

Five Essential Habits For Collaborative Teams

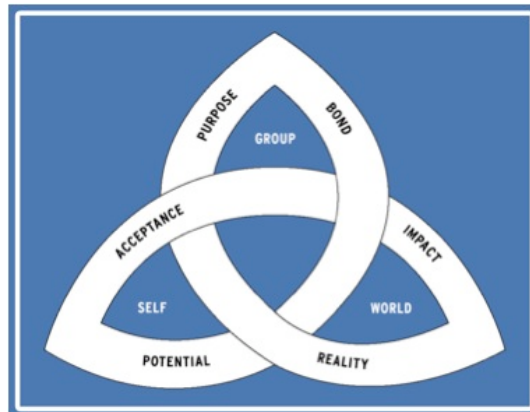
By Lucy E. Garrick

I'm a bit suspicious of lists that promise "the answer" to complex questions. They are a bit like the rear view mirror that reminds us that things may appear smaller than they are. Lists can leave us with the impression that problems and dilemmas of good collaboration are simpler than they really are. After all, human beings are living systems and living systems are highly sophisticated and complex.

Since collaborative teams are a collection of human beings it only makes sense that groups are equally complex by nature. Nevertheless, simple lists can be helpful and in that spirit, I offer here Five Essential Habits For Collaborative Teams, gleaned from both being a member of collaborative teams, and consulting with teams. Layers of skills and coordinated behaviors work together to enable collaboration. These five habits can be practiced with all kinds of teams, those that meet in person, in virtual spaces, and in blended spaces that combine virtual and face-to-face elements.

1. Clarify. The term, *collaboration*, has varied meanings for people. It is possible to collaborate in both peer and hierarchical social systems. When I think of collaboration a specific style of working together comes in mind. Yet teams need to adapt to a variety of styles of collaboration that fit kind of work they are doing. For instance, a fire brigade has a very different style of collaboration when fighting a fire than when preparing a meal at the fire house. Clarifying ambiguous terms such as "collaboration" helps to create shared meaning among team members, and creates a good foundation for the other five habits that encourage effective teamwork.

2. Uncover Needs. Understanding and meeting the needs of a group is one of the most important habits for extraordinary group work. In researching their new book, [Extraordinary Groups: How Ordinary Teams Achieve Amazing Results](#), Geoff Bellman and Kathleen Ryan discovered three sets of group needs shown that are present in groups that produce outstanding results.



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One good way to explore your group's specific needs is to make a practice of asking open and clean questions* about individual member's needs as your group is forming. This practice helps uncover information about what people hope to get from their participation in the team as well as how they would like to be supported by fellow team members.

3. Facilitate Accountability. Although essential to extraordinary teams, it's not enough to simply understand needs and expectations. It is equally important to support each other in meeting those needs.

While there are more layers to the habits of facilitating accountability than can be written here, doing so in a supportive manner helps facilitate team members' willingness and ability to be personally accountable. It also helps the whole team learn and grow closer. On the other hand, calling out a team member's shortcomings with harsh judgment is likely to diminish team trust and reduce team effectiveness.

When everyone practices facilitating accountability it becomes an expression of the team's commitment to its own success. Facilitating accountability begins when each team member demonstrates a willingness to examine and communicate his/her expectations and needs, as in Practices 1 and 2. Once the specifics are visible to the group, all team members can support the group's accountability by paying attention to whether the group is living up to its collective aspirations. Facilitating accountability simply means that each person is committed to practicing awareness of patterns of behavior, expressing curiosity about causes and implications, and is open to change.

Here's a simple example of how it worked for a student of mine at a local college where I teach collaborative teaming. Rick, a project manager, was responsible for convening a daily team meeting at a local software company. He noticed that a pattern of raggedy beginnings and endings had emerged over time which he found troubling. Rick, brought this pattern to the attention of his team mates by asking,

"Has anyone else noticed that we always seem to start and end late?
I am curious as to why this happening. Can we talk about what impact it is having on other team members, and whether we can come up with some ideas to address this issue?"

In collaborative teams, members need to be accountable for the collective welfare, of their fellow collaborators. Rick felt responsible for the team meetings and by respectfully communicating his observations and soliciting help from the team, the issue was quickly corrected. He reported immediate improvement in the group's punctuality, and as an added benefit, he personally felt relieved from the stress of addressing the problem by himself.

4. Welcome Respectful Dissent. Habits require practice. The use of the term, habit purposely acknowledges that collaboration, is first and foremost about relationships, and that relationships are dynamic, complex and from time to time, imperfect.

Clarifying meaning, setting expectations and facilitating accountability pave the way to good relationships. Nevertheless, changes inside and outside the team are likely put pressure on teams that can erupt in discord. When conflict occurs, there is often a tendency to behave defensively.

Recognize that disagreements and team friction, if handled in a spirit of learning, are opportunities to strengthen relationships. You can use some of the same skills for facilitating accountability to work through disagreements. The goal is not only to find solutions but to explore what the team has learned from their experience of the disagreement. By approaching disagreements in this way, the team develops a deeper culture of collaboration.

5. Use A Beginner's Mind. Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki, once gave a lecture on the concept of *Beginner's Mind*.

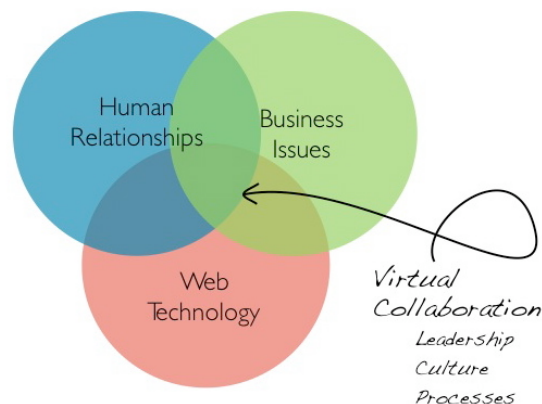
"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

This concept is a useful reminder about the value of our different strengths and the range of knowledge and experience we bring to a group. People tend to engage more fully with new ways of working that they create together, than modifications or compromises. Rather than attempt to blend past experiences or processes, the concept of beginner's mind suggests we be open to a sense of creation.

Regardless of our level of skill and experience, there will likely be someone with more or less skill or experience than you. In order to create a sustained experience of engagement, we have to simultaneously be both teachers and learners. When we are all in alien territory together, the opportunities for innovation skyrocket. If we are not so certain about what we know, we will find that more wonderful and unexpected new things can occur.

The Uniqueness of Virtual Collaboration

An open debate continues about whether face-to-face collaboration is better than virtual collaboration, and whether its challenges are more or less difficult. In my experience working with teams in all environments, I'm not convinced that this is a useful debate. What seems more important is whether a given collaborative style fits the work at hand.



Virtual collaboration occurs at the intersection of the work, technology and human relationships. All three components bring unique possibilities and challenges. If you change one it will affect the others. Creating the conditions for collaboration requires design skills that thoughtfully serve the work being performed, the environment and the collaborators. When the fit is right, almost anything is possible.

* Open and clean questions lies in one of the layers of team collaboration and will be discussed more fully in another paper.

Lucy Garrick is a founding partner of Radical Inclusion, an international virtual consulting group. Our headquarters is located in the internet cloud. We connect and collaborate in virtual space using the same virtual tools and methods we use to consult and train clients. Social media technologies connect, support and engage us from Brazil to Canada, the United States and Germany.