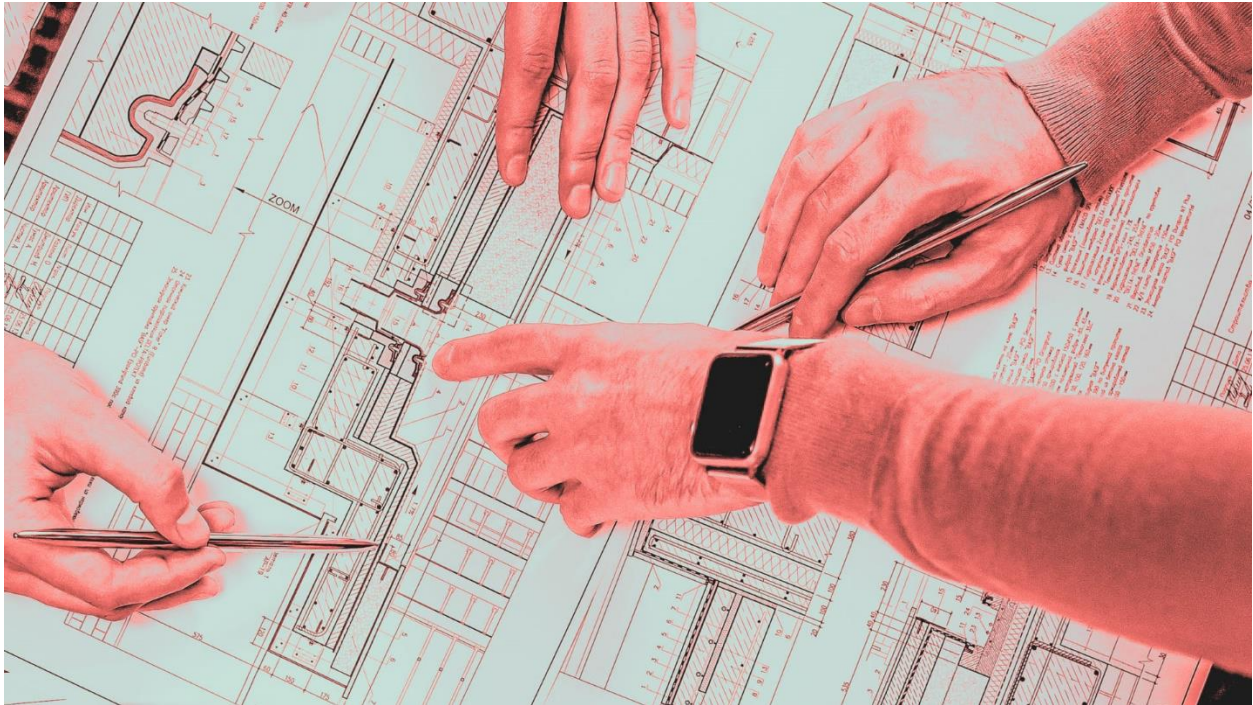


3 Things People Get Wrong About Collaboration

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These common mistakes can derail those big, ambitious projects that require lots of working together.



[Source Photo: Thirdman/Pexels]

Most of the problems we have to solve at work are too big for any individual to handle. There are too many different areas of knowledge needed to be successful. The projects require too much time for one person to do in a timely fashion. And, the tasks that need to be done are not always the most appropriate for one person to carry out.

As a result, these projects must be done collaboratively. Unfortunately, effective collaborations don't just happen naturally. They have to be built. Sadly, we don't teach people how to do this well. As I often say, most of our education is an individual sport, while much of work life is a team sport.

So, here are three big collaboration mistakes people make:

Bad lane assignments

Collaboration works best when everyone is clear on what is expected of them. Members should be added to a team because they have something to contribute. The roles that people are expected to play should be outlined early in the process.

A lack of clear assignments creates two problems. First, it leads to duplication of effort. Several people are likely to move forward with elements of a project without knowing that someone else is doing the same thing. It's frustrating to put good work time into something only to discover that someone else has also worked on the same aspect of the project.

Second, it can also lead to inaction. When you are part of a project, you're also going to be reluctant to step on other people's toes. So, you may be aware of an issue, but wait for someone else to address it. Projects can end up crawling along, because people are not sure which aspects of the project are the ones they are supposed to address.

Lack of real trust

A team can only work together effectively if everyone takes care of the aspects of the project they are assigned and they bring them together effectively to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In order to enable every person on the team to do their work, there has to be trust.

In the absence of that trust, you start to see some team members encroaching on the work of others. A team member who micromanages the work of others is operating from a lack of trust that the other people will do their work well. Team members who proactively do or redo the work that others have done are also displaying a lack of trust.

There are two dimensions of trust to consider. One is that you have to develop trust that the people on your team are good enough at their jobs to carry out their work without a lot of oversight. (If you have concerns, then you should discuss this with supervisors who made the assignments rather than taking on this oversight for yourself.)

The second is that you have to recognize that when you work on a team, the project may come out differently than if you did it yourself. It can be difficult to see a project move in a direction differently than the one you envisioned. It's important to ask yourself whether your concerns are that the project is going in a bad direction, or just a direction you did not plan on. If you have real concerns that the final output is going to reflect poorly on the group, then say something. But, if the output is just going to be different from what you would have done alone, then you have to learn to love the result.

Lack of project management

A common collaboration mistake for many teams is that they have lots of domain experts, but they don't have anyone to manage the project. Project management is an underappreciated skill that needs to be engaged more explicitly in collaborative projects.

A good project manager helps the team to develop roles for members, defines key milestones toward project completion, compiles and organizes documents related to the project, and ensures that team members stay on-track to complete their portions of the project.

Ideally, your organization has some project managers who can be brought into a collaboration. If not, then it's important for someone to take on that role. While formal training in project

management is valuable, even being willing to be responsible for keeping a project moving, enforcing deadlines, and holding onto key documents greatly increases the chances that the project will be completed successfully.