Chapter 15

Working Effectively in a Matrix: Building and Sustaining Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

The complexities of today’s organizations have made it increasingly challenging for leaders to encourage and sustain a culture of cooperation. As organizations become flatter and leaner and people are required to do “more with less,” the key to success is the ability to coordinate decisions and actions across organizational boundaries and gain the support of people who often have competing priorities or conflicting goals. Further, the increasing prevalence of virtual teamwork and widespread use of e-collaboration tools have additional implications for how leaders encourage cooperation and coordinate work. This article explores the critical organizational factors and leadership skills that are required to build a culture of cooperation in today’s highly matrix, and often virtual, organizations.

INTRODUCTION

If you have ever worked in a public or private organization of any size you know that cooperation and coordination are critical for effective execution and organizational success. It is almost impossible to get anything important done without the assistance and joint efforts of others. Yet, despite the fact that there is little argument about the role coordination and cooperation play in the execution of plans and initiatives, it appears that they are elusive and difficult to attain.

In a matrix organization—where people rely on getting work done through others over whom they have no direct authority—maintaining high levels of cooperation and coordination can be a challenge. Added to this is the increasing prevalence of e-collaboration in today’s organizations. OnPoint’s 2011 study of over 900 leaders across industries found that 53% of their organizations used virtual teams and 57% employ telecommuting, where people work remotely from home. The virtual nature of the work, coupled with the need to work across organizational boundaries, makes it even more difficult for today’s organizations...
and leaders to create and sustain high levels of cooperation and coordination. Our study revealed some surprising findings related to the extent to which organizations struggle with this:

- Only 47% responded favorably to the item, “decisions and actions are well coordinated across departments/functions.”
- Only 49% responded favorably to the item, “decisions and actions are well coordinated across levels of management.”
- 40% do not believe that people cooperate across functions and departments to achieve their organization’s strategic objectives.
- 44% do not believe that people in different divisions readily share information, ideas, and best practices.

Given the challenges and complexities of today’s organizations, what can leaders do to encourage and sustain cooperation? Our research suggests that there are three key elements that need to be in place to build a culture of collaboration, and there are two core skills that are critical for leaders to master in order to effectively cooperate in a global matrix structure.

THE THREE COOPERATION BUILDERS

Encouraging and sustaining cooperation and collaboration with people you depend on to get things done can be a daunting challenge. However, it is not an insurmountable one. There are certain conditions that predict when cooperation is more likely to trump competition—namely, when communication is clear and there is transparency about intent, when people understand what they can expect from others and how they will work together, and when the interests of individuals or groups are aligned. We refer to these elements as the Cooperation Builders, and they are critical for encouraging high levels of coordination (Lepsinger, 2011).

Cooperation Builder #1: Improve Communication and Transparency

When we communicate our intent to cooperate, we can increase the likelihood the other person will respond in kind. This, of course, assumes that our communication is clear and our intentions are understood. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Although people often act with good intent and do what they think is right, they are often unable to coordinate their actions because of a breakdown in communications.

The most common mistake is assuming the other person understands what we want or intended. The lesson for leaders is simple: don’t make this assumption. Develop the habit of being explicit about why you are doing something or making a request. Another mistake is not taking the time to do a “comprehension check” by paraphrasing to ensure understanding and, when appropriate, asking questions to confirm the other person’s understanding of actions and next steps.

These two simple actions—not assuming people know what you are thinking and paraphrasing to check for understanding—can go a long way toward making communication clear and transparent and help prevent communication-related missteps. In a virtual organization that relies on significantly more e-collaboration, leaders operate with little face-to-face contact or visual cues which can enhance understanding. In this situation, the effective use of paraphrasing is even more essential. In addition, top performing virtual teams and team leaders leverage technology for communicating (e.g., weekly teleconferences, appropriate use of email, Instant Messaging, webinars) and effectively identify the most appropriate technology to enhance transparency and ensure mutual understanding (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2011).
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