Collaborate or Die!

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John O. Burdett

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"Leadership without ongoing collaboration is like trying to row a boat that only has one oar."

Discontinuous Change

Economists talk about a "tipping point." Historians use the term, "a hinge in history." Management writers dramatically overuse the term, but "transformation" describes the same phenomena. Personally, I prefer the term "discontinuous change."[1] However you describe it, recent records reveal that about once every hundred years business and society go through a period of dramatic reinvention.

In the first half of the nineteenth century it was migration, steam power, advances in farming and the railways. Before the age of rail, the fastest anyone had travelled was on a horse. The overriding challenge? *Responding to the economic opportunity created by advances in the mobility of goods and people*. As the century unfolded we saw the United States truly being "united" and the vast prairies of Western Canada opened up to farming.

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1 Although change is an ongoing reality, one era comes to an end and a new era begins. What has been is left behind and what will be has to be invented, e.g., steam vs oil.

A hundred years ago it was the advent of an oil-based economy, the assembly line and the expanding role of electricity. Among its many advantages, the horseless carriage prevented London from being buried under ever-increasing piles of horse manure. The overriding challenge? Uncovering creative and efficient ways to organize large-scale operations. Separating ownership from professional management happened early in the century, but it wasn't until 1931 that the M-form[2] organization evolved.

Today's catalysts for change are the environment, diversity, inclusion, AI, hybrid employment, smart robots and the shift of power from the enterprise to the employee. And quantum computing lies in the wings. The overriding challenge? *Enabling collaboration to thrive in the face of complexity, uncertainty, an avalanche of data and the need to compete on ideas.* On its own, hybrid employment represents a paradigm shift no less disruptive than the introduction of the typewriter in the 1880s.

Who We Are Is Who We Were When

Collaboration is far more than a skill or a capability. Like storytelling, although far, far older, it's the essence of who we are as a species. When the latest technology was a really nice, pointed stick, it's hard to even start to understand – considering the personal risk involved – what enabled our earliest kith and kin to form groups beyond the family and, eventually, become embedded as part of a tribe.

Neanderthals were at least as intelligent as our ancestors. They were also bigger, stronger and better equipped for the cold. And yet 40,000 years ago, other than in the genes they passed to us through interbreeding, they became extinct.[3] We didn't outsmart them or outbreed them. We did, however, out collaborate them. While Neanderthals were limited to groups of twenty or so, our kind had tribes of one hundred plus. It was, literally, a case of collaborate or die!

Imagine a time 25,000 years ago. You are in Northern Europe. In the distance you can just make out the face of the mile-high glacier that covers the map all the way to the North Pole. Your most immediate problems are hunger and the cold. Fur, fire and a fierce temperament go some way to address the climate. Food is more difficult.

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2   The decentralised, multidivisional structure that Alfred P. Sloan introduced into General Motors became the model for the twentieth century multinational. The Disney Corporation being an example.
3   One to two per cent of the DNA in people of European or Asian background is inherited from Neanderthals.

Many of the game available are ferocious predators that, as time unfolds, would only exist much further south. That there is a tribe to feed – all dependent upon a diet high in calories and fat – points the hunter to a different food source. And with tusks approaching two-and-a half metres and weighing in at six tons, bringing down a woolly mammoth, armed only with a stone-age spear, was no mean feat. For many, it was a fatal encounter.

To move the odds in your favour you avoided the males (much too dangerous), separated one of the weaker animals from the herd (using fire) and reached for your invaluable spear thrower. And then, in a supreme act of collaboration, you and thirty or so of your tribal peers engage in a dance of death with the most dangerous animal Homo sapiens have ever hunted (and eventually hunted to extinction). It's not the fastest, the strongest or the smartest who survive. It's those who know how to, and are committed to, collaborate. Collaborate or die!

Context is Everything

We don't have to learn how to collaborate, it's deeply embedded in our DNA. We are wired that way. That doesn't mean that if we simply step out of the way collaboration will flourish. Not to act is to accept things the way they are. Get comfortable being uncomfortable. Embrace being wrong. Remove the barriers. Sweep away the constraints. Overwrite the processes and systems that, under the guise of effectiveness, keep us trapped in the past century.

It's important to distinguish between *cooperation and collaboration*. The former can be described as "two or more people who share a common goal and the assumption is that they will both gain (equally?) from the outcome." Collaboration, meanwhile, is "two or more people who share a common goal but where your success is more important than mine." When everything else is stripped away, cooperation draws on a self-serving agenda. Conversely, collaboration depends upon generosity of the spirit (altruism). In the quest to survive, it's the difference that makes a difference.

In that they are, invariably, operating in a highly competitive environment leaders, all too often, engage in self-talk along the lines of, "Will this make me look good?" "My Way"[4] may be a great song but it's not much of an anthem for collaboration. Games theory also teaches us that an unbridled will to win from one party inevitably means that, in the end, no one wins. A further problem arises when a cooperation mentality bleeds into activities that demand collaboration, e.g., breakthrough research, innovation, product development,[5] teamwork, coaching, mentoring and fully partnering with the customer/client.

Leadership without ongoing collaboration is like trying to row a boat that only has one oar. No one makes it on their own. While working on the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo had thirteen assistants. Einstein had to have help with his maths. And Pelé needed someone to pass him the ball. And the ultimate best practice in collaboration? Historically, one need look no further than the Manhattan Project. A contemporary example can be found in the Tour de France where the role of a rider in the peloton (the team leader when it comes to a sprint finish) is, literally, "Your success is more important than mine." Beyond that, can there be a better example of what collaboration looks like in practice than the visual spectacle dragon boat racing represents?

Changing an individual is hard – really hard. The problem? "Fundamental Attribution Error."[6] This is our overwhelming inclination to attribute people's behaviour to the way they are rather than the situation they are in. Changing the context is, thus, a far more productive approach.[7] In that context shapes content, there are seven central issues leaders must get right. That is, if they want to fully unlock our compelling and commitment-inspiring collaboration gene.

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4   Music by Jacques Revaux, lyrics by Paul Anka.

5   Product development tends to fall into two camps. One: responding to clients' changing needs. Two: getting ahead of the customer; developing products the customer doesn't know they need. Cooperation may help you address the former but, without collaboration, the latter is a bridge too far.

6   A term coined by Stanford psychologist Lee Ross.

7   In the book *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath emphasise that successful change depends on changing the situation.

1. Leadership matters.

Context shapes what's possible, but the team leader is the conduit through which the context is interpreted. Beyond that, it's not what a leader says that matters. Far more impactful is what they actually do. The simple suggestions that follow highlight how the right leader can create an environment where collaboration flourishes.

  i. Hire people on to the team who ask great questions, display an appetite for life-long learning,[8] who have a track record of successful collaboration, who are inherently curious and whose past behaviour is marked by heightened resilience.

  ii. Be a positive role model. Work on the assumption that, as the team leader, you work for the team and not the other way around. Be seen to collaborate with others – starting with your manager-one-level-up. When you see collaboration happening, go out of your way to catch those involved doing it right.

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8 Few today, if any, have a traditional career. In its place, the need for executives and managers to periodically "reinvent" themselves.

iii. Emphasise that there is no such thing as 99% commitment. This is especially the case when it comes to the agreed goals. If performance targets aren't met trust is eroded. Without trust, collaboration is based on hope. Hope isn't a very effective strategy. Beyond that, the most memorable collaboration is enacted in support of a huge, hairy goal. "First, I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth." – John F. Kennedy to Congress in 1961.

iv. At team meetings be the last to speak. Make sure the authentic you turns up. Learn to be vulnerable. Always explain the "why" behind key decisions. Ask for feedback. Admit mistakes. Lean in to listening. Employ empathy. And if you, even for a moment, appear to come across as the smartest person in the room, take an aspirin, lie down and hope the feeling goes away.

v. Encourage the maverick on the team, but challenge anyone on the team whose intervention is skewed towards, "yes but." Ask those so inclined, "What should we do about it?" In this way, you start to link challenging what is with the need to also introduce ideas that point to a potential way forward. Learn to listen to new ideas with a beginner's mind. The underlying message being "how can we apply even part of this?" and not "what's wrong with this suggestion?"

vi. Display coaching mastery. Train everyone on the team to coach. Have team members coach each other. When someone new joins the team, appoint a seasoned performer on the team as their integration mentor.[9]

vii. Ensure that everyone on the team understands the scope and responsibilities that define the requisite demands of their role. Outside of that required (requisite) core lies the opportunity for each team member to shape the nature of and the contribution derived from the role. In a successful team this, invariably, means a degree of role overlap. Not only is this the sign of a healthy team but within that overlap lies an invaluable opportunity for collaboration.

viii. Selectively, have team members job shadow their peers. Collaboration without understanding is the equivalent of smoke without fire.

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9   This is in addition to the vital role in executive integration the team leader has.

2. Develop a sense of belonging.

People fall naturally into a collaborative frame of mind when they feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves – when they can see the sidelines between the work they do and the difference their contribution makes in the lives of others – when they are part of an outstanding team all heading in the same direction.

A sense of belonging speaks to a compelling purpose, shared values, team fit and clarity around future direction. The latter implies a recognition that all stakeholders matter. It also means that being wedded to the way things are and/or spending too long looking in the rearview mirror will, in all likelihood, result in a *crash*. Without a sense of belonging, expect "not invented here" to be the default behaviour.

3. Collaboration is all about trust + opportunity.
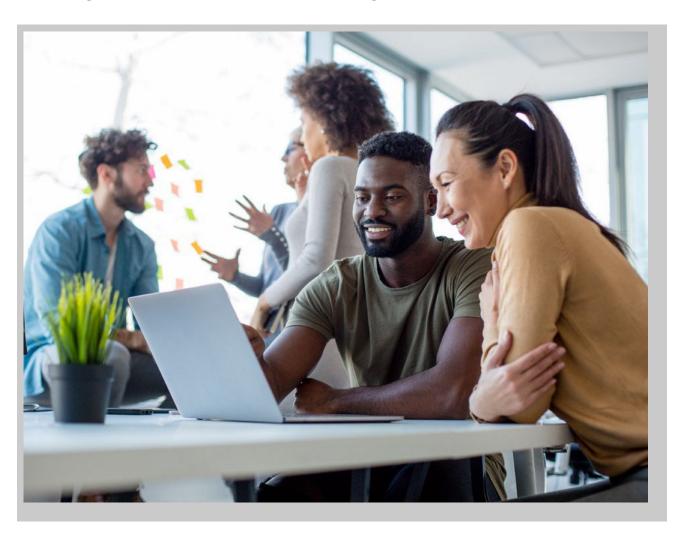
There are five essential building blocks to trust.

- **T**he ability to build rapport. From her research, Harvard psychologist, Amy Cuddy, discovered that the early steps of trust are set in motion within the first 20 seconds. Cuddy emphasises that competency counts for little unless trust has first been established. Qualifications, reputation and experience, similarly, take a back seat until rapport has been established. If you want to open the door to collaboration, those first, precious 20 seconds matter a lot.

- **R**espect. Respect is accepting someone the way that they are. It is to push aside prejudice, bias and negative opinion based on past experience. It's about emotional safety. It's found in language, tone and avoiding unnecessary interruptions. It's about informed enquiry. It's about courtesy. Peter Drucker called courtesy "the lubricant of leadership." It's being interested far more than it is trying to sound interesting. And it's manifest in listening like you have always wanted to be listened to. Especially to those you disagree with.

- **U**nderstanding the challenge, problem or opportunity as viewed by those involved. In shaping the ecology of partnership[10] this is especially important. There are three distinct communication nexuses. One: a focus on my own needs. Two: working to see the issue through the eyes of others. Three: the ability, during the conversation, to (figuratively) step back and observe the interaction. The latter allows us to adjust, modify and/or reposition our own behaviour. When, in our mind, we successfully move into the observer role we open the door to true understanding. Keep in mind, also, that listening is, invariably, the best question of all.

- **S**hared values. There are two kinds of values: personal and organizational. To avoid confusion, it's helpful to think about organizational values as "guiding principles." You can trust someone who hails from an organization whose values differ from the values (guiding principles) of your own organization. Trust, where personal values are in conflict, is a far more problematic scenario. Trust and verify!

- **T**he promise delivered. The acid test of trust is, "Did those involved keep the promises made?" Suggestion, hyperbole and/or goodwill might win agreement the first time around. Fail to deliver on what was committed to, however, and there is no way forward.

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10 Different parties choosing to work together who, although they may have quite different needs, are bound together by a shared purpose.

Collaboration is about opportunity. Many a scientific endeavour has advanced because those involved bumped each other accidentally. Jony Ive designed Apple's headquarters with that specific point in mind. And if you have ever organized a residential, leadership workshop, it quickly becomes apparent that the time spent over dinner or mingling in the evening (in the bar) equates to 50% of the value derived.

This brings us to virtual employment. Two things are clear. Even taking into account the emerging technology, employees who spend 100% of their time working remotely suffer under a collaboration handicap. And executives who insist that 100% of the workforce return to the office 100% of the time are ignoring an important reality. Elvis has left that particular building! And he ain't coming back. The employees that organizations need most will insist on a degree of choice.

The evidence suggests that about a third of those who work in tele-workable roles will be drawn to and will be highly effective in a hybrid employment. And here is where "what was" parts company with "what needs to be." Forget about saving money on office space. If it limits collaboration, it's a Faustian bargain. Forget about hoteling arrangements and work cubicles that separate and divide. And forget about little or no access to meeting rooms that are big enough for the team to meet. Change is invariably about changing assumptions. Make coming to the office a joyful experience. Bring all of the team into the office on the same days. Deliberately design the space such that collaboration is a business priority. And while you are at it, provide opportunity for people to bump into each other accidentally.

4. The feeling of being part of something special is seriously eroded if diversity, equity and involvement are considered anything less than "urgent."

The above is especially the case with those who have joined the workforce in the past decade or so. The dilemma? In the way that DEI is written it projects an unhelpful assumption. Arguably, DEI are in the wrong order. It starts, as it must, with "involvement." It does little good to hire diverse/minority candidates if, when they land, their capacity isn't fully utilised, if they are still on the outside looking in.

Involvement is often presented as a complex and multifaceted issue. At its very core, involvement is the freedom to make decisions. Decision-making, meanwhile, can be likened to water flowing through a pipe. The narrower the pipe, the slower the water flows. Restrict decision-making to the chosen few and delays, frustration and glacier-like change become the inevitable outcome. People feel involved when they are stretched, when they have an opportunity to learn, when they are given the opportunity to make a difference, when they are given the capacity to be the "change."

If you want to stunt involvement and, in doing so, kill collaboration before it gets to the starting line, ensure that team members are: (i) asked to fill out reports that aren't necessary; (ii) forced to use technology that is clearly out of date; (iii) faced with unwarranted levels of hierarchy; (iv) asked to accept that organizational silos are a way of life; (v) trapped in an "ask permission" culture; (vi) punished for taking a risk in pursuit of the vision; and/or (vii) persuaded that reaching out to other teams for help is a sign of weakness.

If you have a thoroughbred and you don't let it run, one of two outcomes awaits. It will either jump the fence or become overweight, lethargic and difficult to manage (recently called "soft quitting").

5. If you want people to collaborate, make "StrAgility" (Strong and Agile) the background music of choice.

A *strong* culture is a way of working together that draws on shared values and a brand that lives inside the organization. It's a recognition that addressing the things that hold the organization back (cultural anchors) – mindset, myth, symbolism, story, ritual and language (metaphor) – are every bit as important as investing in the attributes/processes that move the culture forward (cultural drivers). Included in the latter are vision, what you measure, talent management, revisiting the business model, reengineering the value chain, introducing appropriate technology, the informal organization, drawing middle management fully back into the game and shared best practice. Especially, shared best practice.

You can't have a *strong* culture without a high degree of collaboration. The organization's values amount to little more than window dressing without shared meaning – across the organization. Ritual provides a similar example. A business meeting, the hiring process, executive integration and presentations to the board all draw on the degree and nature of collaboration. In this, they are no different to the rites for a funeral, the marriage ceremony, a bar mitzvah and/or a coronation.

You can't have an *agile* culture without a high degree of collaboration. *Agility* is found in strategic scenarios, a flat structure, a passion for simplicity, a focus on the things that really make a difference, constantly stripping out impediments to speed up action, investment in innovation and introducing software that manages the mundane. Work collaboratively to sift out the administrative dross and you will discover seed corn aplenty; untapped capability waiting to be planted in the right soil.

Strength and agility find common purpose when the business is managed from the outside-in. There are three critical issues here. One: the need to invest in seeking to interpret how the economic, social and competitive environment is unfolding. Where possible, retaliate first. Conversely, in that the future is getting ever more difficult to predict, "readiness" lies at the very core of any winning strategy.

Two: the imperative, in business-to-business scenarios, that at least one major customer is a market leader. The cumulative learning deficit from working exclusively with middle of the pack customers is an ensured path to mediocrity. To be the best, you've got to work with the best.

Three: that the customer's voice is present in every meeting and informs every decision. As the late Peter Drucker pointed out, "The purpose of business is to create a customer." Financial metrics are a good way to keep score, but the greatest emotional trap of all is to assume that because you are making money you must, therefore, be successful. Overconfidence overrides self-critique. A sense of superiority limits analysis. What you think you know blinds you to what you don't know.[11] GE, Nokia, Kodak and BlackBerry quickly come to mind. Heightened self-confidence without humility is rightfully called "arrogance." Although, for self-gain, people may be willing to cooperate with an arrogant team or leader, collaboration presents an entirely different behavioural challenge.

The essence of StrAgility is that culture is a system. You can't address culture piecemeal; you can't work on one element at a time. More often than not, unwanted consequences overtake those that do. A similar outcome is likely for those who ignore the need to measure culture. You can't manage what you don't measure.

Culture – and, with it, collaboration – also represents a series of enshrined habits. The key to developing a new habit is to let go of the old. Beginnings start with endings. Have team meetings to discuss collaboration. Make the focus: "What do we need to stop, start and do differently?" What do we need to unlearn? Don't try to boil

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11 One is reminded of Andy Grove's sage advice, "Only the paranoid survive." Andy Grove was the longtime CEO and chairman of Intel Corporation.

the ocean – start small. The outcome? An agreed, collaboration check list. Review and rework it regularly. Make the check list the team's "collaboration contract."

6. People need (not merely want) a voice.

People need to feel that they can speak out and that their input is listened to. And not just regarding the positive issues. Psychological safety means the opportunity to speak to power, to be free to challenge the status quo[12] and to take time out to measure and collectively act on the effectiveness of the team beyond the results.

If we want people to collaborate, unbridled curiosity and habitually looking beyond the ways things happen today have to become the default behaviours. Psychological safety kickstarts challenging established assumptions. It also: (i) builds team resilience; (ii) is a catalyst in inclusion and diversity; (iii) lies at the centre of employee engagement; (iv) encourages risk taking; (v) is the energy in innovation; (vi) fuels personal growth; and (vii) is a "must have" dimension of team chemistry.

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12 With ideas about how to move forward, please. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have realised that continuously harping on about what's wrong without, at the same time, suggesting a meaningful remedy quickly erodes your personal brand.

Psychological safety[13] evolves through four stages:

i. *Knowing* – curiosity, being aware. Articulating the value of psychological safety. Establishing what "involvement" really means. Creating the early road map. Discussing the value of empowering language, e.g., humility, authenticity and openness. Establishing shared ownership. Avoiding the emergence of competing constituencies by uncovering the key questions around hybrid employment that need to be answered at the outset.

ii. *Sowing* – ploughing under outdated notions of followership, e.g., knowing your place. Establishing criteria for the team's behaviour. Recognising, specifically, where and when there is an opportunity for greater candour. Seeding the ground. Embracing risk. Navigating the first steps forward. Unlearning. Letting go of unhelpful behaviour. Exploring and evaluating appropriate interventions. Collectively catching each other doing it right. The team leader displays vulnerability.

iii. *Growing* – shared and collaborative practice. Appreciating that psychological safety must always be a work in progress. Learning how to learn. Recognising and reinforcing what works. Quietly counselling any outliers. Defending/ supporting risk taking. Shedding the mask. Building the confidence needed for the team to live in truth.

iv. *Showing* – servant leadership. Continuing to learn. Allowing the road map around candour and speaking to power to fully unfold. Taking pride in the team's capacity to deal with the unexpected. Surfacing positive stories. Becoming a role model for others in the organization. Taking time out for celebration.

7. Move beyond a performance management process that sets up internal competition.

If there is one process that destroys collaboration – that exasperates even (especially) the organization's top performers – it's the traditional performance management system. With the competition cheering from the sidelines, the long-established approach, of necessity, forces groups of employees into a normal distribution curve (Bell curve). Not untypically, 70%+ of those in the population involved (the team?) are informed that they are "competent," "average," "meet expectations" and/or some other code that will be interpreted as "mediocrity." How do you coach someone to be more "competent?" Why can't we just tell people that they are successful?

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13 Research by McKinsey indicates that only a handful of leaders demonstrate the behaviours that instil psychological safety. And less than half (41%) of team members felt that there was a positive climate within their team

Introduced in the 1980s, in Jack Welch's "rank and yank"[14] philosophy we see a forced ranking at its most destructive. Long since abandoned (2005), GE's stacked ranking approach mandated for 20% in the top ranking, 70% for the middle ranking and the bottom 10% were fired.

"Stacked ranking" is the perfect system to destroy even the semblance of collaboration. Think of it this way. Each year 10% of the team are fired. Thus, take it as a given that I am going to do everything that I can to ensure that I am either in the top 10% or, at worse, adjudged "competent." The dilemma? In working to collaborate with, support, help, advise, coach, mentor, or in any other way make others on the team successful, I am sowing the seeds of my own downfall.

One of the factors quoted in favour of stacked ranking is that it's a successful way to identify the organization's high potential. Apart from the fact that high performers are not necessarily high potential,[15] there are any number of ways to identify those capable of moving into a more responsible role; approaches that don't poison the collaboration well.

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14 Although he left GE in 2000, Welch defended rank and yank as late as 2013.
15 From personal experience, one of the mistakes organizations make is to bundle performance and potential into the same process. It's not enough to identify those capable of moving into a bigger role. To de-risk the eventual decision it's essential that we push the candidate to the very edge of their capability. In the short term this can result in a performance fall off. A middle of the road performer can thus, at least in the short term, still be a high potential candidate.

Long a captive of the compensation function, it's time to break performance assessment out of the handcuffs it's been in for the last five decades. We need to put the responsibility where it really belongs – back into the hands of the team leader/manager. We expect leaders to bring sound thinking to their role and we reward them accordingly. It seems incongruous that in areas where the team leader's judgement matters most they are given little, if any, real discretion.

Conclusion

Delivering results in a turbulent business environment? Excellence in R and D? A business model that moves beyond performance excellence and competes around customer intimacy? Making a flat, network organization come to life? Adapting to a hybrid workplace? They are all a product of – and depend on – collaboration.

The enemy of collaboration is self-interest. Self-centredness acts like a black hole – it sucks everything in and nothing comes out. Stephen Hawking coined the term the "information paradox." In business it's called "destroying value."

In making collaboration a reality, the following questions are a good place to start.

i.   In the talent acquisition process, how do you ensure that the candidates who are hired display the qualities that underscore collaboration?

ii. What would support and amplify that your team leader works for the team? If you are the team leader, what do you need to do differently in that regard?

iii. When and how do people on the team coach each other? What needs to change?

iv. What evidence do you have that the organization's/team's purpose is truly compelling?

v.   Where and in what way could those you interact with be better at building trust?

vi. In your part of the business, in what ways could "inclusion" be taken to the next level?

vii. In what ways are you managing the culture (StrAgility)? How do you measure culture – where you are and where you need to be? In what ways do you shape the business from the outside-in? In what ways is the customer's voice ever-present in meetings? How and where are you still reliant on the thinking that worked in the past century? To make collaboration a way of life what myths, rituals, mindset, assumptions, beliefs, opinions and/or habits does the team

need to unlearn, change, introduce?   Recognising that they see with a new set of eyes, what would you gain from deliberately spending time with key managers who have recently just joined the business?

viii. What supports your thinking (or otherwise) that psychological safety is alive and well within your team? What needs to happen that is not part of the current behaviour?

ix. What would need to happen for you to move away from a performance management process that produces unhealthy competition?

x. Beyond what you already do, what would it take to make working in-house a joyful experience?

"Be the force for collaboration that you want/need others to become."
– John O. Burdett

COLLABORATION
The Network
Organization

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"You can't have an agile culture without a high degree of collaboration."

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Leadership Beyond Crisis Series came out in 2021. In 2022, in addition to a number of leading-edge articles, he brought out a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

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