



Collaborative Leadership for Change

Why 85% of Projects Fail ... And What To Do About It

Work overload in companies is wreaking havoc on productivity and peak performance, especially on teams. Creating innovative solutions and products faster is the lifeblood of organizational health. Collaborative leadership is a critical capability for producing health in fast-changing modern workplaces.

Collaborative leadership is both a philosophy and toolkit for responding to more and faster change. This paper highlights strategies you can use to turn repeated failures on projects and change initiatives into high performing, successful projects with on-time, on-budget performance.

A View From the Trenches...

From a Technology VP:

“How do you change a culture to get people to speak up? I have a mainframe system that needs functionality to help our CS group. It should be a simple 2-person project. The project team tells me what I want to hear up front: “Sure, that’s no problem.” A few weeks later, I go back to them and I hear “We don’t have the resources we need to do it.” I remind them “You were part of the up front process ... why didn’t you raise the flag then? “Because we were afraid to say what we really needed – we didn’t want to upset you.”

They’re the experts, I need to ask them questions and engage in a real dialogue about the fact we aren’t meeting customer’s needs. I’m the one on the line with the customer. It makes me look bad, and it makes our company look bad.”

From a Project Team Leader:

“We have too many competing priorities. Everyone is competing for the same bucket of money, using the same resources. Not only are the missed deadlines and missed budgets giving us a sense of failure – its frying people and pissing off customers. We can’t keep up, and the result is a steady nibbling away, bit-by-bit, of the trust in us.”

From a Project Team Leader:

“Our website was old – we needed to re-do it to generate revenue, including online advertising revenue. The executives hired a consultant who said “We can generate \$10M in revenue if we get the site up in 6 months.” The consultant and the executive lobbed it over the wall to the technology team, who agreed to do it. 4 months later word came back: “We can’t meet the timeline.” The project took over 14 months to complete. If they had involved us up front, we could have figured out together what could have been done in 6 months.”



“We were afraid to say what we really needed – we didn’t want to upset you.”

“We can’t keep up, and the result is a steady nibbling away, bit-by-bit, of the trust in us.”

Coordination & Integration Stem High Failure Rates of Change

Organizations are increasingly challenged to do more with less. Shifting strategies and priorities are taking a toll on people. The human overload factor in almost every company is wreaking havoc on productivity and peak performance. The evidence? Research confirms that 75% of ALL efforts to improve business performance are failing.^{1*} Technology initiatives and projects lead the pack with failures rates of 85%.^{2*} The vast majority (66%) of employees self-assess themselves as “dissatisfied” or “checked out.”^{3*}

As shown in Table 1 below, misaligned expectations are a prime cause of project failure. The crux of project success lives in high trust and commitment, requiring detailed, frequent, open conversations between people across silos. This requires a blend of group facilitation skills, change leadership methods, and applied neuroscience (how the brain works to maximize productivity) to ensure focused execution. This is not soft – when done well, you will see 20-50% improvements in on-time, on-budget performance of projects.

Table 1. Misaligned Expectations Common In Global Work Environments:

Employees Assume Company Will ...	Leaders ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower me ... reward me ... but don't micro-manage me. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume employees are grown-ups and can take initiative to solve problems.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take care of the details. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't have time to "babysit" projects.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in my career. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plagued by tight margins, often eliminate programs that develop employees.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ALL the resources "needed" to ensure projects are on-time and on-budget. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know that throwing more money at the problem won't fix it.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach me how to "catch on" to the hidden nuances of communication and decision making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume effective communication is happening and will take care of itself.
In the Face of Change Employees Want ...	In the Face of Change, Leaders Are...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More information about "where are we going?" and "What does success look like?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear why people don't know the direction – when they told everyone ... once ... in an email.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity about changing/conflicting priorities and objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% (+) responsible for the goals, and often don't effectively transfer that to others.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To avoid feeling "in the dark." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over-committed and frustrated.

10 Challenges to Workplace Productivity

1. Change is Hard.

Look at any effort to make a small change in your personal life – in your eating, exercise, or daily habits. How easy was that to do? Now imagine your change initiative will require 10 to 10,000 people to change 20% of what they do every day. And that change is one of about a dozen in the past year that occurs in the wake of a reorganization or technology implementation – often where several employees were let go. If you don't believe that lowers productivity, think again. People are distracted by the question "Am I next?" Bottom line: Change is hard – the

best leaders and organizations have a smart, proactive plan for how to help people get on board and opt in, fast.

2. Communication – Never Enough.

Leaders severely underestimate what it takes to get people to do things differently. Often announcements are via a single email; people commonly find out about company decisions from the newspaper or the grapevine. The reason people ignore change messages from leaders? They don't see the benefit, they are rewarded for old behavior, and they don't know what they're supposed to do differently. Your customers would stop doing business with your company if they got an email every month saying "here's a new product" – with no link

to a consistent message, no call to action, and no benefit. Employees are one of your most important customers – they chose to work for you – for now. Communication is improved when leaders think about everything they say and do as building a trusted brand called “high performing workplace.” Bottom line: Handle change in a way that makes sense for people, by doing communication differently than you have in the past.

3. The Evolving Work Contract.

Younger generations show up when they have a stake in the game. Until recently most work contracts put the employer in the driver’s seat – but the pendulum is swinging the other way. Younger employees see themselves in the driver’s seat of their careers by necessity. Organizations don’t develop them, even though research shows career development is a top three satisfaction criteria for employees. Younger employees want their work to have meaning, they want flexibility, and they don’t assign loyalty or extra energy lightly. Many organizations have seen this and are willing to set up a more balanced exchange. In a knowledge economy there are simple ways to establish a better relationship with your employees. Bottom line: How much positive recognition are you giving people? It costs nothing and pays off big.

4. Planning is Static.

Most planning in today’s businesses is either an annual event around budget time, or a spreadsheet managed by a project leader. There is very little attention to planning for hand-offs, coordination, best practice sharing, and integration across boundaries (global and functional) – which is a prerequisite for high-performing teamwork and communication. Further, planning is often seen as a management activity that occurs behind closed doors

“When the process to create an integrated solution lacked INTERNAL integration, it shows – the customer bears the brunt of that lack of coordination.”

with leaders announcing the change after the decisions were made. Bottom line: Establish planning as an ongoing function in a way that constantly addresses roadblocks and shifting priorities. This aligns with the dynamic project team environment where new project teams are formed and re-formed continuously. Create a charter to help people ramp up quickly.

5. Sink or Swim.

Managers with dozens or even hundreds of direct reports are less available to guide and mentor employees. Additionally, managing today is like herding cats - coordinating and organizing people who don’t want to be told what to do. This gap is increasingly problematic with younger employees who are not trained in basic workplace skills. Kid-centric environments where household chores or getting A’s in school were the major responsibility did not prepare new employees to work in a profit-centric environment with tight deadlines, communication vacuums, unclear expectations, stressed out bosses, obscure politics, and constantly shifting priorities. Managers who are too busy to develop, coach, and mentor people find it hard to empower their people to make good decisions; in turn, many of those employees aren’t showing up as mature,

developed workers. Bottom line: Develop a common structure for how to participate and work in teams and meetings. This is a critical productivity tool for almost every size company.

6. Connecting the Dots.

What happens if you pile more onto an over-stuffed plate? Something falls off. Usually that fall-off decision is made by an employee who responds to the person yelling loudest – not by a sponsoring executive who is the link to core business objectives. Bottom line: Connect the dots of your new initiative or project to what's already in place, to avoid triggering a threat response and begin to create that branding familiarity.

7. Communication in the Matrix.

The matrix organizational structure was intended to help people serve various stakeholders better, but has increased confusion in almost every company. People don't know who to go to for what, and are unclear who is making decisions. This is further complicated by finger-pointing and blame, in which people are seeking

“Imagine a relay race in which each runner completes their leg of the race at a brick wall, and their task is to toss the baton over the wall and hope the next runner catches it.”

to protect themselves from making visible mistakes and avoiding risk-taking. Matrix structures rely on deep relationships and constant communication. Diminish the over-use of email, conference calls, and IM – in which people's attention is sketchy and continuously split. Bottom line: The ability to communicate effectively in the matrix requires an increase in short, targeted phone conversations and meetings that end with clear actions and decisions.

8. The Need for Better Handoffs.

Imagine a relay race in which each runner completes their leg of the race at a brick wall, and their task is to toss the baton over the wall and hope the next runner catches it. How effective would this race be, especially run against a competing team who had no walls? This is exactly what goes on inside almost every company, regardless of size. Handoffs and communications on projects are not effective, creating huge wasted time, confusion, and duplication of efforts. Bottom line: Address handoffs across boundaries in an up-front planning process on projects. This accelerates performance and productivity of that project, because people know when and how to reach across boundaries to the right people at the right time.

9. More Integrated Teams.

Goals often set up internal competition, engaging people in “turf wars” for resources with peers. People in various tribes across the business stay aligned with their department – leading to territory wars between groups that need to be in alignment. Who loses? The customer. Bottom line: Establish cross-functional goals that drive key strategies, and create integrated teams who work together on them.

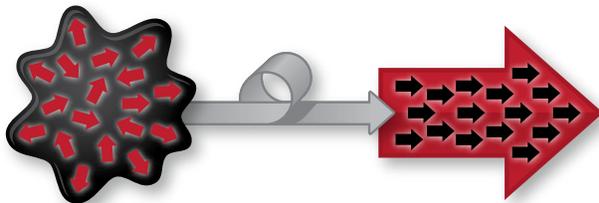
10. Learn How to *Really* Prioritize.

According to research in neuroscience, the activity that taxes our poor brains the most is prioritization. Planning for complicated, dynamic futures is hard. If - then scenario planning requires a structure, energy and attention. Bottom line: It's a cultivated skill to learn how to prioritize effectively; invest time in training and learn how to prioritize.

Alignment is the Answer ...

A leadership decision, such as an acquisition, new strategy, technology project, is where misalignment begins. Like a vehicle that has a new set of tires, change triggers existing priorities and status quo to be thrown out of alignment.

Realigning people is the first step, which is a prerequisite to commitment. Commitment means people are saying "I like it ... I get it ... I want it ...". Until that happens, your predictions will stay locked in PowerPoint's and spreadsheets. You need a process to get the numbers off the paper and into



how people work together. Just as you have to win over customers to get them to choose your product, you have to win over employees to get them to opt-in – by showing them the benefits, giving them a reason, and making it easy.

Creating alignment is not automatic and it's not accidental. With diverse, global, fast-moving teams, you have to condition before the game. This means time spent getting your team working well before you're

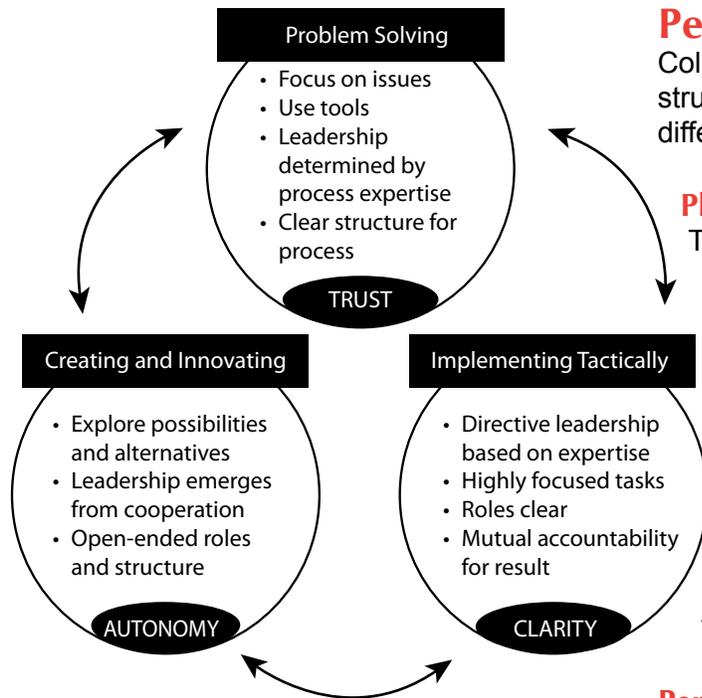
on the field. Teams who are implementing change must engage in an active process to get their fingerprints on designing and building the solution. Alignment is not simply about achieving consensus in a meeting. It is a process of involving more people in planning for performance.

"Projects are the lifeblood of the organization, and teams are like the arteries and veins – the delivery system."

Collaborative Leadership. Align Teams & Realize Better Results at Lower Cost.

The reason involvement is so important becomes obvious when you consider that projects are the lifeblood of the organization, and teams are like the arteries and veins – the delivery system. If your projects are anemic, you won't have good health. If your team artery system is clogged, the project will not flow efficiently. You have to get an entire team of experts – perhaps specialists who have never worked together before – clear about their assignment and working together – fast. This begins by defining appropriate expectations based on the purpose of the team.

Ways of Working in Teams



By utilizing effective, structured practices for team planning, communication, and start-up, you further the process of alignment. This structured process is about embedding several collaboration best practices:

- Talking face-to-face in solution and goal-focused ways
- Building trusting relationships among people who don't work together
- Breaking down walls, boundaries, and silos – internally and externally
- Surfacing concerns early and often
- Bringing new ideas quickly to prototype
- Asking questions (instead of giving the answer)
- Making feedback safe at every level of the organization
- Showing curiosity and learning, versus “we know it already”
- Taking risks to try new behaviors
- Building community

Small Mindset Shifts Create Big Performance Gains

Collaboration best practices happen by structuring business activities in a slightly different way, to include the following:

Planning = Implementation.

The best practice for planning in today's organizations keeps planning alive during the entire project life cycle, to accomplish three goals: 1) Ensure executive sponsorship remains visible and active from beginning to end; 2) Engage key stakeholders in the planning process early; and 3) Define specifically how people will work together (especially across function and geography) to coordinate and collaborate to achieve hard deliverables.

Performance: A Micro and Macro View.

At the macro level, performance is obtained when there is a clear road map for communication, roles, problem solving, and handoffs based on where the trouble spots live. This means visibly connecting the dots between customers, sponsors and other parts of the organization. The people on the team usually know what the trouble spots are – but probably have never have been asked to solve them, nor given a structure to make it easy. At the micro level, create a common meeting structure. This is a very strong success factor in driving project performance.

Keep It Familiar.

People are often suspicious of anything new. Leaders need to create a transition process for a change or reorganization that links to what is going to stay the same. This is typically overlooked, but very simple and powerful.

Visual Problem Solving.

Neuroscience research proves what we've taught for years: the brain focuses better when you solve problems visually. Most meetings focus primarily on talk and the use of visuals is dominated by PowerPoint. This is not an interactive way to get people's fingerprints on the work.

Trust-Focused Messaging.

Your efforts to create a high-performing workplace that can deliver consistent results is the key to branding a great workplace culture that has a high degree of trust. People will need less communication when they know that what they can expect from you is consistent – that they can trust what leaders are saying and doing. This takes repetition, frequency, patience, and interaction (not one-way and not email).

Prioritization.

As mentioned earlier, prioritization is one of the hardest activities human beings try to do. Visualizing fuzzy futures that require holding several complex ideas at once is not something the brain does easily. When you add a change initiative, you won't see it succeed unless you perform a realistic comparison of the existing workloads and commitments.

We will learn what we need to know about helping people see the benefit to the business ... and to them personally."

Putting It Into Action

Remember our project leaders in the opening scenarios? Let's take a look at what a scenario looks like in an organization that has embedded collaborative leadership.

Project VP –

"This new LEAN initiative is a risk for us. The organization's attention is being absorbed almost completely with a global acquisition, and trying to figure out how to integrate our technology and service functions with customer-facing teams in remote locations. After meeting with our internal change focus groups, I feel the mandate has come from them now. So, rather than me having to make this decision wondering how to get buy-in, I'm doing it from a very different starting point – they are demanding it from me. It's important that I accept the responsibility that goes with this, by helping my peers understand that we are making the acquisition pay off quicker by ensuring the benefits clear to everyone, the integration is driven by people who know what to do, and by empowering our people with tools to accomplish that. Given the solid change agents in our organization who are skilled at facilitating meetings with their peers across the company, I know that even where we may face confusion, stalls, or resistance – we will learn what we need to know about helping people see the benefit to the business ... and to them personally."

Project Leader –

"I feel finally, for the first time in my career – that I know how to cultivate the support of my VP and those around the organization who typically don't buy-in to our work. I have the mandate and the tools to be the hub of the wheel in a way that isn't overbearing or seen as over-stepping my authority. It's expected that I help keep everyone lined up – and when I reach across boundaries,

it's seen as supportive, not a threat. That's because we have framed the process of collaboration in our organization in a positive way, driven by the values of our top leadership. When my VP came to me about the LEAN concept and asked me to be part of a focus group to evaluate whether to commit to this initiative – I knew my opinion really counted. I gave my honest input without hesitation, because I trust him. I know our senior leadership prioritizes our change initiatives to align with strategies, and that someone at the top is tracking what those are. So I can rest easy that the pendulum won't be yanked in a brand new direction in a month's time, but everything is linked up. At the same time, I know I can speak up and I will be heard if there's a problem. Given that – and the fact that my role is seen as an integrator of change, I'm fully on board with what this will mean for the organization. I'm a true champion of this LEAN program. “

Steps You Can Take

Collaborative Leadership is about building a strong, high-trust, adaptive culture through stronger health in the lifeblood of the organization: Customer-driven project success. It's more than a philosophy – it's a set of tools for working smarter, and working for and with the customer. Healthy projects are built around four best practices:

1. Jump Start.

Identify a mission-critical project and objective, its impact on the business, and a measurable ROI that executives see as valuable. We advise a “low-risk, high-payoff” pilot, perhaps with a project that's struggling, and stakes are high. The goal is to keep the scope manageable and achieve a quick win.

Goals often set up internal competition, engaging people in “turf wars” for resources with peers.

2. Benchmark.

Compare your sponsorship, team charter, and project success rating against proven success factors. Recent discoveries in neuroscience prove that a few traditional management practices most commonly derail well-designed projects. How are you doing in relationship to the collaboration best practices?

3. Connect the Dots.

Define ROI and the customer value for the project. Teach project leaders how to ramp up a new team quickly, keep roles clear, ensure decisions are clear and timely, and get fingerprints on the work beyond the project team.

4. Drive Commitment.

Leaders believe by stating a clear plan and strategy and telling people about it, is enough to ensure effective implementation. Whether it's a merger, a new technology platform, or a change in strategy, this rarely is the case. Every company can benefit from a more robust, comprehensive process that continually builds linkages between individual performance, team performance, and organizational performance. The tools in this workshop will directly apply to this.

Self-Assess: Imbalanced v. Balanced Workplaces

Table 2. Workplace practices have a direct impact on project performance. Check yourself and your team on how well these are working in your organization.

Activity	Imbalanced Workplace “0 Rating”	Balanced Workplace “5 Rating”	Workplace: Rate 0-5
Teamwork	Sponsorship unclear; goals not well-defined, not linked to strategy or vision; unrealistic timelines; roles fuzzy.	Initiatives clearly align with vision and strategy; goals are cross-functional, members empowered and skilled to implement decisions.	
Communication	One-way “telling”; more information than meaning; reinforces boundaries (eg, geographical, function).	Clarifies direction, two-way feedback-driven; answers, “why are we doing this” and “how does this support our goals?”	
Meetings	Start late; vague agenda; wrong players; unclear action plans.	Start and end on time; clear goal and agenda; used for planning and problem solving; support action.	
Customer Interface	Requires customers to work hard, no coordination across business unit or functions (e.g., sales to customer support).	One point of contact; employees can solve problems for unhappy customers; training and development is ongoing, includes direct exposure to customers.	
Problem Solving and Decision Making	Analysis replaces action; is often wrong problem or a band-aid fix; minimal points of view considered.	Addresses root cause, predictive vs. reactive; considers multiple perspectives; bias for action.	
Feedback and Learning	Mistakes seek blame; only given during performance reviews and mistakes; fear is the driver; no clear process.	Viewed as critical to success; constructive and common “lessons learned” process; focuses on positive reinforcement, emphasizes coaching and mentoring.	

Summary

Collaborative leadership is a critical capability to create speed and customer focus in the modern workplace. It is a powerful toolkit for ensuring that how people work – the unseen lifeblood of your business – is supporting sustainable organizational health.

We hope this information is helpful to you, and has provided some good ideas for getting your change initiatives and projects on the road to better success.

Interested in More?

1. FREE tools on our site: <http://www.corporateculturepros.com/culture-tools/>
2. Read our book: *Transforming Corporate Culture: 9 Natural Truths for Being Fit to Compete* at: <http://www.corporateculturepros.com/learn/fit-to-compete-book/>

Additional Resources

Other Articles:

Managing Paradoxes in Change: Six Steps for Building a Balanced Culture

The Conference Board, September, 2005

Does Your Organization Have a Balanced Culture?

CEO Refresher, January, 2006

Make It a Successful Meeting

CEO Refresher, February, 2006

Managing Paradoxical Opposites

CEO Refresher, April, 2006

Is Your Culture Innovation Ready, Part 1

Link & Learn, September, 2006

Is Your Culture Innovation Ready, Part 2

Link & Learn, October, 2006

Is Your Culture Innovation-Ready?

ASTD, October, 2006

White Paper

How to Drive Business Performance through Culture: The Case, the Research and the Process – August, 2006

The Renewable Leader: Tips for Leading in Fast-Changing Times –

November, 2008

*Sources:

1: Mourier and Smith, 2001

2: Vital Smarts, 2008

3: Gallup Survey, 2006

About Corporate Culture Pros

Lisa Jackson and Gerry Schmidt are corporate culture experts and authors of the book “Transforming Corporate Culture: 9 Natural Truths for Being Fit to Compete.” They offer a proven method to teach leaders how to evolve their corporate cultures to perform better, innovate faster, and show they truly care about people in an unprecedented era of rapid change and transformation.

Visit them on the **web** at: www.CorporateCulturePros.com

Follow on **Twitter** at: <http://twitter.com/corporatecultur>



Gerry Schmidt PhD



Lisa Jackson