

What the Gypsies Can Teach Us: Effective Collaboration

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Abstract—Although the American way traditionally promotes individualism and self-reliance, the technical communication process, by its very nature, demands collaboration. Moreover, current trends in company downsizing and compressed time to market require the delivery of quality products in ever-shortening cycles. Collaborative work offers opportunities for heightened creativity and enhanced quality; but it also engenders confusion and inconsistency. Using personal experience and a survey of professional communicators, we provide insight to successful collaboration, including the differences between collaboration and teamwork, the personal and professional characteristics of an effective collaborator, and techniques to improve collaborative efforts.

Throughout major cities in Europe, gypsies work the streets for their livelihood. Even witting travelers may find themselves approached by two or more gypsies—ostensibly to peddle a newspaper or trinket—and be divested of their wallets.

Is there really something we in our universe of technical communication can learn from such motley crews? There is. It is to survive and thrive through successful, artful collaboration.

Although the American way promotes individualism and self-reliance, the technical communication process by its very nature demands that we collaborate in some manner, whether it be in the planning stage; during the revision process; or on an ad hoc, continual basis. Moreover, current trends in company downsizing and compressed time-to-market schedules require the cooperation of several interactive participants to deliver quality products in ever-shortening cycle times. At its best, collaborative work offers opportunities for heightened creativity and enhanced quality; at its worst, it engenders confusion and inconsistency.

Collaboration: Sink or Swim

When was the last time you turned to a newspaper or business magazine and did *not* see that another corporation was downsized? For example, competition has forced many personal computer manufacturers into oblivion. Those that remain, like Dell and Compaq, are tenacious in their fight for market share. New products and services are being announced at a blinding rate, forcing suppliers to think and act smartly and quickly. As one business writer put it, "...the windows of opportunity are often frustratingly brief."⁽¹⁾

Collaboration is becoming the key to surviving the frenetic pace of fierce competition. The act of collaborating is also known by other names, such as "partnering" and "benchmarking." Indeed, the characteristics of collaboration are also found in the newly coined concept of the "virtual corporation."

Ultimately, the many-faceted act of collaboration is here to stay as a significant way of doing business. Collaboration develops those skills needed to keep swimming with the head above water.

Collaboration Is...

Successful corporate collaboration demands sophisticated personal and professional attitudes and skills.

Demonstration of Interpersonal Skills. Many who have collaborated successfully recognize that "[it] requires a high degree of interpersonal skills."(2). Because collaboration requires advanced personal and professional **skills**, it works best among seasoned professionals or at least peers who feel equally confident about their potential contributions to the project. Because conflict is inherent in the process, the collaborators must be open to facing conflict and must have experience negotiating resolution. Successful collaborators must be able to question, challenge, and adapt. They cannot be intimidated by opposition or, inversely, complacent about apparent harmony.

Like any process, collaboration has its flaws, is not for every situation, and is highly dependent on the participants in the process because roles and responsibilities are less formally defined than in more structured situations.

Cooperation With the Enemy. It is interesting that *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* defines collaboration as 1) the act of performing work or labor together; 2) cooperation with the enemy. Collaborators do not need to be friends or even like one another to produce a quality product. However, they *do* need to cultivate and maintain mutual respect, tolerance, and trust in working together. They must believe that they need one another to get the work done. There is no room for someone so inflexible or distrustful as to demand a single solution or course of action. Collaborators acknowledge that each contributes a unique perspective, that no one individual could complete the project alone. As management theorist Karl Weick says, "Complex situations put a real premium on group processes, division of labor, trust, reaffirmation of what we respect and what we question in each other."(3)

Benchmarking is a perfect example of "cooperation with the enemy." To benchmark a product is to compare it to the competition in such detail as to require an agreement with the competitor to share certain information. Such cooperation flies in the face of the inherent fear Americans have of collusion in the business place. Our strong antitrust laws are testament to that sentiment. But it is also the American way to think and act cleverly and to adapt when necessary.

Likewise, partnering among companies has been found to create stronger links that strengthen the industry as a whole. The "...U.S. Department of Commerce's Strategic Partnership Initiative demonstrates our nation's growing awareness of the importance of partnering..."(4) For example, partnering efforts among U.S. semiconductor manufacturers and their equipment suppliers recently has contributed to a reversal in a ten-year degrading trend in world market share.

The virtual corporation is "a temporary network of independent companies—suppliers, customers, even erstwhile rivals—linked by information technology to share skills, costs, and access to one another's markets...It will have no

hierarchy, no vertical integration. Instead, proponents say this new, evolving corporate model will be fluid and flexible—a group of collaborators that quickly unite to exploit a specific opportunity. Once the opportunity is met, the venture will, more often than not, disband."(5)

In short, industry and government are now understanding the value of leveraging external resources to meet customers' and constituents' demands and to meet reduced budgets.

Product-Driven. Collaboration is not driven by the process or the participants' relationship. Instead, the focus is on the product being developed by the participants within the given deadline.

Buy-In. All participants must recognize their role in the process and be willing to participate despite inevitable conflicts. They must be willing to take risks, do things differently, handle exceptions, motivate themselves and others, and productively deal with whatever surfaces.

Communication. Collaboration, dependent on problem-solving and creative solutions, relies heavily on constant communication. The flow of communication is determined by the collaborators and not by an external authority. Collaborators must proactively use whatever resources are available to communicate. Assignments are not handed to them; instead, any member can initiate a communication when a gap in the flow is perceived.

Resourcefulness. Successful collaboration is often characterized by the spontaneous, creative nature of the group's problem-solving techniques. Because the structure of the collaborative group is less formal and rigid, problem-solving cannot rely on the formal organization to arbitrate or make things happen. Further, the veteran collaborator knows the value of establishing rapport with support staff and knows not to abuse it by making demands, such as unrealistic turnaround times. Planning ahead to avoid logjams is also part of being resourceful. **Adaptive, flexible, resilient,** and cooperative are additional adjectives that describe the necessary ingredients of successful collaborations.

Interactive Process. Collaboration, like documentation in general, requires an interactive process among its participants.

Shared Knowledge. Collaboration works more swiftly and smoothly when the participants have knowledge of and experience with the entire process. This may include project management and scheduling, time management, the publication process (including print operations), and the review process.

Risky. For several reasons, collaboration can be risky. Because strong interpersonal skills are required to make collaboration work and because there is less formal organization to rely on settling issues, stressful situations are more likely to arise. Further, the lack of standard operating procedures automatically creates potential barriers to understanding. Because they are out of the mainstream, collaborative efforts rarely receive reward and recognition. Collaborative efforts may or may not be a boon to the participant's career. Collaboration can enrich skills but individual contributions probably will not be apparent. Moreover, successful collaborators share the victories and defeats

of collaboration. Individual heroics do not make a collaborative effort successful.

Collaboration Is Not...

Collaboration is to be differentiated from the more conventional way of working collectively—teamwork.

Returning to the dictionary, the definition for *team* is 1) a brood of young animals, especially of ducks or pigs; 2) two or more horses, oxen, etc. harnessed to the same vehicle or plow; 3) (a) two or more draft animals and their vehicle, (b) one draft animal and its vehicle; 4) a group of people working or playing together; 5) any number of animals or birds passing in a line; a flock, as of wild ducks, flying in a line. Note the relatively behavioral nature implied in the definition of team. Human interaction is a distinct fourth in order of importance. The definition for *teamwork* is a little bit more mollifying: *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* defines teamwork as 1) joint action by a group of people, in which each person subordinates his individual interests and opinions to the unity and efficiency of the group; coordinated effort, as of an athletic team; 2) work done by or with a team.

Further distinctions between teamwork and collaboration are as follows:

Collaboration	Teamwork
Because projects requiring collaboration are product-driven, the same people may or may not collaborate on another project.	Teamwork usually has the same group of people who are used to working together on various projects.
Collaboration works best among individuals who are experts in their fields. Membership in the collaborative effort depends on the various disciplines needed to be represented in the finished product.	Membership in a team is pre-determined by job assignment.
Collaboration can occur anywhere as long as various modes of communication are available to all participants, such as E-mail, telephones, faxes, networked systems, and so on. Collaborators do not have to be physically accessible to one another.	Teamwork is usually place-sensitive. Teams work together in the same physical space and depend on meetings for exchanging information.
Collaborators are generally peers who have a coordinator. A hierarchy among collaborators may exist, but it is not the driving force. Collaboration is a temporary alliance.	Generally, teamwork requires a leader who also is <i>given</i> some organizational authority over the team, say in granting leave, assigning tasks, and evaluating the employee. The project manager or leader assigns individuals their tasks and guides the overall effort. The team member responds according to his or her assignment. The organizational hierarchy is usually apparent.

Table 1. Teamwork vs. Collaboration

What Worked...

Last year, one of us was asked to come into a large multinational corporation to help with 10 different technical papers for two conferences having entirely different focuses. The papers were drafted by various company experts physically located in Texas, Iowa, and Canada. These authors were accessible by telephone, fax, and overnight delivery. But two were not easily accessed on the network. All illustrations had to be reworked or drawn from scratch. None of the authors had met or even heard of the freelance technical communicator before the collaboration. Helping these experts finalize their papers, meet the proceedings deadlines, overcome logistics and hardware problems, and develop presentations for each author required a collaborative effort, not only with the authors but also with the support staff in Austin (TX) and at the other sites.

The camera-ready copy was mailed in time; the authors were ready to deliver their papers without critically affecting their workloads; and the company had a concerted, uniform presence in the proceedings from both conferences, implying the company was a cohesive entity (which it is). In addition, the company, which viewed the technical papers as one more vehicle for marketing its complex products, provided papers of a highly complex and sophisticated nature that added substance to its marketing efforts, and the authors were well prepared to deliver their papers at the conferences.

None of this could have occurred if the collaborators had not been both willing to participate in the process but also sage enough to understand the dual nature of the papers—to inform and to market.

What Didn't...

A temporary group was formed of writers, editors, a desktop publishing expert, and engineers across the organization. It was unclear who was coordinating the group so another senior engineer was appointed to head the project. The editor, unsuccessful in gaining control, ceased to participate altogether. A novice writer never established rapport with one of the engineers with whom he was assigned to work. The remaining communication members ended up shouldering most of the responsibility for delivering the product.

Recognizing that the quality of the resulting product suffered, the group members cited the lack of clear goals, roles, tasks, and leadership as the main reasons. Communication—or rather, the lack of it—was a major issue. The publications members expected the lead engineer to pass information to the group. However, he passed only the information he thought was important to the editor, whose participation was already sporadic.

The engineers, not understanding the production process, regularly violated schedules. Further, they were unwilling participants in the group because their roles were dictated by the executive office. In turn, they delegated their tasks to others not involved in the project who put it at a lower priority. Because several engineers lacked respect for the roles of the publications people, they were slow to respond to publication requests.

While the product went out on time, group dynamics disintegrated to such a point that some members refused to interact with others after the project.

To Collaborate—Or Not

The following chart shows elements of product development along with two columns that describe the status of the organization developing the product. Use this chart in helping you determine whether collaboration could work in your situation. However, do not use it solely in making your decision.

Elements	Conducive to Collaboration	Appropriate for Traditional Methods
Product	High visibility; Many and varied users	Low visibility; Few users
Type of user	External	Internal
Type of project	Marketing tool	Limited distribution
	Special project	Subject to routine revisions/updates
Time frame	Quick turnaround	Regularly scheduled
Contents	Must cross organizational lines	Within department
Staffing	Staff resources unbudgeted; Pubs staff affected by downsizing	Staff resources identified and budgeted
	Small group only -	Small or large group
Skill level	Specialists, with an eye for overview	Generalists required
	High-level expertise required	Existing specialized data
	Experts are dispersed across traditional organizational and physical boundaries	Experts available within the immediate organization
	Complementary	Single-focused
Leadership title.	Coordinator	Supervisor, Team Leader, Manager, Project Lead
Organizational boundaries	No restrictive boundaries	Organizational boundaries imposed
	Few, if any, standard operating procedures	Standard policies and procedures apply
	Out of the formal reward and recognition loop	Traditional merit awards apply
Decision-making	Consensus not required	Consensus often required
Types	Proposals; Strategic plans ; Annual reports; Journal and trade magazine articles; House organs; Data sheets; Textbooks; Some training manuals (crossing department lines); Some policies and procedures (e.g., safety affects everyone)	Updates Revisions Newsletters

Table 2. Collaboration Checklist