Strengthening Cross-Functional Team Collaboration

By Preston G. Smith, coauthor of *Developing Products in Half the Time* and *Proactive Risk Management*

Product development is inherently cross-functional, involving design engineering, marketing, manufacturing, test engineering, purchasing, regulatory, and, in many cases, external groups. Consequently, in order to provide a superior product, all groups must work together effectively-in other words, collaborate.

Too often, team members simply tolerate collaboration, not getting much more out of it than they commit to it. When they recognize that strong collaboration-especially with those with whom they would rather not have any contact-is at the very root of a winning product, their attitude toward the "enemy" can change. Here we explore some things you can do to improve your team's collaboration, thus directly improving the product you deliver.

Uncover Hidden Assumptions

Collaboration often fails due to differing, unspoken assumptions or hidden agendas. For example, one team member might assume that a supplier will deliver on time, while another team member assumes that they will be late. Perhaps the first team member's thinking is colored by some information about the supplier not available to the second one. It's important to uncover this difference in thinking and explore its roots. Once team members share similar assumptions-or at least understand where they differ—it improves their ability to work together much more effectively.

Similarly, hidden agendas must be brought into the open. Perhaps marketing wants a product interface that they know is used in a market they have targeted for expansion, but it doesn't make technical sense to the design engineers. Even if design engineering doesn't believe in this market, they need to be aware of it so that they don't make other design decisions that are inconsistent with the needs of the expansion market.

The challenge here is in recognizing the differing assumptions and hidden agendas that might derail team collaboration. Time spent in building a common understanding of the project can surface these issues and prevent team dissention later in the project.

Use Appropriate Communication Media

Over the past decade, our alternatives for communicating with our counterparts have exploded to include telephone, voicemail, email, video conferencing, instant messaging, intranets, and shared files on servers. This is both a blessing and a curse, because each of these media can be abused. For example, email is wonderful for documenting simple

facts, such as a meeting time and location. However, it can be ineffective for communicating more subtle information, such as:

- Those who won't attend because they didn't receive the message
- Differing assumptions about why certain items are on the agenda
- Resentment about attending yet another meeting
- Disappointment that so-and-so dominated the last meeting
- Wondering whether those who attend will have to take action items-or whether these will be assigned to those who don't attend!

Other more interactive, synchronous media may be better for communicating such information. Or, you can sometimes overcome the medium's weaknesses by being sensitive to these detriments and employing some workarounds. For example, in the case of the first bullet, you can use return receipts in your meeting announcement email or ask for RSVPs. For bullets 3 and 4, you might anticipate such problems by addressing these concerns with a few attendees over morning coffee or by soliciting concerns, in your email invitation, in advance of the meeting to improve productivity during the session.

Know Your Counterparts

Much of our lack of collaboration stems from not knowing how our colleagues think or operate. To begin to understand what motivates them, get to know how they spend their discretionary time. On weekends, do they golf, volunteer, or mountain bike? Do they generally believe that problems will resolve themselves or that every problem can only spawn hundreds of others?

I once observed an organization that assigned one of its most promising engineers to lead a critical development project. The vice president sponsoring the project didn't really care about understanding the team, only in getting the work done. A few months later, this team leader quit and moved his family to Maine for a simpler, more spiritual life-a huge disruption to the project.

Make sure you spend time with your counterparts. This is often difficult to do today with "teams" dispersed globally. But time spent together is invaluable for understanding motivations and building trust. Better yet, transfer people between departments, as the Japanese do routinely, so that individuals can "walk in their counterparts' moccasins."

You may not be able to meet in person often, but you can routinely keep up with your counterparts' lives. In phone conversations or emails, ask them, "How is your ailing mother doing this week?" or, "How did the swim meet last weekend go?" This isn't a diversion from business but instead an essential part of building collaboration.

Align Your Motivators

We tend to do what we are motivated to do. One motivator in the workplace that gets plenty of attention is monetary compensation. While I'm not suggesting that you pay team members to collaborate, you can ensure that the compensation motivators at least point in the right direction. Although we have been talking about teams, teamwork, and collaboration for some time now, our compensation systems still tend to favor individual and departmental contributions, which in many cases oppose contributions that require collaboration across departments.

According to Katzenbach and Smith, in their recent book, *The Discipline of Teams*, the most powerful type of team is one having mutual accountability and joint work products. Achieving this level of collaboration depends on members believing that "what's in it for them" encourages them to risk sharing accountability and work products with other members. That is, collaboration will happen only when the motivators support it.

About the Author: *Mr. Smith leads New Product Dynamics, a consultancy that guides managers in developing better new products faster. For articles on related topics, visit [New Product Dynamics](#).*