), organizations have to put more effort in establishing a collaborative culture.

Leaders play an important role in creating a collaborative culture. Research about successful teams shows that "Teams
do well when executives invest in supporting social relationships, demonstrate collaborative behavior themselves, and create what we call a 'gift culture' - one in which employees experience interactions with leaders and colleagues as valuable and generously offered, a gift." A leader who wonders why people are talking to each other at the coffee machine, instead of "working," is not nurturing a collaborative culture.

Resources on this topic:

- [The Tension in Collaboration](post by Bruce Lewin)
- [6 Concrete Steps to Building a Collaborative Culture That Inspires](Forbes, by Kathy Caprino)
- [Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams](Harvard Business Review, by Lynda Gratton and Tamara J. Erickson)