

WHY COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT IS SUCCESSFUL

Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW

When we were a manufacturing economy with mostly semiskilled and unskilled personnel, command and control made a good degree of sense. Running assembly lines calls for mobilization of large numbers of people. Command and control best suits that need. However, as we move to an information economy, command and control is not only ineffective, but self-defeating.

Managers are no longer overseeing masses of semiskilled and unskilled laborers. They are overseeing personnel who have skills they do not have. That means they must turn to personnel for technical advice, digest it, integrate it, and make well-informed decisions. It's a whole new ball game that's a difficult change in paradigm for those used to traditional management methods. Most of us still work in command-and-control settings where a small group at the top calls the shots. Communications are one-way, from top down. Personnel on the front lines are viewed as subordinates who should be seen and not heard. Part of this is habit. Part of it is fear. The greatest fear is loss of control if personnel to express their thinking. That's an understandable fear, but it's not what collaborative management is about. Collaborative management is about up flow of information that allows top managers to make sound decisions.

Though collaborative management does not compromise management control, it does require a new set of attitudes and skills. Simply put, organizational intelligence no longer resides solely at the top. It resides in workforces that increasingly have the specialized knowledge and skills required to create today's complex products and services. Today's managers must be able to 1) relate very differently and 2) absorb and integrate complexity. They must become comfortable with the idea of being a member of an organizational team versus being controllers and the source of all knowledge.

Accomplishing today's management tasks requires both a change in how management is conceptualized but a new set of skills. Managers can no longer bark orders and expect blind obedience. To be effective, they must win the hearts, minds, and trust of personnel who possess specialized knowledge and skills they do not have.

Collaborative managers view "success" very differently. While traditional managers gauge success as something they initiated, collaborative managers view success as something created by all personnel within the organization, leaders and personnel alike.

Shifting to collaborative thinking is quite a challenge. Why? We all like to think our idea is the most valid and can feel put down if someone questions it or comes up with a better idea. Collaborative managers want to be told when they are missing the mark. They want to hear great ideas. Their mode of thinking is: "Let the best idea win. Who cares about the source?" They still exercise power and control, but their control comes from staff loyalty instead of fear. They feel results are what makes everyone look good, so they focus on getting results. They credit anyone who comes up with a great idea for improving quality and value. They turn the traditional "me" game into a "we" game. Friends don't let friends down. Staff who admire and respect their manager do not want to let their manager down.

HR professionals are very familiar with the trepidations personnel feel toward autocratic managers. It's unthinkable to even suggest that an autocratic manager is wrong. Autocratic managers demand compliance, right or wrong. Personnel are required to carry out commands they know are ineffective or even detrimental to the organization. Under the old system obedience was held most important. Now it's results that count.

Collaborative managers must work against the tide of fear and create safety for personnel to suggest a better way. They welcome fresh thinking because, in their view, the organization's success is everyone's success.

Collaborative management, again, is not about giving up control. It's about revising traditional attitudes that the manager must always be "right." It's about letting go of ego and applauding all contributions to organizational success, creating a strong sense of pride that is shared by all.

You can see this dynamic reflected in a TV commercial that Intel has been running in recent months. The commercial gives a short spiel about quality and reliability. In the background one sees personnel in tight formation expressing with conviction: "Proud. Proud, proud, proud, proud." Teamwork that brings out the best in people is the secret to Intel's success. Only collaborative management practices can achieve this kind of culture.

John Macek is the publisher of Bosshandbooks (www.bosshandbooks.com). His career in management includes 17 years as a CEO.