

7 Essential Tips for Creating a Collaborative Environment: Strategies for Building Engaged, Successful Teams

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Summary of the 7 Essential Tips

- 1. Strategic unity:** No silos! There is one overarching strategy. Every team connects to the objectives and then all the functions can come together to create a complete picture.
- 2. Collaboration ≠ Consensus :** Collaboration requires clear decision making. Provide an open space, bring diverse ideas together, employ productive candor, and then make the decision.
- 3. Invite differing perspectives:** Encourage a multitude of perspectives. A diverse team with a variety of skills, experiences, and viewpoints can bring innovative ideas, contributing to a richer and more complete solution.
- 4. Candor is essential:** If everyone in the meeting is nodding: Important voices are missing - OR - People don't believe dissent is an option
- 5. Boost participation, with communication:** People digest information in different ways. It is vital to provide multiple communication options to encourage participation.
- 6. Encourage curiosity:** Inspire team members to seek knowledge, question assumptions, and explore alternatives. This invigorates strategic thinking and establishes a culture of continuous improvement.
- 7. Assess & Adapt & Repeat:** Collaboration is a living process with the ultimate goal to enhance strategic outcomes through shared knowledge and concerted action.

In today's fast-paced work environment, where agility and adaptability are crucial, prioritizing intentional collaboration is no longer a "nice-to-have"—it's essential for success. Teams that embrace strategic alignment, open communication, and diverse perspectives are better positioned to innovate and adapt to change. By embedding these principles into their culture, organizations can break down silos, enhance teamwork, and achieve stronger strategic outcomes.

1. Strategic unity



Remote work strengthens the connections within groups and weakens the connections across functions, according to [Microsoft's New Future of Work Report 2022](#), leading to more siloed organizations. It's therefore crucial to ensure good communication across different functions, so that everyone understands the strategic priorities and how their functions contribute to them. This understanding can help identify communication gaps and risk areas, ultimately helping to maintain unity in the strategy.

A shared strategy will bring your organization together. It's like a roadmap, indicating the direction to take and guiding decisions. A 2018 study in the MIT Sloan Management Review found [“The single best predictor of strategic alignment was how consistently managers—from top executives to frontline supervisors—explained their team's priorities in terms of their unit and the entire company.”](#) It's crucial that everyone understands the overall strategy, so every action can contribute to achieving the end goal. Encourage open discussions and provide opportunities for team members to clarify doubts and share thoughts, reinforces

their understanding of the strategic goals. Strategic unity is not just an ideal concept, but a practical tool for achieving organizational success.

How to improve strategic alignment in your organization:

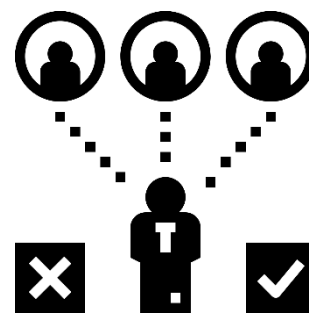
- **Identify and Communicate Corporate Goals:** It's crucial to clearly articulate your company's top-line objectives and ensure they are well communicated and understood across all teams. It sets the direction for everyone in the organization.
- **Include Everyone in Planning:** Ensure all team members engage in the planning process, fostering ownership and increasing commitment to company objectives. This doesn't mean everyone needs to be involved in every meeting or step of the process. Communicate clear decisions and allow individual creativity, returning on a regular cadence as a team to review
- **Align Individual and Team Goals:** Link individual and team objectives to corporate goals. This creates a direct line-of-sight, increasing engagement and commitment. Ensure priorities are clear for the team and de-prioritize tasks that are not linked to the corporate priorities. I.e. Maintenance of digital products is required so they need to be prioritized and aligned to corporate priorities or decommissioned.

2. Collaboration ≠ Consensus

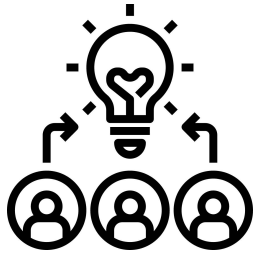
Collaboration doesn't mean everyone agrees on every decision, or that people need to be in constant communication about what they are doing. Collaboration requires both live interactions and opportunities to work asynchronously, and it requires trust in the team. [According to a 2017 study by the Institute for Corporate Productivity \(i4cp\) and Babson College the biggest difference between productive and unproductive collaboration is purpose.](#) When creating a collaborative environment, it is vital to provide the communication expectations and tools along with open communication, so that you are creating Purposeful Collaboration.

How to ensure a collaborative team by implementing thoughtful and efficient decision making:

- **Clarity in Decision-Making Responsibility:** Ensuring the team is unequivocally aware of the individual responsible for decision-making mitigates ambiguity and establishes a framework for accountability.
- **Promotion of Multi-Directional Communication:** The incorporation of multi-directional communication fosters an open and inclusive atmosphere, enabling team members to actively contribute their diverse perspectives and insights during discussions.
- **Fostering Trust in Decision-Making:** Placing trust in the decision-maker's ability to consider all perspectives, data, and risks is pivotal for a successful decision-making process, cultivating a collaborative and cooperative team environment.



- **Emphasis on Objective Decision-Making:** Prioritizing decisions based on information and strategic alignment rather than personal preferences underscores objectivity, contributing to more effective and goal-oriented outcomes within the team's collaborative framework.



3. Invite Differing Perspectives

Creating and carrying out a solid strategy benefits from bringing in various thinking styles. Some people are really good at getting into the nitty-gritty details, others excel at seeing the big picture, and there are those who are great at both. When you mix these different perspectives, you get innovative strategies and practical plans that actually work. An innovative strategy and a tangible execution plan are the results of such varied perspectives.

Every project calls for a variety of knowledge types, encompassing everything from subject matter expertise, to differing thought processes, and worldviews. Embracing diversity of thought is not just advantageous for the team but essential for the success of any project.

Intentionally incorporating diversity of thought into your culture and team structure, therefore, has the potential to elevate your strategic planning processes to entirely new heights.

How to integrate differing perspectives:

- **Diverse Team Composition:** Assemble teams with members possessing varied backgrounds, skills, and experiences. This diversity fosters a rich tapestry of perspectives that can lead to more comprehensive and innovative solutions.
- **Cross-Functional Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between teams or departments with distinct expertise. Cross-functional collaboration promotes the exchange of diverse ideas, breaking down silos and enriching the overall decision-making process.
- **Structured Brainstorming Sessions:** Organize structured brainstorming sessions where team members are encouraged to freely express their ideas and viewpoints. Provide a platform for open discussion without judgment, allowing for the exploration of diverse perspectives.
- **External Input:** Seek input from external sources, such as industry experts, consultants, or customers. External perspectives can offer fresh insights and challenge internal assumptions, contributing to a more well-rounded decision-making process.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish feedback mechanisms that allow team members to share their perspectives on ongoing projects or processes anonymously. This promotes honesty and ensures that diverse viewpoints are considered, even if they deviate from the mainstream.

4. Candor is Essential

An open and honest communication environment boosts trust. It encourages team members to share their thoughts freely, leading to more insightful ideas and a higher degree of problem-solving efficiency. Candor is essential in fostering a thriving collaborative environment. It refers to the quality of being open, sincere, and straightforward in expression. Through candor, misunderstandings are minimized and even entirely avoided, streamlining the decision-making process and making strategic planning more efficient.

“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” Unknown (sometimes misattributed to Winston Churchill)

Promoting candor does not mean ignoring tact or disregarding other’s feelings. Instead, it involves creating a culture that encourages open dialogue but in a respectful way. A culture of candor creates an atmosphere where team members feel valued and heard. This, in turn, leads to better relationship dynamics within the team, higher engagement, and ultimately, better results. It’s truly a vital component in building a strongly collaborative company and team.

How to enhance productive candor:

- **Promote Open Communication Channels:** Establish regular forums to encourage open expression of thoughts and opinions within your team, underlining the value of diverse perspectives. Foster a fearless communicative environment through both formal team meetings and informal feedback sessions.
- **Provide Constructive Feedback Training:** Equip team members with skills to express thoughts positively and solution-oriented, stressing the significance of focusing on behaviors over personal attributes. By fostering a culture of constructive feedback, you create an atmosphere where candor becomes an opportunity for development instead of criticism.
- **Lead by Example:** Team leaders play a crucial role in setting the tone for productive candor. Demonstrate transparent communication by sharing your thoughts, admitting mistakes, and actively seeking input from team members. Be receptive to feedback yourself and showcase how it can lead to positive changes.

5. Boost participation, with effective communication

“39% of employees believe that people in their own organization don’t collaborate enough” Queen’s University of Charlotte

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environment, it is vital to provide the communication expectations and tools along with open communication, so that you are creating Purposeful Collaboration.

Open channels of communication and ensure everyone feels their voice is valued. This not only promotes participation but strengthens the overall collaboration by meshing diverse inputs into a powerful collective intellect. If certain discussions need to be conducted during a meeting, make sure pre-reads go out early. Some people need to have time to digest information and provide a considered response while others are fine to make decisions with fewer details. Providing a variety of live and asynchronous opportunities to collaborate are vital. Use live meetings to be efficient and productive.

How to ensure a collaborative team that has time to be effective:

- **Strategic Alignment:** Ensure that everyone in the organization aligns with and abides by the strategic priorities set by the company.
- **Effective Communication:** Define and agree upon the appropriate situations to utilize various communication mediums, including In-person meetings, virtual gatherings, email exchanges, instant messaging, shared document collaborations, or mapping tools usage, etc. Establish expected response times for different communication channels.
- **Team Structure:** Clearly define the core team and extended team members to foster effective collaboration and coordination.
- **Structured Meetings:** Schedule meetings with a clear agenda that includes decisions that need to be made and any pre-reads that are required for participants to come prepared.
- **Work Balance:** Designate a specific number of hours per week that will be meeting-free, allowing team members to focus on individual work and responsibilities.

6. Encourage Curiosity

Curiosity is a catalyst for learning and innovation, providing a competitive edge for organizations. By fostering an environment that encourages questions and exploration, teams embark on a continuous learning journey, discovering fresh strategies that propel the organization forward. Curiosity inspires employee engagement, motivating team members to surpass their comfort zones and strive for excellence.

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.” Albert Einstein



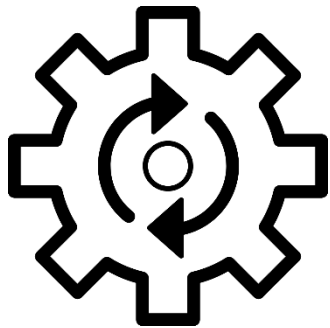
[In a Harvard Business Review \(HBR\) article by Francesca Gino](#) highlights that approximately 24% of employees regularly feel curious in their jobs, while around 70% encounter barriers to asking more questions at work.

Suppressing curiosity poses substantial risks, leading to stagnancy and inertia that can hinder innovation and growth. Without a willingness to question, learn, and evolve, companies risk losing their competitive edge, fostering an atmosphere of anxiety and inaction in the face of change and the unknown. According to the HBR article curiosity in teams leads to fewer decision-making errors and reduced group conflict.

How to cultivate curiosity:

- **Curiosity Forums:** Establish regular forums where team members can openly pose questions and discuss engaging topics, fostering a culture that values and promotes curiosity.
- **Learning Opportunities:** Provide opportunities for continuous learning, such as workshops, training sessions, or guest speakers, to stimulate intellectual curiosity and expose team members to new ideas.
- **Incentivize Curiosity:** Recognize and reward individuals who demonstrate curiosity in their roles, encouraging others to follow suit and actively engage in questioning and exploration.
- **Diversity of Perspectives:** Encourage team members to seek out and consider diverse perspectives, creating an environment where curiosity thrives through the exploration of different viewpoints and ideas.

7. Assess and Adapt Regularly



The key to a successful team lies in its capacity to consistently evaluate its performance, adapt based on feedback, and perpetuate this cycle. This ongoing process allows for continual learning, improvement, and overall team growth, constituting an integral practice for sustained success. It involves a constant analysis of what is effective and what is not, ranging from the efficiency of collaboration to the impact of decision-making processes and the overall understanding and appreciation of the team's strategy.

Assessment should seamlessly transition into adaptation. A team's ability to adapt is paramount to prevent stagnation. This might involve tweaking roles, refining communication channels, or re-evaluating goal milestones. Adaptability is not about changing course impulsively but rather a strategic response to new data or evolving circumstances. Hence, a team's commitment to continuous assessment and adaptation significantly contributes to fostering a collaborative and flexible company culture.

How to integrate Regular Assessment and Adaptation:

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Conclusion

Creating a truly collaborative environment requires more than just good intentions—it demands deliberate actions and a commitment to continuous improvement. By focusing on strategic unity, embracing diverse perspectives, and encouraging a culture of open communication, organizations can unlock their teams' full potential. As collaboration becomes increasingly vital in both remote and in-person workplaces, these tips serve as a foundation for building dynamic, high-performing teams who are invested in their objectives and each other. Implementing these strategies will not only improve team cohesion but also lead to more innovative and effective outcomes. By making these collaborative practices part of your organization's culture, you not only enhance team effectiveness today but also create a foundation for long-term success, adaptability, and innovation in an ever-changing business landscape.



About the Author:

Shannon Lee Topinka is a strategic implementation specialist with over 20 years of experience in the life sciences and healthcare sectors. As the founder of The Collaborative Strategists, she helps organizations—from startups to Fortune 100 companies—develop cohesive strategies, foster innovation, and build high-impact teams. With a diverse background spanning R&D, operations, and commercial functions, Shannon excels at creating collaborative environments that maximize team potential. Passionate about healthcare advancement and women's health advocacy, she is dedicated to building dynamic, engaged teams in both remote and in-person settings.