

COLLABORATION

Cracking the Code of Sustained Collaboration

by [Francesca Gino](#)

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Ask any leader whether his or her organization values collaboration, and you'll get a resounding yes. Ask whether the firm's strategies to increase collaboration have been successful, and you'll probably receive a different answer.



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“No change seems to stick or to produce what we expected,” an executive at a large pharmaceutical company recently told me. Most of the dozens of leaders I’ve interviewed on the subject report similar feelings of frustration: So much hope and effort, so little to show for it.

One problem is that leaders think about collaboration too narrowly: as a value to cultivate but not a skill to teach. Businesses have tried increasing it through various methods, from open offices to naming it an official corporate goal. While many of these approaches yield progress—mainly by creating opportunities for collaboration or demonstrating institutional support for it—they all try to influence employees through superficial or heavy-handed means, and research has shown that none of them reliably delivers truly robust collaboration.

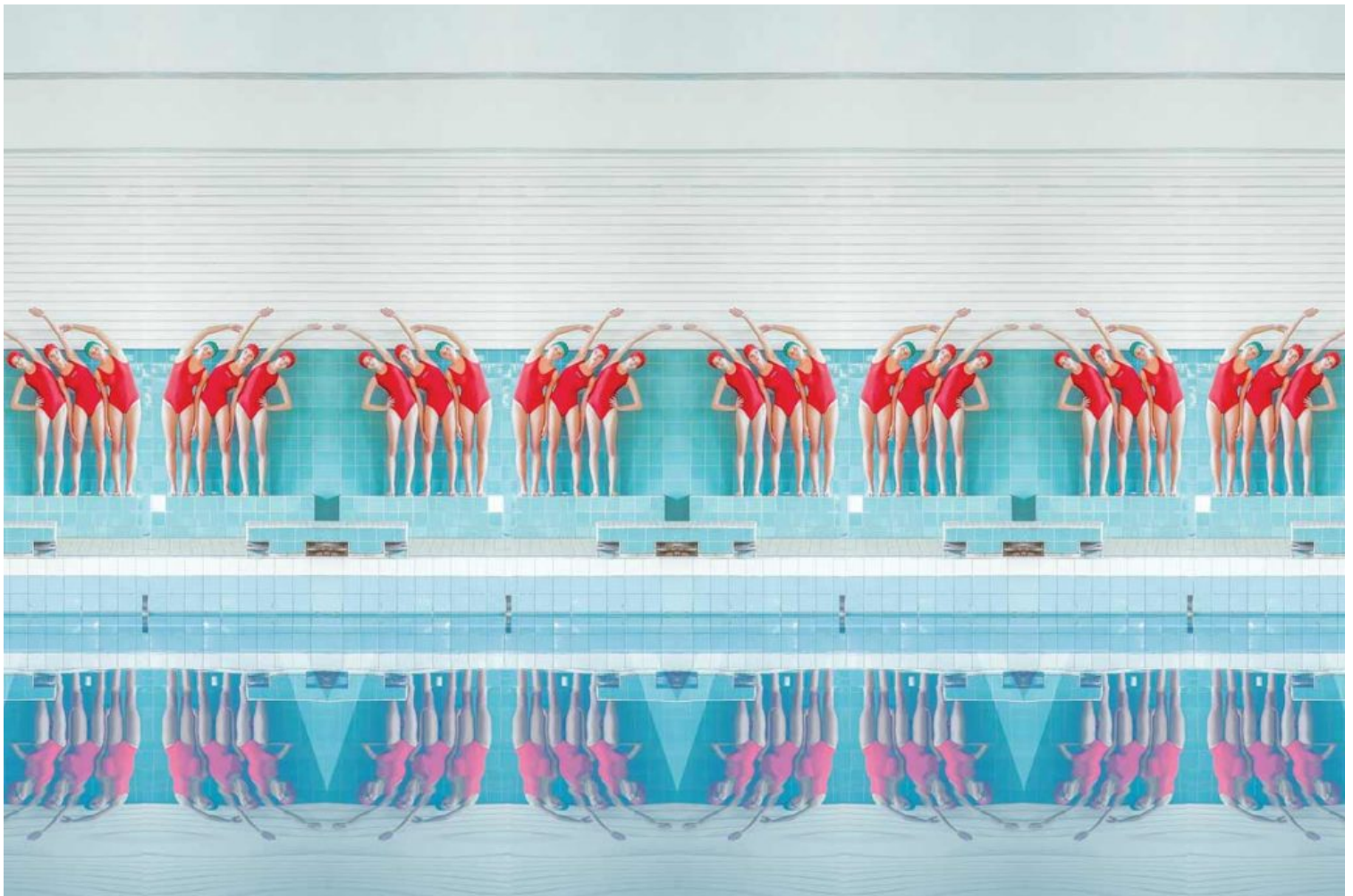
What’s needed is a *psychological* approach. When I analyzed sustained collaborations in a wide range of industries, I found that they were marked by common mental attitudes: widespread respect for colleagues’ contributions, openness to experimenting with others’ ideas, and sensitivity to how one’s actions may affect both colleagues’ work and the mission’s outcome. Yet these attitudes are rare. Instead, most people display the opposite mentality, distrusting others and obsessing about their own status. The task for leaders is to encourage an outward focus in everyone, challenging the tendency we all have to fixate on ourselves—what we’d like to say and achieve—instead of what we can learn from others.

Daunting as it may sound, some organizations have cracked this code. In studying them I’ve identified six training techniques that enable both leaders and employees to work well together, learn from one another, and overcome the psychological barriers that get in the way of doing both. They all help people connect more fully and consistently. They impress upon employees that there’s a time to listen and explore others’ ideas, a time to express their own, and a time to critique ideas and select the ones to pursue—and that conflating those discussions undermines collaboration.

1. Teach People to Listen, Not Talk

The business world prizes good self-presentation. Employees think a lot about how to make the right impression—how to frame their arguments in discussions with bosses, get their points across in meetings, persuade or coerce their reports to do what they want. (Many also spend serious money on speaking coaches, media trainers, and the like.) This is understandable, given the competitive nature of our workplaces, but it has a cost. My research suggests that all too often when others are talking, we're getting ready to speak instead of listening. That tendency only gets worse as we climb the corporate ladder.

We fail to listen because we're anxious about our own performance, convinced that our ideas are better than others', or both. As a result we get into conflicts that could be avoided, miss opportunities to advance the conversation, alienate the people who haven't been heard, and diminish our teams' effectiveness.



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When we really listen, on the other hand, our egos and our self-involvement subside, giving everybody the space to understand the situation—and one another—and to focus on the mission. Listening can be improved by these practices:

Ask expansive questions.

This is one of the behaviors encouraged at the animation studio Pixar. People stepping into managerial roles are required to take, among other courses, a 90-minute lunchtime class on the art of listening, which is held in a conference room decorated with posters of movie characters reminding participants to “Stay curious” and “Build on others’ ideas.”

In the class, participants discuss the qualities of great listeners they’ve known (such as generosity in acknowledging the points of others) and practice “active listening.” That means suppressing the urge to interrupt or dominate a conversation, make it about yourself, or solve your conversation partners’ problems, and instead concentrating on the implications of their words. In one exercise participants practice asking their partners open-ended “what” and “how” questions—which prompt people to provide more information, reflect on their situations, and feel more heard—rather than yes-or-no questions, which can kill conversations. For instance, instead of saying to someone “Did you try asking others who’ve worked on similar projects for advice?” participants are coached to ask “In what ways have you reached out to others for advice?” (For more on how to ask good questions, see “Cross-Silo Leadership,” HBR, May–June 2019.)

Focus on the listener, not on yourself.

In another exercise, two coaches act out conversations to illustrate the difference between active listening and not really listening. One coach might say: “I’ve been so sick, and our calendar is so full, and I have this trip planned to see my family. There’s so much to do and I just don’t know how I’m going to pull it all off.” In the not-listening interaction, the other coach responds, “At least you get to go to Europe” or “I’m going to Croatia in two weeks, and I’m really excited.” In the active-listening version, she says, “That sounds really stressful—like you’ll feel guilty for leaving work and guilty if you don’t visit your family.” The coaches then ask the class to share their reactions and try the more effective approach in pairs.

Engage in “self-checks.”

The American roofing-systems unit of Webasto, a global automotive-equipment manufacturer, has developed a good approach to raising employees’ awareness. When Philipp Schramm became its CFO, in 2013, the unit’s financial performance was in a downward spiral. But that was not its only problem. “Something was dysfunctional,” recalls Schramm. “There was no working together, no trust, no respect.” So in 2016 he introduced the Listen Like a Leader course, which features various exercises, some of which are similar to Pixar’s.

Several times throughout the course participants engage in self-checks, in which they critique their own tendencies. People work in small groups and take turns sharing stories about times they’ve failed to listen to others and then reflect on common trends in all the stories.

The self-checks are reinforced by another exercise in which people pair up for multiple rounds of role-playing intended to help participants experience not being heard. One employee is told to describe an issue at work to the other. The listener is instructed to be inattentive during the first round, to parrot the speaker (repeat his or her statements) during the second, and to paraphrase the speaker (restate the message without acknowledging the speaker’s feelings or perspective) during the third. Employees play both roles in each round. The idea is to demonstrate that hearing someone’s words is not enough; you also need to take in the speaker’s tone, body language, emotions, and perspective, and the energy in the conversation. At the end they discuss what that kind of listening can accomplish and how one feels when truly listened to.

Become comfortable with silence.

This doesn’t mean just not speaking; it means communicating attentiveness and respect while you’re silent. And it’s a challenge for those who are in love with the sound of their own voices. Such people dominate discussions and don’t give others who are less vocal or who simply need more time to think an opportunity to talk.

In another exercise at Webasto, people sit in on a conversation simply to listen. They're instructed to avoid negative nonverbal behavior—such as rolling their eyes when they disagree with someone. The course motto “I am the message!” serves as a reminder to use positive body language when interacting with colleagues.

In successful collaborations, judgment gives way to curiosity.

After taking the Listen Like a Leader class, employees have reported better interactions with their colleagues. Jeff Beatty, a program manager, reflected: “I thought leading was steamrolling people who got in your way—it was about aggressiveness and forcefulness. After going through the class, I can't believe that my wife has put up with me for 30 years.”

2. Train People to Practice Empathy

Think about the last time you were in a conflict with a colleague. Chances are, you started feeling that the other person was either uncaring or not very bright, my research suggests. Being receptive to the views of someone we disagree with is no easy task, but when we approach the situation with a desire to understand our differences, we get a better outcome.

In successful collaborations, each person assumes that everyone else involved, regardless of background or title, is smart, caring, and fully invested. That mindset makes participants want to understand why others have differing views, which allows them to have constructive conversations. Judgment gives way to curiosity, and people come to see that other perspectives are as valuable as theirs. A couple of approaches can help here.

Expand others' thinking.

At Pixar an exercise called “leading from the inside out” has participants present a relevant challenge to their collaborators on a project. Then their teammates ask questions but are instructed *not* to use them as a means of touting their own ideas. Instead, they're supposed to help the presenter think through the problem differently, without offering judgment about the presenter's perceptions or approach or those of other questioners. If a presenter describes the challenge of getting a team member to speak up more often in brainstorming meetings, for instance, the questioners could ask, “How has his behavior changed?” or “Are

there other contexts where this person is more talkative?” If questioners try to sneak in their ideas or opinions, a coach will ask them to rephrase their questions. “We realize that, though simple, these techniques are hard to implement on a regular basis,” Jamie Woolf, Pixar’s leadership development manager, who serves as one of the two main coaches, told me. “So, when someone is, consciously or not, trying to promote his or her point of view, we intervene so that we give the person an opportunity to apply the technique correctly and others the opportunity to learn.”

With this approach, ideas get full attention and consideration. Creative solutions are generated, and team members feel that they’ve been truly heard.

Look for the unspoken.

An advertising and publicity firm I studied uses a similar approach but also trains participants to pay attention to what people are *not* saying. If a member of the creative team presents an idea for how to shape an ad campaign to the client’s needs, for instance, the colleagues listening are tasked with trying to understand his or her state of mind. During one session I observed, a colleague said to a presenter, “I noticed your voice was somewhat tentative, as if you were feeling uncertain about your idea. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses you see in it?”

When team members focus on conveying empathy more than on sharing their opinions, I’ve found, everyone feels more satisfied with the discussion. Showing empathy also makes others more likely to ask you for your point of view. Collaboration proceeds more smoothly.

While listening and empathizing allow others more space in a collaboration, you also need the courage to have tough conversations and offer your views frankly. The next three techniques focus on getting people there.

3. Make People More Comfortable with Feedback

Good collaboration involves giving and receiving feedback well—and from a position of influence rather than one of authority. The following methods can help.

Discuss feedback aversion openly.

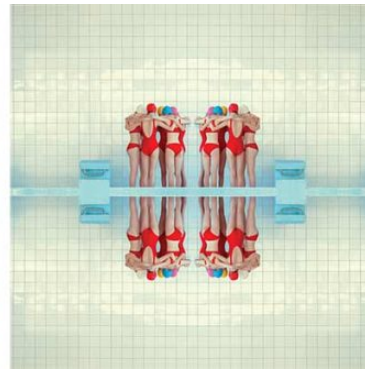
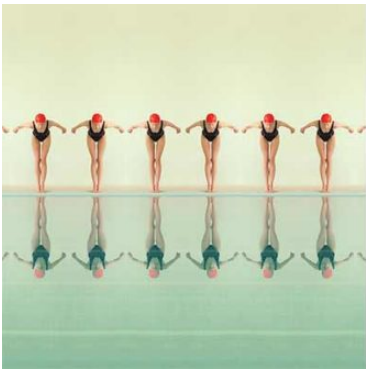
One of Pixar's classes trains new managers to provide feedback more often and effectively and also to get better at absorbing it. (For more on the importance of the latter skill, see "Find the Coaching in Criticism," HBR, January–February 2014.) Coaches first explain that aversion to feedback is common. As givers of it, we want to avoid hurting others. (Even when we know our feedback can be helpful, my research has found, we choose not to provide it.) As recipients, we feel tension between the desire to improve and the desire to be accepted for who we are. The ensuing open discussion of reservations and challenges around feedback helps participants feel less alone.

Make feedback about others' behavior direct, specific, and applicable.

At Pixar and other organizations, employees are asked to follow three rules for feedback: Be straightforward in both how you address a person and what you say about him or her; identify the particular behavior that worked (or didn't); and describe the impact of the behavior on you and others. These practices help counteract a common problem: People's feedback is too general. In an exercise Pixar designed to overcome it, participants are asked to think of a time when they might have offered positive feedback but didn't, and then write down what they *could* have said, following the three rules. Next they practice delivering that feedback to a classmate and reflect on the experience. (In another exercise they do the same with critical feedback.) Recipients are asked to talk about their experience getting the feedback.

Give feedback on feedback.

In this exercise a volunteer reads a piece of feedback that he or she has drafted to the group. The other participants are then asked to identify ways to improve it. If the volunteer says, "You keep missing deadlines," for instance, the colleagues might suggest more specificity—perhaps "You missed three deadlines in the past month."



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This practice is important because even when we overcome our aversion to giving feedback, we tend not to be specific or direct. As Pixar’s Woolf told me, “Often leaders come to see me right before an important meeting they’re about to have and say, ‘Can I rehearse a bit more? I’m afraid of backpedaling and sugarcoating.’ After some rehearsing they’re able to walk into meetings with greater confidence and more clarity on how they’ll say what they want to say.”

Add a “plus” to others’ ideas.

Whenever a Pixar employee comments on a colleague’s idea or work during a brainstorming session, he or she must offer a “plus”—a suggestion for an improvement that doesn’t include judgment or harsh language. Pixar employees told me that this approach draws on three principles of improv comedy: First, accept all offers—that is, embrace the idea instead of rejecting it. Second, to ensure that you’re building on someone’s idea, say “Yes, and…” rather than “Yes, but…” Third, make your teammate look good by enhancing the scene or project he or she has started.

Provide live coaching.

Though tactics like plussing are well understood at Pixar, it isn’t always easy for employees at the company to put them into practice. For this reason, coaches there attend brainstorming meetings to reinforce good approaches and point out lapses. If a comment or a question doesn’t show “collaborative spirit,” the coach will ask that it be rephrased. Live coaching can be difficult—people are sometimes visibly annoyed by the interruptions—but coaches have learned to pay attention to the personalities in the room and adapt accordingly. For example, rather than asking a director to reframe a comment, a Pixar coach might ask him or her to describe the interaction that just occurred: what worked and

what didn't. "In the moment the feedback may not feel good," Woolf told me. "As with medicine, it often takes a while for people to see the benefits. But they come to realize that feedback is a gift and is key to their personal development."

4. Teach People to Lead *and* Follow

A lot of attention is paid, in the literature and in the practice of management, to what makes a truly effective leader. There has been much less consideration of how to follow, though that, too, is an important skill. In interviews at American Express, I learned that the company's best collaborators—those known for adding value to interactions and solving problems in ways that left everyone better off—are adept at both leading and following, moving smoothly between the two as appropriate. That is, they're good at *flexing*.

During the 17-day campaign to find and rescue a group of boys and their soccer coach from a rapidly flooding cave in Thailand in 2018, more and more people arrived on the scene to help: hydraulic engineers, geologists, divers, SEAL teams, NASA experts, doctors, and local politicians. Only through flexing were these collaborators able to contribute all they could and get the most out of those around them. At one point, for example, an inexperienced engineer proposed an unorthodox plan to use large tubes on the mountain above the cave to divert some of the rainwater that was making diving unsafe. Rather than dismissing the idea, senior engineers flexed, giving it the consideration it deserved. After testing revealed the idea's promise, it was implemented, and the water stopped rising.

Because flexing requires ceding control to others, many of us find it difficult. A few simple exercises can make people more likely to flex:

Increase self-awareness.

In some of my classes, I ask students to rate themselves relative to their classmates in three areas: their ability to make good decisions, their ability to get along well with others, and their honesty. Then I ask them to compute their average across the three. Most people's average is higher than 50% and typically in the 70th or 80th percentile, which demonstrates to the students how self-perceptions are often inflated. After all, it's impossible for a majority of respondents to merit better-than-average ratings across all

three desirable dimensions. Unfortunately, our overly optimistic self-perceptions drive our decisions about whether to allow others to have control. So it helps to build self-awareness using this kind of exercise.

Learn to delegate.

This isn't important just for leaders; it's also critical for people working on collaborations where multiple experts come together, such as the Thai cave rescue, and on cross-functional team projects. In a training session to help new Pixar managers delegate, participants discuss why it's so difficult to pass the torch to others and the main reasons we tend to micromanage: It's hard to let go of control, and we feel responsible for the outcome and are aware that the task needs to get done "right." So we focus on the short-term results rather than the long-term goal of developing others through delegation. We favor getting the job done—fast—over the reasons for delegating (allowing others to feel engaged and to grow, and allowing ourselves more time and probably higher productivity in the long run). The coaches talk about cases of delegation gone wrong—whose central lesson is the need for trust—and present a four-quadrant chart, the "skill-will model," which explains how to tailor delegation to the abilities and motivation of those being handed control.

5. Speak with Clarity and Avoid Abstractions

In any collaboration there are times for open discussion of ideas and times when someone, regardless of whether he or she is a leader, needs to cut through the confusion and clearly articulate the path forward. When we communicate with others, psychological research shows, we are often too indirect and abstract. Our words would carry more weight if we were more concrete and provided vivid images of goals. And our statements would also be judged more truthful.

Communication classes both at Pixar and at a large pharmaceutical company I studied included this role-playing exercise: Participants were instructed to think about something they needed to tell a team member and then ask themselves, "What am I trying to accomplish?" They were given time to practice their message. After they delivered it, the person playing the teammate told them whether they in fact had conveyed it with clarity and purpose. And if the teammate couldn't understand why the conversation was

happening, the participant was prompted to ask why and then to reframe the statement to be clearer and more specific and include a purpose. Take a statement like “The project led by our marketing colleagues needs more resources and attention to get to the finish line.” That might be revised as “The project that our marketing colleagues John and Ashley are leading needs an additional \$5,000 and two more members to be completed by the end of the month. I believe two of us should volunteer to help, since meeting the deadline is important to maintaining a good relationship with our client.”

6. Train People to Have Win-Win Interactions

I often ask students to work in pairs to think through how to divide an orange. Each partner is told, without the other’s knowledge, a reason for wanting the fruit: One needs to make juice, and the other needs the peel for a muffin recipe. If they fail to explore each other’s interests, as most pairs do, the partners may end up fighting over the orange. Or they may decide to cut it in half, giving each side an equal if smaller-than-ideal share. Some people even quit when they can’t get the whole orange.

When we communicate, we are often too indirect and abstract.

Only a few pairs arrive at the optimal solution, in which one person gets the peel, the other gets the juice, and both are satisfied. How did they get there? By investigating each other’s needs.

This approach is the key to win-win interactions. In the successful collaborative projects I examined, people were open about their personal interests and how they thought they could contribute to solving the problem. Such transparency allows participants to explore everyone’s vision of winning and, ultimately, get more-favorable results.

Many organizations I’ve studied teach leaders and employees to find win-win solutions through exercises in which each participant has information that others lack—as is true in most real-world collaborations—and all are asked to try to reach the best deal possible for everyone. Afterward, the instructors suggest techniques that could have helped the parties

discover one another's interests better—such as asking questions and listening carefully—and produce more-successful deals. Sometimes the conversations are videotaped and shown to participants after they've had the chance to guess how much of the airtime they got in discussions.

By balancing talking (to express your own concerns and needs) with asking questions and letting others know what your understanding of *their* needs is, you can devise solutions that create more value. With a win-win mindset, collaborators are able to find opportunities in differences.

CONCLUSION

Because the six techniques are mutually supportive and even interdependent, it's ideal for employees to learn and regularly use them all. It's difficult to have win-win interactions if you spend most of your time talking, and it's tough to learn about others' interests if you don't approach interactions with empathy. And conversations won't be productive if you only listen and don't offer your views—a balance is required.

The techniques also create a positive dynamic: Teammates with whom they're practiced start feeling more respected and in turn are more likely to show others respect. And respect, my research shows, fuels enthusiasm, fosters openness to sharing information and learning from one another, and motivates people to embrace new opportunities for working together.

But this dynamic must be set in motion by those in charge. Many leaders—even ones steeped in enlightened management theory—fail to consistently treat others with respect or to do what it takes to earn it from others.

Leaders who are frustrated by a lack of collaboration can start by asking themselves a simple question: What have they done to encourage it today? It is only by regularly owning their own mistakes, listening actively and supportively to people's ideas, and being

respectful but direct when challenging others' views and behavior that they can encourage lasting collaboration. By training people to employ the six techniques, leaders can make creative, productive teamwork a way of life.

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