

A Philly Native's Perspective on Collaboration

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Keywords: collaboration, transparency, authenticity

Abstract

When I hear about collaboration, some of the first words that come to mind are partnership, honesty, willingness, and purpose. Why? In my experience, we learn to be reactive to situations and not proactive. We aren't mind readers and can't determine an individual's intention when we first meet. Burning bridges, lack of respect, and losing sight of the overall goal are all factors that lead to the opposition when collaboration is mentioned. I've done my best to approach collaboration in three ways that have led to my success in building positive partnerships and fostering innovative collaborations.

Introduction

When I hear about collaboration, some of the first words that come to mind are partnership, honesty, willingness, and purpose. Why? In my experience, we learn to be reactive to situations and not proactive. We aren't mind readers and can't determine an individual's intention when we first meet. Burning bridges, lack of respect and losing sight of the overall goal are all factors that lead to opposition when collaboration is mentioned.

Puzzles are a great example of this. From the small puzzles to the big ones, each piece has a purpose and function and if just one piece is missing, the picture is incomplete. I have tried to develop relationships that will not only help me achieve my goal but help others achieve theirs. Each piece matters and it happens often that some individuals bring more to the table than others. Reputations, significance, and impact are also factors that people think about when considering collaboration. I've done my best to approach collaboration in three ways that have led to my success in building positive partnerships and fostering innovative collaborations.

State my intention from the start: It is possible I overuse the word transparency but that is exactly how I'd want folks to approach a possible collaboration. I don't plan to put all my cards on the table during the first meeting, but I also like to be clear about what I have the capability of doing. That initial meeting is the catalyst for identifying if this will be a productive collaboration or not. We are also always learning, so I research new partnerships, identify elements that can apply to my work and identify the resources we have that can support their goals. Most of the time we don't know this until we meet, and your internal team will have their opinions about things stated in the meeting. There are times when you just will not be able to offer anything in return but that doesn't mean you should completely break off ties with them in that moment. Keeping those lines of communication open are important and can have an unseen benefit in the long-term.

Network with a purpose

You don't know what you don't know, and it is essential to a good collaboration to network with a purpose. "Oh, let me show up to this event and hope to run into people that can help my program..." Nope. I would say this also applies to virtual interactions, something everyone has dealt with for a while now during the pandemic. Is it easy? Not for everyone. Some folks have that social butterfly persona, and this is natural to them. You know what's even more natural? Being prepared! I went to an event in Philly a few years back and the organizing group shared a list of individuals and organizations that registered to the event. Real talk, I didn't spend 2 hours studying everyone's names, but I did look over the list and created one of my own of folks I wanted to introduce myself to. I polished up my elevator speech, stocked my bag with business cards and engaged as many folks as I could. I can trace some of my best professional partnerships to this tactic that led to advantageous collaborations.

Authenticity Matters

I think the challenge with this is when you are representing your employer, you may feel like you cannot be your authentic self when representing the organization to others. I've found myself in similar positions and this has paralyzed my ability to form great partnerships. I was sitting in front of about 70-80 people at a STEM conference and there was representation from all over the country in the audience. Unless you are from Philly, you wouldn't know things like jawn, cheesesteaks or out of pocket. I have no issues with code switching or being professional but for the first half of this panel I did not feel like my authentic self. The question came back to me and preference my next statements with "hey folks, I was born and raised in Philadelphia so if there are a few words you don't know..." For the rest of the panel the weight of anxiety lifted, and I was congratulated for making the decision. I bring this up because if it your job is to build relationships and collaborate, it can be challenging. However, it is not impossible and can quite honestly take time to master.

I am always under the firm belief that things happen for a reason, whether we like them or not. Funders are placing a bigger emphasis on collaboration, organizations are sometimes an army of one, individuals bring unique strengths to the table and it's sometimes easier to do it on your own than to trust others. Collaboration does not happen overnight. It takes time, a ton of effort and a willingness to take risks. The stone soup story demonstrates this by identifying a problem and providing a collective solution. There are several versions of this fable, but the challenge is the same. Individuals are in need and begin boiling water with stones in a pot. Eventually one person adds seasoning another adds vegetables and so on. Finally, this stone soup is the answer to a collaboration that benefits everyone.

One of the many answers to Philadelphia's job growth, economic development, diverse hiring practices, access to quality education, affordable housing, poverty, healthcare, childcare, and many other challenges is collaboration. Easier said than done, I know. It will take strong willed individuals to break through the years of inequality, racism, and prejudice. It will take folks willing to break through social norms and think creatively and strategically about how we approach problems. It will take more than one person to uplift our communities and build those

bridges to jobs and careers. It will take innovation to become a better society and develop opportunities for the individuals in the city of brotherly love and sisterly affection.

This is one Philly native's perspective on collaboration based on my experience and interaction with others. There is lots of work to do, so let's make it happen.