

You Can't Compete Externally If You Can't First Collaborate Internally

Jim Tamm

Organizations that are good at collaboration, I call them Green Zone Organizations, are more creative, better places to work and more importantly they are more profitable. Organizations poor at collaboration, which I call Red Zone Organizations, develop more adversarial and less effective working environments. They are characterized by the following¹:

Adversarial Red Zone	Collaborative Green Zone
Low trust—high blame	High trust—low blame
Threats and fear	Mutual support
Guardedness	Dialogue and shared vision
Hostility	Honesty & openness
Withholding energy	Cooperation
Risk avoidance	Risk taking
Attitude of entitlement	Sense of contribution
Cynicism & suspicion	Sincerity & optimism
Work is painful	Work is pleasurable
External motivation	Internal motivation

Red Zone organizations are not creative because if you try something new or risky and it doesn't work out, guess what happens... someone is going to get blamed. So employees tend to be risk avoidant keep-

ing their creative ideas to themselves. If your organization requires creativity in order to thrive and you are unskilled at collaboration, you are in deep trouble.

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In collaborative Green Zone environments if someone tries something creative and it doesn't work out, the conversation is usually about what could be learned from the failure. A great example of this occurred during a meeting I was invited to where a group of NASA managers were discussing what could be learned from the Columbia shuttle disaster. Several managers commented about how NASA always says safety is the number one concern, but they also noticed that if you were a rising star at NASA and you took a job in safety, it would usually stall your career. So they brainstormed how they could attract the best and the brightest at



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NASA into safety jobs, and how they could turn such jobs into career builders rather than career killers. They weren't looking for blame, they were looking for solutions, and as a result of that attitude NASA is one of the most creative organizations in the world.

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Collaborative organizations also tend to substantially outperform their more adversarial counterparts. In their classic book *Corporate Culture and Performance*² John Kotter and James Heskett offered a well researched empirical study showing that more collaborative, performing enhancing (Green Zone) organizations outperformed non-enhancing, less adaptive, (Red Zone) organizations by 755% in net income growth over an eleven year period. The stock price was up by more than 826% in the more collaborative cultures.

If collaborative Green Zone environments are more creative as well as nicer places to work, and much more profitable; then how do you create collaborative work environments? This is what the State of California wanted to know back in the late 1980s when we kept seeing the same adversarial organizations repeatedly before us with employment litigation. These adversarial work environments were costing the State a huge amount of money, not just

2 John P Kotter and James L. Heskett, *Corporate Culture and Performance* (The Free Press, 1992).

from the direct costs of the conflicts, but primarily from lost productivity.

The State teamed up with the Stuart and Hewlett Foundations to look into the differences between the collaborative and adversarial environments and see what we could do to help. Based upon a great deal of research and a great deal of road testing in some very hostile work environments, the State produced dramatic results. By teaching collaborative skills we were able to reduce the rate of measurable conflict³ in almost 100 organizations by 67% over a period of three and a half years⁴. Communications improved, trust increased dramatically and the number of employees who characterized their working relationships as adversarial dropped by almost 70%. The State also saved a lot of money.

If you want create a collaborative environment, what does it take? Based on our original research and 25 years of battle testing in difficult circumstances, we believe there are five skills that are essential for people to learn. They are a combination of skill sets and mind sets, both attitudes and competencies that can be learned, practiced and improved upon in a reasonably short period of time. They are:

- 3 Unfair labor practice cases, requests for mediators and requests for fact-finders.
- 4 James Tamm and Les Chisholm, "Does Interest Bargaining Really Work: A Test Using PERB Data," California Public Employee Relations (CPER) 101, 1993; Clair Brown and Vince Valvano, Analysis of post Workshop Evaluation, January 1991, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley.

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1. Collaborative Intention

Making a conscious personal commitment to seeking mutual gains in your relationships.

We ask people to notice whether they have a collaborative Green Zone attitude or if they operate from an adversarial Red Zone. People in the Green Zone consciously seek solutions rather than blame. They think both short term and long term. They are interested in other points of view and welcome feedback. The key is remaining conscious of building mutual success. People in the Red Zone respond defensively which triggers defensiveness in others. They use shame, blame and accusations and have a low awareness of their own blind spots. They typically see conflict as a battle rather than a problem, and seek to win at any cost. It is impossible for Red Zone environments to produce and sustain long-term, high performing collaborative relationships.

The key is remaining conscious of building mutual success.

Simply paying attention to your mindset will make a big difference. At the Stockholm School of Economics, groups in the International Management Program where I teach must collaborate on a class project. One year the group focused on monitoring their attitudes over a period of time. At certain times each day, wherever they were, they noted if they had a collaborative Green Zone attitude or a more hostile, adversarial Red Zone attitude. Early in the project, more often than not, more of them were in the Red Zone. By the end of the project, simply

by paying attention, more often than not, more of them were operating with a collaborative attitude.

2. Truthfulness

Being able to create an atmosphere where it feels safe enough for people to raise difficult issues and tell their truth.

The level of trust in any organization is determined to a great extent by the amount of truth that is being told. Not telling the truth is one of the fastest and surest ways to destroy trust in an organization. W Edwards Deming always maintained that quality is impossible when people are afraid to tell the truth. Creating an environment where truth thrives requires people to speak with more *awareness*, *honesty* and *openness*. It also requires that people become skillful at listening, which is probably the most often taught, yet unused skill in the world. Skillful listening is what makes it safe to raise problems. People can't solve problems if they are unwilling to talk about them. People won't talk about problems if it doesn't feel safe.

3. Self-Accountability

Taking responsibility for the full range of choices we make either through action or inaction, and taking responsibility for both the intended and unforeseen consequences of those choices.

The way people make little decisions is often a reflection of how they make bigger decisions in their lives. Many people forfeit choices not realizing that not to choose is also a choice. People's beliefs about the amount of choice they have in their lives can either mobilize them or paralyze them. The most effective thing people can do to feel more

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empowered is to change their belief system about how much choice they have in their life and start paying closer attention to the choices they actually are making. Self-accountability is being aware of **all** the choices we make, and taking responsibility for all the results of those choices.

4. Self-Awareness and Awareness of Others

Knowing yourself deeply and being willing to deal with difficult interpersonal issues.

Increasing self-awareness is the greatest asset people have for living fulfilling lives that provide a sense of direction and influence over what happens to them. The ability to make effective choices, build strong collaborative relationships and live an authentic, productive life depends to a great extent on a capacity to be self-reflective. If people do not understand their own feelings, fears, values, intentions, and patterns of behavior, their lives can be like corks bobbing on the ocean. This may provide an interesting journey, but there will definitely be no sense of control over their own destiny.

5. Negotiating and Problem Solving

Skillfully negotiating your way through the conflict that is inevitable in any long-term working relationship.

If your work relationships don't bump up against some conflict every once in a while, you're either in a very unproductive environment, are in complete denial, or are overly medicated. Even the most collaborative, self-aware, accountable, non-defensive, truth-telling people will have a difficult time maintaining successful relationships if they aren't skilled at negotiating conflict in a way that supports rela-

tionships rather than undermines them. Resolving conflict requires both courage and negotiating skill.

Participants in a six year follow up study from nine different countries reported that by focusing on these five skills they increased their chances of getting their interests met in conflict by 45%⁵. They also reported substantial gains in building and maintaining climates of trust and of problem solving. True collaboration begins inside the individual and works its way out into organizations. Much experience over many years convinces me that by concentrating on these five skills people will not only become personally more effective, they can have a big influence on the effectiveness of their company or organization. Because you can't compete externally if you can't first collaborate internally! ■

⁵ Dr. Mayte Barba, Analysis of Beyond Conflict Post-Workshop Survey, 1999.