

**To Become More Authentic and Effective at Collaboration, Ask These 2 Questions...
to Your Self**

***“What does this person know that I don’t know?” and “What is this person better
at than me?”***

In preparing for a team-building session I like to interview the participants. Attempting to get a sense of how much people rely on each other, the first question I ask is, “What kind of team are you on?” and I provide them with the “Interdependence Scale.”



Track and golf teams are mostly independent, with individuals doing their best and the team adding up the scores. On a rugby or soccer team, success results from people relying on each other.

Structure/Strategy

Over the past 15-20 years most organizations, in both their strategy and resulting structures have move towards interdependence. So, it’s likely that most of you are on at least one cross-functional team, or work in a formal matrix.

For an organization to really leverage and harness the power and creativity of these designs, individuals need to have the attitudes, values, and skills of collaboration. There have been hundreds of books written on teamwork and collaboration, as well as popular phrases like:

“There is no I in ‘TEAM’”

“Leave your ego at the door”

“Be a partner to your team, not a boss” (Marshall Goldsmith)

These books and phrases are well-intentioned and contain useful guidance but companies often underestimate the challenges in getting people to collaborate.

Challenges

In the 1830’s Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political scientist, wandered the United States, studying our institutions, culture, and people. In 1835 he wrote, “Democracy in America” and focused heavily on the role of “Individualism” in our society.

In 1841 Ralph Waldo Emerson published his most famous essay elevating the virtues of “Self-Reliance” (Websters: “Reliance on our own efforts and abilities).

“Rugged individuals” and the competitive drive are highly valued here. It’s clear that these qualities of competition, individual effort and self-reliance have contributed to centuries of success and achievement. It also means that many of us are not naturally “wired” for collaboration and sharing information, power, and decision-making.

Research

Many different organizations use a variety of methods to measure and compare countries regarding the degree of collaboration in their societies. Usually the US ranks around 20th world-wide, although recently at least with our younger citizens we have moved up to 13th. PISA, the Program for International Student Assessment, administered a Collaborative Problem-Solving exam to students around the world. Here are the latest results:

1. Singapore
2. Japan
3. Hong Kong
4. South Korea
5. Canada
6. Estonia
7. Finland
8. Macao
9. New Zealand
10. Australia
11. Taiwan
12. Germany
13. United States

So the US students actually did better than several Scandinavian and European countries. World-wide, average female scores on collaboration were higher than males.

Coaching for Collaboration

When I began coaching in 1986, many of my assignments were competitive, aggressive leaders. In many cases their “command and control” approach and/or arrogance were causing problems. In those days coaching was compressed into a two- or three-day time frame. That’s all time I had to guide people to make meaningful, visible changes. I found that there were two key questions, that if a person used in a sincere way, would lead to an immediate shift towards a collaborative mindset and skill set.

Here is the coaching:

When you meet someone who you will be collaborating with, ask yourself, “What does this person know that I don’t know?” and “What is this person better at than me?” (Actually, I

recommend doing this with everyone in your life). Let's examine the potential impact of asking these 2 questions.

Is it "true?" So first let's look at the evidence as to whether this is really true. Does everyone you deal with know things you don't know and are they better than you at something?

- *One Year Olds*

Every one of us could probably learn a lot from how 1-year olds learn to walk. Imagine how most of us would react if 25 times a day we fell and didn't reach our goal. Our self-talk might sound like this:

- "I suck at walking"
- My cousin was walking at 11-months. What's wrong with me?"
- What if I fell down in front of everyone at my 1st birthday party."

Fortunately, one-year olds don't have that self-talk. They just pick themselves up, their little bodies get incrementally stronger and better able to balance. They just focus on learning and improving. Lot to learn from one-year olds.

- *Reverse Mentoring*

I first heard this term about 15 years ago. Now it has become accepted wisdom that younger people are quite often in a position to mentor older people. It's fairly easy to see that our children, nieces, nephews, and younger team members have more knowledge than we do in several areas.

- *We live in a world where not only does no one have all the answers, no one has all the information.*

You might be the head of sales and the most skillful sales person in the company, but your sales people know things about the customer, the competition, and even the economy, that you don't. So I hope you see, Yes, these questions are based on reality.

The Positive Impact

1. *Antidote to Arrogance (The Collaboration "Killer")*

I remember when I introduced these two questions to someone who was sent to coaching because of his perceived arrogance. He openly admitted, "Marty, I see how these questions could work, but if I'm honest, it would never cross my mind to look at someone that way." Arrogant people focus on what they know or have achieved. They are often over-confident that they have all the information they need and therefore are not curious about what you know. These questions are instant game changers for someone who wants to move beyond arrogance.

2. *Curiosity Brings out and Leverages Strength*

If you believe in your heart that these questions are true, you will be genuinely curious about someone's knowledge, skill and capacities. It's a very short step to

them seeing what you can learn from them and how the team can optimize their contributions.

3. *“Catch People Doing Things Right”*

These questions invariably lead to more appreciation, validation, and recognition of others. This is not a trivial result or just “feel good” exercise. Research on high performing teams records that top teams demonstrate 2.7 times as many positive interactions and feedback as marginal performing teams.

4. *Mutual Respect*

I’ve mentioned “mindset” and “skill set” but equally important are collaborative VALUES. Probably number one is “MUTUAL RESPECT.” If you look at people through the lens of these 2 questions your relationship will reflect mutual respect.

Getting Started

For me, these two questions are now automatic. Even when I’m in the role of advising and guiding I still start with seeing someone in terms of where they are more skillful and knowledgeable. If you want to test them out, there are two options.

1. *Observe*

This option doesn’t require you saying anything. Simply look at other people through this lens and observe their strengths and knowledge areas.

2. *Be Curious*

Actually ask them questions about their background, experience, and achievements. For many people it’s an enjoyable (and not that common) experience to have someone be genuinely interested.

Additional Resources

Book: Futterknecht, John, and Marty Seldman, Ph.D. 2020. *Leading in the Global Matrix: Proven Skills & Strategies to Succeed in a Collaborative World.* Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.

Article: Fully Identify Your Strengths and Potential, by Marty Seldman.

<https://martyseidman.com/2023/07/17/fully-identify-your-strengths-and-potential/>