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Developing Your Collaborative Influence: The New "Coin of the Realm"

By *Judge Jim Tamm*
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When IBM sought to transform the direction of the company in 2002, it identified 33 executives who were considered the best future leaders of the companies given its new direction. They came from all over the world, from every part of the business, with an extraordinary ability to get the job done. Researchers studied these 33 successful executives to determine what skills would need to be taught to the next generations of company leaders. All 33 were adept at a skill IBM calls "collaborative influence." It is the ability to get things done by getting people to collaborate with each other, and IBM considers it absolutely critical in a highly complex world.

IBM isn't the first organization to document strong collaborative skills among its most successful employees. When Bell Labs studied its "star performers" to determine what made the difference between "stars" and other merely good employees, they also discovered their "stars" had the same ability to build strong collaborative networks with a wide variety of people.

When the Hewlett and Stuart Foundations teamed up with the State of California to teach collaborative skills in adversarial workplaces, they were able to produce remarkable results. Adversarial relationships were reduced, trust was increased, communications improved. Conflict in 94 different organizations participating in the project was reduced by an average of 67%, dramatically increasing the effectiveness of the organizations. What we learned from that innovative project is that there are five essential skills to increase your collaborative influence. A small increase in proficiency in these five skills has proven to make a measurable improvement in performance.

The five essential skills are:

1. Collaborative Intention: Maintaining a non-defensive presence and making a conscious personal commitment to seeking mutual gains in your relationships.

We call this being in the Green Zone, as opposed to being in the Red Zone which is a more adversarial attitude that we can slip into unconsciously. People in the Green Zone consciously seek solutions rather than blame. They think both short-term and long-term. They are interested in other points of view and welcome feedback. The key is remaining conscious of building mutual success. People in the Red Zone respond defensively, which triggers defensiveness in others. They use shame, blame and accusations, and have a low awareness of their own blind spots. They typically see conflict as a battle rather than a problem, and they seek to win at any cost.

The long-term consequences of a Red Zone culture can be devastating to an organization,

a team, a family or a business. Pain and fear take a toll on individuals, and creativity and overall effectiveness decrease. It is virtually impossible for Red Zone environments to produce and sustain long-term, high-performing collaborative relationships.

2. Truthfulness: Committing to both speak and listen to the truth, and the ability to create an atmosphere where it feels safe enough to raise difficult issues.

The level of trust in any relationship is determined to a great extent by the amount of truth that is being told. Telling the truth about yourself requires a combination of awareness, honesty and openness. A lack of awareness distorts any truth that someone may choose to share. If people are self-aware but choose to deceive others, either by misstatements or withholding, their lack of honesty will eventually weaken the relationship. Finally, if people are self-aware and honest, but choose never to share their thoughts and feelings, their lack of openness will create a barrier to creativity and effective problem solving and limit depth and intimacy in any relationship.

3. Self-Accountability: Taking responsibility for the full range of choices we make, either through action or inaction, and taking responsibility for both the intended and unintended or unforeseen consequences of those choices.

Most people believe, mistakenly, that their choices are narrow. Yet people have more choices than they think. Many people forfeit choices, not realizing that not to choose is also a choice. The way people make little decisions is a reflection of how they make bigger decisions in their lives. People's beliefs about the amount of choice in their lives can either paralyze them or mobilize them. The most effective thing people can do to feel more empowered is to change their belief system about how much choice they have in their life. A sense of influence over our own lives makes undesirable events less demoralizing. Self-accountability is being aware of all the choices we make, and taking responsibility for the results of those choices.

4. Self-Awareness and Awareness of Others: Committing to know yourself deeply and showing a willingness to deal with difficult interpersonal issues.

Whether you want to improve a single relationship or change the culture of an entire organization, the first step is to increase people's self-awareness. The ability to make effective choices and live an authentic life depends to a great extent on a capacity to be self-reflective. If people do not understand their own feelings, fears, values, intentions and patterns of behavior, their lives can be like corks bobbing on the ocean. This may provide an interesting journey, but there will definitely be no sense of control over their own destiny. Such travelers will always be a little puzzled about how and why their lives unfold.

We are greatly influenced by the past, but not inseparable from it. Many people think their past is behind them, and yet unconsciously they carry their past out in front like a shield, wondering why they can't seem to get as close to others as they want. The past is impossible to change, but it doesn't have to determine our future. Increasing self-awareness is the greatest asset people have for living fulfilling lives that provide a sense of direction and influence over what happens to them.

5. Solving Problems and Negotiating: Skillfully negotiating your way through the conflict that is inevitable in any long-term relationship.

If your relationship doesn't bump up against some conflict every once in a while, you're either in a very boring relationship, are in complete denial, or are overly medicated. Even the most collaborative, self-aware, accountable, non-defensive, truth-telling people will have a difficult time maintaining successful relationships if they aren't skilled at negotiating.

Resolving conflict requires both courage and skill.

We believe a negotiating process called the Interest-Based Approach is the most effective method of negotiating relationship conflict. The approach focuses on the underlying interests of the parties before anyone starts looking for solutions. It involves several steps:

1. Set a collaborative tone by being open and direct about your intentions. Reach agreement about the process you will use to deal with the dispute.
2. Discuss the problem and develop a list of issues that need to be resolved.
3. Gain an understanding of the underlying interests of the parties. Interests are the wants or needs that underlie the issues that need to be resolved.
4. Develop a contingency plan. Know what you will be able to do on your own without the agreement of the other party if you agree on a solution.
5. Work together to invent a large number of creative solutions to meet as many interests of all the parties as possible.
6. Evaluate possible solutions against the interests and contingency plans of the parties. Narrow the possible solutions and reach clear commitments where it is possible to verify compliance.

True collaboration begins inside the individual and works its way out into organizations. By concentrating on these five skills, people will not only become personally more effective, they can have a big influence on the effectiveness of their company or organization.

Author's Bio:

Jim Tamm is a former judge and is on the faculty of the International Management Program at the Stockholm School of Economics, the NASA Management Education Program and the Leadership Academy of the University of California, Santa Cruz. He client bas ranges from the United Nations to NASA, Boeing, Toyota, Universities and toy companies. He is co-author of *Radical Collaboration: Five Essential Skills to Reduce Defensiveness and Build Successful Relationships* (HarperCollins) and can be reached at JimTamm@RadicalCollaboration.com or www.RadicalCollaboration.com. © 2007, Jim Tamm

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