

# Why Collaboration Remains Elusive Despite Team Consensus

By BH Tan

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**A few years ago**, a global adhesives manufacturer, which I'll name Sarus, missed their earnings forecast for 2 consecutive quarters for the first time in its history. It had a sizeable presence in China, India, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia. More agile competitors were snipping at their heels with innovative offerings, better technical support and lower prices.

When market forces were in their favor, the company had their hands full keeping up with insatiable demand from customers. The Asian operations were the star performer for the global business. To be sure, when they were on a hot streak, customer feedback had always been good but not great, as they would put it wryly. The GMs of the respective countries and functional heads were all focused on meeting their own KPIs. Their silo mentality translated into poor customer responsiveness and technical support. Suddenly there was consternation at HQ. Divestment of the business could happen unless they could turn it around quickly.

The president of APAC convened an off-site for all the top leaders. Everyone present now knew that they had only one common purpose: first to survive and then regain its competitive position. For that to happen, they would have to double down on collaboration. All the leaders were on board. But friction and tension became manifest almost immediately.

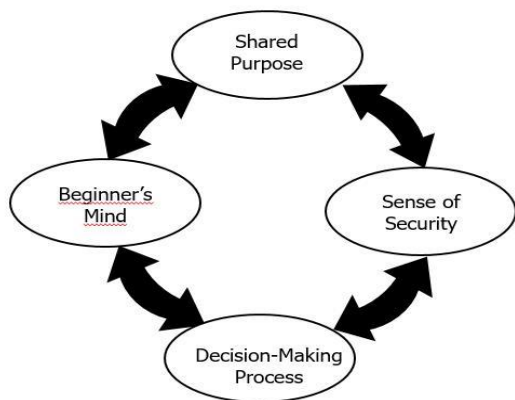
## **No quick fixes**

When businesses face strong headwinds, it becomes a wake-up call. Their leaders will emphasize their common goals and the importance of working as one. But as people at Sarus discovered, the hoped-for collaboration may be elusive even after numerous meetings.

The problem is that leadership teams, like the organizations they lead, are not mechanistic entities but living organisms. If a machine is creaking, we can with some data and analysis determine the root cause(s) such as a worn-out bearing, and have it replaced. Then it should function smoothly again. Not so for a network of people who have different roles, priorities, self-interests and constituencies in the organization. Throw into the mix, diverse personalities, perspectives and nationalities, all vying for recognition and scarce resources. And factor in the absence of mutual trust, interdependence and the spirit of give-and-take. Long-buried and unexamined issues such as accountabilities, identities and power plays will now rise to the fore. As they gather pace and feed on each other, they will bedevil the organizational climate.

## **Four practices for collaboration**

In my work with numerous leadership teams, I have witnessed the ebb and flow of emotions as members struggle with collaboration. The following diagram depicts four practices that will guide leaders in charting their journey towards collaboration.



### **Shared Purpose**

This is the cornerstone for collaboration. Leaders will invariably ask themselves many questions, silently and openly. What exactly is it that only through collaboration we must accomplish that we cannot otherwise? How will it impact the lives and work of people and the future of the organization? What is the value that I can bring to this undertaking?.....

All such questions need to be openly discussed so that everyone feels that their contributions will be consequential and compelling.

Consider the extraordinary rescue of 12 Thai boys and their young coach in June 2018. They were members of the Moo Pa (“Wild Boars” in Thai), a youth football team. After a routine practice they hiked into the Tham Luang cave system that snakes for 10 km beneath Thailand and Myanmar. A flash-flood caught them off-guard. To escape, they went deeper into the caves and became marooned, with water rising rapidly.

News of their extreme peril captured the world’s attention. Experts from all over the globe pitched in over the course of the 18-day ordeal. The final push involved a total of 90 divers-40 from Thailand and 50 foreigners. What rallied

a bunch of people, many of whom total strangers, to collaborate so tirelessly and selflessly? It was a single-minded shared purpose: to get the 13 boys out alive and well. They succeeded. It was high risk. Saman Gunan, ex-Thai Navy SEAL diver, paid with his life when he ran out of oxygen.



### **Sense of Security**

To work well as a team requires deep and candid discussions on all substantial matters. If people aren’t speaking up, fear is in the workplace. It’s a straight causal link between the sense of safety and people’s ultimate commitment. If they can’t disagree, then their agreement counts for nothing. This was what led to the conundrum that Sarus faced.

There are two aspects of sense of security. The first is psychological safety. This is the confidence in people to speak their minds and take risks because they know there will not be negative repercussions. The second aspect is linked to the threat of losing one’s identity and standing when the territorial boundary marking out one’s role is encroached on because of the messy nature of cross-group collaboration.

Sarus was losing out on new accounts because it was

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painfully slow in responding to bids. Before a bid submission, Finance had to complete a credit risk analysis for new cases. This process could be speeded up if Sales and Finance collaborated. Someone in Sales then suggested that response time could even become market-beating if Finance could teach them to assess and structure risk.

Here was an idea worthy of serious consideration. But Finance wasn't ready for it. By equipping Sales to do risk analysis on their own, wouldn't it be asking the fox to guard the henhouse? If credit risk analysis, a highly valued expertise goes to Sales, would Finance now have a lesser role? It represented an existential threat.

### **Decision-Making Process**

The time will come when the leadership team has to make critical strategic decisions. It is not going to be easy. Leadership teams are legislatures, if you will. Each member, with the exception of the most senior leader, represents their own constituency from Sales to Marketing, Engineering, HR, Finance and Supply Chain. Despite having agreed to take off their functional hats and act in the larger interest of the company, there will still be turf interests to protect.

The three most popular approaches are: (i) ask the parties with differing views to present their cases so that other members can weigh in from their supposedly impartial standpoints, (ii) take a vote to seek a majority view, and (iii) let the boss decide. Of these three methods, the first is fraught with tension, and will likely lead to dissatisfaction with the outcome. However if managed wisely, it can become a competitive advantage because new and creative ideas are unleashed. I'll discuss this in greater detail soon. The second and third are over-used default options because people want to avoid heated

arguments, taking sides and making hard choices. This is a cop-out and will haunt the organization to no end.

Most leaders at the pinnacle of a company are individual high performers with egos to match. When it comes down to pitching for their preferred solutions, the natural instinct is to advocate theirs as the best course of action. Winning endorsement is the only objective. In such an emotional state, differing views and questions are to be defended vigorously against. This is the default mode of communication in most companies. The precious opportunity of tapping into the collective wisdom of other people is forfeited! A more helpful approach is to foster a dialogue that balances advocacy with inquiry. While articulating your own views, be genuinely interested to hear the opinions and thoughts of your colleagues. Imagine how the mood will lighten up if leaders say with humility and sincerity, "I have an idea to share and will really value your inputs as I may be missing something."

Most cultures, especially in Asia and the Middle-East, are uncomfortable with expressing conflicting and divergent views. It is the desire to preserve harmony and not cause loss of face. We can make a paradigm shift if we depersonalize and depoliticize conflict. Start by setting the ground rules. Define what are useful and not useful behaviors. Then introduce a process by which members play different roles such a proposer, a devil's advocate, a supporter, a bystander and a moderator. Over the course of months, by adopting this decision-making process, members will have the opportunity to play and become adept with, all these roles.

To paraphrase the ancient Chinese sages, "Be grateful to people who support you. Be very grateful to people who oppose you." By honing our skills in this new mode of dialogue, ego is given a rest. Everyone eagerly

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participates in the learning journey.

### **The Beginner's Mind**

Heads of businesses or functions often see themselves as experts in their disciplines. Their deep knowledge is of great value when addressing challenges. But such expertise can shut them from accepting new ideas. This is called **frozen thinking**, or the disease of the expert's mind. It has plagued the careers of prominent scientists and precipitated the demise of many once-great companies like Nokia, Kodak and BlackBerry. Shunryu Suzuki, a Zen monk, has taught the practice of the **beginner's mind** to counter frozen thinking. He explains, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

When leaders are faced with the pressure of picking critical choices for their companies, it is useful to take pause. Listen up. Welcome questions. Sometimes, a single question can change everything.

### **The journey towards consensus matters far more than the consensus itself**

Many leadership teams mistakenly believe that to kick-start collaboration, they should identify their common goal and then execute relentlessly. This can open up a can of worms instead. It is more productive to view collaboration as a journey involving four key practices. When at last they arrive at a consensus, it will be one that all feel they are a part of and have ownership to turn into success.

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