

**7 Collaboration** – get out of your head and learn something about all of your partners

Everyone has opinions and wants to share them with everyone else. And everyone is a critic and will tell you some version of “If I were doing that, I’d do it this way instead...”

The trouble arrives when we work with others. If everyone talks at once and says what he/she would do (read: what we as a group should do here right now), no one is listening and no agreements will be reached. Learning to cooperate with others makes teams operate. Learning how to collaborate enables more than one person to contribute ideas to the process.

Some teams work better than others, and for the moment I am going to jump into an examination of one of the most pure collaborations possible. Of what does a perfect collaboration consist? The people spend more time listening to others, and they pay attention to how they are listening, making sure it is done with open ears. They all talk a lot about the subjects of the conversations and the work being done, making sure everyone understands everyone as best they can.

If you find yourself thinking that it sounds like a lot of talking about talking, you are right. Checking and double-checking in on each other takes patience, and sometimes, when patience wears thin, the delicate balance becomes much harder to sustain. It takes a lot of work in itself to learn how to collaborate on such a high level, but when a group embraces that effort, the results can be incredible. New ways are discovered, new paths are forged, and sometimes even seminal theories and observations are generated. The reason great things can happen under these circumstances has everything to do with what happens to the people and the group itself: it turns into a larger, single brained organism with its own abilities to reason things through. Decisions no longer are the result of one person’s thought process, but rather an amalgam of many ways of thinking.

The results are inevitably going to be far different than anyone could imagine, and definitely far different than anything those individuals would come up with on their own.

Of course, as with every method, there are limitations to this way of working: guarantees for results in a specific direction will be low because no one can predict the types of discoveries available to the group at any given time, without deliberately stepping outside of the pure collaboration’s envelope. (If a desired result is mandatory, the group’s individuals will need to nudge the results toward where they need it to be.) Another issue has to do with ownership of the ideas generated: they belong to each person and no one at the same time. Using a four-person group as an example, the formula would be that all four own 100% of the work, but no one owns 25%. Ideas become indivisible from the group conscience.

At the most basic level, this pure collaboration is as close as we get to removing every trace of ego from process. For some this may be easier than for others. Perhaps when it is most challenging for someone, it could be said that the person in question needs this sort of training even more than he/she cares to admit. And

so I come back to the qualities developed through collaboration: listening, open-mindedness, and awareness of “self within group” and “group within self.”

By the way, the company I used as an example of this was my own collaborative ensemble, Second Hand Dance Company, a three-man performance group that operated from 1987-2003, touring the world for most of that time with our own collaborative material.

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