Collaboration vs. C-Three (Cooperation, Coordination, and Communication)
by Leo Denise

Collaboration...cooperation...coordination...communication. We tend to use these words interchangeably. All are presumed descriptors of what people need to do to work together effectively. Yet when these words are mixed together, mush results. Each term is different and each has not only strengths but also limitations.

The CCCs of Togetherness

Communication speaks to how persons understand each other and how information (not just "facts," but policies, prospects, rumors, feelings, failures, and all other human experiences) is transferred in organizations. While "lack of communication" tops the problem list in most organizations, the diagnosis is a facile one for many reasons.

The problem of communication, for example, is readily laid at the feet of leaders and managers, who are admonished to communicate more frequently and clearly. What we need here are more newsletters...more memos...more meetings." This recommendation can deny our personal responsibility for reading, listening, observing...and remembering. For most of us, failure to speak is less critical than failure to listen. Most of us are better at pushing information out than at taking it in.

The glibness about communication problems stems in part from a failure to differentiate between all possible information and the information individuals need to do their jobs effectively. For some employees, the apparent premise is that they should know everything. When this request is honored, so much time can be spent communicating that there is little time left to accomplish things that are worth communicating about! As noted in the *INNOVATING* PROFILE on "Data Use, not just data collection" (V6N2), the key is not how much information is made available but what people do with it. Most people are not at all clear on the information that they need to perform at a high level.

We also act as if ideal communications will forge agreement. In reality, when people accurately communicate, they can learn just how far apart they really are. Indeed, many kinds of agreement, actually mask the different perceptions that full communication would uncover.

Peter Drucker, in one of his many practical books (*Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*), sums up the communications grail in this way:

In no other area have intelligent men and women worked harder or with greater dedication than psychologists, human relations experts, managers, and management students have worked on improving communications in our major institutions. Yet communications has proven as elusive as the Unicorn. [1]

Perhaps the issue is less with communication than with its consequences. Even if we could define and express ideal communications, the relationship to results would remain illusive.

Coordination, like communication, begins with an assumption of differences. Different persons, different units, different units create overlap, redundancy and/or separation without coordination. As in athletics, we are coordinated when the arms and legs move together. Everything falls into balance if not symmetry. Coordination is about efficiency.

Unlike communication, however, coordination looks to inform each unit or part of the whole as to how and when it must act. Coordination is a framework used to ensure that otherwise disparate forces will all pull in harness. Among the major coordination problems in any large organization is that between central office and field units. In many cases, coordination boils down to two conditions: that people and units know what they are to do and when they are to do it; and that they see the relationship between what they do and what the coordinated whole achieves.

Coordination achieves efficiency of motion but tells us nothing about the consequence of motion. To speak of a "well oiled" machine or team tells us that friction is reduced but not that results are achieved. Indeed, there can be a weak correlation between coordination and results depending on context. In sports, for example, coordination between a passer and received in football is essential; each must know where the other will be. In a fast break offense in basketball, however, speed and opportunity replace position and relationship.

If coordination has its limits how about our third "C" word—cooperation. Surely the more of this commodity, the better. Not necessarily!

Cooperation is now a hallmark for not every corporate behavior, but corporate culture. The message is clear: get with the group. The observation that Sue or Dan is "not a team player" signals limited mobility in any large organization. While at some level who could object to cooperative behaviors, not everyone adds their highest value by adding soothing thoughts to a "group think." Cooperation is important but so is divergence. If someone has a very different idea to contribute to the group—perhaps as a challenge to its current directions, norms, or assumptions, is it "non-cooperative" to raise it? Much of creativity comes from the sparks of disagreement, dissent, and even conflict. Cooperation too often becomes a call for increased socialization to a culture, not a prompt for high performance. Also, one opposite of cooperative is competitive. Do we deny that "competitive juices" can be useful? Consider also that virtually all of what we call "strategy" is about competitive or comparative advantage. Cooperative thinking is rarely the same as strategic insight.

The organization in which communications constantly fly on all subjects, in which everyone knows and follows the cues to tight and full coordination, and in which everyone is socialized to norms, is not necessarily a high performing group. What's missing is the connection between these inputs and an outcome. One reason for the disconnect between cooperation, coordination, and communication and great organizations is that these "C" words are, at best, controls. They all support controlling tendencies which are, at heart, centralizing. They achieve what they intend: to bring things together as firmly as possible.

Enter Collaboration

Collaboration is not about agreement. It is about creation. As Michael Schrage puts it in his book, *Shared Minds*:

> ...collaboration is the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own. Collaboration creates a shared meaning about a process, a product, or an event. In this sense, there is nothing routine about it. Something is there that wasn't there before. [2]

Collaboration is distinct from each of the "C" words profiled above. Unlike communication, it is not about *exchanging* information. It is about *using* information to create something new. Unlike coordination, collaboration seeks divergent insight and spontaneity, not structural harmony. And unlike cooperation, collaboration thrives on differences and requires the sparks of dissent.

If we use this rigor to define collaboration, we will use the word much less frequently to describe what we do. Consider a community development corporation (CDC) focused on job training and placement and a community college interested in educating hard to place workers. The CDC identifies the trainees and the likely jobs and the community college offers the courses they are presumed to need.

While the CDC and the community college are cooperating, coordinating and communicating, they are not collaborating. Each is doing what they have done in the past in a program that meets mutual needs and requirements. For collaboration to enter, the two partners would need to fashion a new approach. For example, a collaboration might create an educational response to train 20 metal finishers in just those skills they needed to run relevant equipment and to feel highly competent at doing so within 25 days. No degrees, no standard courses, no minimum seat time. A "just in time" input that is very different from anything that the college has formerly offered. Perhaps another new "product" offers training for supervisors of the hiring company on what it takes to ensure high morale as well as high productivity in people with special needs and barriers to lasting employment. Now we have collaboration—a new creation!

Collaboration anchors not in the process of relationship but in the pursuit of a specific result. Collaborations are established to solve problems, develop new understandings, design new products. Collaborations exist in an outcome framework and collaborators are people who intensely and urgently feel the need to create something new. Further, collaborations resist the

urge to define themselves in such process terms as interpersonal support, or even trust. They do not just want to get people in a neighborhood, for example, to feel good about increased involvement. They want to create 50 new jobs or 100 new high school graduates.

One consequence of the outcome focus is that collaborations are time bound. When the creation is complete, so also is that collaboration. Another consequence is that collaboration is not about large numbers of people who have widespread input or come to consensus. It is about a small number of persons who bring distinctive if not unique value to the creative process. As Schrage points out, many of the most effective collaborations are duos, trios, and quartets (Rogers and Hart, Watson and Crick (*Double Helix*), the Kingston Trio, Hewlett and Packard.

One reason for the small size of most effective collaborations is that they are highly vulnerable to the protocols required by larger forms of togetherness. They do not fare well under ground rules—whether of agendas, turn taking, or almost anything else. Collaborations are interpersonally rather than structurally determined.

Schrage reminds us that when Francis Crick won the Nobel prize for the double helix discovery he told a BBC interviewer that "Politeness is the poison of all good collaboration in science." Studies of successful collaborations report that candor and even rudeness are essential. Even such sacred guidelines as "active listening" are set aside. As insights are generated, they are immediately used to build something.

Historically, collaborations involve major differences in perspective. Editor Maxwell Perkins was not a brilliant writer. But he knew how to find and inspire great writers, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe. At everyday levels, consider the collaboration between a doctor and a patient. Especially at diagnosis, the search is for a shared understanding that neither party could, by itself, create or even derive. Collaborations end in some common ground but they do not begin there.

Creating Collaboration
While communication, coordination, and cooperation are prompted by simply having elements that need connecting, collaboration needs a more purposeful starting point. It requires a problem or a potential and a desire to deal with it. Bluntly put, collaboration requires a desire to change. It also requires clear organizational support that is rarely present, thus explaining why most successful collaborations are not set in an organizational context at all.

In brief, here are key steps in forging and completing collaborations:

1.   **Define the challenge.** If collaborations are to be set in a result framework, they need some kind of achievement point or target that clearly cannot be achieved by redoubling efforts or by the other "C" word connections. We need the equivalent of the great new musical, book, or scientific discovery. While the exact shape of the solution is determined during collaboration, some set of boundary conditions or specifications that the collaboration must meet can typically be set in advance. Examples:

We are looking for a new program that can create jobs for people on welfare at no more than $500 per job.

We must reduce by 50% the cost of delivering this service through whatever new program we create.

We must double the number of people who choose to use our services in the next 12 months.

2.   **Define the collaborators.** While many teams and units are defined in terms of "who should be part of this", collaboration typically begin with just two or three persons who are different. The only reason for adding more persons is that they bring an essential additional content or value to the collaboration that is not yet present. Collaborations are a rather pure example of the entrepreneurial team nicely captured in Leo Denise's article "Entrepreneurial Team Building" (*INNOVATING*, V3N4), which stresses building to differences rather than similarities. As Denise notes, it is the focus on agreement that leads to the elimination rather than the use of differences.

3.   **Create the space.** As Schrage points out, most technology in the work place mitigates against collaboration. The personal computer is just that: personal. It is meant to be interactive in the sense of exchanging information but does not readily create a sandbox in which collaborators can simultaneously create or change a screen. Such formats as meetings also allow for "give and take" but rarely for shared creation. Indeed, they rarely intend to create anything. Getting ideas and input or agreement and buy-in is much more prevalent. Whether it is an old fashioned blackboard and a marker in the hands of each collaborator or a shared computer screen, some kind of shared space—part physical, part psychological—is critical.

4.   **Allow the time.** Collaborations need not only available space but available hours. Further, the time needs to move from the margins (30 minutes here and there) to the mainstream. Collaboration is a formal design or solution process, not a "brainstorming" activity deemed soft or peripheral. Clarity on the payload of the collaboration as discussed in step #1 is critical for time (the major cost of collaboration) to be committed.

5.   **Harness the result.** While the great book or science discovery may have a natural path to dissemination, this is not true of many collaborative results, especially if they are outside the mainstream of present practice. Some kind of explicit mechanism to implement the creation or shared new insight is critical. One highly useful generic strategy is to think of collaborations as prototypes. They become explicit early designs of a new product which are then used to fashion new programs or initiatives. See *INNOVATING*'s article "Prototyping:

When Planning Becomes Designing" (V3N2) for a detailed look at this strategy.

Innovation is about divergent thinking and the creation of something new, and collaboration is an essential tool for achieving it. Like all creative forces, it is messy and unpredictable. Unlike cooperation, coordination, and communication it is not a planned exercise or a tidy ten-step process. This C word is different!

Footnotes
1   Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, p.3.
2   Michael Schrage, *Shared Minds*, NY: Random House, 1990, p. 140.

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