

Collaboration: A Better Way of Working

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Some established strategies are dysfunctional and counterproductive.

While many of the old established strategies and negotiation processes are indeed “the norm,” they are also tragically dysfunctional and counterproductive. They squander precious resources and are among the primary causes of failure of all kinds in non-profits, businesses, governments, civic organizations, and families.

They seem logical because we’re accustomed to them.

But since they are the strategies and processes used for years by business leaders, politicians, parents, and other people we have looked up to or viewed as successful, we tend not to question them. We simply accept that “this is what you have to do to make things happen and to get results for yourself and your constituents.”

Those strategies are based on the Law of the Jungle.

We treat those old dysfunctional strategies as logical, normal, necessary, and even good. Never mind that they are based on the primitive Law of the Jungle—kill or be killed, eat or be eaten—a viewpoint that leads us to conclude that every conflict, every confrontation, must end with a winner and a loser. If “we” want to win, “they” have to lose. Unrestrained and ruthless competition is the rule.

Win-win collaboration may seem weak and ridiculous by comparison.

If that is our mindset, then the very idea of *collaboration* is bound to seem weak and ridiculous. Remember, *when we agree to genuine collaboration, we are committing to a win-win philosophy, a paradox in which parties with differing and divergent needs and goals must all emerge victorious in order for any of them to be victorious.*

Now, what sports or military example can you think of that supports that philosophy? None, right? We have been conditioned to look at “opposing” parties as someone to be vanquished.

But whenever an ongoing relationship is a must, then a win-win outcome is a must.

When our conflict is with someone we want to—or must—continue working with, we simply cannot afford to treat that person as an enemy. If we need an ongoing relationship, anything less than win-win is unacceptable.

A win-lose outcome, to even the smallest degree, sets the stage for a weak, unproductive ongoing relationship. There will always be pockets of resentment and mistrust in such a relationship, especially on the part of the loser. What’s more, even if you are the winner, who wants to be in partnership with a loser? We’d all rather team up with a winner for a whole bunch of good reasons. That means it is in our best interest to make sure that all parties to our negotiations finish as winners.

Now admittedly, sometime we may be put in the position of having to fight and defeat what we are sure is an *evil* enemy. But even then there is a price to pay for pursuing such a win-lose strategy, and we will do well to go into it recognizing that our victory is unlikely to be complete or lasting.

True win-win collaboration is the path to lasting victory.

The truth in most situations is that we can have complete and lasting victory for ourselves only when we also—and perhaps first—assure complete and lasting victory for all other affected parties. Anything less than a win-win outcome means that everybody loses sooner or later, directly or indirectly. So, genuine collaboration demands that deliberations begin only when all parties are ready to commit to a win-win outcome as a worthy and realistic goal.

Aiming for compromise is a cowardly strategy.

Please understand one thing clearly: Collaboration, *not compromise*, is the aim. Compromise is more of a lose-lose situation than it is a win-win. In a compromise, all parties have to give up something. In other words, they all lose. Energy is sapped, and enthusiasm is difficult to muster among parties who have settled for a compromise decision.

Settling for compromise before you have made every effort to get a win-win outcome is cowardly and amounts to de facto failure to fully achieve what any of the parties needed or desired going in. Compromise is an absolute last resort.

Going for win-win is the courageous strategy.

Going for win-win, on the other hand, requires each party to courageously say to the others, “We are one-hundred percent committed to understanding your genuine needs and desires in this situation and doing our utmost to help you meet or exceed them.”

Win-win collaboration does not mean that we simply give the other parties whatever they *ask* for. It does mean that we make it our business to be mutually open about what we want and need. It also means that we commit ourselves to being honest and reasonable about where the borders and limits are that determine whether we will feel violated or taken advantage of.

We are each free to focus fully on the *other* party’s needs, because we know that the other party is focusing fully on *our* needs. In the process, everyone’s needs are met—or, better yet, exceeded—and we set in motion potent positive forces that move and change hearts.

Such an approach is in marked contrast to the usual scenario of shooting holes in one another’s viewpoints, lobbing grenades at one another, claiming certain territory for ourselves, erecting fortresses to protect our own interests, and then being surprised when we fail at working together in a spirit of unity and find that we lack support for our decisions.

Genuine collaboration requires us to admit our fears...

Part of the challenge of a collaborative approach is that it requires a willingness to be vulnerable and to express both our positive *and* negative emotions to one another. To make collaboration work, we have to be honest with one another about our fears of lack, loss, and limitation: “If [this] happens, we’re concerned that there won’t be enough [money, energy, infrastructure, or whatever] left to do what we want to do!” “If we let you do [that], we’re afraid that we’ll lose [this]!” “If [that] happens to us, we’re concerned that we will be [too cash poor, not nimble enough, not credible enough, etc.] to recover!”

...and to look out for one another.

Intellectually, we recognize that most of our fears are unrealistic or unwarranted. All the same, beyond being honest and open with one another in expressing them, we need to solemnly commit to looking out for one another in regard to our fears and concerns.

Today’s complex world requires a spirit of win-win collaboration and good will.

Much of what we encounter in today’s complex world is too big and too demanding to be handled successfully if we are hobbled at the starting gate by a win-lose attitude. It is wise to go into a potentially contentious or competitive situation only after we have figured out how to move completely away from adversarial behavior and resolutely toward a spirit of win-win collaboration and good will.