



Bartleby

The pros and cons of collaboration

Teams can work well, but co-leaders often don't

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COLLABORATION at work is generally seen as a good thing. Production of *The Economist* is a co-operative process. A crack team of editors removes most of the bad jokes before this column makes it into print. All writers sign a “gag” clause. (*How did this get through? Ed.*)

Businesses value collaboration. The latest survey by the *Financial Times* of what employers want from MBA graduates found that the ability to work in a team, to work with a wide variety of people and to build, sustain and expand a network of

people were three of the top five skills that managers wanted. Practical qualifications like accounting, programming and applied microeconomics were among the least-desired attributes.

But managers always have to balance the merits of teamwork, which help ensure that everyone is working towards the same goal, with the dangers of “groupthink”, when critics are reluctant to point out a plan’s defects for fear of being ostracised by the group. The disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 was a classic case of groupthink. Sceptics were reluctant to challenge John F. Kennedy, the newly elected American president.

A related phenomenon is the “wisdom of crowds”. Large groups are remarkably good, on average, at estimating such things as the number of beans in a jar or the weight of a prize calf. But that accuracy relies on the guesses being independent. When people are aware of the views of others, there is a tendency for them to herd, as participants are reluctant to look foolish by deviating from the majority view. The same effect may lead to stockmarket bubbles.

Modern communication methods mean that collaboration is more frequent. Workers are constantly in touch with each other via e-mail, messaging groups or mobile calls. But does that boost, or detract from, performance? A new study* by Ethan Bernstein, Jesse Shore and David Lazer, three American academics, tried to answer this question. They set a logical problem (devising the shortest route for a travelling salesman visiting various cities). Three groups were involved: one where subjects acted independently; another where they saw the solutions posted by team members at every stage; and a third where they were kept

informed of each others' views only intermittently.

The survey found that members of the individualist group reached the optimal solution more often than the constant collaborators, but had a poorer average result. The intermittent collaborators found the right result as often as the individualists, and got a better average solution.

When it comes to idea generation, giving people a bit of space to find a solution seems to be a good idea. Occasional collaboration can be a big help; most people have benefited from a colleague's brainwave or (just as often) wise advice to avoid a particular course of action.

Further clues come from a book, "Superminds", by Thomas Malone of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He says that three factors determine the "collective intelligence" of collaborating groups: social intelligence (how good people were at rating the emotional states of others); the extent to which members took part equally in conversation (the more equal, the better); and the proportion of women in the group (the higher, the better). Groups ranked highly in these areas co-operated far better than others.

Close teamwork may be vital in the lower reaches of a hierarchy, but at the top someone has to make a decision. At this stage, intense collaboration may be less helpful. In their book, "Friend & Foe", Adam Galinsky of Columbia Business School and Maurice Schweitzer of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania found that fashion houses with co-creative directors were rated as less creative by industry experts over a decade (from 2000 to 2010) than brands that were individually led. They add that co-led teams of Himalayan climbers are more likely to suffer deaths than those with single leaders.

As the authors note, co-leadership "creates uncertainty over who is really in charge". The battles between Sandy Weill and John Reed when they were co-chief executives of Citigroup in the late 1990s were infamous; the arrangement lasted just two years. Less than 5% of companies in the *Fortune* 500 have used a co-CEO structure since 1989. In short, collaboration may be a useful tool but it doesn't work in every situation. Except at *The Economist*, of course.

* "How intermittent breaks in interaction improve collective intelligence", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2018

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