Commentary

What Is Collaboration? Virtual Team Success Factors

To achieve the resilience of virtual teams, enterprises must address the principles and life cycle of collaboration. In our view, collaboration means more than simply working together on projects — it implies interdependency and trust.

Easing “collaboration” via the Web has lately been a popular theme for those seeking greater enterprise flexibility and resilience. We hear of collaborative teams, collaborative communities and collaborative commerce. The “c” word is used to describe everything from strategic alliances to internal and external partnerships. The concept of collaboration has become so diffuse that users have found it difficult to fit solutions to collaborative requirements. What’s needed is a good working definition of collaboration that characterizes its variants, so users will find it easier to select collaborative offerings that best fit their needs.

To collaborate literally means co-working or “working together.” We offer a more-precise definition: “Collaboration is the process of working together toward a common purpose or goal in which the participants are committed and interdependent, with individual and collective accountability for the results of the collaboration, and each of the participants shares a common benefit.”

The Four Pillars of Collaboration

Effective collaboration is built on four pillars. As with a building supported by four pillars, if any one of the pillars is damaged or broken, the building is at risk of collapsing. With a collaborative IT or product design project, if two pillars fail, the project’s collapse is all but guaranteed.

1. The participants have embraced a common purpose.

The collaborative relationship must be grounded in the principles of trust, which include:

- Dependability
- Consistency
- Congruency, that is, words and actions fit
- Mutuality of shared risks and rewards (see “How Do You Lead, Motivate and Support Virtual Teams?” COM-13-6192)
Effective collaboration requires a state of mind that prioritizes the merits of ideas and skill sets at the expense of individual egos. Also, the team has the imperative to cultivate an environment that promotes constructive criticism without personally offending the collaboration participants.

2. Participants are committed to achieving specific goals and objectives supporting that common purpose.

The lack of a common purpose may not doom a project — for example, the purposes of an enterprise IS organization and the development contractor it engages may be quite different. The “purpose” of an IS organization (in, for example, a state government) will align with the enterprise mission (for example, serving citizens); the contractor’s will not (instead, it will align with a mission, such as “bringing cutting-edge systems to our customers”). Although this mismatch will challenge the project, commitment by the contractor to the more-detailed objectives and milestones, a contract structuring its interdependence and clear accountability can still support success.

3. Participants are interdependent in that they rely on each others’ roles, talents, resources, expertise, knowledge and other contributions necessary to achieve the specific goals and objectives.

The third pillar (interdependency) centers on the need to bring diverse but complementary individuals with the requisite skills, experiences and relationships to the collaborative process. True collaboration is role-based, where individuals understand and support each others’ roles and contributions to the collaboration.

4. Participants are individually and collectively accountable for the results of the collaboration, yet share a common benefit.

Finally, collaboration depends on the accountability of each of the participants to fulfill his or her commitments and responsibilities to the collaborative process as it unfolds. In many respects, the process is like a chain, where any break in the links disrupts and may bring down the process.

The Collaborative Process

The four pillars of collaboration define the success criteria for effective collaboration. But it’s important to recognize that collaboration, like all interactions, follows a predictable process. Understanding the process can provide insight into the types of environment, context and tools needed during various phases of the collaboration.

The collaborative process can be divided into four stages (see Figure 1):

1. The planning or design phase. In this stage, the collaboration is formed, protocols are established, the purpose and goals of the collaboration are defined and agreed on, and the collaborative effort is designed. In the words of the industrial psychologists, this is the “forming” stage of the collaboration.

2. The information or data-gathering phase. Typically, a necessary phase in collaboration is obtaining, organizing and validating information. This is also the “storming” phase, when participants are developing rapport, assigning roles, codifying leadership and negotiating commitments.
3. **The analytical or processing stage.** Here, data and information are analyzed and processed into action-oriented terms that define the output of the collaboration. Again, in the parlance of the industrial psychologists, this is the “norming” stage of collaboration.

4. **The execution or implementation.** Here, the collaboration puts in motion the results of the previous stages. This is the “performing stage” of the collaborative process.

![Figure 1: The Collaboration Process: Tools Required](image)

**Match Applications to Need**

In increasingly distributed and virtual enterprises, applications can provide valuable support for collaborative processes. Many of the applications associated below with a primary phase of the collaborative process can support, to varying degrees, additional phases.

1. **Forming Stage (Planning).** Consider applications that support brainstorming, idea generators, lists and other media that encourages the free flow of ideas and concepts. Examples: eRoom; Groove; instant messaging tools like Sametime, Integrated Development Enterprise’s IDweb, Practicity, QuickPlace

2. **Storming Stage (Data Gathering).** This is the stage when the collaborative process is in a search mode, gathering information and sifting through alternatives, as well as debating and contesting alternative approaches and ideas. Applications best suited for this phase include document management tools, search engines, data retrieval applications and other tools that search out and organize information. Examples: eMatrix, IDweb, iManage, Lotus’ Domino.Doc, Open Text’s Livelink, Windchill

3. **Norming Stage (Analysis).** In this phase, the collaborative process enters its analytical stage. Here, applications should provide online discussion and analysis, decision making and consensus building. Several of the Web-based meeting applications support group discussion, analysis and consensus building. Examples: NetMeeting, PlaceWare, visualization tools like EDS e-Vis, WebEx Meeting Center
4. **Performing Stage (Execution).** Here, the collaboration moves to action: devising schedules and executing against the information gathering and analysis of the previous stages. Project management applications may come into play. Examples: EDS TeamCenter, eRoom, MS Project/Central, Niku, Primavera TeamPlay, Scitor Project/Communicator

**Bottom Line:** Collaboration in all its manifestations is becoming the primary style of work in the connected economy. Working together is the essence of collaboration; working together effectively must embrace the foundation principles, relationships and process steps of true collaboration. To do otherwise will typically result in false starts, wasted efforts and failed initiatives.