

Collaboration: What Does it really mean?



Carlos Dominguez- February 9, 2011

If you type the word “collaboration” into any of the search engines, you’ll get 82 million results. I’m quite sure this won’t surprise you since we hear the word “collaboration” all the time.

I have the privilege of speaking to audiences up to 100 times a year. And can you guess the most popular topic they ask me to address? You got it. Collaboration!

I’ve learned a lot about collaboration in researching for these keynotes, and in discussing it with top business leaders. This has led me to the following five observations:

1. **Definition** – There is a lot of confusion on the very definition of collaboration. If you ask 20 people, you might get 20 answers.
2. **Value of collaboration** – For the most part everyone agrees collaboration is a good thing to do but many haven’t defined what value it brings to their company, or why to do it at all.
3. **How to do it?** – “Effective collaboration” requires a major focus on culture, the deployment and use of technology, the adoption of process/governance for positive results. Few companies focus on all three.
4. **Bad is worse than none** – Morten Hansen points out in his book “*Collaboration*”, that bad collaboration is a waste time and resources and produces no results. Deciding not to collaborate is a better option than bad collaboration.
5. **Used interchangeably with “innovation”** – There is clearly some confusion with the relationship between collaboration and innovation. By being innovative you aren’t necessarily being collaborative and vice versa. There are interdependencies between the two but they are not the same thing.

I believe these five points are worth exploring in greater depth but I’ll focus this blog on #1 – the definition of collaboration. I know this word tends to be overused and lacks meaning for some, but let’s start *collaborating* and see what we can come up with.

#1 Defining Collaboration

I thought Eric Schmidt, chairman of Google, had a **very interesting — and sarcastic — comment on this topic. He said, “When you say collaboration, the average 45-year-old thinks they know what you’re talking about: teams sitting down, having a nice conversation with nice objectives and a nice attitude.”**

Ok, here’s what I found by searching for collaboration.

Wikipedia – **“Collaboration refers abstractly to all processes wherein people work together.”**

Oxford Dictionary – **“United labour, co-operation; especially in literary, artistic or scientific work.”**

Webster – **“To work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavour.”**

All of these seem really outdated so I continued to look. Michael Schrage in his book “*No More Teams!*” defines it this way: **“Collaboration describes a process of value creation that our traditional structures of communication and teamwork can’t achieve.”** I like his introduction of the point that collaboration requires a process and the purpose is to create value.

I think we are on the right track but still not there.

So I continued to search and found this by Evan Rosen in his book “*The Culture of Collaboration*”:
“Working together to create value while sharing virtual and physical space.” Rosen highlights that technology can bring people together and that they don’t need to be in the same location. A very important point since technology, especially video, plays a key role in enabling collaboration across the enterprise.

Another key ingredient in the recipe is the concept of “wisdom of the crowds” or collective intelligence. Mark Granovetter in his 1973 paper, “*The Strength of Weak Ties*”, highlights the importance of diversity in the areas of brainstorming, problem solving and ideation. The more diverse the group, the better they are at these tasks.

It’s now time to throw my own definition into the mix. Collaboration is highly diversified teams working together inside and outside a company with the purpose to create value by improving innovation, customer relationships and efficiency while leveraging technology for effective interactions in the virtual and physical space.

Happy collaborating.