

Collaboration, Consensus, Community and Building A Vision For The Future

By

Wendy Hanson M.Ed and William Corley, Psy.D

In order to build a vision, organizations need to build collaboration, consensus and community. All are linked and involve commitment on behalf of the shareholders and members.

Collaboration

What is it? According to a few online dictionaries, collaboration is “to work together especially in a joint intellectual effort” or “the act of working jointly, they worked either in collaboration or independently.”

Collaboration brings groups together that are usually focused on a single goal. People can collaborate on projects that are in close physical proximity or from a distance. In looking at the definitions on Wikipedia for collaboration there are many examples of collaboration in IT. There is such a need for bringing diverse opinions and perspectives to projects in order to make them successful. Google’s use of small work teams in Engineering is a great example.

Collaboration is important for teams who work internally in order to get along, come to decisions, and build a structure that people can depend on and know how they fit in.

What enables collaboration? Collaboration is enabled or gets its strength from using some main concepts in developing synergy. These are:

1. **Listening actively.** Listening actively is taking a step back from using the lens of your opinion and truly listening to another person’s thought. Coming from a place of being “curious” rather than lining up their thoughts with your current opinion and judgments. Listening actively means you ask questions and your aim is to clarify.

When a person is really listened to, they can feel that from the other person. There is sense a “being heard.” Often times, defenses can be broken down when people at least know that their voice has been heard, just as much as having their opinion accepted.

2. **Speaking up.** When people collaborate and want to create synergy in a team, it is really important to have all the individual voices heard. When decisions need to be made, that’s where the process of consensus can come in. But collaboration requires that everyone gets their voice into the room, into the discussion and that through careful listening people can open up.

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3. **Tell the truth with compassion.** It is important when we share our thoughts and listen, that we are compassionate in order not to close down discussion. We all hold different assumptions and perspectives. There are some keys to telling the truth with compassion such as using a technique called “yes, and.” When you listen to someone who has said something, you can say yes and build upon that. We all know that “yes, but” statements can shut down conversations. “Yes, but” creates a wall. Telling the truth requires speaking from your heart. Create “I” statements rather than “you” statements. We all have a right to speak from our own truth. Making too many “you” statements sounds accusatory and sets up defensiveness.
4. **Be flexible.** Moving away from having your own assumptions is one way of being flexible. When people are collaborating, trying to have a discussion and looking towards coming to a common goal, stating their assumptions are really important. “My assumption about your group is” or “my assumption about your intention is” is a way not to explain what you say is the truth but as an assumption you are holding - which opens up different forms of communication. Being flexible is also being open to possibilities. Have an open mind; seek to understand.
5. **Agree to agree** (commit to resolution). Agreeing to agree is important to a group who is trying to collaborate to get to a point where they will “agree to agree.” It means that that there is a goal in mind, a decision to be made and a team needs to come together without people losing their voice, feeling they have not been heard or compromising in a way that makes them feel they lost.
6. **Know who is on your team.** In teams that collaborate or businesses that come together, it is important to know the strengths and talents of people that are on the team.
 - Where do they come from?
 - What has been their experience?
 - What is important for them in meeting their goals?

If you know who is on your team, it is much easier to appreciate what their values are and what they are trying to accomplish.

- What are they holding on to?
- What will help move this process ahead?

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7. **Create rules of engagement.** Different individuals, teams or organizations that are coming together benefit tremendously from creating rules of engagement or ground rules before starting a process of collaboration. How are we going to work together? What are going to be the things that we can hold each other accountable for? When working with a group, these might be things such as telling the truth, there are no wrong or silly ideas, or speak with compassion. Rules of engagement can be as simple as ground rules for a meeting or could be part of a mission for an organization – this is how we work together.

What are the challenges and barriers to collaboration?

The major barriers are that people or groups get stuck in their own way of doing things and refuse to look or engage in other possibilities to reach the same outcome. There are many paths to get to the same goal and some work different for different types of groups. When bringing groups together that have a different way of doing things, using those keys to synergy to break down the barriers, to open up possibilities of how we can get there in a different ways are so important.

Other barriers are created when people don't share information and they take positions rather than look at common interests and needs. When people feel judged, it becomes a huge barrier to collaboration and open communication.

Coming to Consensus

Consensus decision-making is a decision process that not only seeks the agreement of most participants, but also to resolve or mitigate the objections of the minority to achieve the most agreeable decision. Consensus is usually defined as meaning both – a) general agreement and b) the process of getting to such an agreement. Consensus decision-making is thus concerned primarily with that process (from Wikipedia).

An important part of consensus is really being able to hear all views. Consensus brings in the concept of agree to agree. One model of consensus decision-making has been used by the Quakers and it puts in place a simple structure that moves the group towards consensus. The Quaker model has been well received when employed in secular settings because it gives everyone a chance to speak while limiting potential disruptors i.e. people who want unlimited air time or who have a particular ax to grind. The following aspects of the Quaker model can be effectively applied in any consensus decision-making process.

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- Multiple concerns and information are shared until the sense of the group is clear
- Decisions involve active listening and sharing of information
- Norms limit number of times one asks to speak to ensure that each speaker is fully heard
- Ideas and solutions belong to the group, no names are recorded
- Differences are resolved by discussion with the facilitators; identifies areas of agreement and names disagreements to push discussion deeper
- The facilitator articulates the sense of the discussion – asks if there are other concerns, and proposes a possible decision
- The group as a whole is responsible for the decision and the decision belongs to the group
- The facilitator can discern if one who is not uniting with the decision is acting without concern for the group or in selfish interest. Dissenter's perspectives are embraced.

Adapted from A Comparison of Quaker – Based Consensus and Roberts Rules of Order, Quaker Foundations of Leadership, 1999, Earl Ham College.

Building Community

It becomes clear that collaboration and consensus can also be seen as two steps to building community. What's the value of community? Community has a feeling of belonging that we are all on the same page; that we are moving in a similar direction. Community is usually used in a very positive sense. When we build community, we are building something that will create a better life, a better business, a better structure.

Communities have different opinions. They don't always move in the same direction. Diversity is often a strong value of community that we expect and encourage in order to make our community stronger.

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Vision

Stephen Covey has a basic principle called, "Begin with the end in mind." That is one way to look at using collaboration, consensus, and community to build a strong vision. What is our vision for the future? of a project? of a business?

Margaret Wheatley in A Simpler Way states: Whether we are beginning a relationship, a team, a community organizing effort, or a global corporation, we need together to be asking:

- **What are trying to be?**
- **What's possible now?**
- **How will the world be different because of us?**

Wendy Hanson, M.Ed ,CPCC is the President and Co-Founder of Corley Hanson Associates, a coaching and leadership organization. Corley Hanson Associates works with business on developing results. Wendy does one on one executive coaching as well as working with teams. Corley Hanson specializes in working with tech, media and financial companies.

William R. Corley, Psy.D., CPCC is a psychologist and Co-Founder of Corley Hanson Associates. His background as a manager, educator and salesman provide a unique understanding of people and business. He has over twenty years experience in various leadership positions. Will coaches business professionals and teams to achieve their personal and professional best.

For additional information, please contact Wendy Hanson at (510) 922-9719 or whanson@corleyhanson.com.

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