

Emerging from COVID-19: how radical collaboration can help us thrive

COVID-19 has changed our societies and business environments fundamentally in a matter of weeks. How quaint it sounds now, those off-site meetings and brainstorming and pilot projects to create our 'one-day' future. Suddenly there is no more time. Our tomorrow has kicked in the door of today with big, muddy, unforgiving boots.



Most companies have started thinking about what returning to work after COVID-19 could look like, and understandably, it focuses on the practical health and safety aspects of bringing groups of people back into the office. Few are thinking about the culture they will need to thrive in this 'new normal' (it's in place anyway, right?).

Yet it is wishful thinking to think the corporate cultures we had before COVID-19 will help us thrive in our new reality. Everything is the same, yet everything is different. And just as resources were considered the competitive advantage of the industrial economy, the ability to be radically collaborative – to have open, trusting and nimble collaboration as value, skill and behaviour across entire organizations; collaboration that dismantles fiefdoms, that presents alternatives to dominant beliefs and turns problems into possibilities – will become the competitive advantage of the post-COVID economy.

“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence. It is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

– Peter Drucker

The four dimensions of radical collaboration

The ‘hard reset’ of our world over the past weeks offers us a valuable opportunity to reinvent ourselves: to reflect on what we’ve learnt and decide what we want to stop, keep and start doing. To recommit to what we stand for and look at how we can turn collaboration in this new hybrid working environment into a competitive advantage in service of that commitment.

Let’s be clear: 99 percent of organizations don’t do the concept of collaboration justice.

Why? Because as individuals evolution has hard-wired us to compete (and protect what we have) instead of collaborating (and sharing in abundance). In organizations, this behaviour is exacerbated by systems, structures, processes and reward policies (or personal agendas) that make us hoard and protect what we have: information, resources, time, money.

When we speak of collaboration, we view it most often through one of two narrow lenses: collaboration within one team and often in a physical environment, or if virtual, as part of a high-impact project that brings people from different teams together to reach a specific goal, after which they disperse back into their own teams.

To date, most organizations have been unable (or unwilling?) to embrace and explore the concept of fearless, radical collaboration as an organization-wide initiative.

Our phased return to work post-COVID offers us the ideal opportunity to experiment with new ways of collaborating, as we can continue to build on the changed ways of working together we’ve all started to learn and implement over the past weeks. If we are courageous and we really want to create organizations that can thrive post-COVID, now is the time to thoughtfully explore the four dimensions that make or break radical collaboration: **Purpose, Leadership, People and Systems.**

Purpose

Many sectors and businesses have undergone traumatic, often irreversible changes during the COVID-19 lockdown period. As uncertainty and change will continue to be the norm, it will also require organizations (and teams) to continuously re-examine and evolve their value propositions to stay relevant.

“If we are courageous, now is the time to explore the four dimensions – Purpose, Leadership, People and Systems – of radical collaboration.”

Key questions to consider moving forward:

- How have business priorities changed and what purpose must your team fulfil to serve it in the best possible way post-COVID?
- Are the conversations on the above based on brave, ‘blue ocean’ thinking, or do they skirt some uncomfortable truths?
- Do you have a clear and compelling ‘why?’ (vision) and narrative to help your team commit to this purpose?
- Do you have a team charter to guide the way and was it developed collaboratively with all team members?

Leadership

The harsh truth is that in many organizations, leadership is still structured to solve the [complicated](#) problems of the industrial era: decision-making is centralised with a team leader or management group, making power hierarchical and defined by direct control over a specific set of resources to achieve results within predetermined boundaries. But in our VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world change is complex, systemic and often chaotic. It requires radically different mindsets from those that have delivered success in bygone times. In this new context, for one leader to hold all the power, capability or competence to make decisions on behalf of others vastly under-utilises a team’s capacity, wisdom and ability to make a real impact.

Now is the time for leaders to ask bold questions such as:

- Do you set the example for radical collaboration with your own behaviour? Do you explore courageously, as defined by [Otto Scharmer](#), “with an open mind, heart and will”?
- Do you shape your organization intentionally for impactful collaboration – both internally and externally?
- Does your leadership style allow for trial-and-error in collaborations and encourage a learning culture?
- Do you, as a leader, get out of the way to let people collaborate freely and radically?

The post-COVID economy will require a courageous new leadership approach, as innovation born from radical collaboration requires system thinkers – leaders who can hold the space to harness diversity of opinion, friction, independence and decentralisation to catalyse the collective wisdom and leadership of the team.

Companies earn higher margins, inspire greater client loyalty, attract and retain the best talent, and gain a competitive edge when employees collaborate across boundaries.

People

In order to thrive in the hybrid post-COVID working environment, organizations will need to focus on enabling more and better collaboration within and across teams. In her research on [‘Smart Collaboration’](#), Dr Heidi K. Gardner shows that companies earn higher margins, inspire greater client loyalty, attract and retain the best talent, and gain a competitive edge when employees collaborate across boundaries.

What does this imply about the people we recruit and the skills we focus on developing in employees?

To foster collaboration, we should be looking for and developing skills such as:

- Self-awareness and awareness of others
- Self-responsibility
- Curiosity and openness to the ideas of others
- Strong networking and collaboration intentions and skills
- Comfortable with ambiguity and not knowing – a willingness to explore the unknown
- Flexible and able to adapt course swiftly
- Participative problem-solving skills
- A bias for action

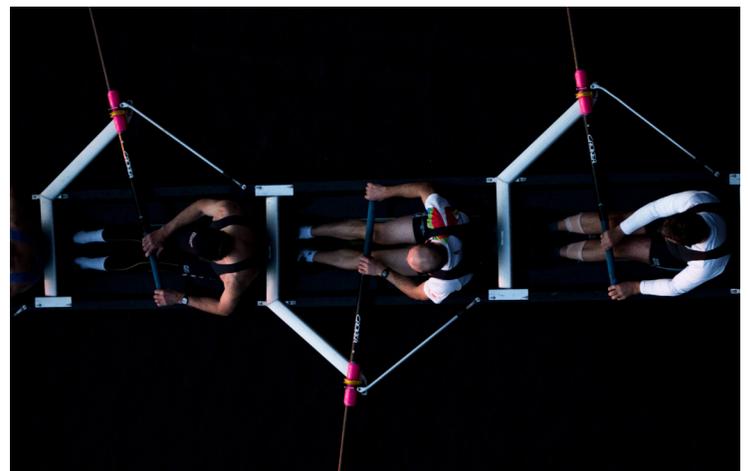
Let’s be clear: recruiting the right people is only one small part of the equation. Growing these skills in employees and leaders alike and embedding collaboration as a value across all elements of the organization’s culture is equally – if not more – important to creating truly collaborative ecosystems.

Systems

An organization can only collaborate as well as its systems, structures and processes allow. In order to understand how an organization collaborates, we must first understand the barriers to collaboration that exist within the organization. What embedded rigidity or ‘silo thinking’ is built into systems, structures, processes, technologies and policies that hinders radical collaboration?

To facilitate radical collaboration, we must be clear about:

- What are the key value chains across the business that deliver products or services to your customers in a distinctive way today?
- Where can structures and processes be simplified and standardized to gain clarity and alignment, and deliver added value or innovation across teams? What are the quick wins?
- Do you use the best technologies to enable and encourage collaboration among distributed employees? Is it an enabler, or a barrier to collaboration?
- Do your systems ensure equal access to information or are they set up to facilitate information hoarding?
- Is your physical workspace designed to aid collaboration within one team or across multiple teams?
- Do your reward and recognition policies pit business units, teams and individuals against each other, or do they direct people’s competitive spirit toward the external marketplace?



And finally: are your efforts – across purpose, leadership practices, people, systems and structures, policies, workplace layout, and technologies – aligned to support radical collaboration or are you sending mixed messages that will keep your employees stuck in the past, too afraid to move in fear of transgressing an unwritten rule?

The reality is that our tomorrow has arrived, and it won't wait for us to catch up.

Now is the time to cheer on your people to display bold, innovative behaviors and hold space for new collaborative dynamics to emerge across your organizations. (Yes, beyond your direct control.) Because radical collaboration is about encouraging people to think and work outside of their usual functional areas, to explore ideas, insights, and concepts fearlessly and as equals – and to have the courage to do so ourselves as leaders. This is where the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow lies.

Because let's be honest: if not now, when?

The reality is that our tomorrow has arrived, and it won't wait for us to catch up. Now is the time to cheer on your people to display bold, innovative behaviors and hold space for new collaborative dynamics to emerge across your organizations.

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