Chapter 1: Management Summary

Collaboration in the workplace – which we define as *two or more people working together, either face to face or virtually, toward a common business goal* – presents both opportunities and challenges to an organization. The collaborative energy, skills, and knowledge of workers can lead to more and better ideas, products, and services; faster cycle or development times; faster response to business challenges or changes in the competitive landscape; and reduced costs.

The results of initiatives to improve collaboration have been mixed because the challenges have not been met. Companies still do not know how to identify when and where in the organization collaboration is most important, how to get collaborative activities started, how to sustain them, and how to measure and communicate their business value.

Successful collaboration arises from business strategy, aligns with business outcomes, and is supported by organizational structures and technology. Like any other process, it requires thought, preparation, support, energy, and communication. Handing someone a hammer does not make him or her a carpenter; giving people collaboration tools and technologies without showing them how to work together, how to use the tools, how to define success, and how to get results does not make them collaborators.

Interventions to improve collaboration should be done for specific work groups with specific collaboration objectives. Getting this design for collaboration right involves:

- Setting the business objectives, with an eye toward interdependence of associated activities, difficulty of coordination, and key players and their locations.

- Within each objective, identifying the business processes that will most benefit from improved collaboration, and determining the nature and extent of the need and opportunity. Then breaking each process down into its component activities, with an eye toward the skills and behaviors needed to perform each activity successfully.

- Aligning the "three C's" of collaboration to enable each process and its activities:

  - *Components* – the elements of the work process and how they interrelate.

  - *Construct* – the infrastructure, including information technology systems and physical facilities.

  - *Capacity* – the skills and beliefs of the people involved.

Figure 1: The "Three C's" of Collaboration
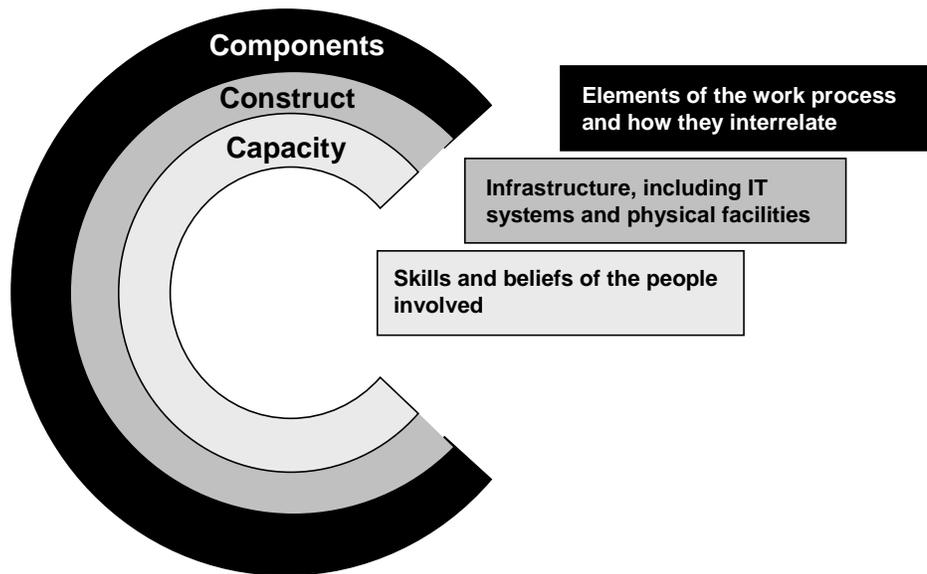
Collaboration involves coordination – managing the interdependence among activities. Interdependence is an important factor in determining the kind of collaboration that's appropriate. Following Thompson's classical book *Organizations in Action* (1967), interdependence can be:

- *Sequential* – Certain tasks in a process must happen before others can. For instance, when building a product, such as a car door, you have to press a steel plate into the shape of a door, then paint it – doing it the other order is not possible.

- *Pooled* – Fulfillment of one task is dependent on many other tasks, all of which are necessary, none of which are sufficient. This is common in problem solving, where a solution is often dependent on contributions from many group or team members who separately contribute their expertise, imagination, and ideas.

- *Reciprocal* – Work performed by each member of the team or group depends on the work performed by everyone else. This is common in market situations – you cannot sell something unless a buyer is willing to buy, and vice versa.

Using Thompson's interdependencies, companies can align the "Three C's" of collaboration and facilitate communication and coordination (see Figure 2).

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Figure 2: Aligning the "Three C's"

Component	Construct	Capacity
Sequential	• Technologies for planning • Scheduled meetings • Formal task forces	• Planning and project management skills • Knowledge of rules and standardized procedures • Vertical communication channels
Pooled	• Technologies for communication • Physical proximity • Opportunities for the development of relationships and trust	• Cross-functional team design • Full-time integrators • Skill in listening, balancing advocacy and inquiry • Horizontal communication channels
Reciprocal	• Technologies for commitment • Opportunities for face-to-face communication and unscheduled meetings	• Skill in mutual adjustment and negotiation • Shared values

In Chapter 4, we use this framework with case studies to illustrate how it can be applied to any company to reveal issues and possible outcomes, based on the current mix of component, construct, and capacity.

Major Findings

- **There are different types of collaboration.** Collaboration can be focused – aimed at a specific project or target. It can also be a way of operating across the organization that is more a way of doing business. Both require tools and technologies and training, but developing a company-wide collaboration mindset is harder to accomplish because it involves developing a culture rather than a set of skills.

- **The problems with collaboration often stem from bad process design.** Successful collaboration is the product of thoughtful design that is based on specific goals, timetables, metrics and measurement, and the capabilities of the people involved. People cannot collaborate on process activities that are not aligned with goals or results.

- **Collaboration requires both an "emotional quotient" and an "active component."** Collaboration requires the emotional strength for people to speak openly about the business and to accept and embrace change. Working together involves getting more perspectives and ideas into consideration, hence the willingness to reach out to others and share ideas.

- **Culture and unwritten rules undermine collaboration.** People will almost always do what they perceive to be in their own best interests. If collaboration with others, even if it makes economic or business sense, is not supported by compensation and reward systems, people will not collaborate. If unwritten rules say, for example, that working

across groups will get you in trouble with your own manager, then you are very unlikely to do it (even if you give it lip service).

- **The lack of supportive reward, recognition, and compensation systems undermines attempts at collaboration.** We found time and again that these systems have to acknowledge collaborative behavior. When you reward individual heroes, the message is that collaboration is not important – regardless of any public pronouncements to the contrary.

- **Technology is neither the challenge nor the solution to collaboration.** Technology is a tool – a necessary tool – but nothing more than a tool. When they relied on technologies to inspire people to collaborate, most companies failed to see any significant results. There is, however, a great tendency to look to technology to solve problems that are organizational in nature, and to blame the technology when it doesn't work.

- **Collaboration can work well in big projects that individuals or individual organizations cannot solve alone.** It also can work well when the task or goal is so daunting and so important to the organization that people lay aside their personal feelings and concerns to make sure it gets done right.

Key Recommendations

- **Identify a focus and common goals for collaborative efforts.** When collaboration fails, it is often because there are no clearly defined goals and objectives to give the collaborative process purpose and energy. The collaborating team must agree on goals and objectives, or reshape both to ensure that everyone is aiming in the right direction. These goals must be tied to business strategies and outcomes, not the simple implementation of collaborative technologies.

- **Make sure senior leaders publicly endorse and support collaboration.** Senior leadership's public support for focused or broad collaboration is a powerful signal to managers and all employees that they should be looking for opportunities to collaborate.

- **Include a good facilitator.** Every collaborative team needs a facilitator – formal or informal, insider or hired expert, as the situation demands. The facilitator must be able to adopt a neutral stance whenever needed, focusing on the smooth functioning of the team toward its business goal.

- **Meet physically first, then virtually.** The value of face-to-face meetings plays out over the course of a project – people who have met have a harder time ignoring one another and are less likely to let one another down. These meetings also give members a sense of how the others work and of what they know, making it easier to get to the right person when they need to.

- **Align reward, recognition, and compensation systems to support, not thwart, collaboration.** Reward collaborative behavior publicly and make collaborative behavior or team performance a component of performance assessment.

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