THECR NETWORK

How to Cultivate Collaborative Behavior at Your Organization

📷 SNAPSHOT

SPEAKERS

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COMPETENCIES
Culture, Community Management

MATURITY PHASES
CMM1, CMM2,

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

As a follow-up to a previous call, Michael returned to further share his collaboration expertise. The highlights of the discussion are noted below:

1. Michael offered a very basic definition of collaboration as the **"Action or act of working with other people to produce or create something."**

2. **Cultivating a culture of collaborative behavior begins with the understanding by all within the organization that more can be accomplished working together than individually.** With that mindset – and the opportunity to meet with others within the organization across departments, divisions and geographies – collaboration can truly begin to permeate the culture.

3. **Cultivating collaborative behaviours requires cultural support**. It does have a lot to do with an organization's leaders, but not exclusively. The latter means that others within the organization can also contribute and cultivate a culture of collaborative behavior in an organization.

OVERVIEW

Michael Sampson's Background:

Michael focuses on collaboration for end-user organizations in order to help them to be productive and effective in their work.

Collaboration – Assertion, Implication, Action: To begin the discussion, Michael referred to three factors of collaboration:

- The assertion is that collaboration is about people.

- Collaboration is a concept. Accordingly, it is non-directive and non-explicit, meaning that it will mean different things to different people. Therefore, in order to talk about collaboration, the discussion should be prefaced with a definition of collaboration. If one person is talking about collaboration as a behaviour and the next person is defining it as a strategy, then there is not a common ground to make collaboration work within the organization.

- Since collaboration is non-explicit, it is open to interpretation, adaption and an international embrace. It can be massaged to make it work for the individual needs of the organization.
- The implication of the above statement is that we can identify core collaborative behaviours.
- The actions that we can then take are that collaborative behaviours can be cultivated in the people within an organization.

Defining Collaboration: Michael discussed the following six elements of collaboration and the questions that come to his mind as a result:
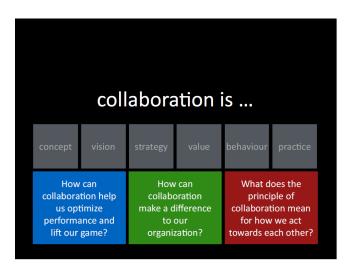

Figure 2 -
**Collaboration is...
Slide 10**

For the first question: "How can collaboration help us to optimize performance and lift our gain?"

Michael used a performance issue as an example. If the execution and processes are sloppy, knowledge transfer or knowledge sharing cannot occur. Therefore, individuals within the organization are left to "reinvent the wheel." That leaves the window open for errors. The optimization of performance could be around improving execution, improving efficiency and improvement of the liability of the processes that currently exist.

On the other hand, in some organizations the performance challenge is the need for improved innovation. In this case, collaboration becomes a driver of innovation, idea effectiveness, bringing discontent, bringing different perspectives and bringing disruptive views to the forefront for analysis. Under an execution model, that is not the desired outcome. The desired outcome is consistency of process and/or approach so that the performance gain is achieved.

The second question is "How can collaboration make a difference to our organization?"

Answers to this might involve improved performance, improved employee engagement, as well as improved engagement with external stakeholders and partners, etc. Furthermore, what does the principle of collaboration mean for how we act towards each other? If collaboration is a value, and/or a behaviour and if collaboration is encapsulated in a set of practices, then what does that look like and what does that mean for the organization?

As stated by Michael earlier, collaboration is about people. Therefore, a very basic definition of collaboration is that it is the "Action or act of working with other people to produce or create something."

As discussed in the last call, Michael highlighted what he believes to be the three P's of Collaboration:

- **Practice:** The practice of collaboration with respect to interdependence, respect and openness.

- **Process:** There are processes for making decisions, sharing ideas and giving updates. There are processes for how we work on documents and pretty much everything and anything in an organization. Processes can be collaborative by nature or they can be directorial. Collaboration needs to be infused in an organization's processes.

- **Potential:** In order to encourage people to collaborate, there needs to be a benefit or a value to the organization.

BEST PRACTICES

The following is a summary of the various best practices that emerged from the discussion with members:

Understand the Eight Practices of Collaboration: One of the lifts of potential behaviours for collaboration would be Michael's list of eight behaviours or practices, aptly outlined by the word "PRACTICE":

- **P**romoting Interdependence: This refers to the promotion of interdependence as a way to accomplish work in an organization. Individually, people are competent and capable in what they do, but they must also recognize that other people are competent and capable in what they do, as well. The intersection of what each individual can bring to the table creates an opportunity to do something great, i.e. something greater than what could be accomplished individually.

- **R**especting the Individual and his/her Point of View: Everyone has a background, a history and a set of experiences that comes with a set of perspectives, a set of ideas and a way of looking at the world. In a collaborative activity. The respecting of those perspectives and differences provides the ground rules that allow for a greater creation of collaboration that what would not happen if differences were not valued or not respected.

- **A**llowing Productive Friction: Another behaviour or mindset is one for allowing productive friction to drive people towards developing great points of view and/or to explore boundaries of possibilities. In particular, disagreements highlight a difference of perspective which, if embraced, acts as a conduit to explore ideas.

- **C**ommitting to Work Through Difficult Issues to Completion: There is no point raising disagreements or differences of opinion if they are swept under the carpet.

- **T**rusting that Others are Working for the Best Outcome: When people have a difference of opinion, when they raise a different perspective or come at it from an alternative standpoint, it is important to trust that everyone is working towards the best outcome for the group.

- **I**nforming Others on Current Status and Roadblocks: When working towards a goal collaboratively, it makes absolutely no sense to put up roadblocks to communication and/or to not inform others as to what is being accomplished by all parties involved. A willingness to inform others of challenges and of current points of activity provides a confirmation that the right things are being worked on and also highlights or raises the opportunity for people to help each other, particularly if they can pass on their experience and knowledge.

- **C**ommunicating to Draw Out, Not Shut Down: The idea behind this is to use a communication style that draws people out by trying to understand their point of view rather than shutting them down. It means acknowledging differences and alternate points of view.

- **E**videncing Openness to the Ideas of Others: This can be likened to walking in the other person's shoes in order to create a willingness to entertain new ideas.

Understand Behaviour within Various Contexts:

Michael shared that, as an observation, the way individuals behave happens within a context. There is a group context around the culture of the group – what is expected and how they behave. There is a set of corporate contexts around what is permissible, what is a normal way of acting, what is expected when you ask for help and how the corporation reacts if someone fails.

There is also a national context, a national culture, a national set of behaviours that are different from country-to-country. There are some common themes, but there are differences between the main cultures or countries around the world. So, it is important to remember that when we are talking about being collaborative that that happens within a series of other contexts:

-*Individual Context* – Michael shared four collaborative behaviour strategies within an individual context:

▪*Practice Collaborative Interaction:* As individuals, we are in charge of how we behave. Therefore, we can give ourselves permission to practice collaborative interaction in the way that we deal with other people. For instance, we can ask questions like: "What do you think?" or "How do you see this?" or "Is there anything that I can do to help you?"

▪*Learn About Others Beyond the Task:* This refers to truly getting to know others beyond the job at hand, i.e. their interests, hobbies, educational backgrounds, work history, etc. This helps to understand the types of contributions that others are making to the project while also demonstrating respect for them as an individual.

▪*Explore the Space for Collaboration:* This refers to being intentional about the opportunity, i.e. examining how others in your firm or network can contribute and how everyone can work together. It could mean starting with a project that offers the opportunity to put collaborative practices and behaviours in place.

▪*Broaden your Network at your Firm:* Michael gave an example of a firm that has set up weekly video chats for 30 minutes where participants are randomly chosen to chat with each other. People do not know each other intentionally. Their divisions and/or departments may be completely different, but by talking about what each person is working on, horizons are broadened. That type of approach – being very intentional about collaborating across divisions, silos, countries or geographies – is a way of increasing each individual's knowledge base and strengthening his/her organizational network The idea is to make time to meet other people and make the most of what you have available to you within your company.

-*Team/Group Context:* Michael shared three collaborative behaviour strategies within a team/ group context:

▪*Build Team Spirit and Connectedness:* Agile Development Methodology uses a practice called: "Daily Stand-Ups". Basically, each day the team gets together in the morning to share what they are working on, what they have done and the roadblocks they are facing. Hearing this in a team context provides the opportunity for group feedback and a chance to help each other. Waiting to do this monthly means backtracking and extra work if people go off track in that time. By meeting every 24 hours, it offers a more efficient way to keep the project in alignment.

▪*Great Collaboration can be Quiet:* Michael believes that tremendous collaboration can happen when someone gives you a deep and thoughtful review of a document or project with constructive, helpful feedback and/or added resources. These types of contributions can be very powerful and very effective.

▪*Debrief on Team Dynamics:* Taking the time to look back over the past week or month to see what has been working well for the team, as well as where improvements could be made, is a model of continuous improvement that can only help the team overall.

-*Management Context:* Michael shared an effective collaborative behaviour strategy within a management context:

▪*Actively Engage in Collaboration Tools:* For this strategy, Michael shared two practices:

➢ **Connecting Employees with Other People:** At IKEA, new employees are welcomed by their managers, who explain in detail what they will be responsible for in their new roles. As well, each new employee is given budgeted time to sit with others within IKEA who can help them transition into their responsibilities.

➢ **Engage Actively in the Youth of Collaboration Talk:** Managers should be public when they respond to posts from others rather than responding privately. By publically acknowledging posts and publically providing feedback, it develops a culture of collaboration and collaborative behaviour, especially for junior members.

-*Executive Context:* Michael shared eight collaborative behaviour strategies within an executive context:

▪*Be an Exemplar of Collaboration:* If the executive can share updates and current thinking, it helps to break down barriers and work across silos. Michael believes that divisions and silos have a role to play in creating a particular context and enforcing a particular focus. Where they work, they work very well. Equally, there needs to be someone or a group of people who are able to look across silos and divisions and be the role model that shows how more can be accomplished together vs. individually.

▪*Learn Practical Ways of Collaborating:* Executives can learn practical ways of collaborating. Clifford Chance runs a workshop called: *"Working Across Borders"* for senior managers. It talks about the cultural and practical issues of working in virtual teams. For senior managers who have come up through the ranks with pre-conceived ideas about virtual teams and community collaboration, an intentional education program can help bring them into this journey.

▪*Design Spaces for Cultivating Relationships:* One such example of this is what was described above re: providing meeting spaces for people to get together and learn from each other. This is something that an executive can do to set a context or culture in place for collaboration. Equally, given that many organizations are increasingly virtual and digital, they can champion shared areas, such as community spaces for meeting virtually or digitally.

▪*Make Collaboration a Cultural Value:* This is a critical approach to cultivating collaborative behaviour. This gets to the heart of collaboration, not just mental assent. Additionally, executives can draw attention to and reward collaborative wins and approaches that they see portrayed by individuals within the organization.

▪*Hire for Collaborative Competence:* When hiring, executives can look for the candidate's history of collaborative behaviour as a way to turn a culture from anti-collaborative to collaborative. In the interview, listen for the number of times the candidate says "we" vs. "I". A predominance of "we" shows a more collaborative disposition.

Design Initiatives that Require Collaboration: There are firm-wide initiatives that will only succeed with a collaborative approach. Executives can champion these efforts.

Michael shared a CEMEX case study (also mentioned in his other call and subsequent report). CEMEX introduced their collaborative tool some years ago to support a global initiative upon which the future of the organization was dependent. This initiative saved the company a significant amount of money by reducing fuel costs. It was accomplished because people from across the firm were brought together to problem solve and fix a problem that they would not have otherwise been able to solve on their own.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following is a summary of lessons learned as shared by participants within the discussion:

Michael asked participants how they know when they are collaborating, i.e. what it looks like for them:

- One participant stated that she likes the idea of welcoming disagreement as long as individuals are able to express their own ideas and everyone involved has the best interests of collaboration in mind. It can be challenging because sometimes people shy away from expressing an opinion that they feel is different or might cause a disagreement. However, that can be a great way to get ideas. Therefore, this participant encourages people to speak from an honest place because it could be a way to lead everyone in a better direction.

- Michael agreed, adding that he read about a manager who actually dismissed the meeting if he asked for feedback and no one shared any alternative viewpoints. He then sets a new meeting time for people to come back with their viewpoints. This takes a strong leader to be able to do something like this because he/she actually wants to hear differing points of view and not just views that reinforce his/her ego.

- Another participant added that some of the best forms of collaboration that she has seen are when people start with an idea and build on it with inputs from different perspectives. The outcome is far better as a group than it ever could have been individually.

Michael added that in one of his books he examines the use of ideation tools. One of the capabilities of ideation tools is that the number of available votes for a set of ideas can be limited. When a limitation is put on something, it causes a different thought process. In this case, one that will be very selective based on the goals at hand.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

Hillary observed through this discussion that for all the behaviours listed in the "Best Practices" above, community enables every single one of them. It struck Hillary that oftentimes community can be something that unearths that discord or friction. While this can be positive, it can also be alarming to others in the organization who only see community as a cause of friction.

Therefore, it becomes critical for the community manager to help translate its ultimate value and to help people who are not comfortable with that friction; turn the fear into something productive and collaborative.

Michael added that he heard someone say that community tools/collaboration tools/social business tools do not create culture, they reveal culture. If the organization has someone in a position of authority who says that they feel uncomfortable giving people the ability to express disagreement, the organization risks losing good people. People need a voice. If people do not have a voice it fosters a layer of discontent across the organization because people's opinions are not valued or validated.

To further corroborate this statement, Hillary added that community can actually become a risk aversion tool because it sources potential issues and brings them to the surface to be dealt with immediately vs. festering into something bigger and potentially dangerous for the organization. Michael agreed.

Michael asked participants on the call to share how they practice collaborative behaviour within their organizations:

- One participant shared that she has a group of people within her organization who are charged with putting together a weekly "Lessons Learned" feature for everyone in the organization to help them learn from each other.

- Another member shared that he runs his company's Social Ambassador Program. He encourages ambassadors to contribute to the program and drive the community beyond just their individual roles as ambassadors. To do this, they encourage their ambassadors to submit content that they can then share through the platform. That can be anything from an article to a video, etc. It has helped their ambassadors to submit content more actively, to the point where one third of their weekly content is ambassador submitted. This helps this member to curate content.

- Another participant shared that she works with many students and helps them to practice conflict as they begin to bond together as a group – a practice that intrigued others on the call. It entails the use of role-playing various conflicts before there is anything of significance to disagree about as a group. By the time they reach the point of narrowing in on ideas or making an important decision together, they have an idea of how to work together through the conflict.