

# 6 STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

by Kevin Grigg, P.E.

Silicon Valley startups redefined the modern office. Cubicle walls came down, making collaboration part of the culture. Seeing the successes that the tech industry enjoy, other industries have begun to change their approach to workplace ethos.

As the CEO of an engineering consulting firm, this has been a difficult challenge. Technical professionals, especially engineers, like to figure things out on their own. But when collaboration works, it takes the best from each person and creates new ideas.

## NEW PHILOSOPHY

So how do you get a firm to adopt a new philosophy? It's not something that happens overnight. It takes thought, direction, proactive integration, and constant nurturing. We've taken a six-step approach at our firm, and it's paying off.

**1. Define It.** What does collaboration mean in your firm? Is it just some vague notion of "working together," or are your organizational needs and expectations more specific? Gather a select group of employees. This shouldn't be your usual trusted advisors. You want ideas from different lines of business, with different levels of experience, and with different perspectives. Take an hour or two to talk about how collaboration already exists, where it is lacking, and how better implementation will impact your company.

**2. Communicate It.** Now that you know what it is to your company, it's time to make sure that your entire organization knows that collaboration is an operational imperative. This starts at the highest level, but takes buy-in from everyone. The push for collaboration will be ongoing, and you will hold your employees accountable for this behavioral norm. If you have an all-employee meeting, this should be a highlight, every time. Mention it at smaller group meetings and make sure department managers are doing the same. Use visual aids (posters and graphics) and company communications (emails and internal posts) to reinforce your message.

**3. Incentivize It.** A great way to communicate your intent is to make collaboration a part of employee goal setting and evaluation. Work with HR to include collaboration as a performance criterion, and award people who excel. This will set the standard for your firm. Include collaboration as a measure that influences compensation. You can also institute a rewards program that acknowledges good examples of collaboration.

**4. Monitor It.** For upper management (those you routinely work with) include an assessment of their efforts related to collaboration in quarterly performance "check-ins." But also take the pulse of those who work for them. Ask to sit in on project or department meetings. Ask employees as you pass them in the hall. Recognize that you may not get an entirely truthful answer as people typically want to give the answer they think you want to hear.

**5. Live it.** Lead by example. Be a collaborative leader, as opposed to a dictatorial or distant leader. Ask for help and new ideas. Create a space on your intranet for people to suggest ideas without fear of retribution. Interact regularly with your employees, your clients, and those outside of your organization that influence your firm's success, including elected and appointed officials.

**6. Sustain It.** Use every reasonable opportunity as a leader of your firm to reiterate the importance of collaboration as it relates to the success of your employee's professional development and to your firm's overall success. Articulate examples of stellar collaboration to illustrate, reinforce, and reward collaborative behavior(s).

Changing a linear model to a collaborative one will not happen overnight. People must see the benefits to believe the message. Don't give up. And don't be afraid to change an approach if you're not seeing traction. Be flexible and keep your goal in sight. ■

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