COLLABORATION:

CONCEPTUALLY SIMPLE, OPERATIONALLY CHALLENGING

Excerpts from The Partnering Guide™ Blog

By Jan Twombly, CSAP and Jeff Shuman, CSAP, PhD

The Rhythm of Business®

COLLABORATION:
Conceptually Simple, Operationally Challenging

Collaboration is one of the most misunderstood and overused concepts in business today. There are many perspectives on what it is, ranging from the simplistic—working with other people to produce an outcome—to the complexity of the latest technical platform that allows data and documents to be shared. It is treated as a value, a competency, and even an event.

No wonder companies are struggling in their efforts to increase collaboration, as recently described by Harvard's Francesca Gino. Yet building an organization's ability to collaborate has become critical. The Institute for Corporate Productivity finds that the ability to collaborate is "highly correlated with market performance."

Neither finding comes as any surprise. Collaboration is conceptually simple and operationally challenging. Our own hands-on experience, coupled with research implemented through our Collaborating to Win™ assessment of individual ability has consistently linked better collaboration to better outcomes. The key questions for leaders implementing strategies that hinge on partnerships and alliances with external parties are, "How to define collaboration as a behavior?" and "How to build it as an organizational capability…and advantage?"

This collection of posts from *The Partnering Guide*™ blog presents our perspective based on over 20 years of personal experience, research, and helping others implement collaboration as a *strategic and purposeful way of working.* We hope you find these posts enlightening and welcome your thoughts and stories of creating successful outcomes through collaboration.

In collaboration and partnership,

Jan and Jeff

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Collaboration: Easier Said Than Done

Collaboration is a business buzzword that everyone thinks they know what it means and how to do it, but few truly do; yet it has never been more important than it is today. In addition to the lack of collaborative skills and mindset would-be collaborators also face a *Collaboration Paradox*—the systems, processes, and policies that have enabled success in the past reinforce barriers impeding success in today's ecosystem-based collaborative business models. Developing the necessary capability—the mindset, skillset, and toolset for intra- and inter-organizational collaboration—is a work in process for most organizations. This capability also needs a backbone to latch itself to—the culture, policies, and processes of a *leadership system* that enable and encourage collaborative ways of working.

As a business concept *du jour,* collaboration means everything from open office concepts to electronic documents that multiple people can work on simultaneously, to team work. These are all elements of collaboration, but they fail to adequately define it. Collaboration is a risk sharing and resource leveraging **strategic behavior** that necessitates coordinating activities and exchanging information for mutual benefit. It requires an environment of trust, transparency, and respect. It is a comprehensive way of thinking and acting that takes proficiency in multiple skills. It is not a single skill and certainly not a technology.

Companies that are successful in becoming digitally-enabled and customer-obsessed—and therefore prepared to compete as we enter the 2020s—are those best able to collaborate internally and externally. For example, MIT Sloan Management Review's research finds that: "A focus on collaboration—both within organizations and with external partners and stakeholders—is central to how companies create business value and establish competitive advantage."[1] According to a study by SAP, "Digital winners tend to have more managers with strong collaboration skills than lower performing companies. In addition, 74 percent of these top performing companies plan to actively nurture the concept of collaboration within their organizations over the next few years."[2]

[1]David Kiron, "Why Your Company Needs More Collaboration," *MIT Sloan Management Review,* Fall 2017

[2]Virginia Backaitis, "Collaboration Leads to Success in Digital Workplaces," SAP Survey, 2017

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Despite collaborative skills becoming ever more the imperative, the reality of collaborative execution is far more challenging than the data would have you believe. In a study from Capgemini, approximately 85 percent of executives believe that their organizations easily collaborate across functions and business units, whereas only a little over 40 percent of their employees—who are actually on the front-lines of collaboration—agree.[3] A *Harvard Business Review* article on collaboration sheds light on this collaboration gap:

> Leaders think about collaboration too narrowly: as a value to cultivate but not a skill to teach. Businesses have tried increasing it through various methods, from open offices to naming it an official corporate goal. While many of these approaches yield progress—mainly by creating opportunities for collaboration or demonstrating institutional support for it—they all try to influence employees through superficial or heavy-handed means, and research has shown that none of them reliably delivers truly robust collaboration.[4]

Does this mean that, while collaboration works in theory, it can't be practically applied? Not at all. But the question does strike at the heart of the problem—*collaboration is easier said than done.*

Let's look at a simple example. A company we were engaged with instituted a campaign to improve collaboration amongst sales teams. The company spent a lot of time, effort, and money on a program intended to promote collaboration within the teams. When the results were evaluated, the program's sponsors found that level of collaboration hadn't improved at all.

Our analysis quickly identified why that was the case. The teams' performance was evaluated by rank-ordering each of the team members from best to worst. Using the existing performance criteria, the individuals at the top received a number of "rewards" for their success, while the folks at the bottom of the rankings lost their jobs. Clearly, the evaluation process encouraged an "everyman for himself" approach that was exactly the opposite to the desired increase in team collaboration.

That's the collaboration paradox at work—rewarding the traditional approach while investing to get the desired increase in collaboration. Despite focusing on collaborative skill building, the company neglected to adjust their employee evaluation and reward system—elements of the leadership system—to support collaboration. Leadership worked to change the evaluation system to reward collaboration and our subsequent analysis demonstrated both increases in collaboration and sales performance.

[3] "The Digital Culture Challenge: Closing the Employee-Leadership Gap," Capgemini Digital Transformation Institute, 2018

[4] Francesca Gino, "Cracking the Code on Sustained Collaboration," *Harvard Business Review,* November-December 2019

This is but one example of attempts to foster collaboration falling flat because the leadership system was built for competition among team members, not collaboration. Until companies evolve their leadership systems, collaboration as a strategic behavior will remain easier said than done.

Would be collaborators face a *Collaboration Paradox*— the systems, processes, and policies that have enabled success in the past reinforce barriers impeding success in today's ecosystem-based collaborative business models.

Five Skills for Collaborating Across Boundaries

In our post *Collaboration: Easier Said Than Done* we said that leadership systems had to evolve to break the collaboration paradox—the barriers that impede collaboration, but enabled success in a prior business environment. That's one part of the puzzle of making collaboration an organizational capability. There are also operational and execution skills to collaboration between entities in addition to the psychological skills and values such as openness, empathy, and delegation that are typically present when individuals behave collaboratively.[5]

Behaviors are ways of conducting oneself or how a group acts in response to its environment. On a psychological level, collaboration is a natural response to an environment of trust, transparency and respect. In that nurturing environment, one is more likely to be open to other's ideas, empathetic to their concerns, and willing to give up some level of control and credit.

Organizations agree to collaborate to *leverage and align* the resources of each party for customer benefit which should result in mutual benefit for the collaborators. This requires uniting two or more entities that each have their own strategies, cultures, goals, and processes, implying *crossing organizational boundaries* to access those resources. This adds complexity, risk, and challenge to the endeavor.

The Role of Trust

Trust is essential but insufficient for collaboration to produce results. It is developed by experiencing trustworthiness, which is demonstrated through accountability and accepting the other party's rights and interests as valid.[6] When there is a lack of trust in a partnership, motives are questioned and actions second-guessed. The party that believes it cannot trust its partner wants more and more information and tends to duplicate its partner's

[5]See for example: Francesca Gino, "Cracking the Code on Sustained Collaboration," *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 2019

[6]Jeffrey Shuman, Janice Twombly with David Rottenberg, *Collaborative Communities: Partnering for Profit in the Networked Economy*, Dearborn Trade, 2001

work, losing the resource leverage that is the purpose of collaborating. Lack of trust is akin to a metastasizing cancer on a partnership, as one person's expressions of mistrust spreads to the next person. Soon the partner gets frustrated and people start to believe there is an ulterior motive to the behavior they are experiencing.

As a partnership develops, trust starts low, building as the partners engage with one another and experience trustworthiness. That experience can come through human interactions or it can come through systematic and programmatic interactions that are unbiased and make it easy for partners to conduct their business together. Because many companies have yet to fully integrate a collaborative way of working into their processes, policies, and procedures, the ease of interaction is not always present, creating friction and inefficiency. This drag on partnering reduces the benefits of the resource leverage partnering is intended to produce and makes people less willing to believe or to trust that partnering is the appropriate behavior.

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Operationalizing and Executing Collaboration

Skills are an ability to do something well. The something rises from a casual activity to a skill through practice, which implies a learning mindset. The skills that follow all require learning in every interaction with partners and customers. This means that one cannot collaborate well until and unless one has the ability to learn fast—to recognize one's current level of understanding about the situation at hand and the participants' needs, wants, obligations, and barriers; to make assumptions about how together you might achieve a desired outcome; to put those assumptions into practice; learn if it works and if not, why not, and to iterate your assumptions and try again. *(Figure 1 – Learn Fast).* Think of the ability to learn fast as the uber skill of collaboration.

The skills of collaboration that certainly take practice and result in an ability to respond individually and as an organization to the current business environment include the five that follow *(Figure 2 – Collaborative Skills).* We don't claim these to be exhaustive, but rather core skills without which collaborative behavior is not possible.

The give and get of reciprocity

At its essence, collaboration is a continual negotiation in which I'll help you achieve what you are trying to do so that you are more willing to help me do what I am trying to do. In collaboration, one gets what one wants and influences outcomes by helping others achieve their desired outcomes. This is

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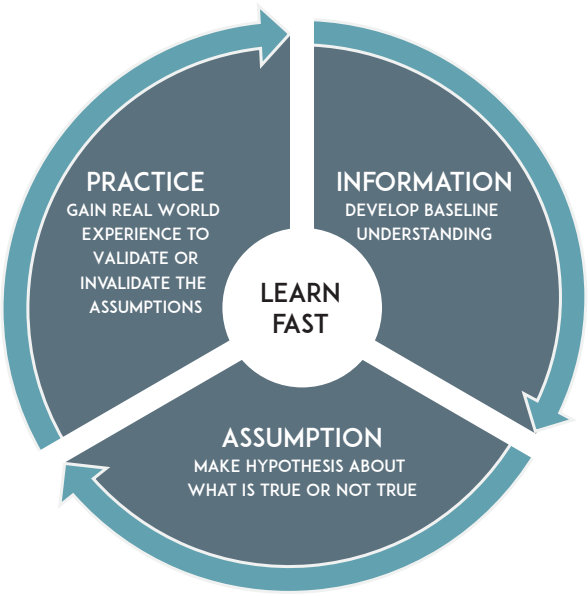

Figure 1 – *Learn Fast*

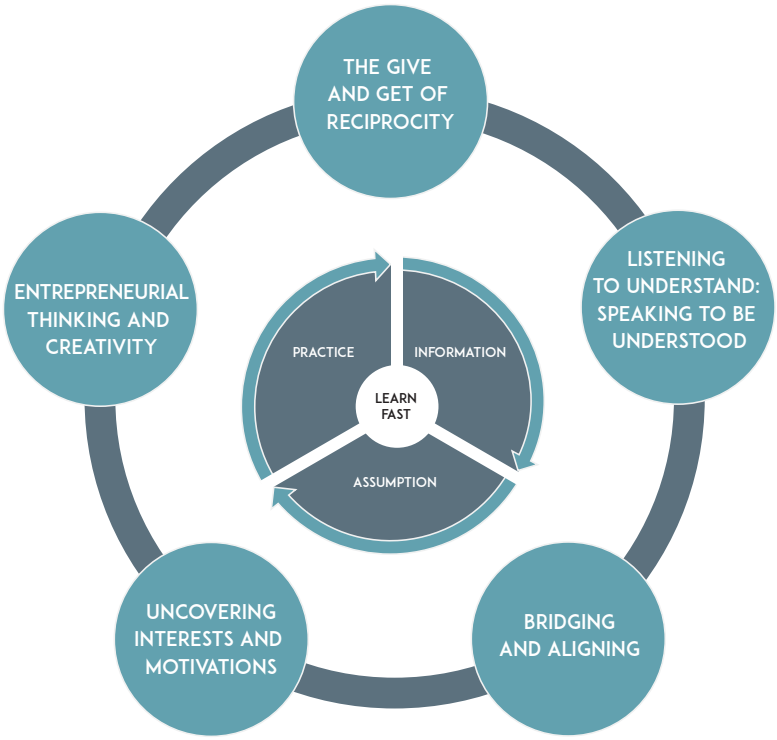

Figure 2 – *Collaborative Skills*

true between individuals and when those individuals are acting in their role as representatives of organizations.

The fuel for this exchange of value is "relationship currencies;" the insight, access, knowledge, and physical resources of one party, which another can only tap into because a collaborative relationship exists. Relationship currencies, such as access to a thought leader or decision maker, knowledge of a company's management strategy, or technology road-map, are only available within the context of a relationship built on trust, transparency, and respect. [7]

We often have to influence others to engage in or refrain from certain activities or behaviors to advance the strategic intent of the collaboration over parochial interests. Often, we have no authority over the individuals we are attempting to influence. Relationship currencies both provide and facilitate the exchange of value. The receipt of something of value can influence an individual's behavior.[8] In order to influence an organization's view, negotiating position, or actions, individuals must be influenced.

Listening to understand; speaking to be understood

As noted by Stephen Covey, "most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply."[9]

Whether you are the initiator or recipient of communication, the key to communication in collaboration is to create "common language with shared meaning." To use an example we frequently use in training sessions, when one party says "tree," they picture the oak at the end of their street. Their listener is thinking about the redwood forest he drives through on the way to Santa Cruz, California! Clearly, they don't have the same mental picture, which means they aren't well aligned and are talking past each other creating misunderstandings that impede collaboration.

Creating common language with shared meaning also requires appreciating communication styles and being able to understand what is unsaid. Given corporate politics, posturing, and those pesky organizational barriers to collaboration that keep surfacing, it is often essential to parse words and how they are said to get to actual meaning.

When there is trust, it is much easier to communicate more transparently. The job of the collaborator is to speak plainly, listen actively, and ensure both parties see not only the same tree, but the same forest.

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[7] See *The Real Power of Collaboration,* https://rhythmofbusiness.com/insights.php?pid=32, The Rhythm of Business, 2009. Also, Cohen and Bradford, *Influence without Authority,* 3rd edition, Wiley, 2017

[8] Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion,* Harper Collins, 1984, 1994, 2007, 2016

[9] Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change,* Simon and Schuster 1989

In collaboration, the intent is to create greater value. In compromise, the parties find a middle ground, usually leaving value behind and often creating the risk of future disagreement because no one is satisfied.

Bridging and aligning

Differences are the strength of collaborations, building upon diverse sources of value to accomplish something the partners could not do on their own. Yet sometimes diversity leads to a collision course before finding an aligned path forward. This is true within a single function of an organization, across functions within an organization, and among partners. A critical element that enables collaboration is the ability to bridge differences and align diverse views and resources. Until that occurs, decisions don't get made and the work of the collaboration doesn't move forward.

It is important to distinguish collaboration from compromise. In collaboration, the intent is to create greater value. In compromise, the parties find a middle ground, usually leaving value behind and often creating the risk of future disagreement because no one is satisfied. Bridging differences and aligning stakeholders requires that the parties are willing to be creative and consider options, making liberal use of the relationship currencies that are valuable to each party.

This often requires finding a third way. It isn't the way any of the partners would do something if acting on their own, but it is a new way that allows each to satisfy their individual requirements. The third way may turn out to be an innovation that saves time and money for all.

Uncovering interests and motivations

Motivations matter when collaborating. They facilitate or prevent achieving alignment with decisions. They can be a cause of problems and conflict. Equally, understanding each party's motivations opens avenues for finding innovative resolution to problems. Understanding both your partners' motivations as well as yours is essential for getting to each party's underlying interests—what really matters or *what* they are trying to accomplish. The *what* may be very different from the *how* when you can get beyond stated positions which are simply one way of achieving an objective and get to interests.

It takes astute observation to get at a core understanding of interests. A facility at inquiry—the art of the question—is also essential. Asking good questions requires an ability to listen and advance the understanding by formulating the next interaction. We often refer to the five-whys methodology, also known as the fishbone diagram, to get a sufficient understanding of motivations to form creative solutions.

Entrepreneurial thinking and creativity

Collaboration is a value creation strategy—creating something new that one company could not achieve on its own. That makes it an entrepreneurial activity. Indeed, like an entrepreneur, collaborators have to set a North Star—the purpose of the collaboration stated from the perspective of the value customers and the partners receive. It should also define the experience they have in participating in the collaboration.

And just as an entrepreneur rallies people around the vision for his or her venture, creating an environment where they are comfortable making their resources and relationship currencies available to achieve the North Star, the leaders of any partnering venture must do the same. This brings us back to trust. Without a sufficient level of trust, people won't rally and make their resources available and the collaboration will not succeed.

Collaborating Across Boundaries

In *Collaboration: Easier Said Than Done* we said that the leadership system had to evolve to break the collaboration paradox. That's part of the puzzle. The other element is that the skills of collaborating between entities need to create an environment where the partners can leverage and align resources across boundaries, uniting two or more distinct entities in the common purpose of delivering benefit to the customer, and thereby the collaborators. Collaboration is conceptually simple, but operationally very challenging.

Like an entrepreneur, collaborators have to set a North Star—the purpose of the collaboration stated from the perspective of the value customers and the partners receive. It should also define the experience they have in participating in the collaboration.

Collaborative Leadership: The Antidote to the Collaboration Paradox

Thus far in this series of posts on collaboration, we've defined it as a purposeful, strategic behavior that is easier said than done. This is because of both a failure to build the **capability**—the mindset, skillset, and toolset—to collaborate across boundaries and the **collaboration paradox**—the systems, processes, and policies that helped companies be successful in the past that today impede their ability to collaborate.[10] In this post we look at both **collaborative leadership** and the **leadership system** required to support and implement the capability as the antidote to the people and organizational challenges of achieving success in cross-boundary collaborations.

Defining Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership is the ability to rally people and their resources, broadly defined to include both traditional resources and relationship currencies, around the strategic purpose of collaborating as defined by the value it brings to customers and collaborators. This strategic purpose is known as the North Star. Collaborative leaders create the trusting, respectful environment in which activities can be prioritized and coordinated, and information exchanged in pursuit of that North Star. These leaders accomplish alignment with the strategic purpose absent traditional levers of control and instead use their collaborative skills to help would-be collaborators understand why it is in their interest to make their resources and relationship currencies available for mutual benefit.

Collaborative leaders play a variety of different roles, depending on the situation at hand:

- **Entrepreneurial catalyst—** Guide people to learn fast, to make assumptions about how collaborators might achieve a desired outcome; to put those assumptions into practice; learn if it works and if not, why not, and to iterate assumptions and try again.

[10]"Collaboration: Easier Said Than Done," *https://rhythmofbusiness.com/insights.php?pid=87, The Partnering Guide,* The Rhythm of Business, December 9, 2019

- **Discerning orchestrator**—Bring customers, partners, and stakeholders together to create and implement solutions that provide desired outcomes and experiences for all concerned, bridging differences and aligning interests to reach the North Star

- **Empathetic coach**—Use listening and speaking skills to understand motivations, interests, and challenges collaborators have in navigating the organization and the partner, helping the collaborators solve problems in a manner that produces a fair and efficient distribution of value, keeping them aligned with the North Star

- **Enthusiastic evangelist**—Advocate for collaborators, helping them attain and leverage resources, evolve culture, build trust, and champion the collaboration with relevant stakeholders

- **Diplomatic influencer**—Help people see that it is in their best interest to make their resources and relationship currencies available to their collaborators, or to do something differently, so that there is a mutually beneficial outcome

Whatever the specific situation, collaborative leaders:[11]

- Inspire others to embrace what can only be achieved by harnessing the collective wisdom and resources of the ecosystem

- Think, communicate, and act holistically, always bringing the customer's perspective

- Break down the traditional boundaries of functional and organizational silos and blast through complexity to create agile, cross-functional teams that mesh with their external partners

- Create opportunities for agile experimentation and the means to advance them through the business, eliminating non-value-added process and tearing down structural, cultural, and political barriers

- Help people viscerally grasp what is different as they collectively reach for the North Star

Collaborative work requires everyone to be leaders. What leadership means is different if you are in the executive suite, the front lines, or the middle of

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[11]Jan Twombly, Jeff Shuman, and Lorin Coles, Own Your Transformation: A Five-Point Agenda for Creating Your Organization's Collaborative Leadership System for a Digital World, Insights from the SMART Partnering Alliance of The Rhythm of Business and Alliancesphere

What leadership means is different if you are in the executive suite, the front lines, or the middle of the organization.

the organization. Each has a different role to play. Executives must demonstrate the behavior they expect, foster the right environment, provide the resources required, and effect the necessary organizational changes. The leaders in the middle of the organization, including the alliance and partnering professionals who are the tip of the spear of collaborative leadership, are the coaches of the front lines—the people who engage with customers and partners on a daily basis and who make or break any collaboration. It is the leaders in the middle who must play the multi-dimensional role of change agent and orchestrator, all the while building the capability—the mindset, skillset, and toolset—that enables the company to execute in collaborative models.

The Leadership System

Every organization has a leadership system. It is the vehicle through which leadership is exercised. It manifests itself through interdependent and reinforcing mechanisms for:

- Decision making and execution
- Leader selection and development
- Accountability to deliver desired experiences and outcomes for customers, partners, and stakeholders
- Shaping and structuring the organization
- Advancing an organization's cultural norms, values, and ethics

An organization's leadership system has both formal and informal elements and is embedded in its processes and culture. It usually isn't talked about much, but it shows up in every aspect of an organization. The elements depicted in *Figure 1, Elements of a Leadership System,* constitute a typical leadership system. There is not a one-size-fits-all collaborative leadership system because how leadership is exercised in any given organization varies based on structure and purpose.

Figure 1 –*Elements of a Leadership System*

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Barriers to Collaboration

A **collaboration paradox** emerges when the leadership system supports processes and behaviors that are barriers to effective collaboration. For example, as we described in *Collaboration: Easier Said than Done* some performance management systems still support a stacked "calibration" in which individuals on a team are pitted against each other when the desire is that they collaborate. Or perhaps resource allocation doesn't take into account contractual commitments to partners, leaving alliances scrambling to gain access to people, money, and equipment. In both cases, the way the components of the leadership system are operationalized creates a disincentive or barrier to collaboration. These barriers are the key causes of friction and inefficiencies—i.e., lost time, money, and opportunity—when partnering.

We've shared data in the past that senior leadership thinks their organizations collaborate well, but employees don't agree. This C-Suite collaboration gap is caused at least in part by the collaboration paradox.[12] We asked the ASAP community to identify the barriers to collaboration and partnering causing inefficiencies. They gave us a very long list that include both individual, non-collaborative behaviors encouraged by their existing leadership systems, as well as structural barriers. We've summarized their list against the seven components of a leadership system. *Figure 2, Barriers to Effective Collaboration,* represents the most frequently cited aspects of non-collaborative leadership systems.[13]

[12]"Closing the C-Suite's Collaboration Gap," *https://rhythmofbusiness.com/insights.php?pid=79, The Partnering Guide,* The Rhythm of Business, Inc., December 20, 2018

[13]Jan Twombly and Jeff Shuman, *"Partnering Readiness: The New Strategic Leadership Agenda for Partnering Professionals,"* Strategic Alliance Quarterly, Q4 2019

The objective of the new, collaborative leadership system? To ensure that processes and culture don't prevent people from collaborating, purposefully and opportunistically, with colleagues in their own organizations, and, in one-to-one alliances, multi-partner engagements, and in ecosystems.

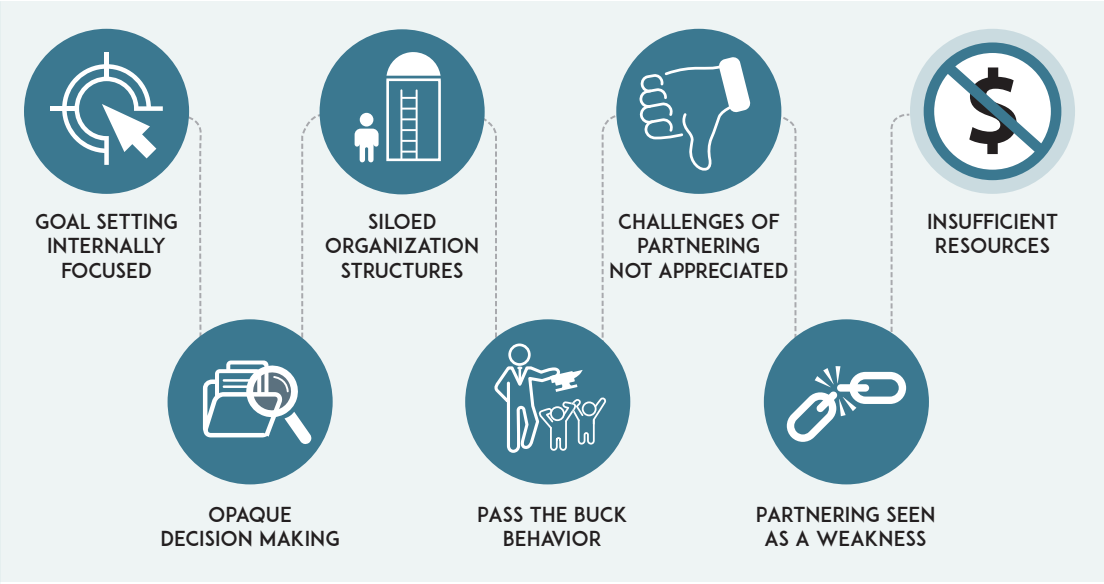

Figure 2 -*Barriers to Effective Collaboration*

The leadership system is the backbone that enables and supports collaborative behavior and is part of shaping culture. These barriers to collaboration have to be removed if organizations are to become agile and succeed in our customer-obsessed, partnering everywhere world of 2020.

What Makes a Leadership System Collaborative?

Figure 3 – Key Characteristics of a Collaborative Leadership System describes the desired mindset and focus needed to engage successfully in today's ecosystems. The objective of the new, collaborative leadership system? To ensure that processes and culture don't prevent people from collaborating, purposefully and opportunistically, with colleagues in their own organizations, and, in one-to-one alliances, multi-partner engagements, and in ecosystems. Additionally, leadership systems operate at many levels, including how a manager incentivizes her department, a team leader encourages accountability, or an alliance governance structure aligns its decision-making calendar with the internal governance calendars of the partners. Alliance and partner professionals influence and in some instances control how these elements of a leadership system are implemented and can do so in ways that advance a collaborative agenda.

LEADERSHIP SYSTEM ELEMENTS	KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF A COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP SYSTEM
PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT	Goal setting and evaluation incorporates externally facing and internal cross-functional team goals and metrics
DECISION MAKING	Takes into account that there are governance processes between the organization and its external partners that may result in choices and courses of action that represent a "third way" in order to best align the parties' interests
ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE	The activities, processes, and people are united in small, value-creating, fit for purpose teams that follow agile design and operations principles. Silos and boundaries are more easily permeated, with the North Star as a guide
ACCOUNTABILITY	Obligations to deliver the elements of value one has committed to are holistic, including external constituencies as well as to one's own organization. There are also obligations of teams to each other and partner companies to each other
TALENT DEVELOPMENT	Collaboration and partnering skills are recoginzed as essential to corporate success and thus are considered in recruitment, compensation, advancement, and ongoing professional development. The specific roles required in external collaborations (governance members, alliance manager, etc.) are specifically recognized, goaled, and compensated
VALUES, CULTURE, ETHICS	Norms, behaviors, principles, and codes of conduct promote inclusiveness, celebrate differences, transparency, and encourage a way of thinking and acting that espouses that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts
RESOURCE ALLOCATION	The process of prioritizing, assigning, and managing assets (financial, human, physical plant, and others) is done in a manner that recognizes certain assets are required throughout a collaboration lifecycle to create intended value

Figure 3 –*Key Characteristics of a Collaborative Leadership System*

Collaborative leaders at all levels of the organization need to translate each characteristic into specific policy, process, structure, and behavior appropriate for their company and the partners it works with to provide customers, partners, and their companies the value and experiences they desire. In our partnering everywhere world, it is essential to evolve leadership and the system through which leadership is exercised to break the collaboration paradox.

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About the Authors and The Rhythm of Business

Jan Twombly, CSAP and **Jeff Shuman CSAP, PhD,** are the principals of **The Rhythm of Business,** a consultancy and advisory firm with core expertise in partnering, strategic alliances, and collaboration. Since 1999 they have consulted globally and offered education and training to help organizations achieve higher levels of partnering and alliance success. They work with leaders to build and execute a collaborative leadership agenda, break down barriers, and drive consistently excellent alliance practice throughout an organization and its partnerships.

Twombly serves on the Board of Directors of the Association of Strategic Alliance Professionals as Chairman of the Editorial Committee. Shuman is also professor of management at Bentley University in Waltham, Massachusetts.

The Partnering Guide™ blog regularly features their latest thought leadership and posts on current topics in partnering, strategic alliance, and collaboration. Access it at ***www.rhythmofbusiness.com/insights.***

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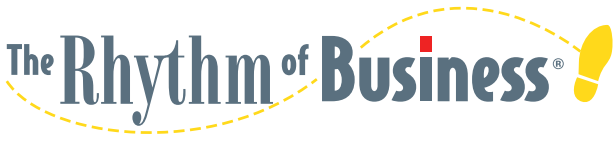

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