

Book Review

Collaborate: The Art of We – Dan Sanker

Jossey-Bass; 2012; 190 Pages; ISBN: 111811472

Collaborate: The Art of We

The phenomenon of collaboration is getting popular in organizations; however while it is not a new buzzword; it is gaining more mileage because of the changes we see around us. In his book *Collaborate: The Art of We* (2012), author Dan Sanker makes the case for social Darwinism – the constant battle for survival – by stating that in the coming decades, the fittest will be the ones who know how to collaborate. In today’s global economy, time is of essence, as is quality. The book is timely because in the light of the present economy, collaboration is not just a best practice, but also an essential practice for performance.

Forty people collaboratively contributed to the forward of this book. The author created a wiki and the foreword writing team got together to create a foreword that addresses the author’s qualifications for writing the book, the special contributions the book makes to the field, the readers who will be interested in the book and why and last, but not least, the ultimate significance of the book. This is a first of its kind and a concrete example of the power of collaboration. This effort alone is enough to pique one’s interest in the concept of collaboration and the intent of the book. In the preface the author emphasizes that while collaboration is not a new fangled idea, it is newly important and enabled because of cultural and economic changes that are occurring related to technology and globalization. The author references his own organization, CaseStack, as a successful experiment in collaboration.

Collaborate: the Art of We consists of ten chapters each detailing a piece of the puzzle that is collaboration. Mindful that he is dealing with a fairly new trend, Dan Sanker reiterates that the word “collaborate” appears in Google searches twice as much as it did a few years ago. As of the writing of the book, a search on “collaborate” yielded about fifty-two million results. The author emphasizes that the book is written for those with the drive and intellectual curiosity to embrace a new way of thinking that requires a new approach to reach success. The book is linear in the way it is written, beginning with a description of collaboration – what it is and what it isn’t, why collaboration is doable and critical to success, why it is important, how collaboration can be put into practice despite obstacles and finally, the tactical requirements and tools to achieve collaborative success.

The first chapter is aptly titled ‘What collaboration is and isn’t’. The author defines collaboration as “the synergistic relationship formed when two or more entities working together produce something much greater than the sum of their individual abilities and contributions” (pg. 3). The author proceeds to explain resource sharing, networking, coordination and cooperation. He explains how these concepts are part of collaboration, but not collaboration in and of themselves. He concludes the first chapter by sharing his company CaseStack’s collaboration experience as a case study.

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The second chapter is titled ‘Dawn of the knowledge-based collaborative era’. In this chapter the author outlines history from the industrial revolution to the information economy. He states that the future is headed towards a knowledge-based economy. He emphasizes that the knowledge-based economy demands innovation. He further gives two examples that drive his point home – Facebook, the largest social networking platform began as a collaborative effort and continues as one, and Proctor and Gamble (P&G) and Clorox, two rivals collaborated to create the Glad ForceFlex trash bags – the two companies worked together to build a bigger business than each could have developed on its own. The author further states that in the present globalized economy, collaboration is what propels organizations forward. It actually goes against traditional wisdom and downright competitiveness. Internal collaboration is also encouraged, before collaboration with competitors is cautiously discussed. He emphasizes that while collaboration and competition are not mutually exclusive, it is important to stress that the most successful organizations are neither collaborative nor competitive all the time. The author also discusses collaboration with customers and outsourcing as a collaborative venture.

In the third chapter, ‘The collaboration payoff’, the author explains the advantages of collaboration – not just for businesses but also for the world in general. He uses the example of the song ‘We are the World’ as a life saving collaborative effort that raised more than \$63 million for humanitarian aid. He points out that collaboration is essential for efficiency, productivity and sustainable innovation. He states that the business benefits of collaboration include increased learning, improved, more efficient research and development, increased innovation, access to a larger resource pool, reduced need to spend valuable resources by preventing a replication of services, easier handling of large projects, exploration of new markets, time savings, improved training, and last, but certainly not least, sustainability.

The fourth chapter, ‘Risks of collaboration’, details how there is a time and a place to use collaborative business practices. The obvious and most important risks discussed with regards to collaboration are data security, intellectual property, legal and antitrust issues, and reputational risks. The author also outlines other situations that present a risk of failure including, tight time constraints, when the project isn’t important enough to be worth the effort, when the overall result has little to no chance of significant improvements or achievements, lack of necessary authority or support, lack of sufficient diversity, misaligned reasons for participation, collaboration for bad ends – crime, terrorism, corporate theft, etc.

The fifth chapter is titled ‘Collaboration Essentials’. In this chapter, the author explains the key components required to achieve a successful outcome using collaboration. These components also distinguish the process of collaboration from other forms of working together and include increasing the capabilities of others, and sharing risks, rewards, and responsibilities. The author concludes this chapter by explaining that for collaboration to be successful, many elements need to come together including ongoing communication, willing participation,

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brainstorming, teamwork, a common purpose, trust, a plan for achieving the goal, a diverse group, mutual respect, a written agreement, and effective leadership.

The sixth chapter is aptly titled ‘Stages of collaboration’. The author divides this chapter into three sections, viz., three stages: getting started, implementing the plan, and evaluating the outcome. The author expounds that not every collaborative project requires every action and that tasks are certainly not always done in the order he has listed them. According to him, the first stage – getting started – includes assembling the group, selecting or identifying a leader, defining and agreeing on the goal, identifying measures of success, establishing roles and responsibilities, agreeing on a working process, establishing a process for communicating with one another, setting priorities, making decision, holding one another accountable, and developing an action plan for achieving the goal. The second stage – implementing the plan – includes tracking and monitoring progress, and revising the plan, if necessary. The final stage – evaluating the outcome – includes determining what worked and what might have been done differently, and deciding on the next steps.

In the seventh chapter ‘Setting up for success’, the author gives a further detailed explanation of how to assemble a team for collaboration – he lists and explains attributes that make good team members. He also illustrates how important it is to define and align the goal and explicates how it can be put into action. He concludes this chapter by describing how to develop an action plan and why it is important for the group to agree on a working process. This chapter is in essence a continuation of the sixth chapter.

In the eighth chapter, ‘Strategies for a successful collaboration’, the author drafts six factors that aid a collaborative effort in being successful – establishing and maintaining trust, keeping the communication channels open, using conflict productively, maintaining commitment, using brainstorming to generate high-quality ideas, and getting a consensus on decisions.

The ninth chapter, ‘The role of technology and social media in collaboration’ steps away from explaining collaboration independently. In this chapter the author demonstrates the role that technology plays in collaboration. He reiterates that even though the latest technology is discussed in the book, it will probably be outdated as soon as the book is published! The technologies he discusses are cloud computing, mobile technology, social networking, etc. He also stresses the importance of choosing tools depending on what needs to be accomplished as a result of the collaboration. He concludes by discussing technology and collaboration in two organizations – General Electric (GE) and the Mayo Clinic.

The tenth and final chapter in this book, ‘Fostering a collaborative culture in your organization’, delves into how the collaborative mind-set must be ingrained into the culture of the organization(s). The author emphasizes that the tools themselves don’t provide successful

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outcomes – it is the organizational culture combined with the tools that provides staggering results and groundbreaking outcome. The key points he highlights in this chapter with regards to organizational culture are leadership and best practices. He explains and illustrates how the leadership's promotion and support of collaboration is critical for success. He also reveals eleven practices that help in creating and maintaining the perfect collaborative culture. True, there is no one recipe for success in collaboration, but these practices have been found among organizations that reap the benefits of a collaborative culture.

Collaborate: the Art of We is an amazing roadmap for individuals or organizations that are interested in creating a collaborative culture and using collaboration for success. It is a book that it meant to be read start to finish, cover to cover. Having said that, it cannot be used as a literal 'how-to' guide. Every organization is different, and the different factors that play a role in a particular organization need to be examined and considered before beginning on the journey of collaboration for success. The author does a good job of avoiding technical jargon in the book. Case studies and real life examples from the corporate workplace are abundant and this helps understand the concept better. Throughout the book, Dan Sanker makes a compelling argument for the paradigm explained in the book and offers a set of practical tools for tapping into talent, overcoming organizational obstacles, and creating dramatic incremental value by collaborating between organizations.

The use of collaboration can help entrepreneurs, the corporate workforce and educators to efficiently and effectively meet their organizational goals. Whether in the workplace, a formal educational setting, or an informal learning situation, individuals and organizations strive to perform well. This book, as aforementioned, can be used by adult educators and learning and performance practitioners to evaluate the role that collaboration can play in their respective organizations and institutions. However, for the overall success, the underlying factors, risks involved, technologies that can be availed and organizational culture need to be examined before undertaking this clearly promising journey of collaboration. Dan Sanker's book is a thorough and comprehensive guide to collaboration and will be useful to a large audience both in the corporate workplace and in academia.

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