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The Collaboration Conundrum

New research finds that, while organizations agree that workplace collaboration is a good thing, fewer than one-third actually provide employees with a proper framework for it. But, experts say, HR is in a great position to build more bridges within an organization's different divisions.

By Michael O'Brien







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As the difficult business climate continues to challenge organizations, the importance of collaboration among teams comes into greater relief. And yet, a majority of organizations fail to put in place the proper framework to allow workers to effectively collaborate on business projects.

That's according to a new report based on a survey of nearly 900 industry and government professionals across Canada, entitled [Tearing Down the Walls Blocking Collaboration and Better Business Performance](#).

It finds that 65 percent of survey respondents believe that their organization's project performance would improve if their teams worked more collaboratively, but only 28 percent actually create a structure that makes it easier for employees to work together.

ESI International, an Arlington-Va.-based project management-learning company, conducted the eight-question online survey, which had 895 project management and business analysis directors, managers and staff, as well as other professionals involved with their organizations' projects across Canada, as respondents.

One obstacle preventing more organizations from working collaboratively is rigid work structures that exist within companies, according to the report. In addition, organizations are not investing in the right mix of skills training needed to improve collaboration on projects and initiatives.

"Businesses and public-sector organizations have a proven best practice in using collaborative teams to drive improved performance and attain numerous other benefits, but the study results show the majority aren't taking advantage of the approach," says Glenn R. Brule, executive director of global client solutions at ESI.

"Organizations that continue to conduct business in silos will be left behind," he says.

The report suggests best practices for building collaborative teams such as offering more autonomy within projects, tearing down organizational roadblocks and providing teams with the right mix of business and technical skills.

More collaboration will lead to better project/initiative outcomes and, ultimately, higher overall business impact, according to the report.

"From an HR perspective," Brule says, "I would definitely encourage

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organizations, and their leadership, to take serious stock of their 'dysfunctionality,' work more on engaging their management team, develop trust, instill ownership and accountability, and encourage healthy debate and dialogue."

But before all of that can happen, he cautions, the entire organization must be led to a mutual understanding and agreement on the importance of teamwork.

"This means that shared goals and objectives must be consistent, collaborated on, agreed upon and, finally, delivered as a consistent message throughout the entire organization," he says.

That presents challenges of its own, says Marie Peeler, founder of Peeler Associates, a Boston-based leadership and executive-coaching firm -- including the possibility of built-in "dis-incentivizers" against collaboration.

"I once knew a company that aspired to have business units collaborate in deciding where to place new business, based on what was in the customers' and the whole company's best interest," she says.

"However, by basing senior managers' bonuses purely on the revenue of their own operating unit, they removed any incentive for them to collaborate in discussions that might lead to placing business in any other unit, even when it was in both the client's and the company's best interest."

Dis-incentivizers aren't always financial, she says.

"Sometimes companies just make it too difficult to collaborate, and employees find it easier not to," she says.

In order to set a good example for others in the organization, Katrina Pugh, president of AlignConsulting and author of [Sharing Hidden Know-How: How Managers Solve Thorny Problems with the Knowledge Jam](#), says HR must model collaboration among its own team members.

"Be the collaborator you want [your employees] to be," says Pugh, who also is a member of the faculty of Columbia University's Information and Knowledge Strategy Masters Program.

Too often, she says, organizations simply "expect" collaboration to occur -- and fail to understand that they need to supply employees with tools, processes, incentives, role models and output models on an ongoing basis, she says.

"After 20 years of collaboration hype," she says, "our organizations have become apathetic."

Despite this, Pugh says, HR leaders have an "immense opportunity" to foster collaboration within their organizations by identifying effective collaboration behaviors, such as formal team-forming, project management, inclusive communication and the respectful discussion of issues.

Organizations also can motivate collaborative outcomes by, for example, rewarding teams for their project deliverables or by rewarding groups for sharing knowledge.

She also believes that organizations need to "let experiments happen -- such as with social-media tools, wikis, doc-shares -- and involve the most bold employees in helping move toward smarter, more easy-to use tools."

"Applaud learning," she concludes. "Don't focus on mistakes."

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